

LIVING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

A report on how students
feel about COVID-19



The world of student marketing has been turned upside down. COVID-19 has closed schools and universities, cancelled summer exams and put a big question mark over the rest of 2020. And while no-one can be sure just yet what this means for UK universities and colleges, we must spare a thought for the students whose plans for the next six months (and beyond) have been thrown into question.

A-Level students would now be gearing up for a month of revision timetables, coursework and a final push through May exams to the best. Summer. Ever. And for university students every week is precious. Every late night in the library missed is another day closer to the dissertation deadline. But now the big question is if any of it even matters.

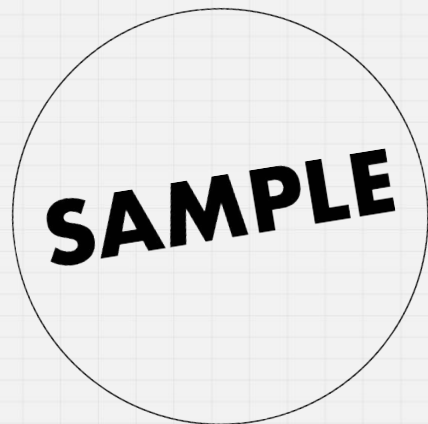
So we must ask; how do students feel about COVID-19? What are they worried about? Do they still plan on going on holiday this summer? How about university, is that still on the cards? Do they still even want to go to university? Let's find out.

This research will give your brand, university or institution an insight into what *really* matters right now for students. At a time of such uncertainty for the higher education sector, all brands should consider very carefully *what* and *how* they're communicating with their student audience.

The need to 'think student' is now more important than ever.

METHODOLOGY

We shared a survey with our audience of students on the Student Hut Opinion Panel, the UK's most diverse and engaged youth panel. It was open for 48 hours and closed on Monday 16 March 2020, during which we conducted deep-dive surveys with 329 students. Equal weighting was given to each participant's response.



329
RESPONSES

20,000
DATA POINTS

AGE
16-24

19.8
AVERAGE AGE
OF RESPONDENT

87.5%
FROM THE UK

19%
SIXTH FORM
/COLLEGE

74%
UNDERGRAD

**LEVEL
OF STUDY**

4%
POSTGRAD

2%
GRADUATE

48
HOURS

SURVEY OPEN FOR SURVEY OPEN FOR

The survey was designed and analysed by the Research division at Natives, the team behind the National Clearing Survey, the European MBA Survey, the Student Media Insights Report and other global research projects and led by our award-winning Director of Research, Kas Nicholls. Accredited partners with the Market Research Society, demonstrating our commitment to research and insight excellence.

KEY FINDINGS

1

Students are more concerned about how COVID-19 will impact their education than their own health.

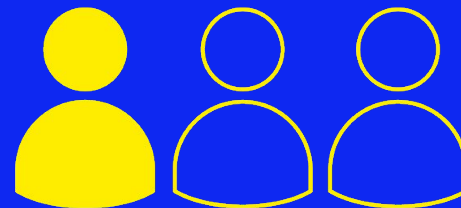


2

Just under half of students are now considering an online course provider rather than a traditional in-class HEI.

3

1 in 3 students would rather go to a university with more online or distance learning options in September 2020.



4

Just over half of students would defy government advice and plan to attend an event or visit friends.



5

Less than 1 in 5 have any confidence in the government's response.

SECTION 1: WHAT IS CONCERNING STUDENTS?



**9 IN 10 STUDENTS
ARE CONCERNED
ABOUT THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19**

It's no surprise that students' education is their main cause for concern. It's a pretty nerve-wracking time to be a student, with universities having already sent out their undergraduate offers for September 2020. And university students have been affected by teaching strikes already this year, so might already be worried they're falling behind.

Living through a global pandemic, we'd expect students' own health and wellbeing to be a top priority. However, students are ranking education-based anxieties like 'impact on exam results', 'missing school/college/uni' and 'not getting into university' even higher.



**STUDENTS ARE MORE
CONCERNED ABOUT
MISSING OUT ON THEIR
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ARE THEIR OWN HEALTH**

Over half of students say they're concerned about the impact COVID-19 will have on their health. But what *is* surprising is that they're **more** concerned about the impact and disruption this will have on their education.

