



Department  
for Education

# **COVID-19 Parent and Pupil Panel**

**School Leavers Report**

**February 2021**

**IFF Research Ltd**



Government  
Social Research

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## Executive Summary

In November 2020, the DfE commissioned a wave of the Parent and Pupil Panel (PPP) focussed exclusively on school leavers. School leavers were defined as pupils who had been recruited as year 13s in the 2019/20 academic year and were expected to have left school by the start of the 2020/21 academic year. Invitations were sent to all 1,570 school leavers on the panel and a total of 731 completed the 5-minute online survey between 4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020 (a response rate of 47%).

### Plan for the 2020/21 academic year

When school leavers were asked to think back to their plans at the beginning of the summer holidays (before they had received their exam results) over three-quarters (77%) were planning to study a higher education (HE) qualification (at university, college or elsewhere) for the 2020/21 academic year. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) school leavers were more likely than White leavers to have been planning to study a HE qualification (87% vs. 73%).<sup>1</sup> Male school leavers were more likely than females to have been planning to start an apprenticeship (16% vs. 7%).

A quarter (25%) of school leavers changed their plans after they received their final exam results in summer 2020 (e.g., changing what they were going to do or where they studied). Ninety per cent of school leavers that had initially planned to study a HE qualification (at university, college or elsewhere) had done so.

Fewer school leavers started an apprenticeship by November (4%) than reported that they intended to start one in July before they received their exam results (11%). This was the only significant change between what pupils had intended to do (from academic year 2019/20) and what they had ended up doing.

Of these 25% of school leavers whose plans had changed, most said it was because their grades were lower than expected (62%, the equivalent to 15% of all school leavers), however reasons relating to COVID-19<sup>2</sup> were also given by 42%. Of those who had planned to begin an apprenticeship, half said their plans had changed because there were no jobs or apprenticeships available (58%).

### Experience of university, apprenticeships and traineeships

Nearly all school leavers who were studying for a HE qualification by November 2020 were doing so at a university (98%). The remaining school leavers were either studying

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary for definition of BAME school leavers.

<sup>2</sup> “My career plans changed because of COVID-19” or “I was worried about the impact of COVID-19 on my plans for the 2020 / 21 year”

at a college (1%) or elsewhere (1%). Thirteen percent of these school leavers had applied for their current institution through clearing, rising to 19% among school leavers who had been eligible for free school meals (FSM) whilst at school. Understandably, students whose plans changed following lower (or higher) than expected/required exam results were more likely to be studying at a university or college applied to through clearing. The remaining eighty-seven percent of students were at the university/college which they had originally applied to through UCAS.

The survey asked university students about their learning experiences so far (in the academic year 2020/21) by asking how their classes or lectures had been delivered in the previous fortnight.<sup>3</sup> The most common methods of delivery were live online group classes (80%), pre-recorded lectures (78%) and live online lectures (62%).

When asked if they had considered changing anything about what they were doing in the current academic year (2020/2021), more than two-thirds of school leavers at university had not considered changing anything (69%). The proportion of those who had not considered changing anything was highest among those who had experienced in person lectures in the past two weeks (80%).

Amongst university students who had thought about changing what they were currently doing, BAME students were twice as likely as White students to have considered changing course (15% vs. 7%) and male students being almost twice as likely as female students to be considering leaving university completely (13% vs. 7%).

Overall, around six-in-ten (58%) higher education (HE) students reported having a positive experience there so far, though a sixth (15%) reported an overall negative experience at university/college. Students experiencing online only learning were twice as likely to say their experience at university had been negative when compared to university students who had experienced both online and in person teaching (22% vs. 11%). Around two-thirds (63%) of White students reported having a positive time at university/college so far, whereas fewer than half of BAME students reported this to be the case (46%).

## **Mental health and wellbeing**

In November 2020, school leavers were asked about their happiness, life satisfaction, the extent to which they feel the things they do in in life were worthwhile, and their anxiousness levels. Compared to secondary pupils (in late October 2020), school leavers gave lower mean scores for happiness (6.1 vs. 7.2), life satisfaction (5.8 vs 6.7) and worthwhileness (6.1 vs 6.8), and higher anxiety mean scores (4.5 vs. 2.9).

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<sup>3</sup> This would cover a two-week period between 21<sup>st</sup> October – 9<sup>th</sup> November.

## Reflections on education and career path

Picking a route which would allow them to get a good job was the most important factor (89%) for school leavers when deciding about what education or training route to follow in the 2020/21 academic year. This was seen as more important by BAME school leavers (57% vs. 40% of White school leavers), those who were eligible for FSM at school (55% vs. 45% of those who were not) and those living in urban areas (48% vs. 36% of those in rural areas).

Two-in-five school leavers (38%) felt that they have had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot of' control over their education route / career path since September 2020, with this higher among those currently studying a HE qualification (41%). This compares to 29% of school leavers who felt they had 'not very much' or no control 'at all'. Furthermore, four-in-five school leavers (79%) said that they were confident that what they had been doing since September 2020 was the best option for them. This rose to 83% amongst those who were currently studying a HE qualification. Unsurprisingly, those who were currently unemployed and looking for a job were less confident, with over half (55%) not being 'very confident' or 'confident at all' that what they have been doing since September is the best option for them.

# Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting closure of schools in spring 2020 to most pupils, the Department for Education (DfE) wanted to conduct research to assess the on-going views and experiences of pupils and their families. This rapid-turnaround, robust research programme began at the start of the 2020/21 academic year but has also collected opinions and experiences of the previous summer term school restrictions. The research aims to help DfE make evidence-based policy decisions, monitor the impact of the COVID-19 / post-COVID-19 situation, and see how views and experiences of parents and pupils change over time.

The research has been structured into two broad phases, with an additional school leaver phase:

## 1. Recruitment Wave

In August 2020, pupils who were in years 6 - 13 and parents of pupils who were in reception to year 10 in the 2019/20 academic year were invited to take part in a 15-minute online survey via invitation letters sent to their home address. Both parents and pupils were sampled (by year group) from the National Pupil Database<sup>4</sup>, and by completing the survey became part of the COVID-19 Parent and Pupil Panel (PPP). The Parent and Pupil Panel comprised of 7,191 parents (of primary and secondary pupils) and 5,327 secondary pupils who took part in the first 'COVID-19 Parent and Pupil Panel' survey.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Subsequent Waves

Between the recruitment wave and the first subsequent wave all pupils moved up a year group at school. Pupils that had moved into years 7-13 and parents of pupils who had moved into reception to year 11 in the 2020/21 academic year were invited to take part in up to seven subsequent online surveys during the 2020/21 academic year, between September 2020 and February 2021, lasting around five minutes each. The August to October finding report presents the findings for the first four PPP waves with these parents and pupils.

## 3. School leavers Wave

In November 2020, the DfE commissioned a wave focussed exclusively on school leavers. The 1,570 pupils that had been recruited as year 13s in the 2019/20 academic year were expected to have left school (not including sixth-form or further education (FE)

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<sup>4</sup> The NPD only includes the details of pupils attending schools. It does not include those in sixth-form colleges, further education (FE) colleges or alternative provision (AP).

<sup>5</sup> For more demographic information on the panel please see the PPP Interim Report



colleges) by the start of the 2020/21 academic year and were invited to take part in this wave.

Responses from this group of participants are included within the PPP Interim Report, notably in report chapters that consider the impact of COVID-19 on the 2019/20 academic year, such as the 'Lockdown and Summer Activities' chapter. Here they were referred to as 2019/20 year 13 pupils (rather than school leavers). That information is not repeated in this standalone report, which is focussed on their experiences after leaving school.

This report presents the findings from the school leavers wave which explores plans for the 2020/21 academic year, any changes to these plans, experiences of university, experiences of apprenticeships, mental health and reflections on education and career paths.

# Methodology

## Participant Characteristics

Pupils in year 13 in the 2019/20 academic year were oversampled in the initial recruitment stage in order to ensure an adequate sample of 'school leavers' for a standalone wave would remain on the panel in the 2020/2021 academic year. In the 2020/21 academic year 6,912 year 13 pupils were invited to take part in the recruitment wave which ran 13<sup>th</sup> August – 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020. 1,570 of those invited did take part, a 23% response rate.

In November 2020 invitations to take part in the school leavers follow-up wave were sent to all 1,570 school leavers on the panel. A total of 731 school leavers completed the 5-minute online survey between 4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020 (a response rate of 47%). The table below shows how this response rate varied amongst different demographic groups for the school leavers wave. The findings reported have been weighted to be representative of the full set of school leavers.

**Table 1. Response rates by demographic profile of school leaver panel members<sup>6</sup>**

	<b>Number of school leavers</b>	<b>% of all school leavers on panel</b>
All school leavers on panel	1,570	100%
Those that participated in this school leavers wave	731	47%
Free school meal eligibility (FSM, see Glossary for full definition)	189	12%
Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND, see Glossary for full definition) status	120	8%
Children in Need (CIN) (see Glossary for full definition)	5	0%

<sup>6</sup> Please note percentages will not always sum to 100% due to some respondents not providing demographic data, or demographic data not held on the NPD.

	Number of school leavers	% of all school leavers on panel
Ethnicity: White	508	32%
Ethnicity: Asian	114	7%
Ethnicity: Black	43	3%
Ethnicity: Mixed	30	2%
Ethnicity: Unclassified	8	1%
Ethnicity: Other	17	1%
Gender: Male	67	4%
Gender: Female	126	8%
Region: East Midlands	62	4%
Region: East of England	104	7%
Region: London	148	9%
Region: North East	23	1%
Region: North West	52	3%
Region: South East	110	7%
Region: South West	71	5%
Region: West Midlands	94	6%
Region: Yorkshire and the Humber	67	4%

Source: Pupil information (year group, FSM, SEND, CIN, ethnicity, gender, region) sourced from the NPD.

Please note that throughout this report, unweighted figures (and percentages) have been used where base sizes (specific demographic sub-group sizes) are particularly small (<50) and this is indicated at relevant sections.

## Plans for 2020/2021 academic year

This section of the report explores what school leavers plans were for the 2020/21 academic year prior to receiving their final exam results as well as how and why these plans had changed by November 2020. This chapter also reports the plans that NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) school leavers have for the future.

### Initial plans for the 2020/21 academic year

School leavers were asked to think back to their plans for the 2020/21 academic year at the beginning of the summer holidays, before they had received their exam results.<sup>7</sup> At this stage, over three-quarters (77%) were planning to study a higher education (HE) qualification (at university, college or elsewhere) as shown in Figure 1. Of the school leavers that wanted to go into HE, the vast majority (92%) had planned to study towards a bachelors degree, with 3% planning to start a masters and 2% a foundation degree.

Taking a gap year (12%) or beginning an apprenticeship (11%) were plans for just over a tenth of school leavers, and were the most common routes planned apart from higher education.

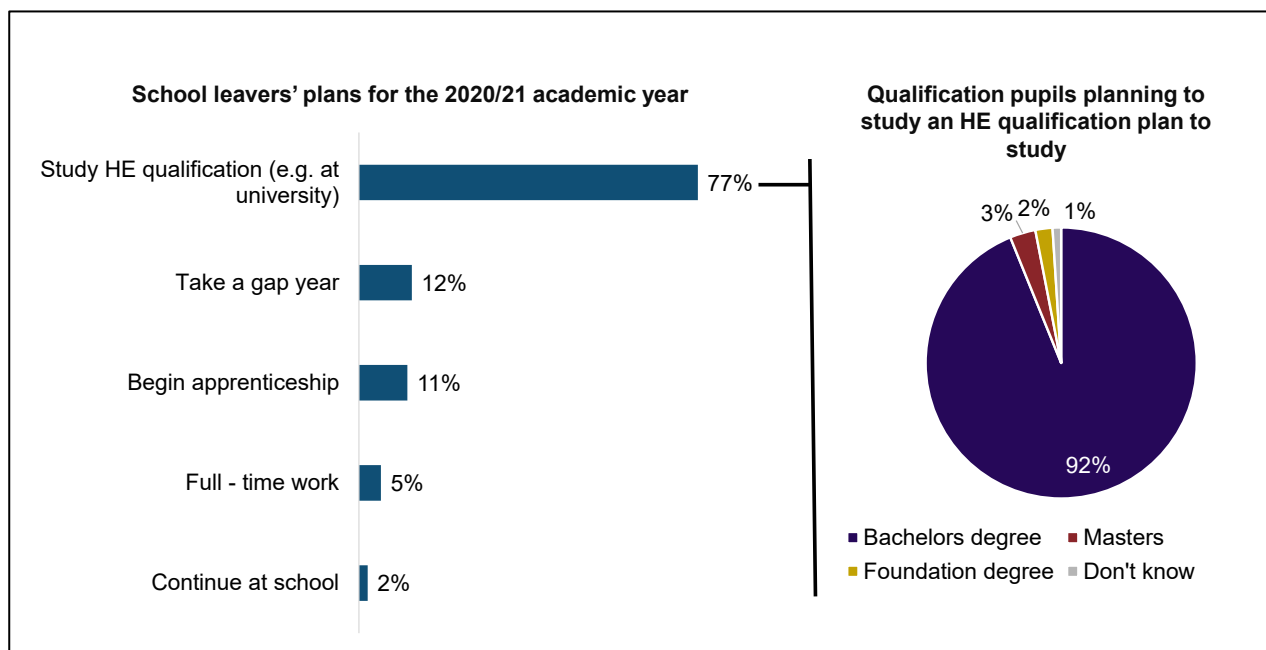
The three-quarters (77%) of school leavers that wanted to go study a HE qualification in 2020/21 is comparable to the 80% of the current 2020/21 academic year 13s that stated in the October wave of the PPP that they want to go to university in the next academic year, as well as the 72% that thought university was their most likely path for the next academic year.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, beginning an apprenticeship (18%) or taking a gap year (16%) were the next two most common plans amongst year 13 pupils for 2021/22.

