



Best Laid Plans:

London's 'Covid Cohort' and
Progression to Higher Education



An AccessHE Report

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AccessHE is part of London Higher

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AccessHE

AccessHE is a key division of London Higher and the pan-London network supporting underrepresented learners to access and succeed in higher education (HE). AccessHE does this by facilitating collaborative outreach and student support work that brings together HE providers, schools, colleges and local government. It is the largest regional membership organisation of its kind in England, representing 28 HEI members.

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Executive Summary

→ Executive Summary

Efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic have impacted on many aspects of young people's lives, not least their outlook on their future and the ways in which they prepare for it. Nowhere was this more apparent than following the cancellation of key stage 5 examinations in summer 2020 and the government's decision to award qualifications on the basis of 'Centre Assessed Grades', profoundly altering the post-secondary pathways of a generation of school and college leavers.

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that covid-related disruptions to examinations and schooling have impacted on school and college leavers' post-secondary decision making, much less is known about how this has manifested at a regional or group level. This AccessHE research report will explore attitudes to and readiness for commencing higher education (HE) study among London's 'Covid cohort' in 2021.

Based on a large-scale survey of sixteen-, seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds in the capital, the research sheds light on how young Londoners view HE, how they prepare for it, and how confident they feel about commencing their programme of study. It also puts forward recommendations for understanding and better supporting the needs of London's different student communities through the transition out of secondary education into HE, thereby feeding into work underway elsewhere in the sector with the same aim of supporting students who are about to begin their HE journey.¹

About this report

This report has been written by AccessHE and draws on fieldwork undertaken by YouthSight, the polling agency, in late summer 2021. As the widening access and participation division of London Higher, AccessHE works with a membership of 28 HE providers in the capital to improve outcomes for underrepresented learner groups at all stages of their HE journey.² Given the very high proportion of students from underrepresented backgrounds who progress to HE in the city, we wanted to understand more about the ways in which the pandemic had altered young Londoners' attitudes to HE, and HE readiness specifically, with a particular focus on these widening participation groups. We commissioned YouthSight to survey London-based members of their Youth Panel who are were undertaking level 3 qualifications and therefore either due to enter HE in 2021-22 or in the process of considering their post-secondary options. The report shares key findings from the survey, focusing on collective attitudes, approaches to the HE transition, and differences at sub-group level in London when it comes to HE readiness.

1. Especially the work of the Student Futures Commission under the auspices of the UPP Foundation. See <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/> [last accessed 12 October 2021].
2. We follow the Office for Students' definition of underrepresented groups that is included in its regulatory guidance to providers with respect to widening access and participation. See https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/92d85140-2719-4af0-85c9-b28ee1038c5e/regulatory_notice_1_access_and_participation_plans.pdf, pp.17-18.

Key findings

Based on the survey responses, we found that:

1. There is no evidence that school and college leavers in London are any less likely to pursue HE study post-pandemic.
2. Prospective students in London clearly see the personal benefits of HE study, both financial and intellectual. Motivations for pursuing HE are overwhelmingly for positive as opposed to tactical reasons, which is somewhat counter-intuitive given increased participation in higher education has historically been counter-cyclical.
3. Students nonetheless approach decisions about HE progression with a degree of pragmatism and see career prospects as an important factor.
4. Young Londoners are broadly confident about making the transition to HE, and whilst it appears that the pandemic may feed into other concerns about starting a degree, it isn't a concern in and of itself.
5. The majority of students we surveyed are expecting a normal or near-normal HE experience. This has implications for students, in terms of how their actual experience in HE during a period of readjustment for the sector will compare to their expectations. It also has implications for providers, who will need to consider whether these expectations enable or work against a successful transition into HE.
6. Students prepare for HE in different ways and obtain pre-entry advice and guidance via different routes depending on their background.
7. A characteristic that emerges in our survey as an especially strong determinant of attitudes towards and preparation for HE is being a First in Family HE student. This may be because family has become a more important mediator and influencer of HE attitudes during successive lockdowns.

Recommendations

1. Convene a pan-London conversation between students, providers, schools and colleges about HE transition support that seeks to identify possible shared approaches.
2. Establish a standing young Londoner HE progression committee. This could serve as an interface between London HE institutions and prospective students and enable co-creation of transition support and of curricula.
3. Strengthen information-sharing processes between providers and schools/colleges relating to how HE programmes in London will be delivered and what students can expect from their institution's extra-curricular offer. Uni Connect, Discover Uni and UCAS can all play a role here as can local authority-led careers and HE advice and guidance networks.
4. Encourage HE providers to include 'first in family' in their evaluation of and reporting on continuation outcomes for students to understand any impact this characteristic has on the transition to HE.
5. In tandem with this, undertake a London-wide, longitudinal study of how young people's post-secondary choices are shaped and mediated in the post-pandemic period. This would complement other studies already underway looking at the pandemic's longer-term effects on educational, career and mental health outcomes for young people.



Introduction

→ Introduction

This report explores the attitudes of the 'Covid cohort' in London towards HE. It looks firstly at levels of interest in HE and reasons for pursuing this pathway amongst young Londoners, setting their views in the context of the pandemic's ongoing impact. Secondly it considers what preparation young Londoners undertake prior to commencing an HE programme. Thirdly, it unpicks differences in preparation for and also in concerns about the HE transition between groups of students.

The reference to 'best laid plans' in the report title reflects, in one respect, our concern with HE preparedness. To a greater or lesser extent, all survey respondents indicated an awareness of the need to prepare for HE, whether as part of the application and pre-enrolment process or via possessing certain enabling credentials and skills such as work experience or teamworking abilities. We look in detail at the nature of these preparations as well as general levels of confidence about entering HE in chapters 2 and 3 of the report.

The 'best laid plans' title is, in another respect, acknowledgement of the disruption that has characterized the final years of school and college for this cohort – a crucial context for understanding how they navigate the HE transition. For many students, post-secondary plans were taken out of their hands by government decisions about school closures and examinations. The report does not form a judgement on whether the HE preparation they undertook was better or worse than that of other cohorts but rather recognizes that the preparation itself was disrupted. It instead asks whether this disruption has produced new kinds of inequality and sub-group differences within London when it comes to HE readiness – a question that is picked up in chapter 3.

Methodology

The report's findings are based on a 29-question survey that was circulated to London-domiciled school and college learners in early September 2021. These learners were recruited by YouthSight via its 16-30 Youth Research Panel. The survey was designed by AccessHE. It included questions about respondents' post-secondary plans and current HE applications/offers, their views on the benefits of HE study, and what, if anything, had motivated them to pursue HE. In addition, current offer holders were asked about their expectations for their programme of studies and wider HE experience, their feelings about commencing HE study, their thoughts on where to access HE advice and guidance, and their own preparations for HE.

503 responses to the survey were received. They were analysed using the following variables: gender; year of study; ethnicity; Free School Meals eligibility; and family at university. 75% of respondents were female, 22% were male and 3% listed Other or preferred not to disclose their gender. 74% of the sample were in their final year of school or college (6% of the sample overall were college learners). 21% were eligible for Free School Meals and 46% were the first in their family to go to HE. The cohort was also ethnically diverse, with 38% coming

from Asian backgrounds, 33% from White backgrounds, 14% from Black backgrounds, 10% from Mixed backgrounds, and 4% from Other ethnic backgrounds. 2% did not disclose their ethnicity. Respondents could select from one of 18 ethnicity categories using standard Census definitions in the survey but the data was grouped by main-level category in the analysis owing to the sample size.