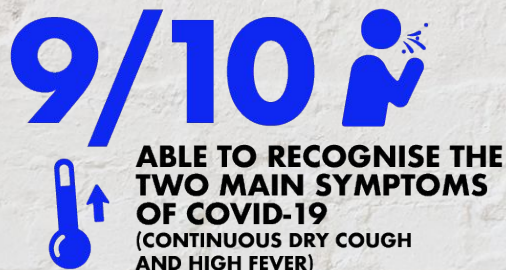
While students can get COVID-19, they're not in the age group that's most at risk, and so their own health may not be as much of a concern as feeling like their own future is beyond their control. All this being said, their top concern was the health of their friends and family.

So, what precautions are students taking to protect themselves against COVID-19? Luckily, government advice about how to protect themselves (and others) seems to be getting through, with:

SECTION 1: WHAT IS CONCERNING STUDENTS?

The good news is that students know what to look out for, with:

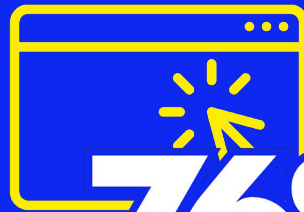
However, not all of the government advice has been taken on board:



SECTION 1: WHAT IS CONCERNING STUDENTS?

But with so much new information flying around, it can be hard to know where to look for the facts, and who to trust. Because we get our news from different places and the government advice being open to interpretation, there's no guarantee that we're all hearing the same thing. **76%** of students say they're getting their news via traditional media such as the BBC, Sky and CNN. **61%** are getting their news via social media, and **only 1%** say they 'get no news at all'.

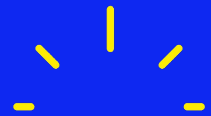
So, even though students are getting their daily news from a wide range of sources, we can rest assured that the important messages about COVID-19 are getting through, and students are taking note.



76%

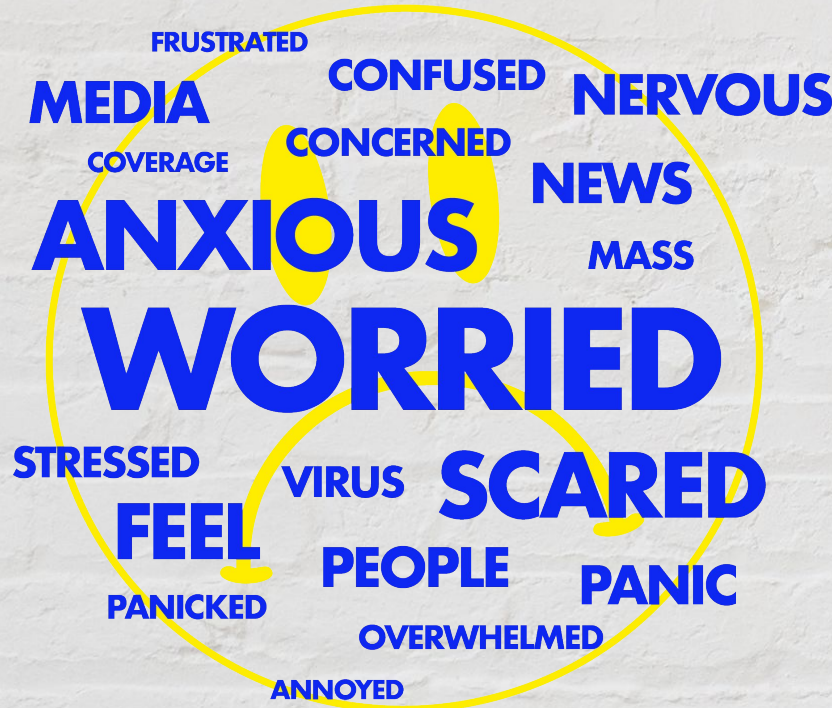


61%



1%

SECTION 1: WHAT IS CONCERNING STUDENTS?



But how is this making students feel? As a generation, young people today are relatively good at recognising and talking about their mental health. And so when asked about how news coverage is making them feel, their responses are far from positive.

‘Anxious’, ‘worried’, ‘nervous’, ‘scared’ and ‘confused’ were among the top responses, and this is hardly surprising.