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<sup>77</sup> For this initial question, school leavers were able to select more than one option e.g. entering full time work and taking a gap year.

<sup>8</sup> See the PPP interim report for more information on current pupils plans for the next academic year 2021/22.

**Figure 1. Initial plans for the 2020/21 academic year**



Source: PPP Wave 3, A1: “Thinking back to the beginning of the summer holidays in July, before you received your exam results, what were you planning to do for this 2020/21 academic year? (multiple choice)” All school leavers (n=731). Responses under 2% not shown (this includes :begin a traineeship, other learning, other, don’t know); A2: “And what qualification were you planning to study?” School leavers who planned to study a HE qualification (n=555).

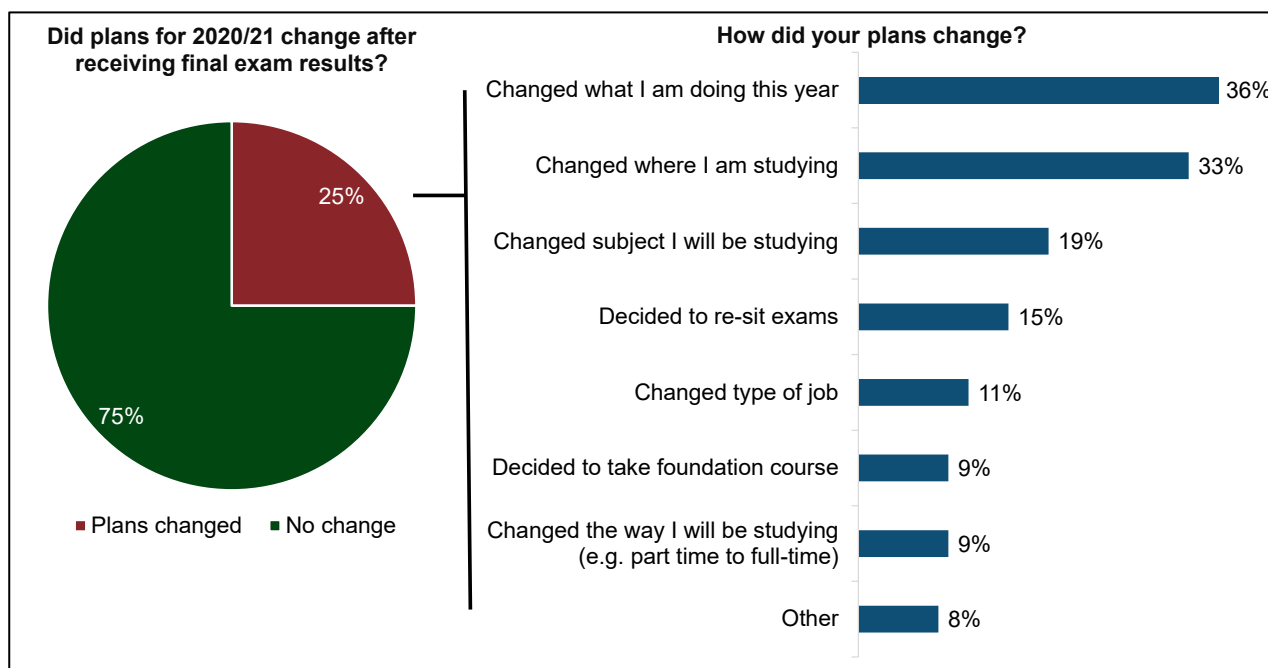
There were some significant differences between subgroups in plans prior to receipt of exam results.

- Male school leavers were more likely than female school leavers to have been planning to start an apprenticeship (16% vs. 7%). There was, however, no significant difference in terms of intention to study a HE qualification by gender.
- BAME school leavers (see Glossary for full definition) were more likely than White leavers to have been planning to study a HE qualification (87% vs. 73%). White school leavers were significantly more likely to say they had planned to start full time work (7% vs. 3%).
- Pupils with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) (as reported in August 2020) were less likely than those without SEND to have been planning to study a HE qualification (65% vs. 78%) and were more likely to have planned to enter full-time work (12% vs. 5%), continue at school (6% vs. 2%) or begin a traineeship (3% vs. 1%).

## Changes to plans for the 2020/21 academic year

As shown in Figure 2, a quarter (25%) of school leavers said their plans changed after they received their final exam results in summer 2020. This was most commonly an overall change to what they had planned to do in 2020/21 (36%, equivalent to 9% of all leavers) or a change to where they planned to study (33%, equivalent to 8% of all leavers).

**Figure 2. Changes to the initial plans for the 2020/21 academic year**



Source: PPP Wave 3, A3: “Did your plans for the 2020/21 year change in any way after you received your final exam results this summer?” All school leavers (n=731); A4: “How did your plans change?” School leavers whose 2020/21 plans had changed (n=193).

Those who originally planned to begin an apprenticeship or take a gap year were more likely to have changed their overall plans (47% and 37% respectively) than those who had intended to study a HE qualification (21%). A third of school leavers who had been eligible for FSM and intended to study a HE qualification had changed their plans.<sup>9</sup>

Those who were eligible for FSM at school were more likely than those not eligible to have changed their plans (34% vs. 24%), as were school leavers with SEND compared to those without (38% vs. 24%).

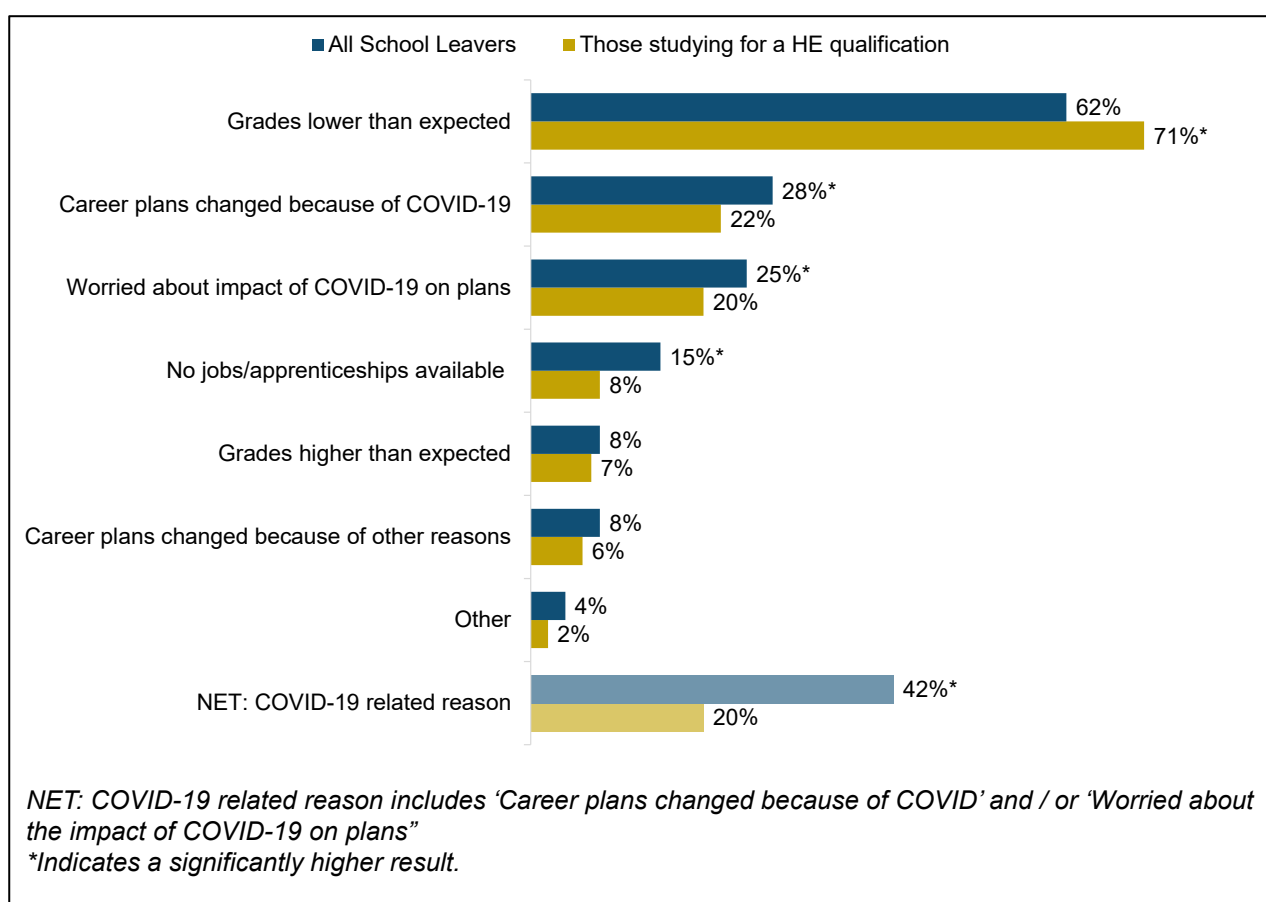
As shown in Figure 3, for school leavers who reported that their plans had changed, most said this was because their grades were lower than expected (62%, the equivalent to

<sup>9</sup> Due to small number of FSM eligible school leavers this finding should be interpreted with caution.

15% of all school leavers).<sup>10</sup> Two-fifths of leavers (42%) reported a COVID-19 related reason for the change to their plans. For 28% COVID-19 had led to a change in career plans and a further 25% were worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their plans.

Unsurprisingly, the reasons for changing their initial plans are closely linked to the requirements of their next step i.e. particular grades being met or there being enough demand from businesses for new employees or apprentices. For example, school leavers that had initially planned to study a HE qualification were more likely to have changed their plans because their grades were lower than expected (71%) while those who had planned to begin an apprenticeship were more likely to say their plans had changed because there were no jobs or apprenticeships available (58% vs.15% overall).

**Figure 3. Reasons for changes to the plans for the 2020/21 academic year**



Source: PPP Wave 3, A5: “What are the main reasons your plans changed? (multiple choice)”  
 School leavers whose 2020/21 plans had changed (n=193).

BAME leavers, who were significantly more likely to report that they planned to study a HE qualification prior to receiving their results, were also more likely than their White peers to have changed their plans because their grades were lower than expected (76%

<sup>10</sup> Leavers could select multiple reasons for why their plans had changed.

vs. 54%). In comparison, White school leavers, who were significantly more likely to have planned to enter full-time work, were more likely (than BAME leavers) to say their career plans had changed because of COVID-19 (32% vs. 18%) and that their overall plans changed because they were worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their plans (29% vs. 15%). These findings should be interpreted with caution due to relatively small number of respondents.

## What school leavers are doing in 2020/21

There were very few significant differences between what (now) school leavers had planned to do in 2020/21 (before receiving their results) compared with what they were actually doing by November of the 2020/21 academic year (when this research was conducted).<sup>11</sup>

Although a quarter (25%) of school leavers reported that their plans had changed since finding out their final exam results, the only statistically significant shift in what pupils (from academic year 2019/20) were actually doing was in apprenticeship starts. Eleven percent of leavers had reported that they wanted to start an apprenticeship in 2020/21 but by November 2020/21 just 4% had done so.