Partly owing to the survey design and participant recruitment, and partly owing to space constraints, this report does not consider HE attitudes of mature learners in London. This is a vital topic but one that warrants separate treatment, not least given the very different ways in which the pandemic has affected this learner group. It also does not consider attainment as a determinant of attitudes and HE preparedness as attainment data was not collected. Although application patterns and offer holding is used as a proxy indicator for HE progression in parts of our analysis, it is important to note that the fieldwork for this report was completed prior to the start of the 2021/22 academic year, and as such no enrolment data has been collected from survey respondents, meaning we cannot take into account levels of attrition between offer stage and enrolment.



Chapter 1 – Attitudes towards HE

→ 2. Chapter 1 – Key Trends

This opening chapter presents headlines from the survey data and considers what, in general terms, these tell us about young Londoners' current attitudes towards higher education. Although the survey data represents a snapshot in time and does not provide answers about how these attitudes may have changed or evolved over the course of the pandemic, it is possible, by comparing the survey responses with other data on higher education progression in London, to identify areas of continuity and change. As it will show, interest in HE study has not diminished amongst young Londoners since the outbreak of Covid-19.

Demand for HE

Perhaps the most significant parallel with pre-Covid attitudes shown by the data is the very high levels of appetite for higher education amongst young Londoners. 97% of respondents to this survey were actively considering applying to an HE course and 93% of those in their final year of school or college held an offer. In London as in England more generally, levels of interest in progressing to higher education remain high. Indeed, this was a trend registered by UCAS in their analysis of the 2020 and 2021 HE application cycles, in which numbers of acceptances at national level remained steady compared to 2019.³ Looking at UCAS data for London specifically, acceptances increased amongst young applicants in the same period. It is therefore fair to say that young Londoners continue to see higher education as an attractive post-secondary option.

If the pandemic has not affected demand for HE, neither, on the evidence of this survey at least, has changing government rhetoric on the value of university study. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the current government has publicly abandoned the last Labour government's 50% target for young HE participation and made concerted efforts to direct greater numbers of young people towards technical and vocational education pathways, as part of its vision for what the current Universities Minister has referred to as 'true social mobility'.⁴ However, in spite of this attempted rebalancing, young Londoners have not (or at least, not yet) embraced technical and vocational pathways to any significant extent. Whilst the majority of survey respondents had considered pathways such as doing an apprenticeship, getting a job and/

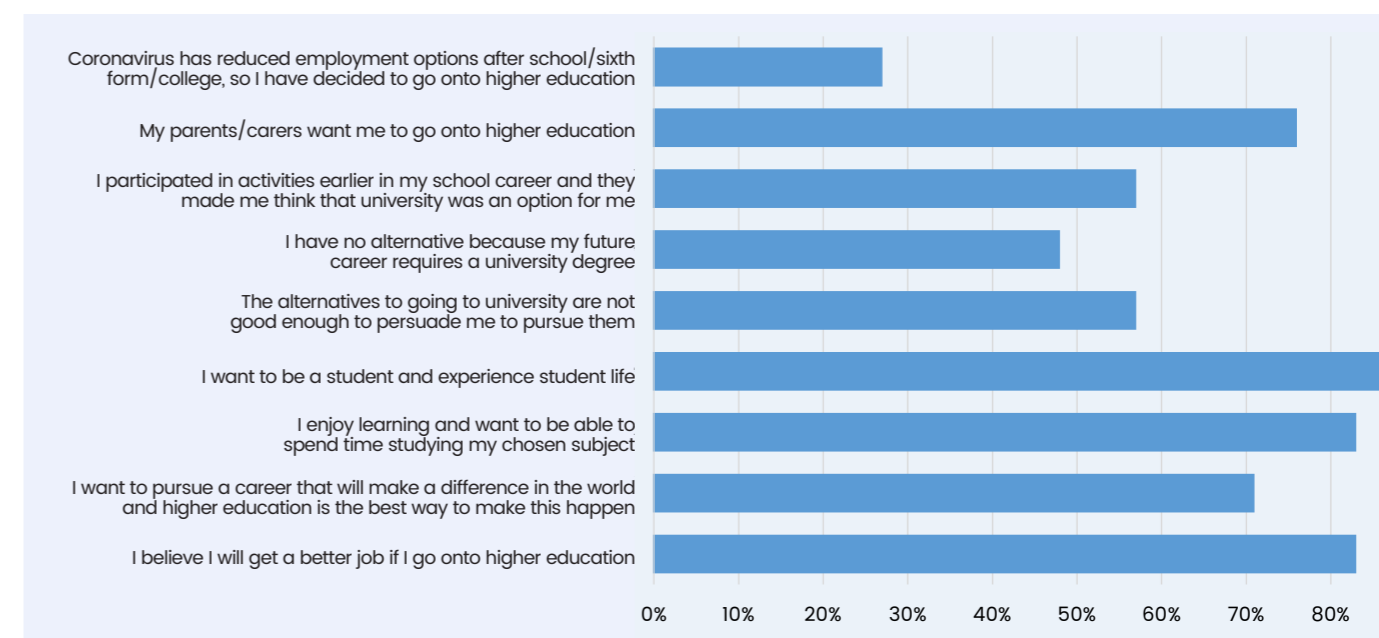
or doing another form of qualification besides HE, it is striking that a significant minority – 46% of respondents overall – had considered HE alone when thinking about post-secondary destinations. However, the figure is somewhat lower (37%) for students who were completing their first year of level 3 study in summer 2021. Whether or not this is attributable to the influence of government rhetoric on learners at an earlier stage of their post-secondary decision-making process is unclear, but certainly warrants further exploration.

Though our 2021 survey is a static picture of demand for HE, looked at as a barometer of longer-term predictions, it is consistent with earlier research anticipating an increasingly ethnically diverse young student population in London.⁵ Respondents from Asian ethnic groups for instance made up 37.4% of offer holders, which was a larger proportion than respondents from White backgrounds (33.8%), and students were equally likely to hold an offer irrespective of their ethnic background. Similarly, the same proportion of Free School Meals (FSM)-eligible students as non-FSM students held an offer at the time of responding to the survey (73% in both cases). As a proxy for HE progression rates, the offer rates for the 'Covid cohort' in London indicate that the young HE student population is indeed becoming 'hyper-diverse'. As by far the largest proportion (c.40%) of young Londoners remain in the capital to study, this is first and foremost a consideration for London HE. We discuss below the implications of the survey findings for providers, but what is clear is that HEIs in the capital can expect to educate and train an increasingly diverse and multi-ethnic young student population in coming years.

