Safety, food and well-being are a greater concern than attainment: The views from university widening participation staff in the context of Covid-19

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"We have concerns that the young people we support in some of the most deprived areas will now be lacking structure, role models and security." (Outreach professional)

We conducted a survey between 25th March and 20th April 2020. 262 respondents identified as widening participation and outreach staff. Their key concerns for the widening participation students they serve were:

1. Safety and sustenance

- "For at risk children- that there could be a higher likelihood that they could experience abuse/neglect without school as a safe place."

- "[there are young people] who are probably safer inside of school then outside of school."

- "Students that did receive free school meals now may not be getting a proper meal all day which affects their learning"

- "Lack of nutrition or money/financial stress and worry being placed on them (FSM)"

2. Mental health and well-being

- "Mental health and well-being concerns which might pose acute risk during the crisis and a long-term trauma effect afterwards that might be particularly challenging for this [Widening participation] group of students."
- "Falling behind, disengaging from school, disengaging from friends, poor health and wellbeing, low self-esteem"

3. Differential support at home and potentially worsening attainment and progression gaps between more and less advantaged children

- "At this time more reliance is being placed on home support. This therefore favours those with parents with the knowledge and skills to support home schooling. Similarly, Higher Education Information Advice and Guidance is reliant on parental knowledge to support students. Therefore, people whose parents don't have this knowledge, or who are estranged from them, are disadvantaged at this time."
- "I think there are many families where the parents cannot support home schooling, and that will include many of the other groups: SEN, in care, single parent, without internet access, LPN, estranged/disabled/EAL/pupil premium"
- "Families less able to support home schooling - limited engagement with continuing studies, and therefore falling behind on return to school"
- "I worry that the 'summer gap' we see between the most and least deprived children when school is in a 'normal' academic year will only get worse during this pandemic."

4. Concern for those lacking access to IT connectivity, resources and support, in particular that new online resources would not be accessible to those who need most support.

- "I'm worried about our assumption that all learners have access to mobile technology, and a space and the support to access resources. While not all schools are created equal, there is at least something to be said for the school day providing structure and support to students."
- "Without internet access - having to focus on accessing resources through alternative means, and therefore reduced engagement with studies"

- "Assumption that everyone has access to e-learning and parents able to engage, or that children's home lives are conducive to e-learning"

In terms of interventions, respondents wanted to see:

1. Direct support to students, parents and teachers, especially to help reduce inequalities in access to resources and connectivity and to promote well-being and emotional support.
2. Targeted support for students on free school meals, young carers and estranged students
3. Clear policy guidance on the use of predicted grades in university admissions for students in at-risk group
4. Universities to review their contextual offers and extenuating circumstances offer process

Introduction

We conducted rapid response research assessing the perception of widening participation practitioners in universities and Uni Connect partnerships on how the closure of schools as a result of the social isolation measures enforced due to the Covid-19 pandemic on 20th March 2020 impacts on young people in compulsory education, and affect the work of widening participation practitioners in supporting progression to Higher Education (HE). The work was motivated by concerns that inequalities will deepen as a result particularly in terms of creating limitations on the functioning of state education as a force that can effectively reduce the magnitude of inequalities in educational achievement.[1] Therefore, the survey sought to highlight key issues and concerns and point to the potentially useful policy and practice recommendations to promote widening participation to higher education at this unprecedented time.

This widening participation practitioner survey was part of a broader survey on the impact of school closures with 2219 responses overall, mostly from parents and teachers but also with just over 200 responses from young people aged 16-18. Our survey containing closed and open-ended questions was available between the 25th of March and 20th of April. We received 262 responses from professionals working largely for universities or Uni Connect partnerships in widening participation.