By November 2020, about a third of school leavers who had initially planned to start an apprenticeship had done so. Instead, 17% were studying a HE qualification, 15% were unemployed; and about one-fifth were working either part-time (14%) or full-time (6%). The remainder were either continuing at school (5%), taking a gap year (4%), studying at further education (FE) college or other training provider (2%) or were not sure (5%).

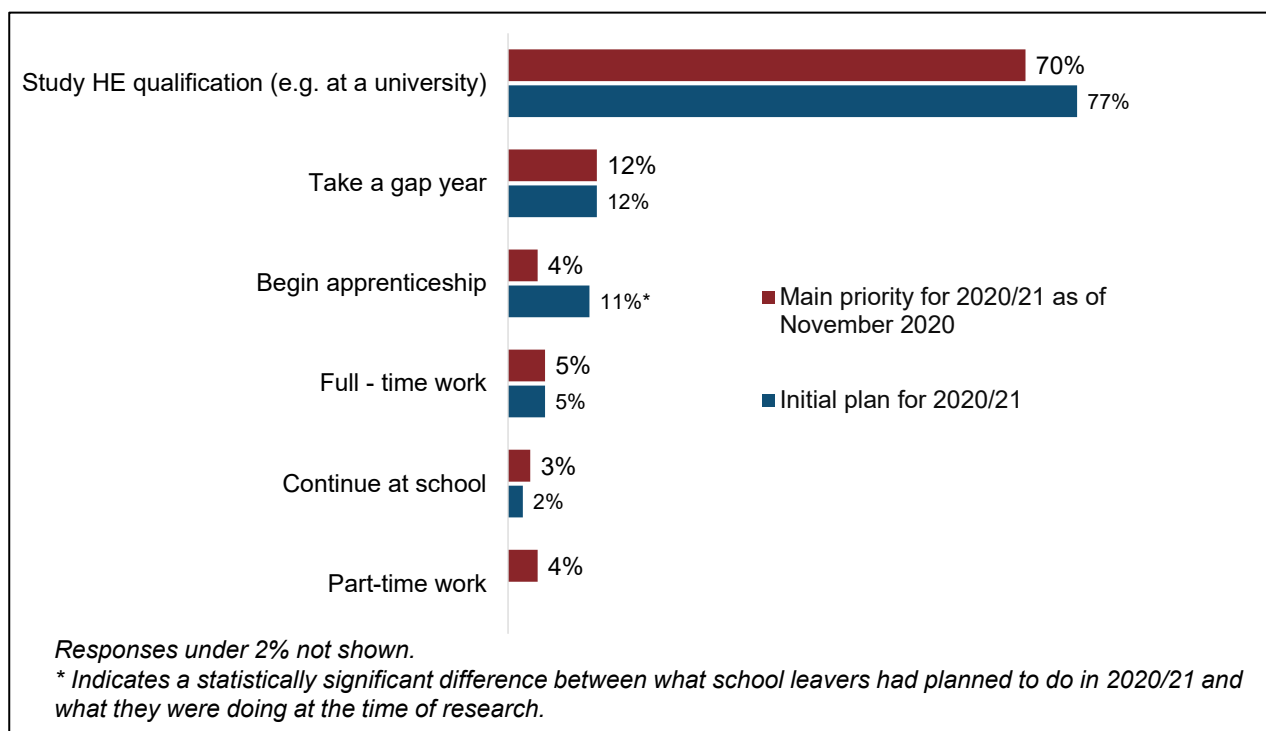
As shown in Figure 4, the proportion of school leavers studying a HE qualification in November was broadly in-line with the proportion who had planned to be (70% compared to 77%). Ninety per cent of school leavers that had initially planned to study a HE qualification (at university, college or elsewhere) had done so.

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<sup>11</sup> School leavers who selected multiple options when asked “What best describes what you are doing now?” were asked a follow up question asking between the options they had selected, which was their main priority. This was then combined with those who had only selected one option to the original question for the analysis purposes.



**Figure 4. Comparison between what school leavers had planned to do in 2020/21 prior to receiving exam results and what they were doing in November 2020/21**



Source: PPP Wave 3, A1: “Thinking back to the beginning of the summer holidays in July, before you received your exam results, what were you planning to do for this 2020/21 academic year?”; A6/A6A “What best describes what you are doing now? (multiple choice) / “Which of these is your main priority?” All school leavers (n=731).

### School leavers who had initially planned to study a HE qualification in 2020/21 but had not done so

Just 5% of school leavers who had planned to study a HE qualification were instead working full-time or part-time. One percent were respectively taking a gap year, currently unemployed and looking for work, continuing at school, doing other learning at a FE college or other training provider or were not sure.

Amongst the research participants this amounts to only 56 leavers who had plans to go to study a HE qualification but had not done so (and not just been postponed). This is too low a base to report weighted data, so the profile should be treated as indicative and unweighted figures have been used. Of these 56, 50 (or 89%) reported that they had not started their course when their plans changed but six school leavers had started their course, with two having since dropped out but four still doing the course.

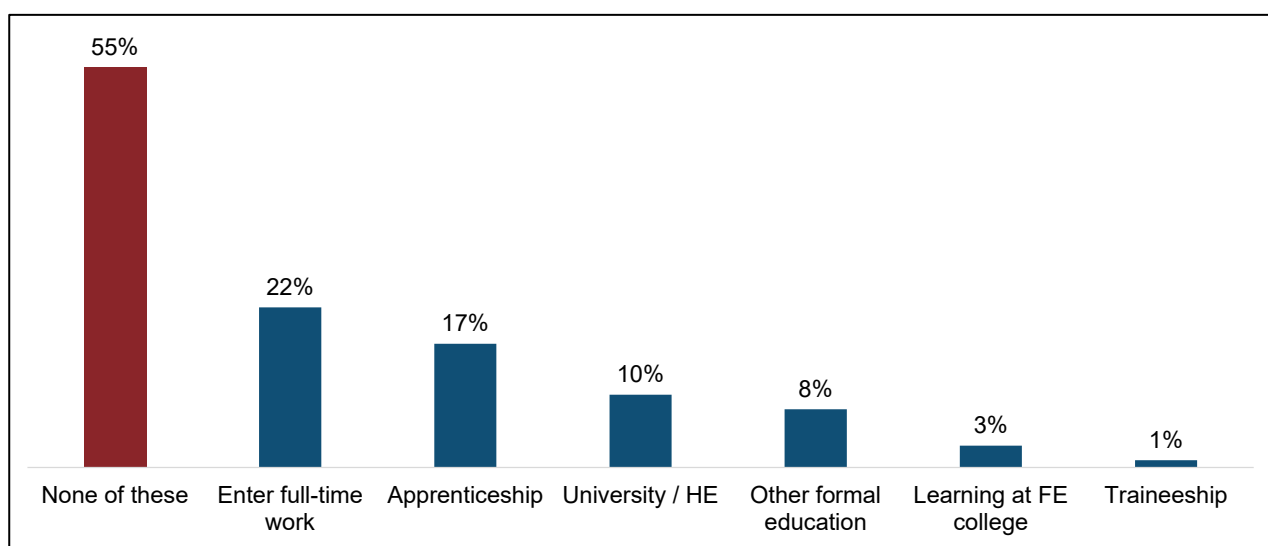
Among those whose plans to go to university had changed, 69% reported that they were still planning to study a HE qualification; with 86% of these participants saying they would

start in the next semester in September/October 2021. The remaining 14% were less prescriptive and reported that they would start at some stage in future.

### School leavers that were not in education or training by November 2020

School leavers that were not in education or training in November 2020 (and instead were working, unemployed or didn't select any of the options provided about what they are currently doing) were asked about their plans for the next six months. As shown in Figure 5, just over half (54%) did not have plans to start education or training, about one-fifth were hoping to enter full-time work (22%), and a similar proportion were hoping to start an apprenticeship (17%).

**Figure 5. Plans for the next six months amongst school leavers who were working, seeking work or who were not in education or training**



Source: PPP Wave 3, A7: "Are you planning on starting any of the following in the next six months?" School leavers who were working, not working but seeking work or who were not in education or training (or not taking a gap year) (n=172).

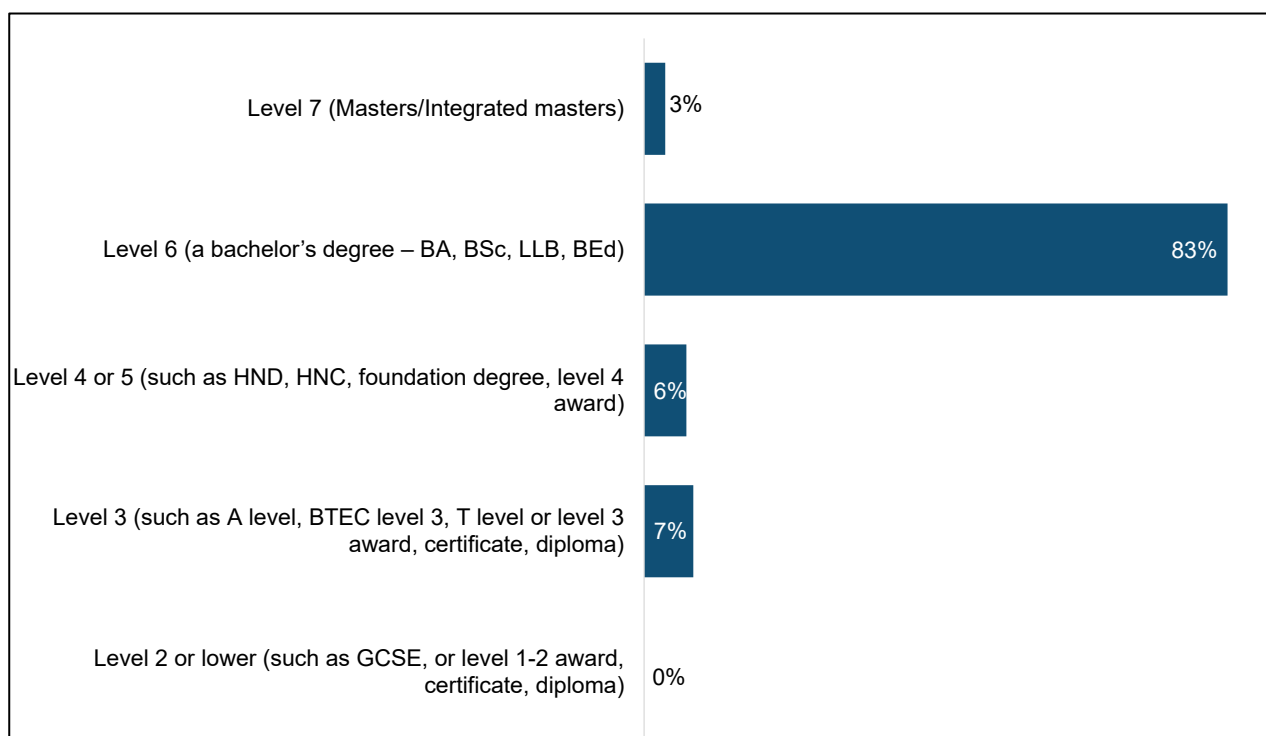
As referenced in the changes to [plans for the 2020/21 academic year](#) chapter above, BAME school leavers were significantly more likely than White school leavers to have planned to go to study for a HE qualification, but to have not started by November 2020. Among school leavers who were working or in education in November 2020, BAME school leavers were more than twice as likely to say that they were planning to start studying for a HE qualification in the next six months than their White counterparts (23% vs. 8%). These findings should be interpreted with caution due to relatively small number of respondents.

It was significantly more common for leavers with SEND (as reported in August 2020) to be planning to enter the workforce full-time in the next six months compared to non-SEND leavers (47% vs. 20%).

### Qualification level studying towards

As shown in Figure 6, around eight-in-ten (83%) school leavers in education or training in November 2020 reported studying towards a Level 6 qualification<sup>12</sup>. Less than one-in-ten said they were studying towards a Level 3 (7%) or a Level 4 or 5 (6%).