3. For 2020 data see <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report> and for early 2021 data see <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2021/2021-cycle-applicant-figures-30-june-deadline#:~:text=2021%20cycle%20applicant%20figures%20%E2%80%93%2030%20June%20deadline%20%7C%20Undergraduate%20%7C%20UCAS> [last accessed 12 October 2021].
4. The phrase was first used in an online keynote address by the Minister at a National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) summit in July 2020. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/universities-minister-calls-for-true-social-mobility> [last accessed 12 October 2021].
5. See Berzins, K. et al, The Higher Education Journey of Young London Residents (London Councils, 2020); also Atherton, G. and T. Mazhari, Preparing for Hyper-Diversity: London's Student Population in 2030 (AccessHE, 2018). Available at <https://www.accesshe.ac.uk/yYdx0u7/Preparing-for-hyper-diversity-Londons-student-population-in-2030.pdf>.

Motivations for progressing to HE

Diagram 1: Motivations for progressing to HE, net agreement (all respondents)



Having considered what the survey tells us about levels of demand for HE, we now turn to students' motivation for applying. As the graph above demonstrates, young Londoners are overwhelmingly positively motivated to progress to HE. They were most inclined to agree with the following statements relating to HE study:

- I want to be a student and experience student life (85% strongly agree/agree)
- I believe I will get a better job if I go onto higher education (82% strongly agree/agree)
- I enjoy learning and want to be able to spend time studying my chosen subject (82% strongly agree/agree)

It is interesting to note that, whilst respondents are evidently career-minded, they are just as likely to be intellectually motivated to pursue higher education. Furthermore, respondents are most motivated of all by the appeal of student life. This may not come as a surprise given, as we describe below, the majority of young Londoners expect their HE experience to resemble that of the pre-pandemic period. It is however a revealing counterpoint to the more ambivalent views expressed by current students when asked in 2021 about how their experience of HE compared with their expectations.⁶

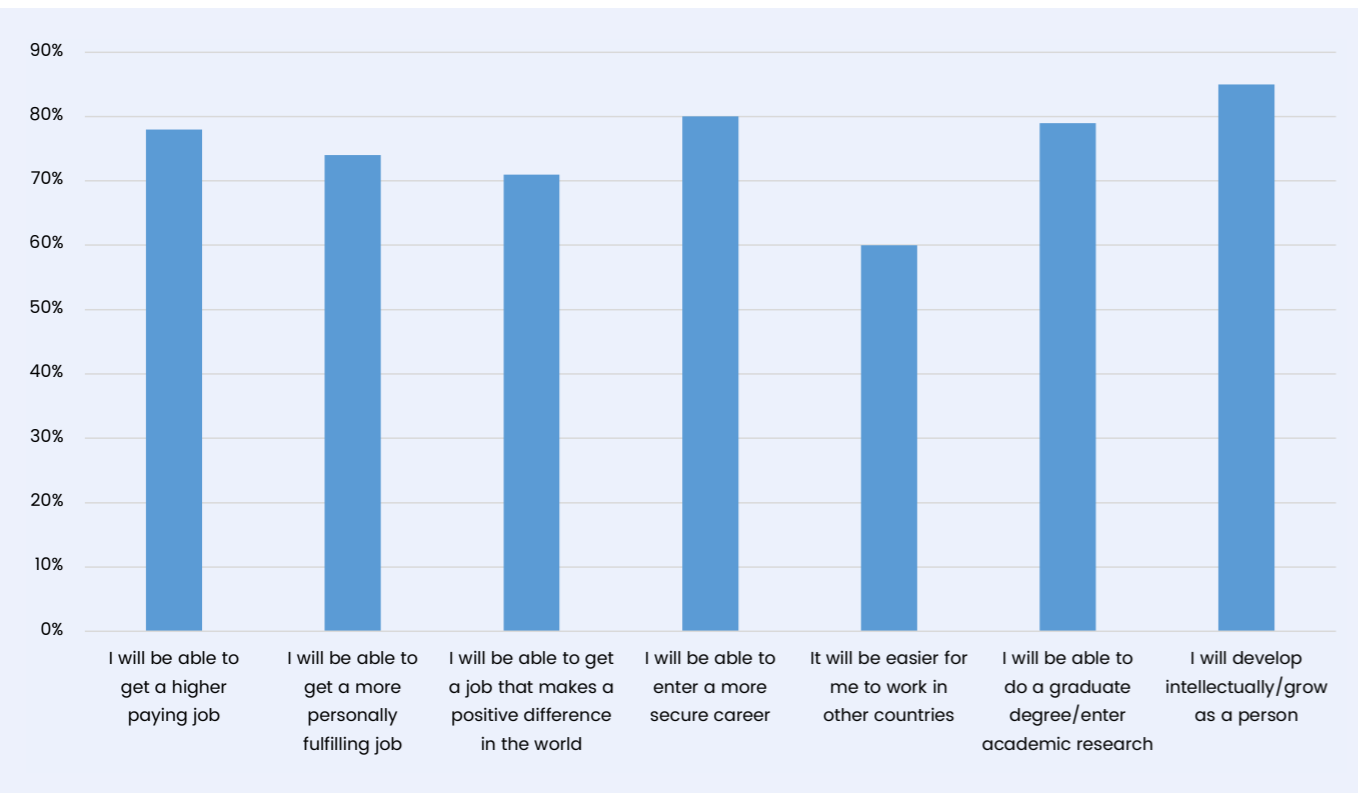
Conversely, there is little evidence that young Londoners are choosing HE for tactical reasons such as shielding from the economic downturn. Fewer respondents agreed (26%) than disagreed (39%) with the statement 'Coronavirus has reduced employment options after school/sixth form/college, so I have decided to go onto higher education'. Moreover, there is a strong inverse correlation (99% sig rate) between disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement and either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the positive statements such as enjoying learning and wanting to experience student life.

What one can infer from this is that prospective students actively embrace positive reasons for pursuing a university place whilst also actively rejecting negative explanations for doing so in which they are cast as having little agency in their own choices. Other negatively framed statements such as choosing HE as a least bad option, such as 'the alternatives to going to university are not good enough to persuade me to pursue them', also resonated far less with respondents.

6. See for example Neves, J. and R. Hewitt, The Student Academic Experience Survey 2021 (HEPI/AdvanceHE, 2021), p.17f. Available at https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SAES_2021_FINAL.pdf.

Perceived benefits of HE

Diagram 2: Perceived benefits of having a university degree, net agree (all respondents)



As with their motivations for pursuing HE, this cohort sees the benefits conferred by HE study as primarily individual and experiential. When asked for their views on a range of possible benefits of HE study, the largest number – 85% of respondents in total – agreed with the statement ‘I will develop intellectually/grow as a person’. They were next most likely to agree with the statements ‘I will be able to enter a more secure career’, ‘I will be able to get a higher paying job’ and ‘I will be able to get a more personally fulfilling job’ respectively.

Respondents appear to link HE strongly to personal growth and development, though career prospects are also clearly important. For this cohort, the role of HE in helping them secure a stable job is also more likely to be identified as a benefit than any salary premium associated with HE study. This is not altogether consistent with stated motivations for progressing to HE, where, as we have seen, only a small number of respondents claimed to be entering HE as a means of shielding from a challenging job market. It does however indicate a degree of pragmatism in students’ decision-making. Though personal fulfilment plays a major role in HE decision-making, so too do practical and longer-term considerations.