Journalists are being accused of scaremongering, using language that creates fear and panic in young people, and with images of overcrowded hospitals and empty supermarket shelves becoming the norm, it’s getting harder and harder to switch off. And when we consider how unavoidable the news is at the moment, with COVID-19 being talked about on nearly every platform almost all of the time, it can sometimes do more harm than good.

SECTION 2: THE RESPONSE OF YOUR UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OR SCHOOL

So far, we've understood how students are feeling, their main concerns and what they're doing to protect themselves from COVID-19. But how does this affect their mindset towards your university, college or school, and what can you do to help?

While COVID-19 may well have affected how businesses operate for good, with an increasing number of staff working from home, the same could be said for universities, colleges and schools.

Our survey found that **a third of students** say they want their university or college to offer online alternatives in place of in-person classes by September 2020. And in a significant shift, **44% of prospective 2020 undergraduate students** are considering an online course provider instead of a traditional course with in-person delivery.



SECTION 2: THE RESPONSE OF YOUR UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OR SCHOOL

So could this be the end of in-person teaching? Online course providers have often struggled to find their place within higher education, but are becoming commonplace as time goes on. If institutions don't keep up with student demand and consider online alternatives, they could risk falling behind.

"THIS IS MY FINAL TERM OF MY DEGREE, SO EVERY DAY COUNTS. AS IMPORTANT AS IT IS TO PROTECT EVERYONE FROM THE VIRUS, I ALSO DON'T WANT TO LET ALL OF MY THREE YEARS OF HARD WORK GO TO WASTE, MONTHS BEFORE I AM DUE TO GRADUATE."

But there are also things you can start doing now to connect with your students. Our survey found that **53% of prospective students** would favour a university in September 2020 which offers clear information and advice on COVID-19. Now we know there's a lot of uncertainty about the September 2020 intake and no official guidance on how best to tackle this. So don't feel the need to make promises or big claims that you can't deliver.

Instead, think small, be honest and focus on what you *can* tell them. Consider the kinds of content that your students will want to read about. Whether that's a blog about keeping on top of your mental health, or a Twitter discussion about the best ways to work from home. Show that you're human, show that you care and remember that we're all in this together.



**STUDENTS ARE NOW
CONSIDERING ONLINE
PROVIDERS INSTEAD
OF A TRADITIONAL
IN-CLASS DEGREE**



**STUDENTS WANT THEIR
UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE
TO OFFER ONLINE
ALTERNATIVES IN PLACE
OF IN-PERSON CLASSES
BY SEPTEMBER 2020**

SECTION 2: THE RESPONSE OF YOUR UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OR SCHOOL

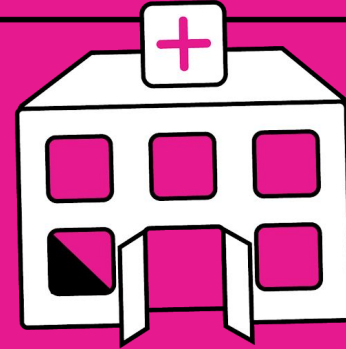
If you keep communicating with your students they'll feel supported, even if you don't know all the answers. The trick here is to be as accommodating as possible. Our survey found that **51%** of prospective students would favour a university with a flexible admissions criteria in the wake of COVID-19. While nothing is set in stone just yet, it's important to appreciate that your students may have limited control over their final A-level grades. So remember this when deciding on your 2020 entry criteria.

Whatever you decide, remember to communicate it clearly. Showing leadership is key, and will give students the guidance they need. When asked, **only 8%** would favour January start dates, although **43%** are more likely to study online.