**Figure 6. Highest level of qualification being studied for by school leavers in higher education**



There were some significant differences in qualification levels being studied between subgroups of school leavers who had continued in education or training:

- School leavers who were eligible for FSM at school when they were at school were less likely to be studying towards a Level 6 qualification compared to their non-FSM counterparts (74% vs. 83%).
- Those with SEND at school were less likely to be studying towards a Level 6 qualification compared to school leavers without SEND (69% vs. 83%). They were

<sup>12</sup> At university, school, FE college, with a training provider or doing an apprenticeship.

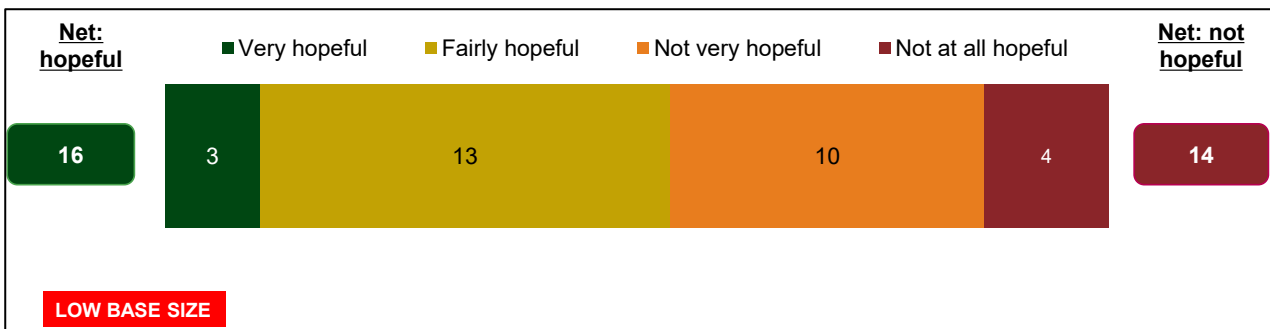
twice as likely to be working towards a Level 3 qualification (14% vs 7%).

- School leavers who reported low levels of anxiousness (in August 2020) were more likely to report studying towards a Level 6 qualification compared to school leavers who reported higher levels of anxiousness (88% vs 80%).

### Getting started in apprenticeships and traineeships

School leavers (30) who reported that they wanted to start an apprenticeship / traineeship in the next six months, were asked how hopeful they felt about securing one. More were hopeful (16) than not hopeful (14).

**Figure 7. Hope of securing an apprenticeship / traineeship within six months**



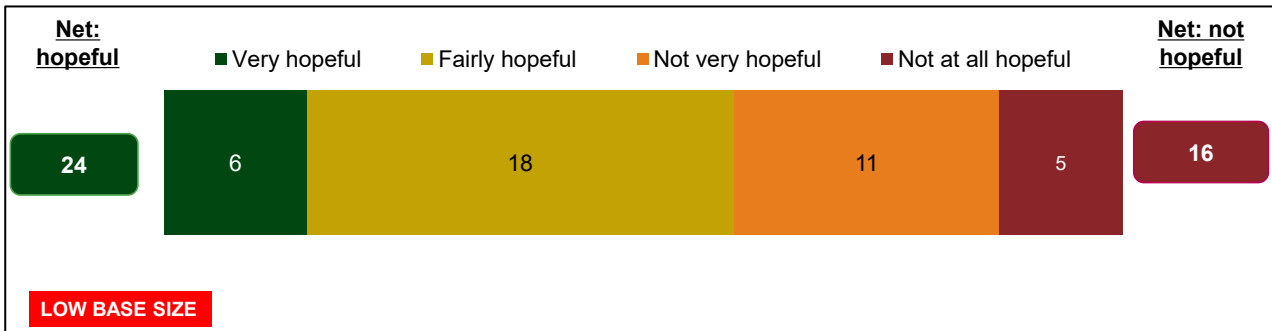
Source: PPP Wave 3, F7: “You previously mentioned that you were planning on starting an apprenticeship / a traineeship in the next six months. How hopeful do you feel about getting an apprenticeship / traineeship?” School leavers planning to start an apprenticeship or traineeship (n=30). Low base size and unweighted data: findings should be treated as indicative only.

Of those not hopeful the main reason given was a belief that there are not many apprenticeships or traineeships available in their local area (8) and not hearing back from their applications (7).

### Getting started in full time work

Of the 40 school leavers who were planning on starting full time work in the next six months, the majority (24) were hopeful of getting a full-time job vs. around a third not hopeful (16).

**Figure 8. Hope of securing full time job within six months**



Source: PPP Wave 3, F5: “You previously mentioned that you were planning on starting full-time work in the next six months. How hopeful do you feel about getting a full-time job?” School leavers planning to get a full-time job within next six months (n=40). Low base size and unweighted data: findings should be treated as indicative only.

Of not hopeful, the main reasons given were ‘I am not hearing back from the places I have applied for’ (9) and not feeling they have good enough skills or experience (8).

## University experience

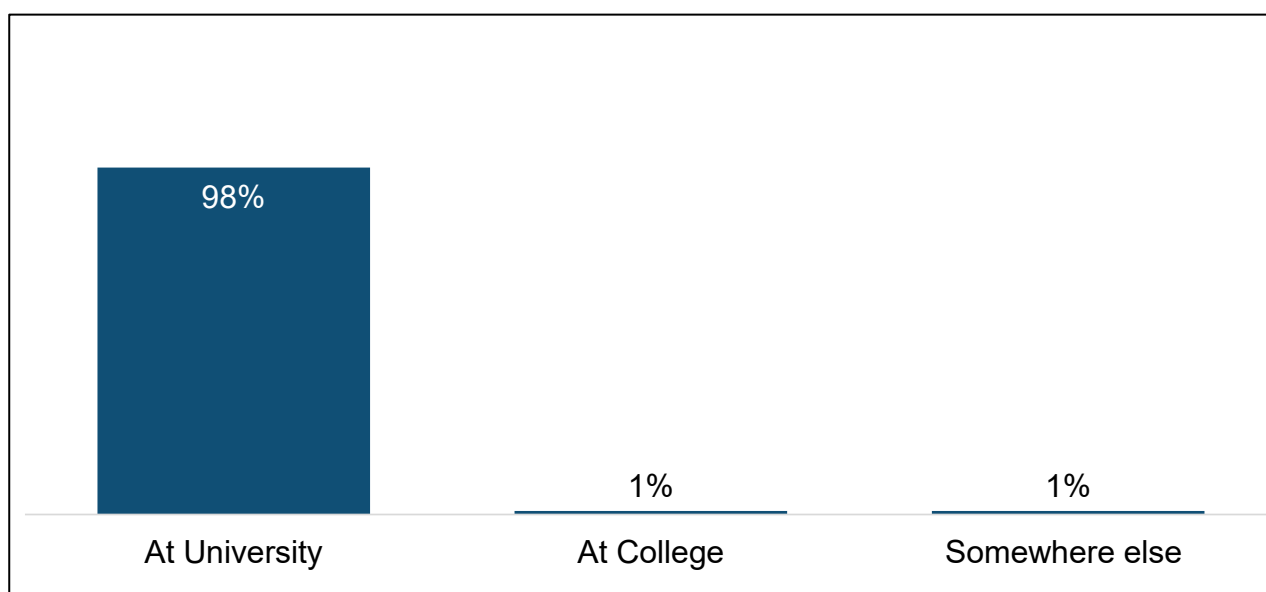
This chapter of the report explores the experience of school leavers who chose to study a HE qualification at university / college in the 2020/21 academic year, including their overall satisfaction. This chapter will cover place of study, level of qualification studied for and method of delivery, as well as any planned changes to university/college arrangements.

As autonomous bodies, higher education providers are responsible for the delivery of their own teaching and assessment. To help HE providers make informed decisions about their provision during the pandemic, the government has issued HE operational guidance, which is regularly updated and is informed by the latest public health advice.

### Higher education: place of study

As shown in Figure 9, nearly all school leavers who were studying for a HE qualification by November 2020 reported doing so at a university (98%).

**Figure 9. Place of study for school leavers studying for a higher education qualification**



Source: PPP Wave 3, E0: "Are you studying for your higher education qualification at university or at college?" School leavers studying for a HE qualification (n=498).

### Application routes

School leavers were asked about their application process for university or college. Around one-in-eight (13%) school leavers who were at university or college had applied

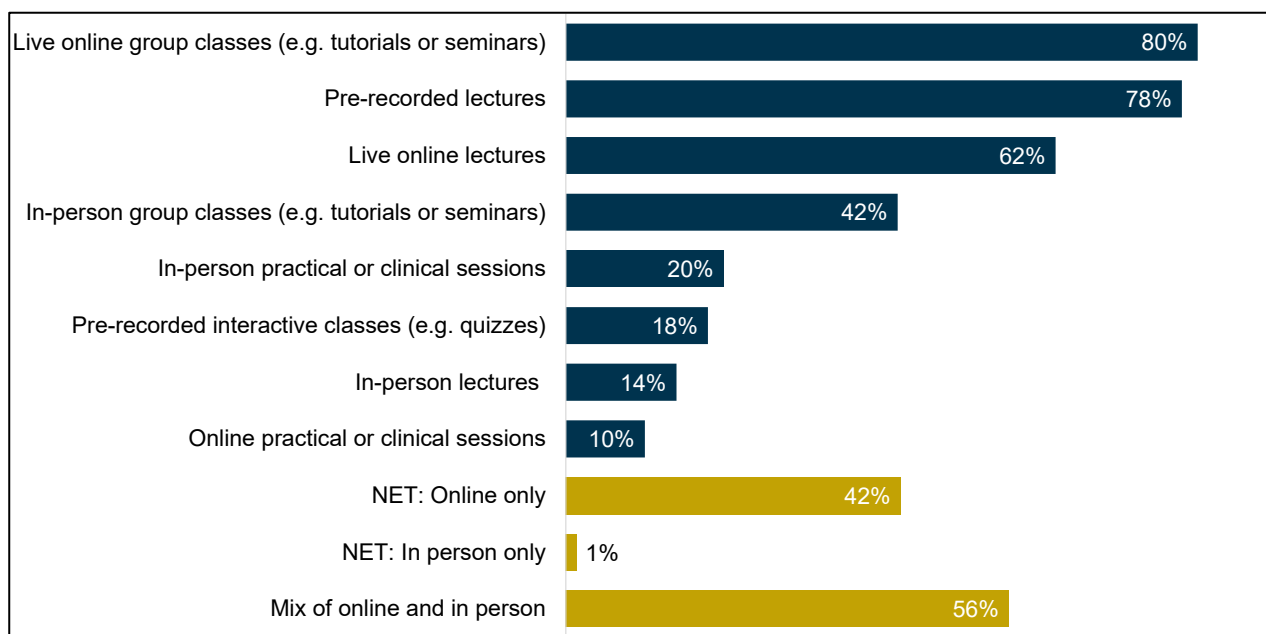
for their current place through clearing (rising to 19% among school leavers who had been eligible for FSM whilst at school), with the remaining 87% studying at the university/college which they had originally applied to through UCAS.

Understandably, students whose plans changed post exam results were more likely to be studying at a university or college applied to through clearing, compared to school leavers whose plans had not changed (47% vs. 6%).

### Class and lecture delivery

School leavers who were at university in November 2020 were asked how their classes or lectures had been delivered in the previous fortnight<sup>13</sup>. As shown in Figure 10, the most common methods of delivery were live online group classes (80% had some delivered in this way), pre-recorded lectures (78%) and live online lectures (62%). In-person learning was less common: 42% had experienced in person group classes and 14% had experienced in person lectures. Overall, a majority had experienced both in-person and online learning, although four in ten (42%) has experience solely online learning.