7. AccessHE analysis of UCAS 2020 End of Cycle data.

Preferred HE destinations

Whilst we did not collect attainment or enrolment data as part of the survey, we did collect information on the provider type(s) that respondents were planning to apply to or from which they held offers. This indicated the type of institutions at which respondents were intending to study.

The most striking feature of young Londoners’ choice of HE destination is the number applying to Russell Group providers. Of the respondents who had already applied, 61% had applied to a Russell Group institution. Though the survey sample is unlikely to be wholly representative of application patterns for all young Londoners, it almost certainly does indicate that pandemic-related changes to assessment practices and the offer-making behaviour of providers first seen in 2020 has continued to shape HE destinations of young Londoners in 2021. In summer 2020, when Centre Assessed Grades were used to determine exam results, leading to unprecedented numbers of students achieving top grades, Russell Group providers in London increased their intake of London-domiciled students by 25% compared to 2019.⁷ As the same approach to assessments was taken in summer 2021 this is likely to at least partially explain the very high number of Russell Group applicants within the survey cohort.

It remains to be seen whether this represents the high-water mark in the number of young Londoners seeking to progress to the capital’s Russell Group providers. Certainly, the return to pre-pandemic assessment models in 2022 is expected to change attainment profiles at national and regional level. In the immediate term though, high-tariff providers in London can expect to face distinct challenges related to inducting higher numbers of students and supporting their transition to HE. As we will see in chapter 3 however, the challenges extend beyond the pandemic’s distorting effects on destinations and represent a priority for all providers, who between them will educate and train upwards of 40% of London’s ‘covid cohort’ based on current rates of young Londoners remaining in London to study.



Chapter 2 – Preparations and Readiness for HE

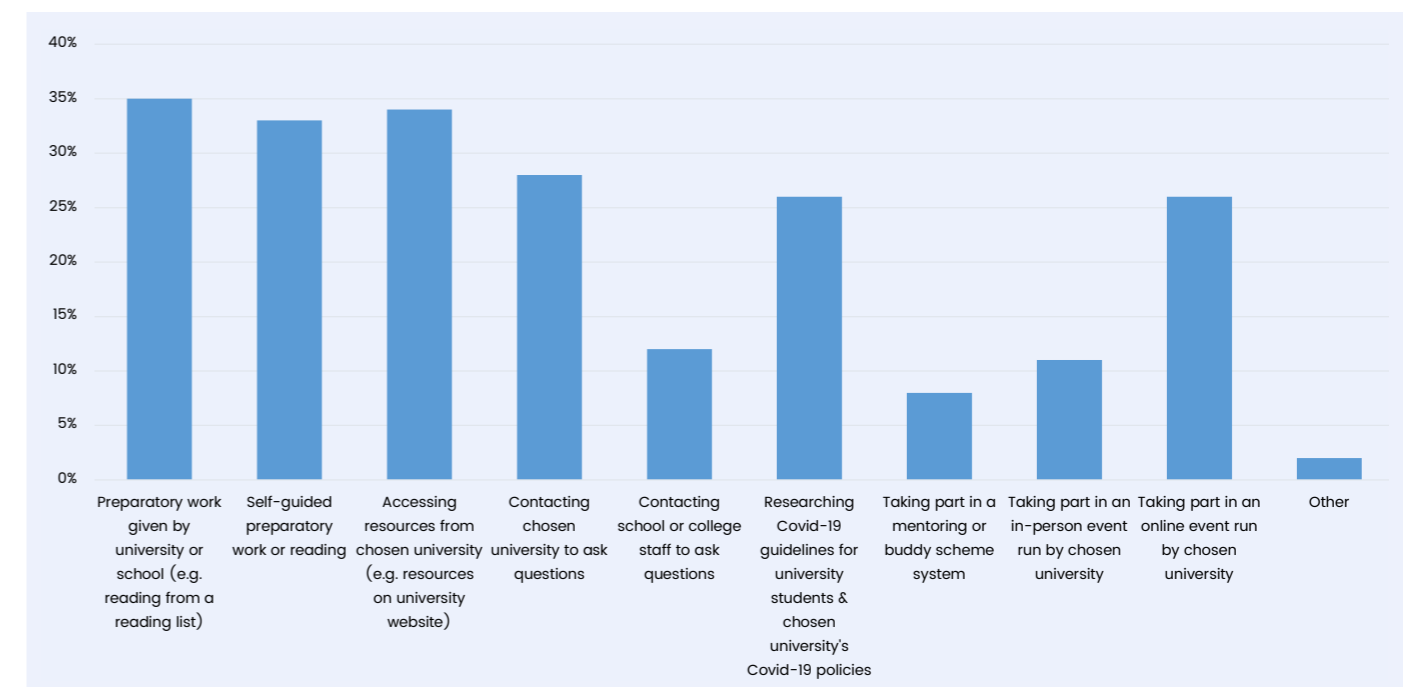
→ Chapter 2 – Preparations and Readiness for HE

In this chapter we explore how students who responded to the survey prepare for HE and how ready they feel for it. Students preparing for HE study in 2021 are in a very different situation from previous years. They will be entering HE after two years of disruption and virtual engagement with education. They will be contending with Covid-19 regulations and blended learning approaches, though equally, age-old concerns about fitting in, handling academic work and making friends remain.

When we surveyed 2021 offer holders in London, we found some evidence of the Covid-19 pandemic impacting their concerns, attitudes and expectations around starting HE. We also found differences of approach, values and preparation styles persisting across demographic groups. When we controlled for factors such as ethnicity, FSM eligibility and family HE status, we found evidence of narrow but persistent gaps. These gaps could be causing the capital's less advantaged students to arrive for HE study less prepared and less confident than their peers.

Preparation for study

Diagram 3: Steps taken to prepare for HE study (all offer holders)



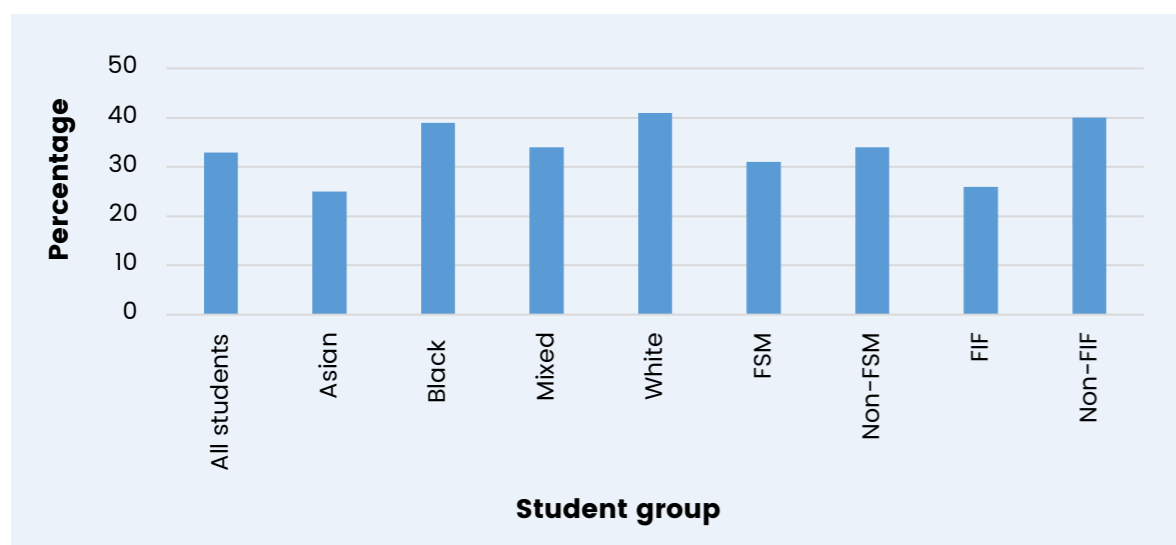
When we asked 2021 offer holders in London about how they had prepared for HE, we found that there was little difference between how likely students of different demographic groups were to prepare for study. Different socio-economic and ethnic groups reported doing similar amounts of preparation, but they chose different balances of activities.