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[1] Raudenbusch, S. W. and R. D. Eschmann (2015). "Does Schooling increase or reduce social inequality?" Annual Review of Sociology 41, 443-70.
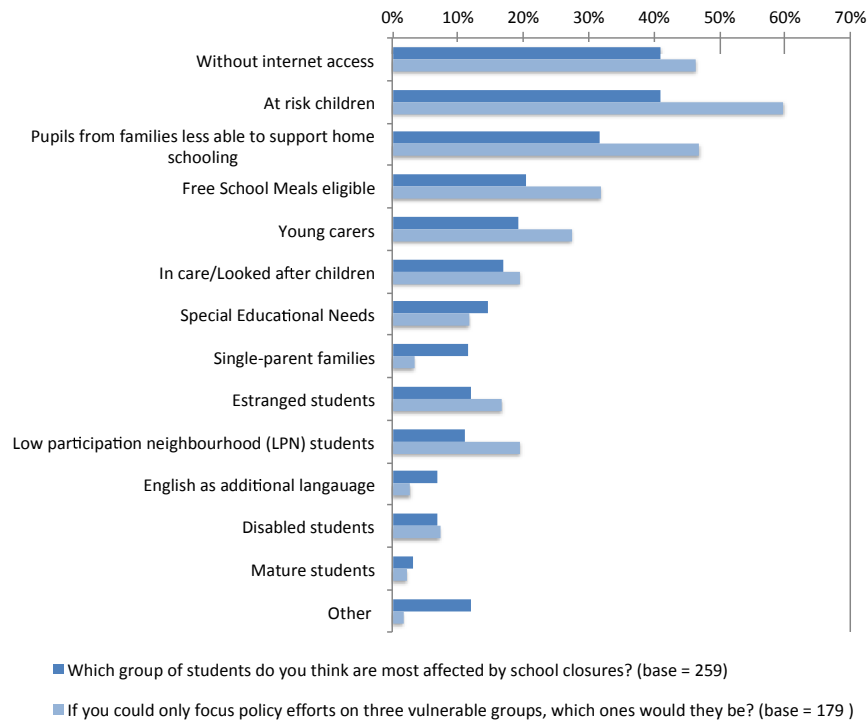
Views on the impact of school closures on students

Respondents felt that the effects of school closures are likely to cut across all groups of students, although students who already face disadvantages will be hardest hit. Most concern was about well-being and mental health, but there were high levels of concern (around 4 out 5) across many aspects such as attainment and progression and the long-term prospects for disadvantaged students.

Using a scale of 1-5 where 5 is most concerned and 1 is least concerned, please tell us how concerned you are about the impact of school closure for the students you target as part of your Uni Connect partnership?	Average (base = 74 respondents)
Attainment	3.8
Progression opportunities	3.9
Wellbeing and mental health	4.4
Long term prospects	3.8
Other*	3.9

*Respondents mentioned aspects related to family dyanmics, social skills.

We also asked respondents which groups of students they thought were most affected by the school closure and where policy makers should target their support:

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%

Chart categories (top to bottom):
- Without internet access
- At risk children
- Pupils from families less able to support home schooling
- Free School Meals eligible
- Young carers
- In care/Looked after children
- Special Educational Needs
- Single-parent families
- Estranged students
- Low participation neighbourhood (LPN) students
- English as additional langauage
- Disabled students
- Mature students
- Other

■ Which group of students do you think are most affected by school closures? (base = 259)

■ If you could only focus policy efforts on three vulnerable groups, which ones would they be? (base = 179)

Those without internet access/IT connectivity, those defined as 'at risk' and those who lack support at home as the groups were of most concern to respondents.

The qualitative comments indicate that there are major concerns for the safety and well-being of at risk children, because of the risk of abuse, exploitation, poor mental health, self-harm, risky behaviour/ falling victim to crime or being dragged into it themselves). Added to this, children at home who were previously not at risk may develop into being at risk without services knowing (due to not being at school and therefore with less chance for professionals to notice changes of behaviour and so on).

Many comments implied that a lack of home support was more likely for students in the other disadvantaged groups. The comments also suggest that lack of home support may coincide with other issues, such as lack of space for study for students in over-crowded households. Concerns were expressed for estranged students who may risk feeling very isolated and vulnerable during this time.