**Figure 10. University remote education delivery methods**



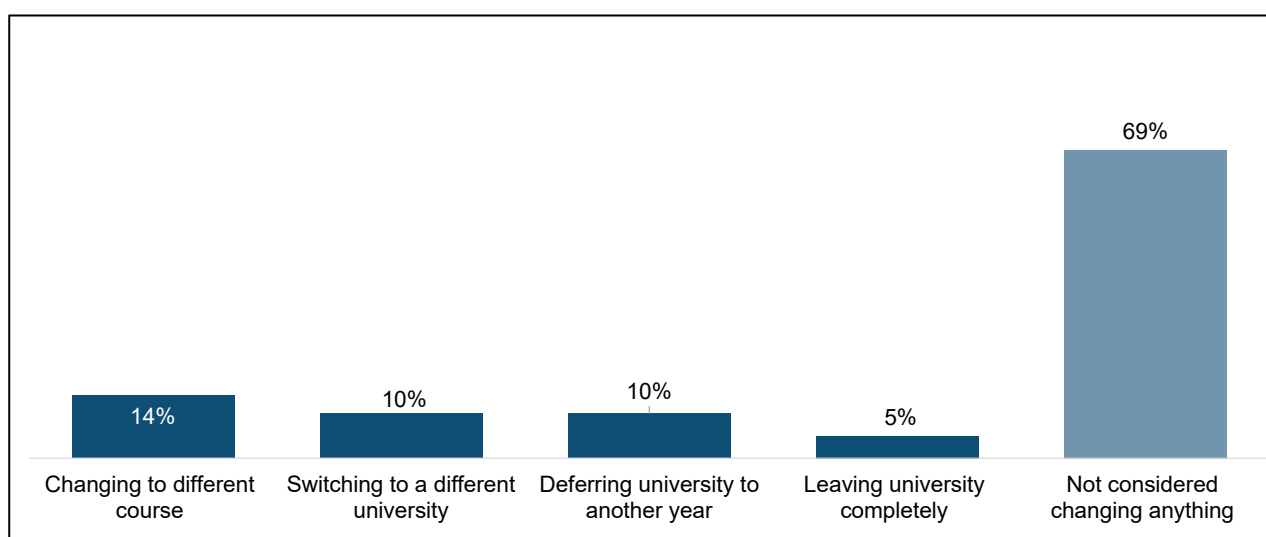
Source: PPP Wave 3, E1: “In the past two weeks, how have your classes or lectures been delivered?” School leavers at university (n=488).

<sup>13</sup> This would cover a two-week period between 21<sup>st</sup> October – 9<sup>th</sup> November.

## Considering changes to university

School leavers who were at university by November 2020 were asked if they had considered changing anything about what they were doing in the current academic year (2020/2021). As shown in Figure 11, more than two-thirds (69%) of school leavers at university had not considered changing anything. Around a sixth (14%) had considered stopping and deferring university to another year, one in ten (10%) had considered changing course, and a further 10% had considered leaving university completely. A further 5% had considered switching to a different university.

**Figure 11. Changes considered by school leavers at currently at university**



Source: PPP Wave 3, E6: "Have you considered changing anything about what you are doing this year?" School leavers at university (n=488).

Of those who had considered changing their arrangements, the following subgroups were twice as likely to be considering the respective options compared to their counterparts:

- Male university students were almost twice as likely as female students to have considered leaving university completely (13% vs. 7%).
- BAME university students were twice as likely as White students to have considered changing course (15% vs. 7%).
- University students who were eligible for FSM at school were twice as likely to report having considered switching to a different university (11%), compared to their non-FSM counterparts (5%).
- University students who considered someone in their family household to be at high risk of COVID-19 in August, before they went to university, were almost twice as likely than those without someone high-risk in the household to report considering deferring university to another year (21% vs. 12%).



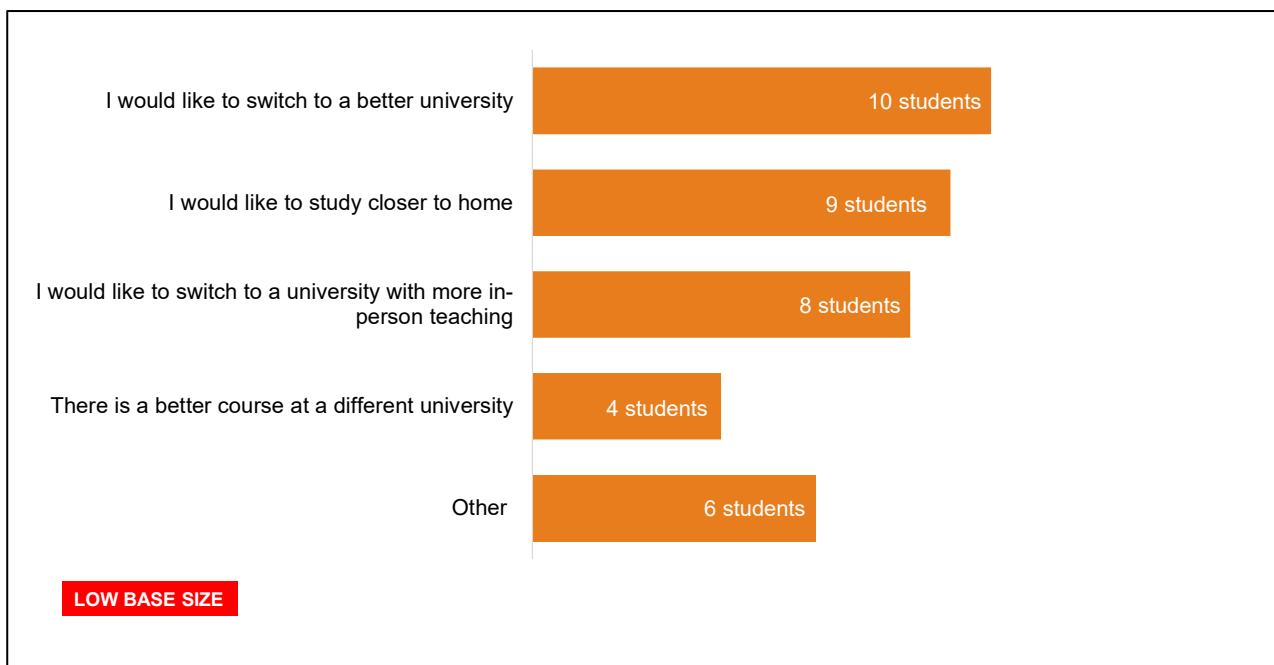
The method of class or lecture delivery may have had some impact on students' intentions for their future university studies. Those who had experienced in person lectures in the past two weeks were more likely than those who had experienced online practical sessions to report *not* considering changing anything (80% vs. 51%)

Students at university or college who had considered a change within this academic year were more likely to report a negative university experience so far (22% vs. 15% average).

### Changing or leaving university

Amongst the research participants, 29 university students had considered switching to a different university, as shown in Figure 12. This is too low a base to report weighted data, so the profile should be treated as indicative. The most common reason for wishing to change was to switch to a 'better' university (10 students).

**Figure 12. Reasons for wanting to change university**

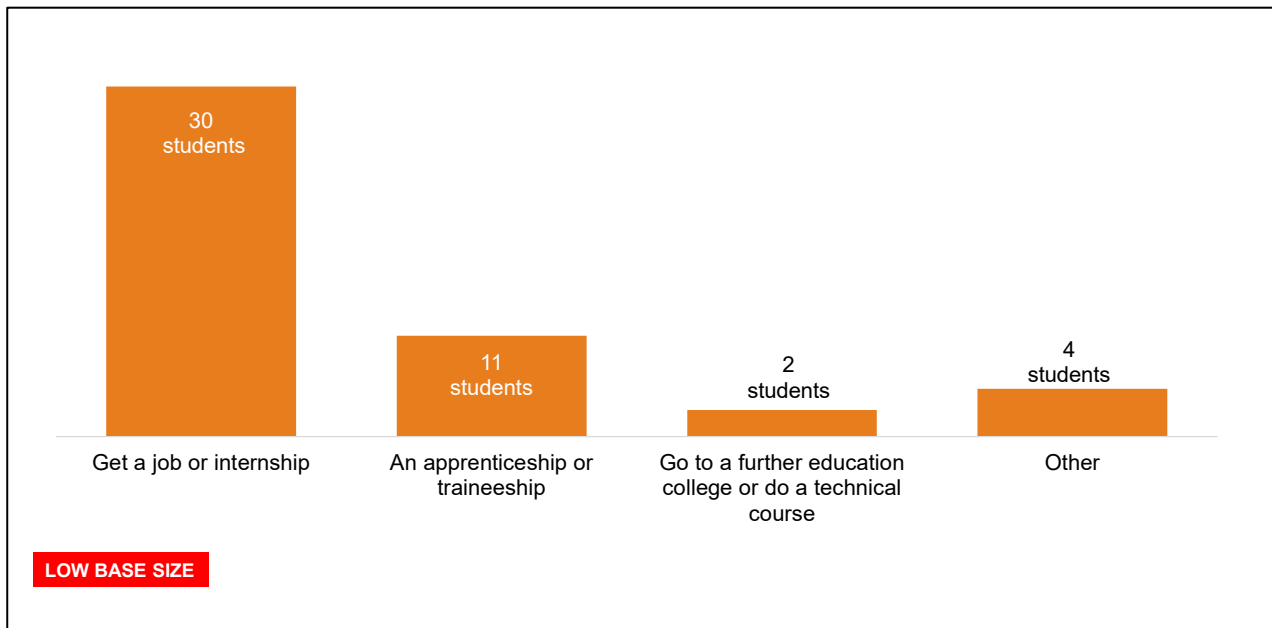


Source: PPP Wave 3, E6A: "Why would you like to switch to a different university?" School leavers at university or studying for a higher education qualification who have considered switching university (n=29). Low base size and unweighted data: findings should be treated as indicative only.

The majority of students who had considered moving to a different university had not spoken to anyone about this decision (17), but 11 had spoken to friends or family.

Forty-seven students reported they were considering leaving university completely. Of those who were considering this option, 30 reported they would like to get a job or internship, 11 said they would like to do an apprenticeship and two would like to go to a FE college or do a technical course (as shown in Figure 13). More than half of these students had spoken to friends and/or family about it (26) but just three had spoken to their current university.

**Figure 13. What those considering leaving university would look to do**

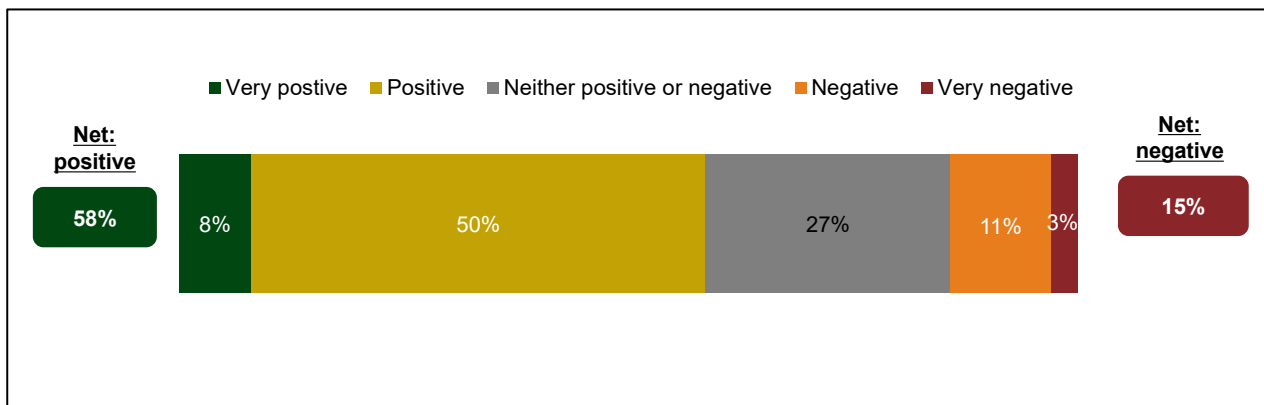


Source: PPP Wave 3, E8: "If you were to leave university this year, what would you like to do instead?" School leavers at university or studying for a higher education qualification who have considered leaving university (n=47). Low base size and unweighted data: findings should be treated as indicative only.

### Experience of university or college

As shown below in Figure 14, around six-in-ten (58%) school leavers at university/college reported having a positive experience at their university/college so far. About a sixth (15%) reported an overall negative experience at university/college, and a quarter (27%) reported it was neither positive nor negative.

**Figure 14. Feelings about experience at university or college**



Source: PPP Wave 3, E2: “Overall, would you say your experience at university / college so far has been positive or negative?” School leavers studying for a higher education qualification at university or college or studying at a FE college or other training provider (n=520).

The method of teaching delivery impacted student’s satisfaction levels. Students experiencing online only learning at university / college (in the previous two weeks<sup>14</sup>) were twice as likely to say their experience at university had been negative, compared to university students who had experienced both online and in person teaching (22% vs. 11%).<sup>15</sup> As shown in Figure 10, 42% of students had received online learning.