SECTION 3: CONFIDENCE



**LESS THAN 1 IN 5
STUDENTS HAVE
CONFIDENCE IN
THE GOVERNMENT'S
RESPONSE**



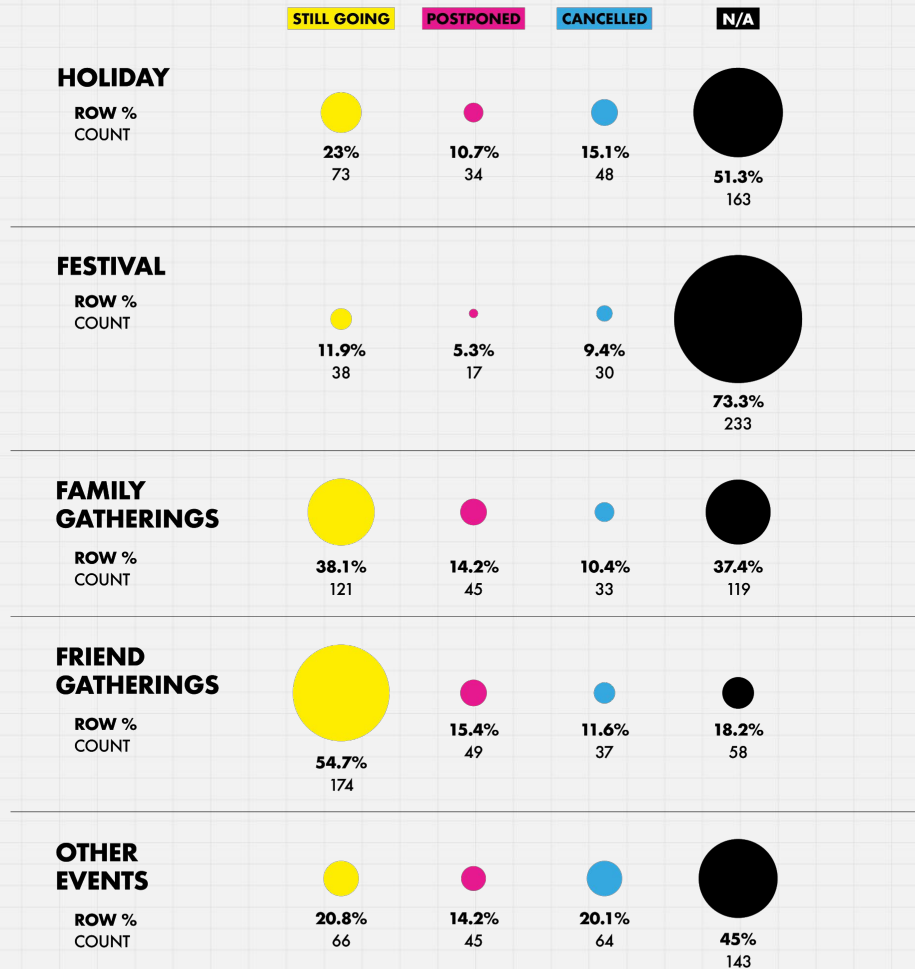
**LESS THAN 1 IN 5
STUDENTS THINK
THAT THE NHS IS
PREPARED**

SECTION 3: CONFIDENCE

Looking towards the future, how confident are students about the UK's ability to get through COVID-19?

When asked if COVID-19 has changed any of their social plans, **54.7%** said they were still going to meet up with friends. And **just under half of students (48%)** would defy government advice and attend an event if they had paid for a ticket (and this was still an option).

STUDENT HUT

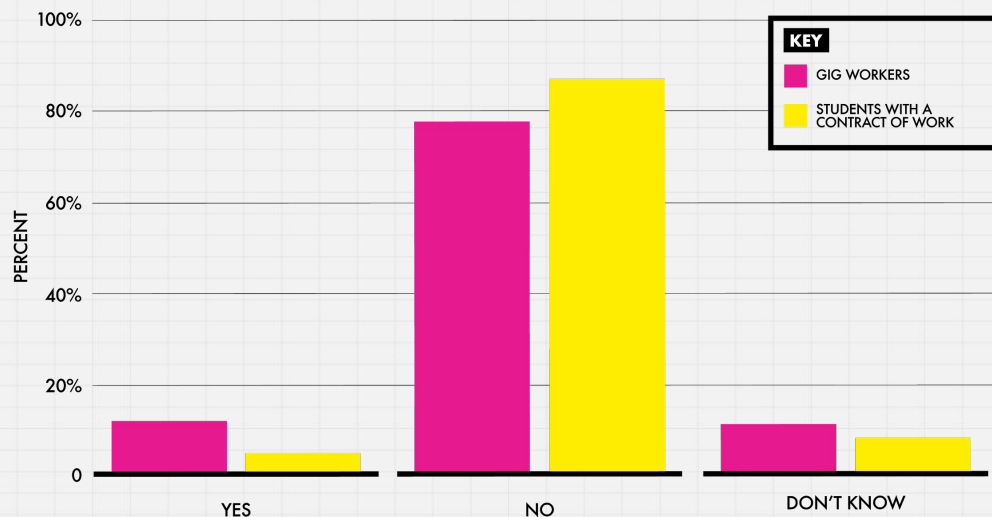


SECTION 3: CONFIDENCE

It's important to note that this data was collected on w/c 16th March (if you want to receive our weekly update, get in touch) so this will have changed since. What's interesting is the lack of confidence students have in the government response and the NHS's ability cope. But they don't yet view this as a hindrance to their social lives or plans for the summer.