Around a third of respondents would like to see policy efforts focused towards Free School Meals eligible students. The comments highlight concerns that educational and emotional resilience, as well as levels of support, are lower for students in low income households compared to their more advantaged peers. The potentially wide range of problems facing those in households with low income were mentioned, from lack of adequate food or nutritious meals, as well as insecure housing, and increased pressure on families to continue working making carers of these students more distant and less able to provide educational and emotional support, and also increasing the risks of their families direct exposure to the Covid-19 virus and its associated potentially devastating consequences.

A fifth of those who responded would like to see policy efforts focused in areas of low higher education participation (LPN), as a proxy for students in the most deprived areas. It was clear that most respondents expect relative disadvantage to be neighbourhood related, and that those in areas scoring the worse on indicators of social and economic disadvantage including higher education progression are more likely to fall into the priority groups identified above. Economic disadvantage does not just raise issues to do with access to educational resources and support (including internet access) but other important requirements related to getting adequate daily nutrition, mental and emotional support and safety. The sense also emerged that students who are young carers will be under additional pressure at the current time, and well over a quarter of respondents saw this group as a high priority. Other people noted that extra pressure is also put on children in families with English as a second/additional language as they are often relied on for translations and supporting essential households tasks such as shopping.

Amongst other groups affected by school closures, students in the transition stages of education (Years 11 and 13) were most often mentioned by Uni Connect respondents. A range of issues was raised: not only those associated with grade calculations for those who have cancelled exams, but also missing out on progression/transition support in the summer term. Several comments point to concerns that the aspirations of students who don't have a family background in higher education may be influenced against higher education progression because of negative attitudes of their families or because they are under pressure to support the family economically. If grade predictions are used as a basis for admission to courses, state educated students in state

education will be adversely affected because research has shown that only 16 per cent of applicants achieve the A-level grad points that they are predicted and most are over-predicted. However, this overprediction is less for those from disadvantaged backgrounds meaning that advantaged students are likely to benefit from an admissions system based on predicted grades. .[2] Issues were also raised in relation to the higher education progression opportunities for some specific groups, notably students who aspire to enter medical education as lack of access to work experience opportunities, may be exacerbated in the current climate.

Implications for widening participation to higher education activities

All but a small handful of respondents said there were negative implications for their work, and the most prevalent implication is the postponement or cancellation of planned activities with groups of students and/or teachers. One Uni Connect partnership respondent said 182 events had been cancelled so far. Where events have been postponed, knock on effects were noted for the future (for example a Uni Connect practitioner said much of the work they have spent the last 4 months planning is now postponed and finding new dates, re-booking events etc will take time from the work that would have started in September. This is how one practitioner described the impact:

> *"The summer terms are a time where there is significant engagement due to schools dedicating time to personal development and for Y12 students its a crucial time to support them in exploring HE options. It is not just the events that have already been cancelled but it is the uncertainty of what comes next, whether schools will reschedule cancelled activity or just move on to the next activity leaving a gap for some students. Also if there is significant catching up to do in terms of the curriculum it could have a knock on impact on the engagement schools have with [outreach]."*
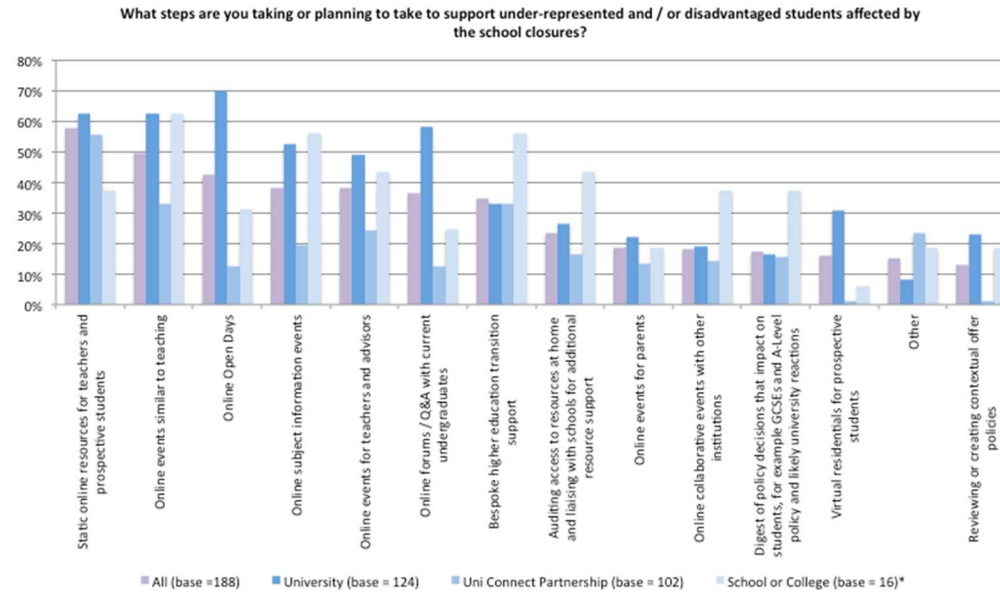> [Widening Participation Liaison Officer]