By calculating the average percentage of students from different groups who had undertaken preparation activities, we calculated a 'preparedness' figure for each group. Excluding demographic groups with a sample size of twenty or fewer individuals, there was a gap of only four percentage points between the most and least prepared groups. After excluding demographic groups with a sample size of five or fewer individuals, the most prepared group was White students (24%) and the least prepared groups were jointly Black, Asian and First in Family (FIF) students (20%).

The more important difference between demographic groups in response to this question was the type of preparation members of each were doing. Popular methods of preparation for study included completing work given to students by their university, self-guided preparation (such as extra reading or language practice) and downloading resources from university websites. With a small number of exceptions, these were the most popular methods of preparing for higher education across all student demographic groups. The wide spread of students indicating that they had used each of the forms of preparation listed indicated strongly that there is no one path or method of preparing for entering HE.

Attending in-person events at universities has become much harder than it was in previous years, and has been partially or completely replaced by online events for different students and institutions. Almost all the demographic groups covered in this data were more likely to have attended an online event than an in-person event, though the breadth of the gap varied. FSM-eligible students were only one percentage point more likely to attend online than in-person events, while Black students were twenty percentage points more likely. To understand the reasons for these differences, more research would be needed into the factors that cause offer holders to choose to engage with universities in person or online.

Diagram 4: Percentage of students who report doing self-guided preparation



While self-guided preparation was popular overall with all this survey's respondents, there were noticeable differences between groups in rates of self-guided preparation. The only two groups with rates of self-guided preparation over 40% were White and non-FIF students, and the groups with the lowest rates were FIF, FSM-eligible and Asian students.

Schools with more experience of sending students to HE will likely be more comfortable and experienced making suggestions about how to prepare in students' free time.

It is not clear from this data what exactly has produced gaps in this area, but diagram 4 demonstrates that self-directed individual preparation for HE was correlated with the most represented groups in HE across every metric we examined.

The survey also asked students about the activities they thought were most important in helping a person succeed in HE. From this data, we can see some general features of this year's applicants' views, and some areas of difference across demographic divides.

Self-directed work using independently researched resources is likely to require more disposable income, time and confidence from applicants than attending events or completing work set by HEIs. As an 'optional extra' activity, it may be harder to fit in on top of set work and university events and it will be disproportionately more difficult for students who have jobs, caring responsibilities, or struggle to find convenient places to work.

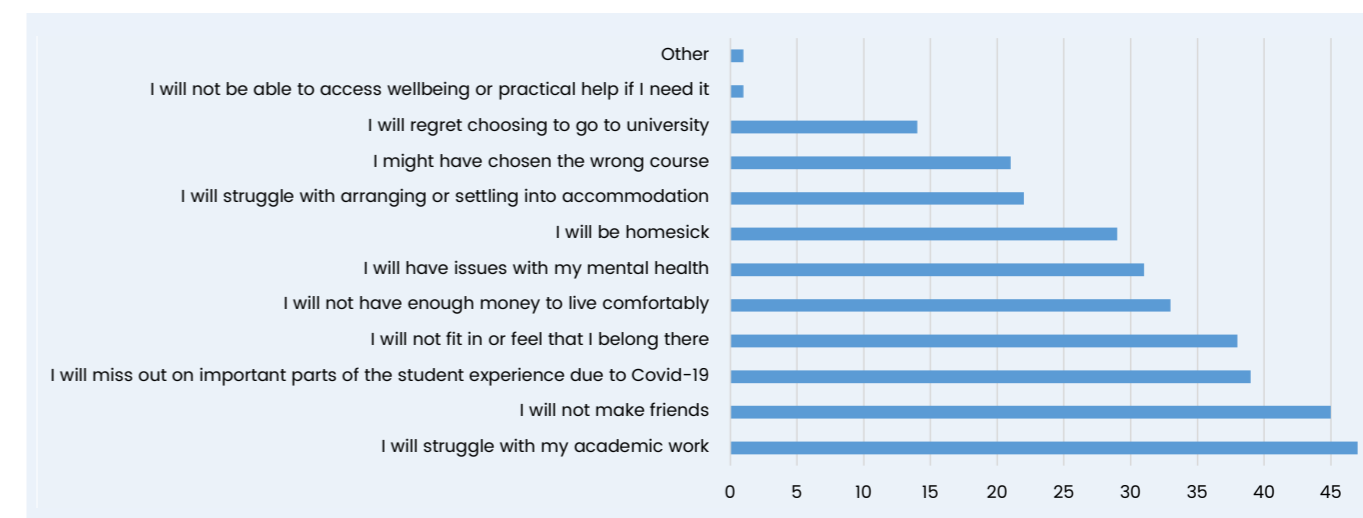
All respondents agreed that good study skills were more important to success than high grades at school or college. For some groups the divide between how likely they were to rate study skills or good grades as more important was wider than others, and Black students in particular were more likely to rate good grades as important.

Summer schools, camps and other outreach activities were in general much less likely to be regarded as important, though the groups most commonly targeted by these interventions were the most likely to attach importance to them. For example, 5% of FIF students rated these as the most important activity helping students succeed at HE, compared to only 1% of other students. Relatively small proportions of students overall take part in these programmes, but this could be some indication that the students who do participate in them recognise their value.

Concerns about HE

We also asked offer holders to indicate which common worries they had experienced in relation to starting HE study. In diagram 5 we can see that while Covid-19 has undoubtedly impacted students' worries about commencing study, it was not the most common worry. The idea of missing out on important parts of the university experience due to Covid-19 ranked third, with 39% of respondents reporting concern about this. Worries about struggling with academic work and not making friends were more common than pandemic-related concerns by some margin.

Diagram 5: Percentage of students who reported experiencing common worries (all respondents)



For some demographic groups, other concerns outranked Covid-19 as well. Fear of not fitting in at their institution was a more significant fear for students from Asian and Mixed backgrounds, and the possibility of not having enough money or issues with their mental health was more concerning for students from Black and Mixed backgrounds.

Certainly, some of these issues are likely to be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Students entering HE this year have missed out on opportunities to work and build up their savings during successive lockdowns, and for many their parents will be less able to offer them financial assistance than they might have been without the impact of the pandemic. Concern about mental health, for young people particularly, is very high in the current climate, and it is telling that numbers of referrals for conditions such as eating disorders have increased significantly for young people compared to the period prior to the pandemic.⁸

8. See Solmi, F. et al, 'COVID-19 and eating disorders in young people', The Lancet, 5:5 (2021), pp.316-318. On young people's mental health more broadly, see <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/05/one-in-five-15-to-24-year-olds-globally-often-feel-depressed-finds-unicef>.