Several significant differences between subgroups emerged, the most stark include:

- Around two-thirds (63%) of White students reported having a positive time at university/college so far, whereas less than half of BAME students reported this to be the case (46%).
- Students who were eligible for FSM at school were less likely to report having a positive experience compared to students who were not eligible (43% vs. 59%).
- University / college students who considered someone in their family household to be at high risk of COVID-19 in August (before they went to university/college) were less likely to report having a positive experience so far at university/college (50%) than those without someone who was high-risk in their household (62%).
- Having a negative time at university or college are linked to lower scores on other wellbeing measures. For example, students were significantly more likely than average to say they were having a negative experience at university (15% average) if they also had low scores for happiness (31%), life satisfaction (31%) or worthwhileness (28%). Interestingly there does not appear to be a correlation between anxiousness levels and experience of university so far.

<sup>14</sup> This would cover a two-week period between 21<sup>st</sup> October – 9<sup>th</sup> November.

<sup>15</sup> Students who only selected one of more of the following options were categorised as having online learning only. ‘Live online group classes’, ‘Live online lectures’, ‘Pre-recorded lectures’, ‘Pre-recorded interactive classes’ or ‘Online practical or clinical sessions’

## Negative experience of university or college

School leavers who reported having a negative experience so far at university/college were asked why this was (83 students). The most common reasons given for a negative experience were the COVID-19 restrictions (75), followed by students feeling that what they are getting from their university/college does not justify the fees (71).

- Female university students were more likely than males to report having a negative experience due to not getting the full university experience due to the COVID-19 restrictions (96% vs. 83%) and difficulties finding friends (74% vs. 51%).
- BAME university students were more likely than White university students to report finding it difficult to make friends (77% vs. 54%) and to report that the teaching quality at the university / college has been poor (58% vs. 29%). White students were more likely than BAME students to report struggling financially (31% vs. 9%).
- University students who reported considering changing what they were doing this academic year were twice as likely than those who were not, to report finding it hard to settle in at university (67% vs. 31%).

## **Mental health and wellbeing**

School leavers were asked a series of ONS-validated questions about personal wellbeing, including how happy they felt yesterday, their life satisfaction, the extent to which they feel the things they do in life were worthwhile, and their levels of anxiousness.

The questions in this series are asked in a similar way, using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is 'completely'. The questions ask school leavers 'overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?', 'overall, how satisfied are you with your life?', 'overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?' and 'overall how anxious did you feel yesterday?'.

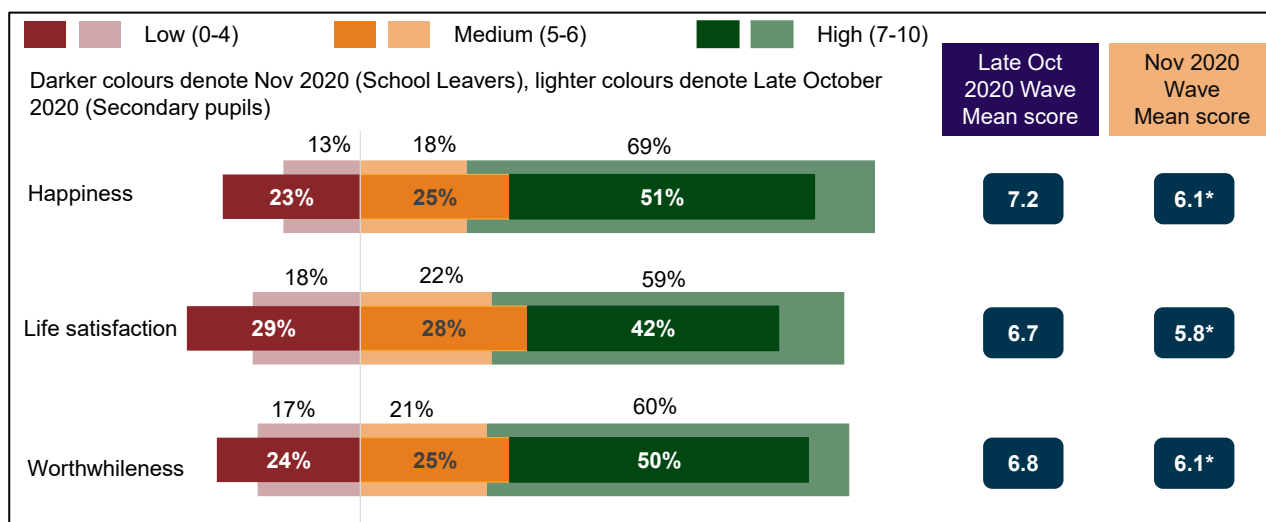
It is important to note that for the first three measures, a high score of 7-10 is a positive score as it suggests high levels of happiness, life satisfaction and worthwhileness, whereas for the anxiety measure a low score of 0-3 is a positive score as it represents low levels of feeling anxious and a high score (6-10) is a negative score for those who were considered anxious.

### **School leavers' views on their own wellbeing**

In August and November 2020, school leavers (2019/2020 Year 13 pupils) were asked these questions regarding their mental health and wellbeing. It should be noted that in August, many school leavers were asked these questions on or near the day before year 13 students received their exam results which may have affected the responses given to these questions. Consequently, this report focuses on comparing the November scores with those given by all secondary pupils in late October 2020.

As shown in figure 15, school leavers in November 2020, gave lower scores for happiness (6.1 vs. 7.2), life satisfaction (5.8 vs 6.7) and worthwhileness (6.1 vs 6.8) compared to secondary pupils during a similar time (late October 2020). HE students also gave lower scores than secondary pupils across all three wellbeing measures but these were not significantly different to school leavers overall: happiness (6.2), life satisfaction (5.9) and worthwhileness (6.3)

**Figure 15. School leavers' happiness, life satisfaction and sense of worthwhileness**



Source: PPP Wave 3, B5: “Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile? Please give an answer on the scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “completely.” All school leavers November 2021 (n=731) compared to secondary pupils in late October 2020 (1,661).

In November 2020, the following groups showed differences in wellbeing scores:

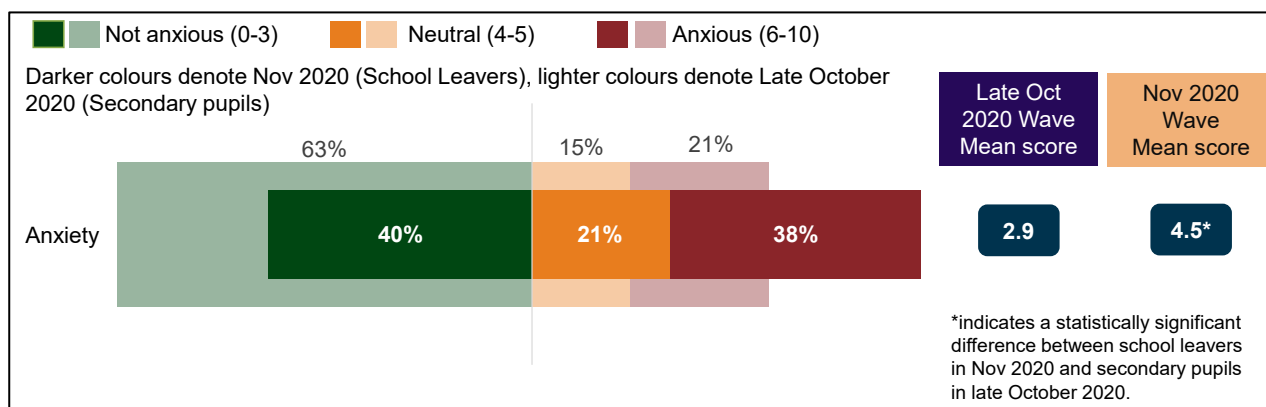
- Those studying for a HE qualification reported higher scores for life satisfaction (5.9 vs 5.8) and worthwhileness (6.3 vs. 6.1) compared to school leavers overall.
- Male school leavers were more likely to report a high happiness score (57% vs. 46% among women), and high life worthwhileness score (55% vs. 47% among women). This was the same pattern amongst secondary pupils in October 2020 (77% vs 60% for happiness, and 68% vs. 51% for worthwhileness).
- Those not eligible for FSM at school had a higher mean score for all three measures than FSM school leavers: happiness 6.2 vs. 5.7; life satisfaction 5.8 vs. 5.3; worthwhileness 6.2 vs. 5.6. The same pattern was seen amongst secondary pupils in October 2020 (7.3 vs 6.8 for happiness and 6.8 vs. 6.4 for worthwhileness)<sup>16</sup>.
- School leavers whose plans changed after their exams results reported lower life satisfaction and worthwhileness mean scores compared to those whose plans didn't change (5.2 vs 6.0, 5.6 vs. 6.3).

<sup>16</sup> The difference was not significant for life satisfaction (6.8 vs. 6.5)

## Feelings of anxiousness

School leavers (including HE students) reported being more anxious in November 2020, compared to secondary school pupils in late October 2020 (a mean score of 4.5, for both all school leavers and HE students, vs. 2.9). In November 2020, nearly two-in-five school leavers (38%) gave a high anxiousness score, compared to one-in-five secondary pupils in late October 2020.

**Figure 16. School leavers' anxiety**



Source: PPP Wave 3, B6: "Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday, where 0 is 'not at all anxious' and 10 is 'completely anxious'?" All school leavers November 2021 (n=731) compared to year 13 pupils August 2020 (1,570).

In November 2020, the following groups showed differences in anxiousness scores:

- Female school leavers were more anxious than male school leavers (4.9 vs. 3.8), which was also the case amongst secondary pupils (3.6 vs. 2.4)
- Those who had had SEND in August 2020 were more likely than those who didn't to have an overall higher anxiousness score (5.0 vs. 4.4).
- School leavers who in August 2020 reported someone in their house was at high risk of COVID-19 were more likely than school leavers not in one of these households to have an overall higher anxiousness score (5.0 vs. 4.2).

## Loneliness

In both August 2020 and November 2020, school leavers were asked three questions relating to loneliness which were combined to create a mean score between three and nine, with three representing lower levels of loneliness and nine representing higher. This score was based on the UCLA loneliness measure This score is.:

- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?

- How often do you feel isolated from others?
- How often do you feel left out?

Overall, school leavers had a loneliness mean score of 6.3. This score is between three and nine, with three representing lower levels of loneliness and nine representing higher. In comparison, when asked these questions in August 2020, school leavers (then year 13 pupils) had a loneliness score of 5.

Some sub-group differences of interest in November 2020 include:

- Females had a higher mean UCLA loneliness score compared to males (6.5 vs 6.0).
- School leavers who reported in August that someone in their household was at high risk of COVID-19 were more likely to have a high loneliness score than those that do not (6.7 vs. 6.1).



## Reflections on education and career path

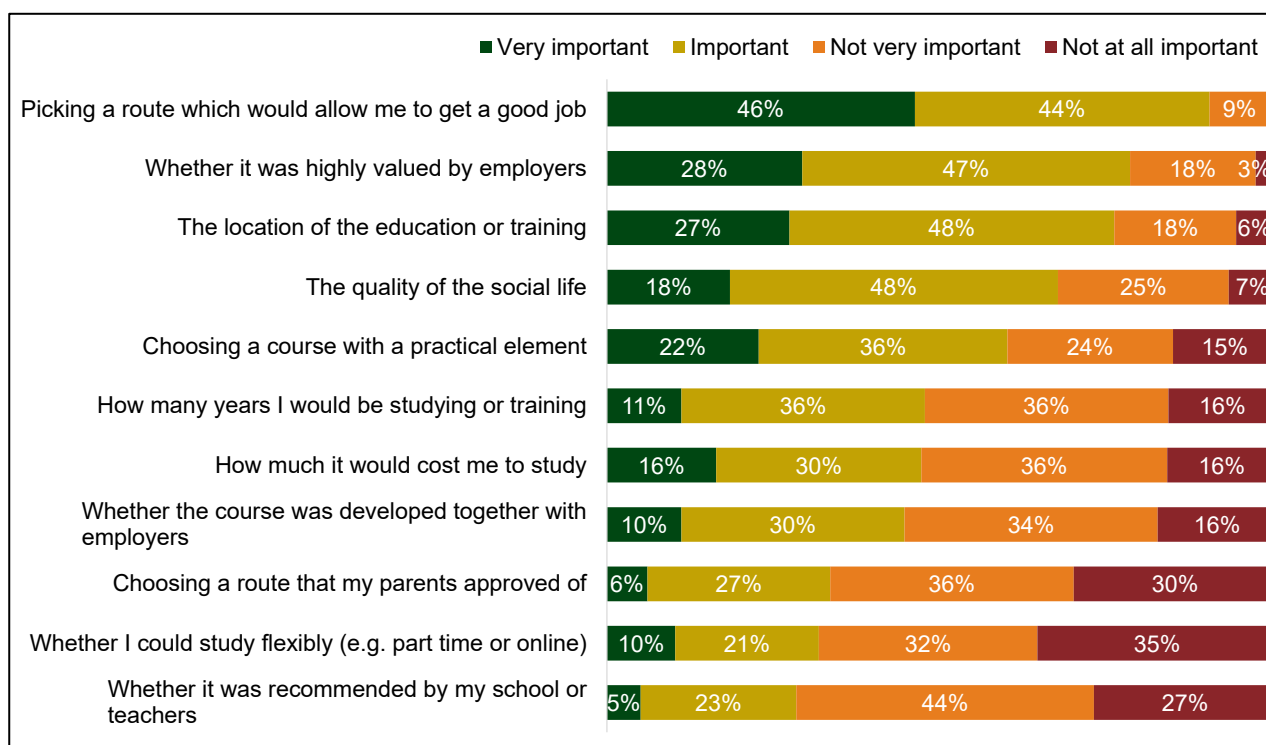
This chapter of the report explores the factors influencing school leavers' education and career paths. It will also cover the extent to which school leavers feel in control of their future and their confidence and satisfaction in the decisions they have made since leaving school.