New developments in widening participation to higher education activities

Most respondents identified steps that are being taken or are in planning stage to support under-represented and / or disadvantaged students affected by the school closures. Increasing focus on online materials and a shift to online delivery of events being at the forefront of these developments.

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[2] Wyness, G. (2016) Predicted grades: accuracy and impact. London: UCU.

What steps are you taking or planning to take to support under-represented and / or disadvantaged students affected by the school closures?

All (base =188) University (base = 124) Uni Connect Partnership (base = 102) School or College (base = 16)*

Caution low base

Seven out of ten respondents who are in university widening participation and related roles said that open days would be offered online, and over six out ten said their universities were offering online events similar to teaching, and static online resources. Online open days were a feature across all types of institutions. Respondents in Russell Group institutions were more likely than those in other types of institution to offer static online resources (67% of respondents in Russell Group institutions said this compared to 57% and 53% in Post-92 and other institutions respectively). Over half (53%) of all university respondents spoke about online subject information events, and just under half (49%) were offering online events for teachers and advisors. Online forums / Q&A with current undergraduates featured for 58% of university respondents overall, and respondents in post-92 institutions were most likely to say this (74%). More respondents in the post-92 and other types of institutions were offering bespoke higher education transition support compared to those in Russell Group institutions (44% compared to 23% of respondents in Russell Group institutions). Around two-fifths in Post-92 institutions (39%) and a quarter in other types of institutions (24%) were offering online events for parents, compared to 14% of respondents in Russell Group institutions. Virtual residentials featured more highly for respondents in Russell Group institutions (44%) compared to only 17% of respondents in other institutions. Respondents in the

'other' category of universities were most likely to say they were reviewing or creating contextual admissions policies (41%), well above twice the share of respondents in the Post-92 and Russell Group institutions.

> *"Online resources/support particularly targeted at underrepresented groups. Ensuring all support is mobile friendly, as many learners do not have access to computers."*
> [Evaluation lead]

Around a third of Uni Connect respondents pointed to planning for online outreach activities, to be offered through school partnerships, or direct to students. For example one senior leader spoke about personal phone calls for pupils in year 11 or 13 about choices for the next year and futures. Other aspects of the Uni Connect offer mentioned by respondents included online mentoring or tailored support via email. Overall, around a third aimed to continue to offer bespoke transition support. A Programme Leader in a Uni Connect partnership said although they are using a range of alternative ways of working with schools and students, the uptake/engagement of students in this this offer may be limited as school leaders are dealing with more pressing issues.

On a positive note, several respondents were optimistic that developments taking place now out of necessity may create new working models for the future. For example, one Widening Participation Officer commented that the current situation has opened new channels for communications with schools and telephone conversations have taken on a more personal touch, which will perhaps benefit relationships going forward. There were mixed views about the potential effectiveness of online delivery. Some respondents felt that online delivery methods, although as yet untested, may prove beneficial.