Many other common worries about starting HE, too, are likely to be interlinked. Worrying about not being able to find a job could inform concern about money and worrying about not making friends or fitting in feed into worries about mental health.

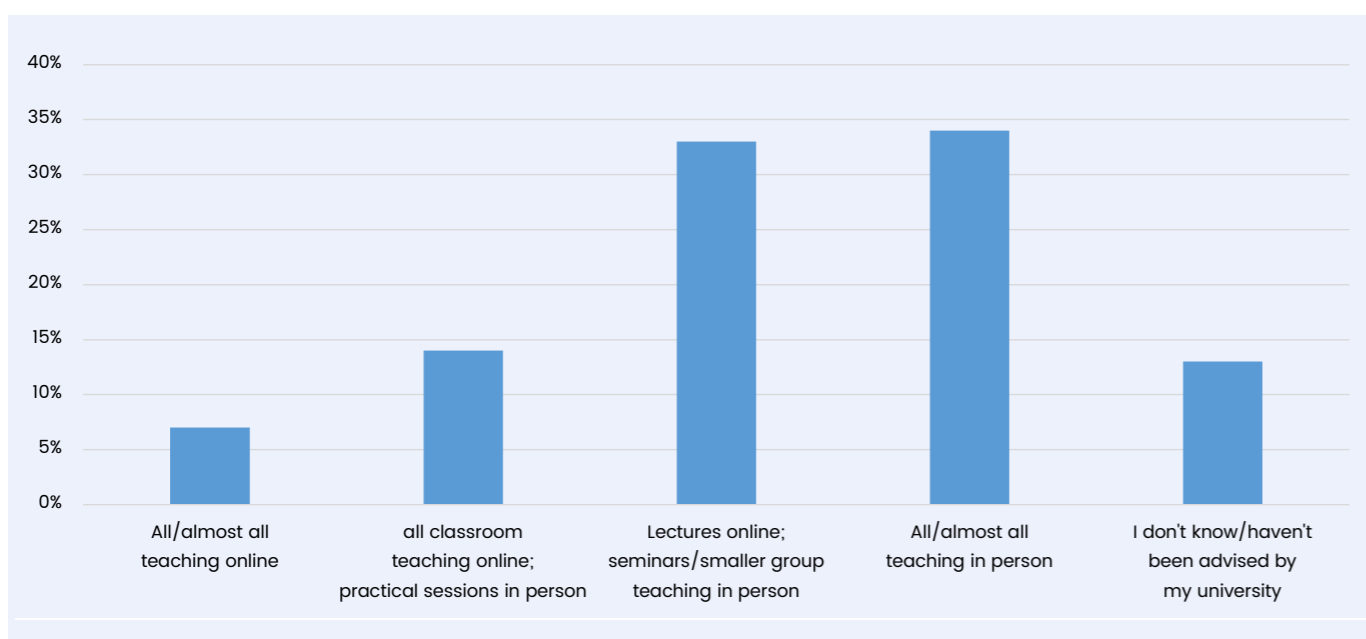
Despite these potential areas of overlap between students' common concerns, it is still significant that students did not identify the pandemic specifically as a worry at a higher rate than these other areas. This may indicate that Covid-19 feeds into students' worries about

entering HE, but the students do not see it as overwhelming all other concerns.

The bottom-ranked concerns among almost all students were regretting going to university or not being able to access wellbeing or practical help if they needed it. Students having comparatively high levels of certainty about HE being the right path for them and being able to find support if it is needed is grounds for optimism here. It suggests that whatever else 2021's London students are concerned about, they are sure they want to be studying.

Expectations

Diagram 6: How much of your teaching at university are you expecting to be online and how much in person?



Survey responses indicate that the majority of students are expecting a 'normal' or near-normal (by which we mean pre-pandemic) HE experience in 2021-22. Over two thirds of survey respondents expect all or most of their teaching to be delivered in person. Nine out of ten students plan to participate in an extra-curricular activity through their institution. Most (60%) expect access to specialist study spaces and equipment with either no or only minor limitations such as having to pre-book spaces. It appears that students who are closer to entering HE – in other words, 2021 school and college leavers – are more certain about how their course will be delivered but also more

realistic about the prospects of provision being partly online. One plausible explanation for this is that these students have received information directly from a firm or insurance choice institution, as offer holders reported having significantly greater levels of personalized contact with HE providers.

In line with their fairly high expectations of HE, students appear to be fairly confident about the transition to HE: 60% of respondents reported that they are confident about starting university. The figure is higher (64%) for those whose parents went to HE and lower (56%) amongst the first generation HE cohort.

Conclusion

This survey data shows us a cohort of applicants who are taking steps to prepare for HE study and are sure that it is the correct path for them. While Covid-19 is likely to have impacted their preparation and their attitudes at the beginning of their HE journey, it has not transformed their attitudes into something unrecognisably different from previous cohorts.

Supporting this year's incoming students in HE will require understanding how changes wrought by the pandemic have impacted existing worries, where it has amplified or altered pre-existing worries and where extra investment is required to mitigate its influence. Providers in the capital should take note of students' differing preferences when it comes to interacting with them and their outreach/IAG offer and consider how contact with different student groups could be more targeted in coming years. These sub-group differences within London are explored in further detail in the next chapter.



Chapter 3 – Differences between Groups

→ Chapter 3 – Differences between Groups

Different demographic groups expressed different attitudes to HE and described different ways of preparing for it in response to the survey questions. We explore these in further detail in this chapter.

Differences by Socio-Economic Background

Compared to the differences between other demographic groups, FSM eligibility was not correlated with large differences in behaviour or opinion across the questions we asked. The only large gap between FSM-eligible and non-eligible students was their attitude towards self-directed preparation and their likelihood of undertaking it. Non-FSM-eligible students were more likely to report doing self-directed preparation for university and attending online events, while FSM-eligible students were more likely to do every other form of preparation. 15% of non-FSM-eligible respondents indicated they thought self-guided preparation was the most important type of preparation for starting study, compared to just 10% of FSM-eligible respondents.

suggested by their higher education institution. This may indicate greater willingness on their part to take part in organised activities offered to them by schools, colleges or universities. This cohort was also slightly more likely than their peers to rank summer schools, camps or similar programmes or having a paying job as the most important, and three to four percentage points more likely to rank good teamwork and communication skills or taking part in extracurricular activities as most important.

