



Future Plans and Aspirations

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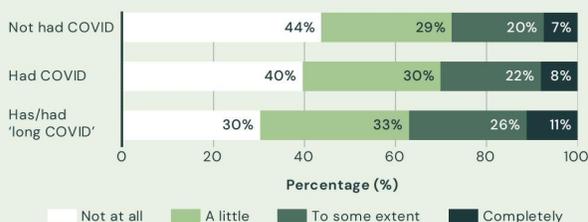
Highlights

- Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong bearing on how young people saw their futures. Of those who had made education plans by the start of the pandemic, almost two-thirds (64%) reported that their educational plans had changed (at least to some extent) because of the pandemic. Career plans were only slightly less likely to have been affected: three in five (60%) of those who had made education plans had changed them as a result. Females, young people from disadvantaged family backgrounds, and those attending state comprehensive schools were more likely than their counterparts to report that they had changed their education and career plans due to the pandemic.
- Young people who reported having had 'long COVID' or ill health, who were asked to shield or who experienced economic hardships were more likely to have changed their future plans. Those who described themselves as having suffered from 'long COVID' were the most likely to have had their career plans affected, with 70% of this group having changed their career plans at least to some extent, compared with 56% of those who had not had the virus at all.
- Disadvantaged students were less likely to receive information, advice and guidance (IAG) during the pandemic. Those who attended independent schools were significantly more

likely to have accessed formal IAG activities: 86% of this group accessed at least one type of IAG activity while at school, compared to just under seven in ten (69%) across state comprehensive schools as a whole, and 67% at the schools with the highest levels of free school meal (FSM) eligibility.

This cohort of young people continues to have large inequalities in their educational aspirations. Disadvantaged students were less likely to be planning to apply for university, had less confidence about getting into university, and were more likely to plan to do a vocational qualification. While 98% of participants who were privately educated and 92% of those who attended state grammar schools reported that they were likely to apply for university, only 68% of those attending state comprehensive schools say they plan to do so.

Change in career plans due to COVID-19, by COVID status



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Conclusions and Policy Implications

- Evidence from the first wave of the COSMO study suggests that, across the board, the pandemic has had major implications for young people's future plans. Other than those attending independent schools, the majority of young people said they had changed their career plans as a result of the pandemic – with similarly large-scale changes in education plans. That the pandemic has had implications for the future plans of so many young people makes supporting them to make informed choices about their education and careers all the more important. Future waves of COSMO will look to further develop our understanding of these changes in plans by looking at outcomes for the cohort, and will inform policy responses that help to mitigate the long-term impacts of the pandemic on aspirations.

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- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those attending state comprehensive schools (particularly those with more disadvantaged intakes) were among the most likely to have their plans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They were also less likely to have access to career information, advice and guidance (IAG) during the pandemic. Provision of IAG in schools remains important, as it helps to inform young people's future plans – be this considering future career options, selecting a pathway towards vocational qualification, or choosing a university course. Enhanced provision of IAG and mentoring services in schools (particularly in those with high rates of FSM eligibility) is an important plank of the policy response to the pandemic and should be considered a key element of education catch-up.
- Much good work has been done in recent years around Widening Participation (WP), which aims to broaden access to university among groups that have historically had lower rates of admission. During the pandemic, access gaps actually widened, despite an increase in overall HE progression rates.²⁰ Gaps in access are likely to remain for the COSMO cohort – with those from disadvantaged backgrounds being both less likely to plan on applying for university, and having less confidence that they will successfully get a place if they do apply. In light of this – as well as this group also being more likely to have changed their education plans – WP provision should be redoubled, with evidence-based support targeted at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Conversely, young people who attend either independent or selective state schools are significantly less likely than their state comprehensive peers to either currently be taking (or plan to be taking in future) a vocational qualification. Similarly, young people who go to schools with lower rates of eligibility for free school meals (i.e. those who are, generally, more advantaged) were less likely to be planning to take a vocational pathway. Any gaps in information and expertise around these options should be addressed to highlight this as a potentially valuable pathway into future careers.
- Some COVID-19 pandemic experiences, including having had 'long COVID', suffering from ill-health, being asked to shield, and experiencing economic hardship during the pandemic were found to have had influenced young people's future plans. Future briefing papers will further explore both the financial and health impacts of the pandemic, again using data from Wave 1 of the COSMO study.