### Factors influencing education and career path

All school leavers who were in education or training in November 2020 were asked how important 11 factors were when making decisions about education and training routes to follow in the 2020/21 academic year.

As shown in Figure 17, picking a route which would allow students to get a good job was the most important factor for school leavers when deciding what education or training route to take, with 89% saying this was important. The least important factor for school leavers was whether the route was recommended by their school or teachers, with just over a quarter (27%) reporting this was important.

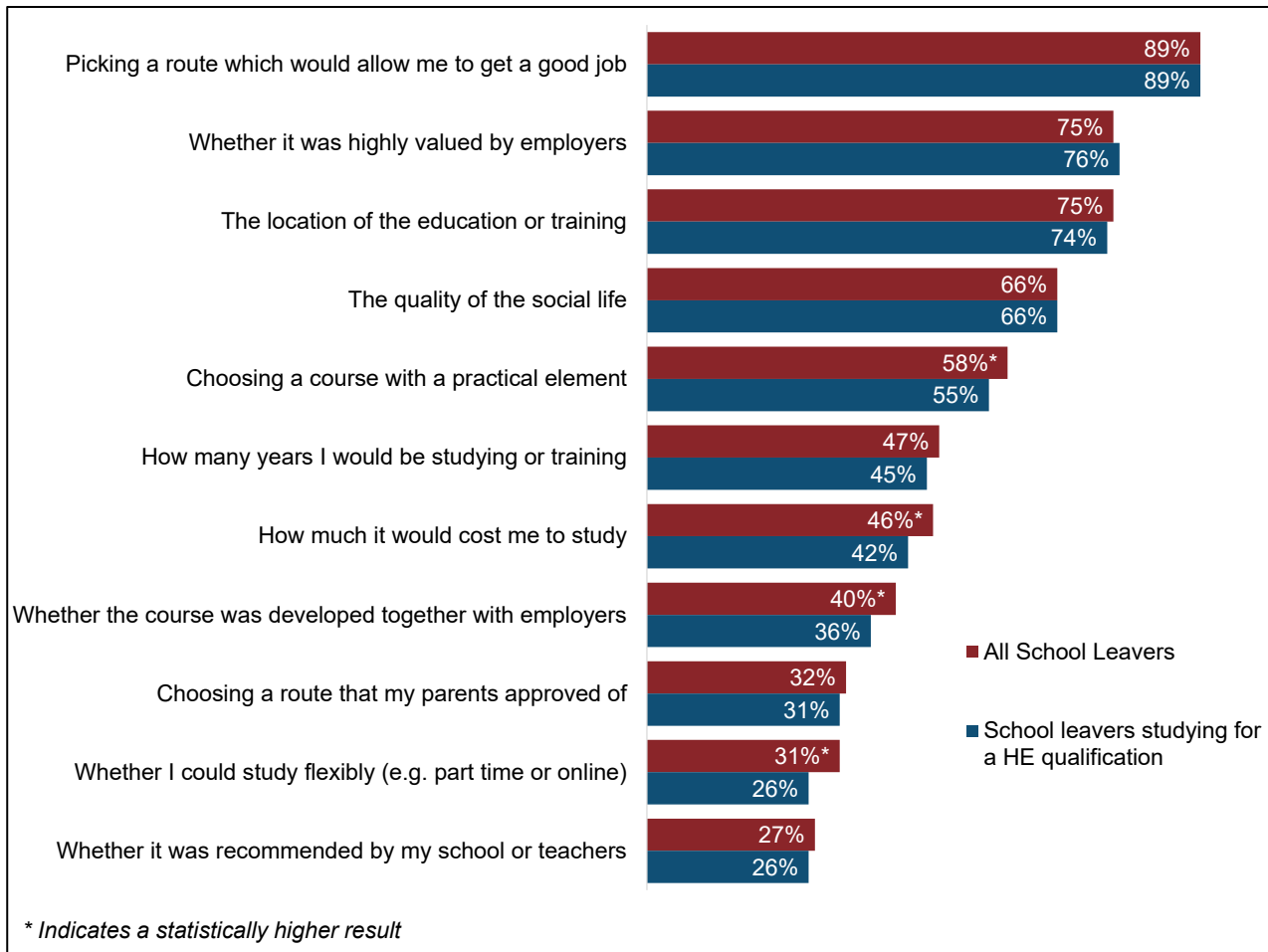
**Figure 17. Factors influencing school leavers education and career decisions for 2020/21**



Source: PPP Wave 3, D1: "How important were the following factors when making your decision about what education or training route to do in this 2020/21 academic year?" School leavers in education or training or planning to be within six months, except those continuing at school (n=595).

As shown in Figure 18, there wasn't a factor that was more important to those studying for a HE qualification than school leavers overall.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 18 Factors that do influence school leavers education and career decisions for 2020/21**



Source: PPP Wave 3, D1: “How important were the following factors when making your decision about what education or training route to do in this 2020/21 academic year?” School leavers in education or training or planning to be within six months, except those continuing at school, all school leavers (595), those studying for HE qualification (n=497).

Picking a route which would allow school leavers to get a good job was considered more important by:

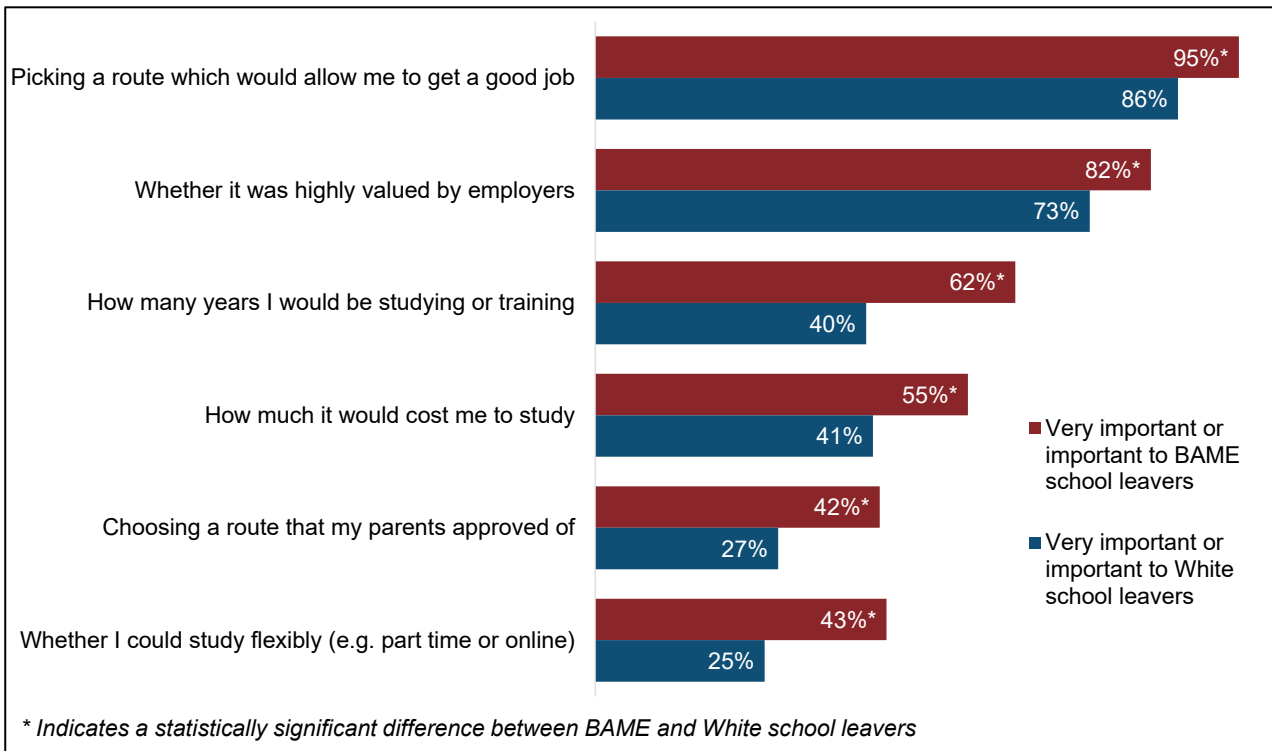
- BAME school leavers than White school leavers (57% vs. 40%).
- School leavers who were eligible for FSM at school than those who were not (55% vs. 45%).

<sup>17</sup> Chart shows factors that school leavers, and those studying for a HE qualification, thought were ‘important’ or ‘very important’

- Those living in urban areas rather than rural areas (48% vs. 36%).

There were several factors that were considered more important to BAME school leavers than White school leavers, as shown in Figure 19. In particular: how many years they would be studying (62% vs 40%), choosing a route that their parents approved of (42% vs 27%) and whether they could study flexibility (43% vs 25%).

**Figure 19. Whether listed factors important in influencing school leavers education and career decisions for 2020/21, by ethnicity**

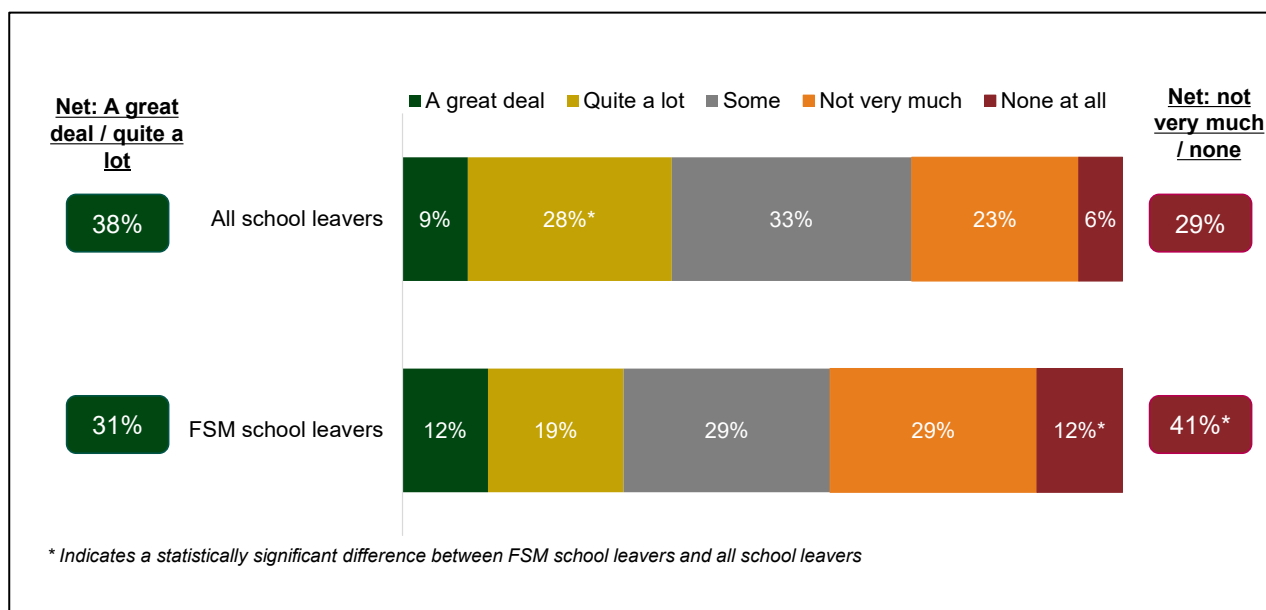


Source: PPP Wave 3, D1: “How important were the following factors when making your decision about what education or training route to do in this 2020/21 academic year?” School leavers in education or training or planning to be within six months, except those continuing at school, White (n=400), BAME (n=190).