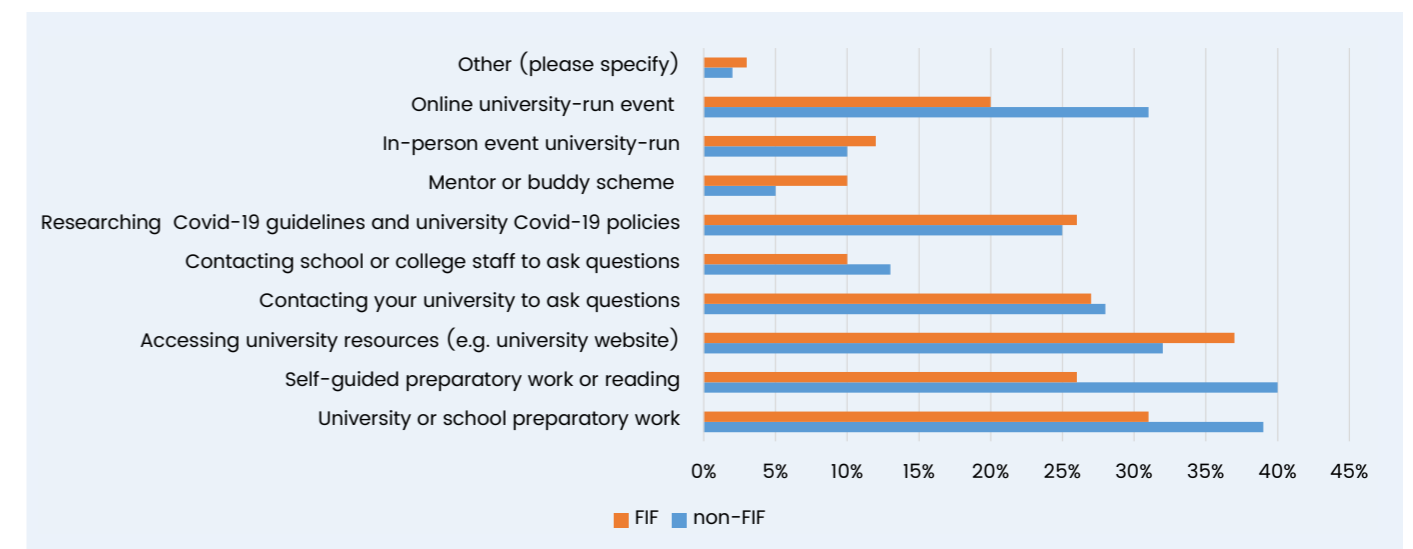
FSM-eligible students are by contrast more likely to contact their school, college or university for guidance, attend events, and do work

London's FSM-eligible students seemed to find a wider range of skills and experiences outside traditional academic skills relevant to success in HE than their peers. These students prepare for study in multiple different ways and take advantage of support where they have access to it.

Differences by Family HE Experience

Unlike FSM-eligible students, students who were the first in their family to go to HE do seem to approach HE preparation very differently to their peers. The HE sector in London should consider offering additional support for this group specifically, as the data indicates that the largest gaps in accessing pre-entry support exist between FIF students and those with family experience of HE.

Diagram 7: Pre-HE preparation activities for FIF and non-FIF students



Though FIF students were less likely to have undertaken almost all forms of preparation, they were twice as likely to have taken part in structured mentoring or buddying schemes (10% vs 5%) and were more likely to access university resources online and attend in-person university events. As we see from diagram 7, FIF students are less likely than their peers to undertake self-guided study and preparatory work, though when asked elsewhere in the survey how important they perceive the activity to be, they were more likely than their peers to consider it the most important form of preparation (19% vs 11% of non-FIF students).

Responding to a separate survey question asking who they would speak to for advice and guidance about preparing for university, they were also five percentage points more likely than their peers to rate their teachers as their most likely form of support, and seven percentage points more likely to rate university

staff highest. By contrast only 18% of FIF students, as opposed to 29% of non-FIF students, said they were likely to ask their parent/carer or a family member. These responses suggest differences in where and how FIF students access support: outside of the family home and either brokered via their school or offered by an HE provider.

The fact that FIF students value self-guided preparation highly but are significantly less likely to do, and the fact that they are more likely to engage in formal IAG programmes and speak to IAG professionals as opposed to family, suggests that this group are most likely to prepare for HE when specific support infrastructure is in place. Many London HE providers already include FIF in their eligibility criteria for pre-enrolment transition weeks and provide support via this route, but providing longer-term, structured engagement opportunities for FIF students would also be advised.

Differences by Ethnicity

Gaps in amounts and types of preparation, concerns about starting HE and attitudes to HE readiness exist between White students and those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. However, in many cases there is as much difference between individual BAME groups as there is between BAME students and White students. This reinforces the need to disaggregate the 'BAME' label when seeking to understand access and participation issues and to frame responses, as AccessHE has argued in relation to differences of outcome by ethnicity at later points in the student lifecycle.⁹

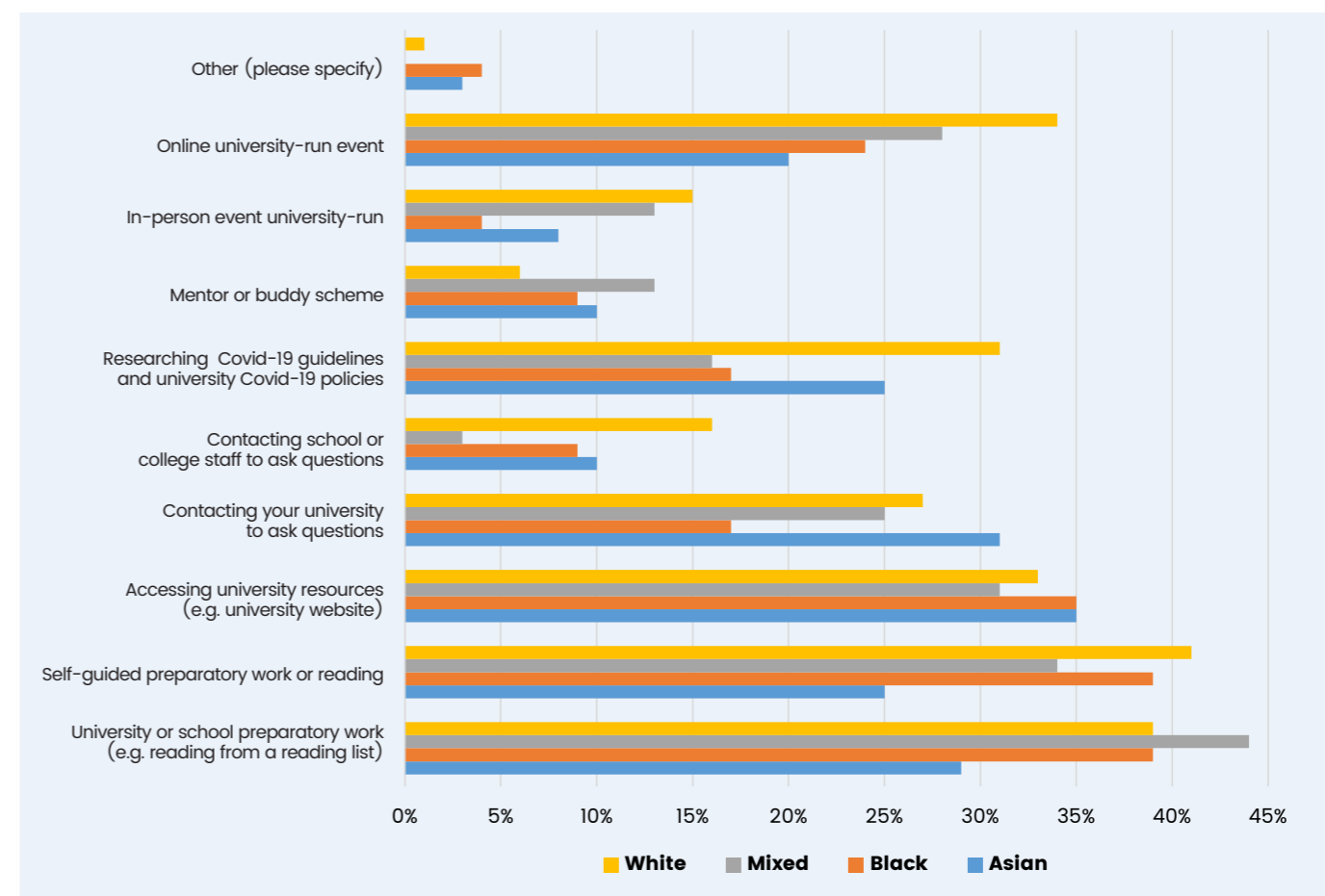
There was only a four percentage point difference between the highest and lowest average preparation figure, so differences in overall levels of preparation between ethnic groups were small, but each individual group had a distinctive profile of priorities, concerns and approaches to preparation. We can see that while White students have higher average levels of preparedness overall, there are many forms of preparation that students from BAME groups are accessing in London.