Support from policy makers
We asked respondents what type of support they would like to receive. In the free text, two respondents commented:

> *"I would like to see an offer of a national programme of online activities/events/webinars that students and parents can access during this time which can help to prepare for the next step."*
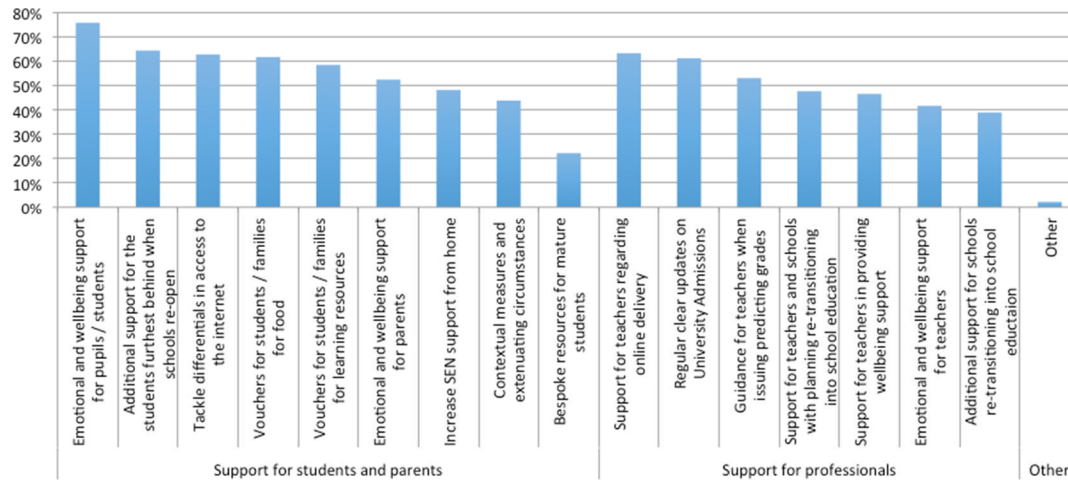
> *"Clear and concise messaging to pass to schools and students about HE progression and the UCAS process this summer."*
>
> *"The cancelling of A levels and the proposed use of constructed grades is causing a lot of concern and also raising questions about how they and other measures can be used for selection while still being fair and encouraging widening participation."*

The quantitative data indicated that respondents most wished to see support for well-being and additional support for those falling behind. A majority would like to see support to tackle differentials whether in relation to internet access, learning resources, or necessities. Just under half were in favour of prioritising increased SEN support at home and support for teachers in relation to online delivery, and a large minority welcome support for teachers re-transitioning students into education and providing emotional support.

Well over two-fifths thought changes should be made to contextual measures and extenuating circumstances in higher education admissions. Regular updates on university admissions along with guidance on grade predictions stand out as key measures many respondents would like to see to support higher education transition at this time.

What support from policy makers would most help you to improve outcomes for those students most negatively affected by the impact of school closures?

A bar chart showing percentage responses for various support options, grouped into "Support for students and parents", "Support for professionals", and "Other":

- Emotional and wellbeing support for pupils / students — ~75%
- Additional support for the students furthest behind when schools re-open — ~64%
- Tackle differentials in access to the internet — ~63%
- Vouchers for students / families for food — ~62%
- Vouchers for students / families for learning resources — ~59%
- Emotional and wellbeing support for parents — ~53%
- Increase SEN support from home — ~48%
- Contextual measures and extenuating circumstances — ~44%
- Bespoke resources for mature students — ~22%
- Support for teachers regarding online delivery — ~64%
- Regular clear updates on University Admissions — ~61%
- Guidance for teachers when issuing predicting grades — ~53%
- Support for teachers and schools with planning re-transitioning into school education — ~48%
- Support for teachers in providing wellbeing support — ~47%
- Emotional and wellbeing support for teachers — ~42%
- Additional support for schools re-transitioning into school eductaion — ~39%
- Other — ~2%

Overall, it is clear that widening participation professionals are very concerned about the less advantaged students they serve and the impact of the pandemic on their experiences and future prospects. It is worth highlighting that these concerns are not always or even primarily about educational outcomes but about their general safety and well-being.

In terms of their own practices, there was obviously some uncertainty and anxiety around the rapid changes to delivery and working practices and the cancellation of many widening participation events. However, there were also silver linings with some aspects of practices improved and having the potential for long-term enhancements to practices after the re-opening of schools.