### Level of control over the future

In November 2020, school leavers were asked how much control they felt they had over their education route / career path since September 2020. As shown in Figure 20, two-in-five school leavers (38%) said that they have had ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot of’ control over their education route / career path since September 2020. Over a quarter thought they had had no control (6%) or not very much control (23%).

**Figure 20. Level of control over education or career path (all school leavers and those eligible for FSM)**



Source: PPP Wave 3, D2: “In general, how much control do you feel you have had over your education route/career path since September 2020?” All school leavers (n=731). FSM school leavers (n=189).

School leavers who had FSM status while at school were less likely to say they had any control over their education route or career path since September 2020.

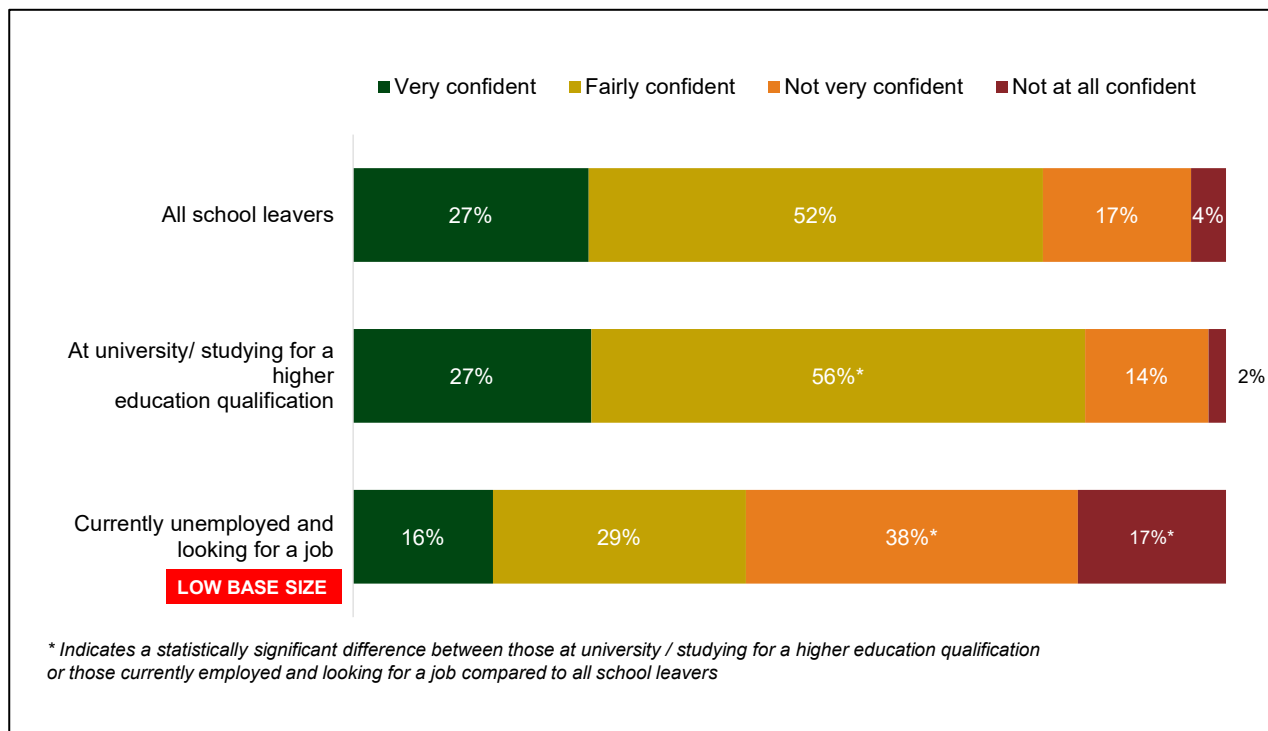
Those currently studying for a HE qualification were more likely to say they have had control over their education route / career path, with a third (33%) saying they had had ‘quite a lot’ of control compared to 28% of all school leavers. Those currently unemployed and looking for work were more likely to say they had ‘not very much’ control (55% vs 23% overall<sup>18</sup>).

### Confidence in decisions made after leaving school

In November 2020, school leavers were asked “How confident are you that what you have been doing since September 2020 is the best option for you right now?”. As shown in Figure 21, four-in-five school leavers (79%) said that they have confidence that what they had been doing since September 2020 was the best option for them. This rose to 83% amongst those who were currently studying for a HE qualification.

<sup>18</sup> Although significant, there is a relatively small base for those who are currently unemployed (32)

**Figure 21. School leavers confidence in activity since September 2020 being the best option currently (all school leavers, those studying for a higher education qualification and those unemployed)**



Source: PPP Wave 3, D3: “How confident are you that what you have been doing since September 2020 is the best option for you right now?” All school leavers (n=731), school leavers at university or studying for a higher education qualification (n=498), unemployed school leavers seeking jobs (n=32). Low base size for unemployed: findings should be treated as indicative only.

Those in studying for a HE qualification had slightly higher levels of confidence than the average of all school leavers (83% vs 79%). Unsurprisingly, those who were currently unemployed and looking for a job were less confident, with over half (55%) being ‘not very confident’ or ‘not at all confident’ that what they have been doing since September is the best option for them.

Other significant differences between subgroups of note were:

- Male school leavers were more likely than female school leavers to say they were ‘very confident’ in what they were doing being right for them (31% vs. 23%).
- BAME school leavers were more likely than White school leavers to be ‘not very confident’ (23% vs. 16%), but less likely to say ‘not confident at all’ (1% vs 5%).
- School leavers, who changed their plans for 2020/2021 following their exam results, were less confident that what they have been doing since September has been the best option for them (62% were ‘not very confident’ or ‘not at all confident’ vs 85% who didn’t change plans). Thirty-eight percent said they were

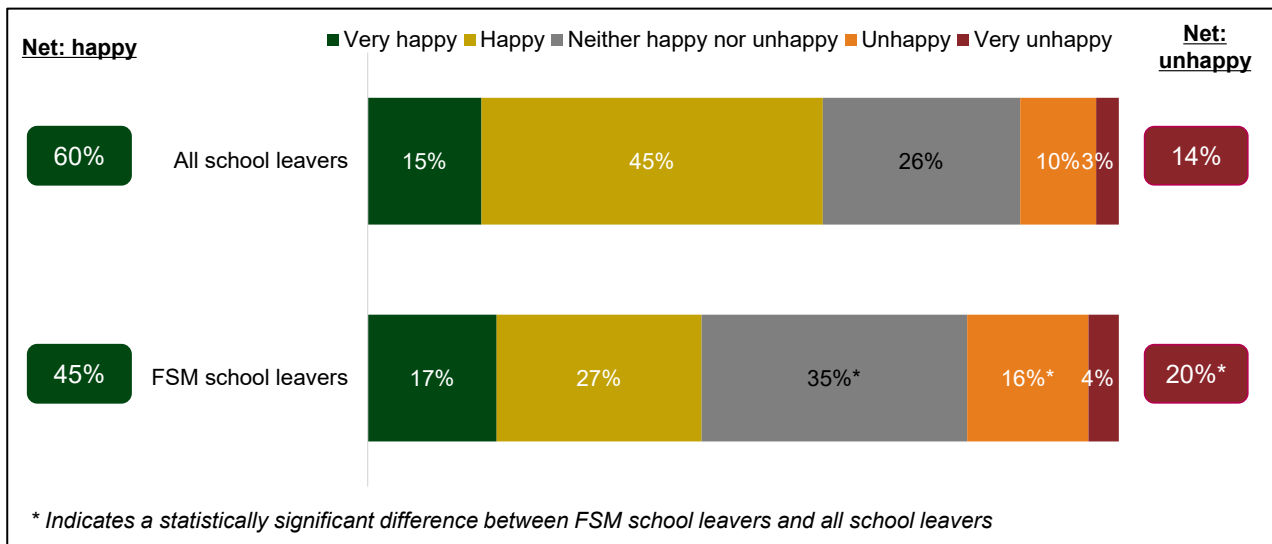
not confident it has been the best option for them.

## Happiness levels

Three-in-five school leavers (60%) said they were happy or very happy with what they have been doing since September 2020.

As shown in Figure 22, school leavers who were eligible for FSM at school tended to be less happy than their non-FSM counterparts; with fewer FSM school leavers reporting they are happy compared with all school leavers (45% vs. 60%). A fifth said they were very unhappy or unhappy (20% vs. 14% of all school leavers).

**Figure 22. School leavers happiness with activity since September 2020 (all school leavers and those eligible for FSM)**



Source: PPP Wave 3, D4: "In general, how happy do you feel about what you have been doing since September 2020?" All school leavers (n=731). FSM school leavers (n=189).

Other significant differences of note were:

- Those currently studying for a HE qualification were more likely than school leavers overall to say they are happy with what they have been doing since September 2020 (64% vs. 60%). Forty percent of those who have taken a gap year said they were happy compared with 60% of all school leavers, most likely reflecting the restrictions on work, leisure and travel during this period.
- BAME school leavers were less likely than White school leavers to say they were happy or very happy with what they have been doing since September 2020 (52% vs. 62%).

## Conclusion

This report sets out findings from the school leavers wave of PPP. It captures what this cohort were doing in November 2020, how this had changed and been impacted by COVID-19 as well as reflecting on their mental health.

It showed that there had been little change between what school leavers had intended to do after leaving school, and what they had actually gone on to do. The majority both planned to study, and ended up studying, a HE qualification. There were some whose plans had changed though, either at an overall level or in relation to something more specific e.g. where they were going to study. In particular, many who had originally planned to study an apprenticeship had not gone on to do so. The pandemic and worries about the impact of COVID-19 were common reasons school leavers gave for changing their plans, although this was not the only thing shaping their experiences. Plans had also changed as a result of higher or lower grades and the availability of jobs and apprenticeships. The report showed that a large majority felt that they have some control over their career or education path (although few felt they had a great amount of control) and that most were happy with what they had been doing since September 2020.

The report captures the experiences of those starting university in November 2020. It shows that over half had a positive experience so far, though experiences varied considerably across different key sub-groups and the method in which learning was being delivered. For instance, BAME school leavers or those who had been eligible for FSM in school were less likely to report having had a positive experience so far this academic year.

Very few students had considered leaving university despite challenges they may have faced. The report shows the dominance of online and pre-recorded studying amongst those attending university in Autumn 2020, with four-in-ten students having only had experience of online learning. This builds on the findings from surveys focused on primary and secondary pupils in August to October, which highlighted the way in which the education system has adapted to the restrictions put in place by the pandemic through the availability of remote learning.

This report provides several findings regarding mental health and wellbeing, including details of school leavers' wellbeing scores. Compared to secondary pupils at this time (who had seen an increase in wellbeing during the autumn term), school leavers were less likely to have positive mean scores regarding happiness, life satisfaction, worthwhileness and anxiousness.

Across many findings, this report echoes the picture found within the parent and pupil results reported in the August to October findings report. It shows differences in experiences and perspectives between male and female school leavers, those who had

been eligible for FSM whilst at school versus those who hadn't as well as between BAME and White school leavers. For instance, those who had been eligible for FSM at school were more likely to have lower wellbeing scores than other school leavers.

The COVID-19 Parent and Pupil Panel Survey will continue into 2021 and the DfE plans to conduct at least three more waves, amongst current parents and pupils, during the remainder of the academic year 2020/21. They will continue to help DfE make evidence-based policy decisions, monitor the impact of the COVID-19 / post-COVID-19 situation, and see how views and experiences of parents, pupils and school leavers change over time.



## Glossary

CIN – Children in Need

EHCP – Education Health and Care Plan. This is a legal document that describes a child or young person's special educational, health and social care needs and explains the extra help that will be given to meet those needs and how that help will support the child or young person,

FSM – Free School Meal. Eligibility for FSMs is used as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Pupils eligible for FSMs were considered to be living in greater socioeconomic deprivation than those pupils who were not eligible for FSMs.

SEND – Special Education Needs and Disability

BAME – Black and Minority Ethnic. Includes all ethnicities other than White and Unclassified.



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For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact us at:

[omnibus.surveys@education.gov.uk](mailto:omnibus.surveys@education.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

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