What's more, students working in the gig economy are **twice as likely** to go work if they're suffering from the typical symptoms of COVID-19, than students who have contracted hours or are in full-time education.

WOULD YOU CONTINUE TO GO TO WORK IF YOU EXPERIENCED COVID-19 SYMPTOMS?



CONCLUSION:

With very little confidence in the government's response to COVID-19, students are concerned about disruption to their education more so than anything else. This is not only impacting their plans for the future but the way they view traditional teaching. Institutions must therefore carefully consider their offering for September 2020. They must make strategic decisions to keep students on board throughout the summer regarding how classes are taught and how they plan to enrol students. But in order to protect their brand throughout the pandemic, institutions must put the concerns of their students front and centre.

To finish let's see what students think will be the lasting effect of the pandemic:

"PEOPLE WILL BE BETTER PREPARED IF THERE IS ANOTHER OUTBREAK OF A NEW VIRUS"

"IT WILL MAKE MORE PEOPLE SCARED OF TRAVELLING AND GOING DIFFERENT PLACES AGAIN"

"EVERYONE WILL BE MUCH MORE CAUTIOUS WITH GERMS AND SPREADING ILLNESSES"

"DEPRESSION AND MONEY WORRIES"

"VERY LITTLE, AS SEEN WITH PREVIOUS EPIDEMICS"

"FINANCIAL ISSUES"

"WE HAVE TO REBUILD THE SOCIETY FROM SCRATCH"

"LESS PEOPLE WORKING"

"INCREASE IN RACISM TOWARDS ASIAN PEOPLE"

"THEY WILL REMOVE PHYSICAL CASH SOON, AND USE THIS AS JUSTIFICATION"

CONCLUSION:

The world has certainly changed a lot in the past two weeks, so it's more important than ever before to 'think student'. Understanding *how* and *why* students feel and think about the current situation will be vital to all student specialist marketers. This is made possible with Student Hut's 130,000 strong diverse and engaged student Opinion Panel. If you would like to track and record student sentiment and attitudes to COVID-19 on a weekly basis with real time data, [sign up to our tracker today](#).

The screenshot shows the Student Hut website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like 'Reviews', 'Recommended', 'Study Tables', 'Surveys', 'Offers', and 'Articles'. A search bar and a 'Sign Up Free' button are also present. The main content area features a large banner with the text 'WHAT IMPACT IS COVID-19 HAVING ON STUDENT CHOICES?' and 'WHAT STUDENTS REALLY THINK'. Below this, a paragraph states: 'COVID-19 is creating unrelenting change for everyone. Students are no longer taking exams, education is moving online, and entire societies are in lockdown. Each day brings new measures and impacts. To be agile and understand how COVID-19 is impacting students' views, actions, and mental health, we need to talk to them. And you need tangible insights to inform how to support and engage a student audience.' A 'Find out more' button is located below this text. Further down, a section highlights: 'Student Hut has the **UK's most engaged** and diverse panel, from our audience of 1 million users and over 130,000 subscribers.' Below this is a sign-up form titled 'Receive weekly updates on student attitudes here'. The form includes fields for 'Full Name *' (split into 'First Name' and 'Last Name'), 'Work Email *', 'Organisation' (with a sub-field for 'Institution Name'), and 'Job Title'. A 'Sign up here' button is at the bottom of the form. A small disclaimer at the bottom of the form reads: 'The information that you provide will be used and stored in accordance with our Privacy Policy. This page was built on Databox.' At the very bottom of the page, there's a section titled 'The Office for Students chose the Student Hut Opinion Panel to understand the views of key student groups; including applicants, undergraduates, graduates, and postgraduates, to measure the impact of the OFS and its projects in England.' This section includes a graphic with logos for '2020', '2021', and '2022'.