White students were more likely to have attended an online university-run event and have done self-guided preparation than any other group. As we have discussed, self-guided

preparation seems in this survey data to be more strongly associated with the groups currently most represented in HE. White students were also significantly more concerned about making friends (52%, compared to 43% of Asian students, the next most concerned group) and more likely to worry about the impact of Covid-19 on their student experience. Though this could be related to high levels of expectations about the social dimension of their HE experience, respondents from White backgrounds were no more likely than those from other ethnic groups to plan to engage in extra-curricular activities or student societies, so one would expect to students from other ethnic backgrounds express these same concerns.

Black students were the least concerned about socialising and fitting in. Of the activities they rated as important for helping students succeed, Black respondents prioritised traditional academic skills above softer skills and other areas of life experience. They were more concerned about money and logistics than the student experience – indeed worrying about having enough money to live comfortably was the second most common concern for Black students, compared to the fifth most common concern for all other students. More Black students than any other group rated high grades

Diagram 8: Pre-HE preparation for students of different ethnicities



as the most important activity for success in HE. Black students were also most likely to rate relevant work experience or internships highest. This functional understanding of what is required to access and succeed in HE is an interesting counterpoint to other groups and the fact that Black students worry less about the social transition to HE warrants further investigation.

Asian students were by contrast the least likely of all ethnic groups to rate high grades as the most important factor helping students succeed in HE. They were more than twice as likely to rate having a paying job as the most important activity as any other ethnic group, and they were also the group of students most likely to rank extracurricular activities highest.

This very wide variation in priorities, attitudes and concerns between different groups makes it impossible for any single programme of support or intervention to help all young London students from widening participation backgrounds thrive during their transition

to HE study. Support and guidance offered to students from 2021 onwards will need to consider this broad spread of priorities. As a sector, we should prioritise addressing the concerns of all students and being aware that some student groups will want support in specific areas. Furthermore, we must recognise that concerns which are relatively low priority for the student body as a whole might be a much larger concern for one particular group.

To this end, we recommend creating a pan-London forum for HE providers and London students from underrepresented backgrounds to meet and discuss their needs relating to the transition to HE in the post-pandemic period. This would enable more regular dialogue and ensure that prospective students with lived experience of preparing for HE in the midst of Covid-19 are involved in co-creation of support initiatives. The forum could operate as a standing committee and be hosted by London Higher/AccessHE with support from London Uni Connect.

9. See Atherton, G. and T Mazhari, Going Beyond BAME: Higher Education Awarding Gaps and Ethnicity in London (AccessHE: 2021). <https://www.accesshe.ac.uk/yYdx0u7/SBT2331-AccessHE-Going-beyond-BAME-Report-v4.pdf>. Survey questions relating to ethnic background used the Office for National Statistics' ethnicity categories but have used main-level categories in our analysis given the sample size. We recognise the limitations of this approach.



Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions

Whilst this report has looked at just a cross-section of the 'Covid cohort', it finds high levels of appetite for HE and fairly high levels of confidence in starting HE study. This is encouraging and attests to the resilience of the young people we surveyed. At the same time, the report finds differing levels of HE readiness and evidence that students from certain widening participation backgrounds prepare for HE in ways that require greater provider input. It will be crucial to recognise and respond to this as a sector if these students are to be effectively supported as they make the transition to HE.

Looking at the survey responses we find that:

1. There is no evidence that school and college leavers in London are any less likely to pursue HE study post-pandemic.
2. Prospective students in London clearly see the personal benefits of HE study, both financial and intellectual. Motivations for pursuing HE are overwhelmingly for positive as opposed to tactical reasons, which is somewhat counter-intuitive given increased participation in higher education has historically been counter-cyclical.
3. Students nonetheless approach decisions about HE progression with a degree of pragmatism and see career prospects as an important factor.
4. Young Londoners are broadly confident about making the transition to HE, and whilst it appears that the pandemic may feed into other concerns about starting a degree, it isn't a concern in and of itself.
5. The majority of students we surveyed are expecting a normal or near-normal HE experience. This has implications for students, in terms of how their actual experience in HE at a period of readjustment for the sector will compare to their expectations. It also has implications for providers, who will need to consider whether these expectations enable or work against a successful transition into HE.
6. Students prepare for HE in different ways and obtain pre-entry advice and guidance via different routes depending on their background.
7. A characteristic that emerges in our survey as an especially strong determinant of attitudes towards and preparation for HE is being a first-generation HE student. This may be because family has become a more important mediator and influencer of HE attitudes during successive lockdowns.

Recommendations

As this report shows, a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting HE progression is unlikely to achieve equality of outcomes for students. It is important firstly to orientate transition support in the post-pandemic period towards those who have been impacted most acutely by the events of 2020 and 2021. But more to the point, this support should meet students where they are, recognising the differences in how discrete groups learn about and prepare for HE. A useful starting point on the way to achieving this would be to increase student consultation and co-creation, as we recommend below. At the same time, more research is needed into how certain widening participation characteristics influence the transition to HE.

1. Convene a pan-London conversation between students, providers, schools and colleges about HE transition support that seeks to identify possible shared approaches.
2. Establish a standing young Londoner HE progression committee. This could serve as an interface between London HEIs and prospective students and enable co-creation of transition support and of curricula.
3. Strengthen information-sharing processes between providers and schools/colleges relating to how HE programmes in London will be delivered and what students can expect from their institution's extra-curricular offer. Uni Connect, Discover Uni and UCAS can all play a role here as can local authority-led CHEIAG networks.
4. Encourage HE providers to include 'first in family' in their evaluation of and reporting on continuation outcomes for students to understand any impact this characteristic has on the transition to HE.
5. In tandem with this, undertake a London-wide, longitudinal study of how young people's post-secondary choices are shaped and mediated in the post-pandemic period. This would complement other studies already underway looking at the pandemic's longer-term effects on educational, career and mental health outcomes for young people.



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