



Research Briefing Published on Thursday 18th June 2020

University students and the Coronavirus crisis

Introduction

High Fliers Research, the independent graduate recruitment research company, has conducted a special survey of university students who are due to begin the final year of their undergraduate degrees in the autumn, to find out how they have been affected by the Coronavirus crisis and what they are expecting when the new academic year starts in September or October.

A total of **803 undergraduates** from 46 universities across the UK took part in the research, which was conducted online between 8th and 12th June 2020.

Universities featured within the research include Edinburgh, Nottingham, Warwick, Leicester, Newcastle, Durham, Exeter, York, Birmingham, Oxford, Cambridge and the London School of Economics. All participating students are due to graduate from university in the summer of 2021.

The survey asked students what they did when the Coronavirus crisis began in mid-March 2020 and how well they think their university has done in terms of providing teaching and assessments remotely whilst the UK has been in lockdown.

The research also examined students' plans for the autumn – whether they intend to return to their university town, city or campus at the beginning of their final year of studies, and what teaching arrangements they believe their university should provide for the new term.

About High Fliers Research

Since its launch in 1995, **High Fliers Research** has been at the forefront of researching graduate recruitment at the UK's leading universities. Its annual survey of up to 20,000 final year students, *The UK Graduate Careers Survey*, is conducted on behalf of sixty major national and international graduate employers and provides recruiters with a campus-by-campus assessment of new graduates' career plans and their expectations & aspirations for their first graduate job.

The research is also used to compile the annual rankings for *The Times Top 100 Graduate Employers* and High Fliers Research conducts regular research with these organisations to track the number of graduate vacancies and starting salaries available at the UK's most sought-after graduate employers.



University Students during Lockdown

When the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic began to take hold of the UK in mid-March 2020, the London School of Economics was the first of several universities to confirm that they were closing early for Easter and that teaching during the summer term would be delivered online. Ten days later, when the Government’s ‘stay at home’ instruction was issued, every other university followed suit, with students encouraged to travel home and stay there for the remainder of the academic year.

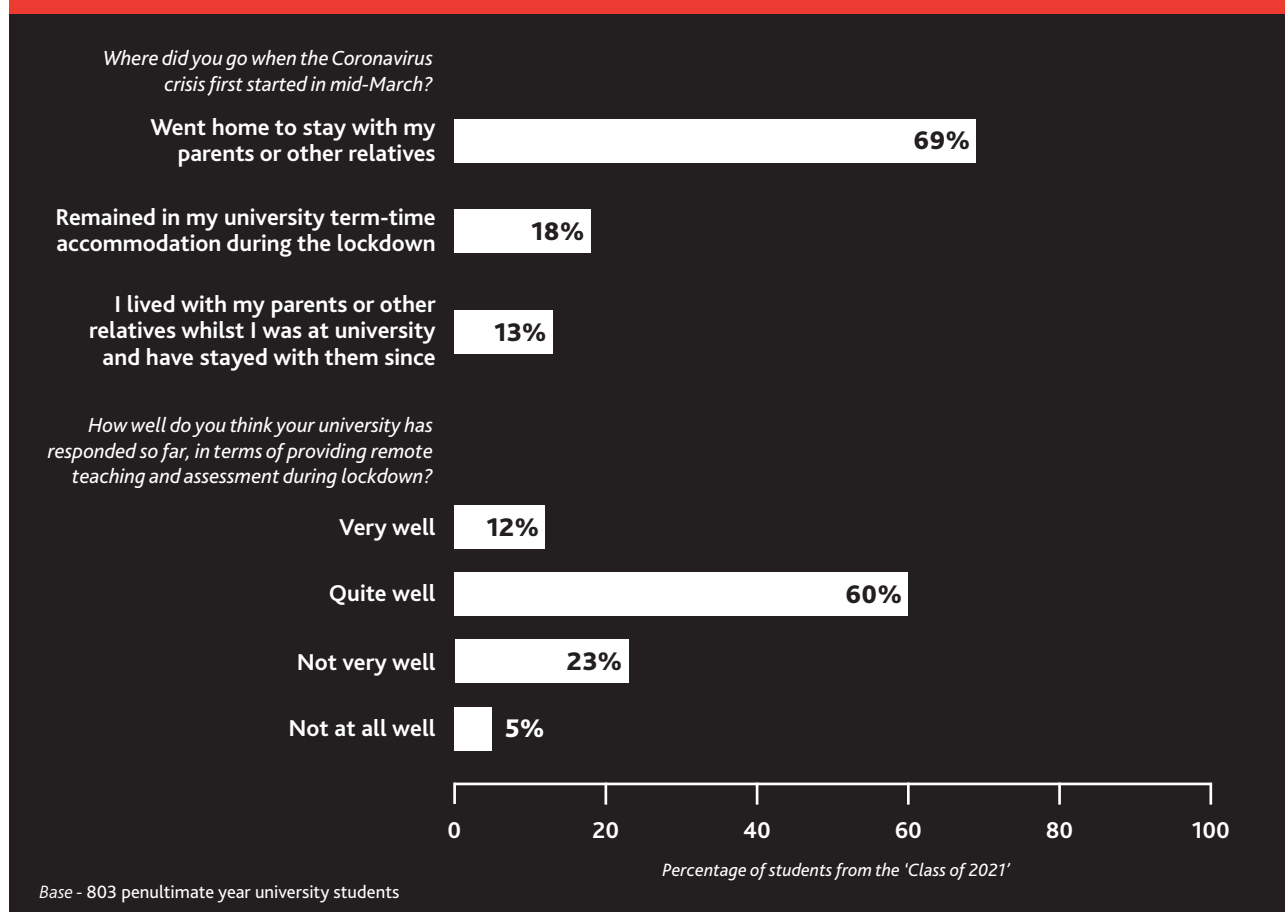
This latest research confirms that more than two-thirds of university students went home to be with their parents or other relatives during lockdown (see *Chart 1*), but almost a fifth opted to remain in their university term-time accommodation. One in eight students said they were already living at home for their university studies and stayed there.

Nearly three-quarters of students thought their university had done well with the provision of remote teaching and assessment during the lockdown period, with 12 per cent of students saying their university had responded ‘very well’ and 60 per cent said that it had done ‘quite well’. Fewer than one in twenty students thought that their university had responded ‘not at all well’ to the crisis.

Many students were impressed by how quickly their university adapted: *“they provided recorded lectures and live seminars online and altered our exams so that we could take them online”*; *“my university offered Covid-19 relief packages, waived university accommodation fees and even offered laptops to any student that didn’t have access to a computer”*; *“Exeter University were pioneering in their approach to exams with the ‘No Detriment Safety Net’ policy”*.

But some felt their university’s response should have been better: *“my university’s communication with students has been sporadic, lacklustre and confusing”*; *“we were sent YouTube videos in place of lectures – I don’t think this justifies the fees paid for the year”*; *“our university only prioritised those graduating in 2020, so I’ve had no online teaching or assessments at all from March onwards – 3 or 4 months of nothing and having to still pay in full for university is ridiculous”*.

Chart 1 Where Students went during Lockdown and Views on Universities’ Response to the Crisis



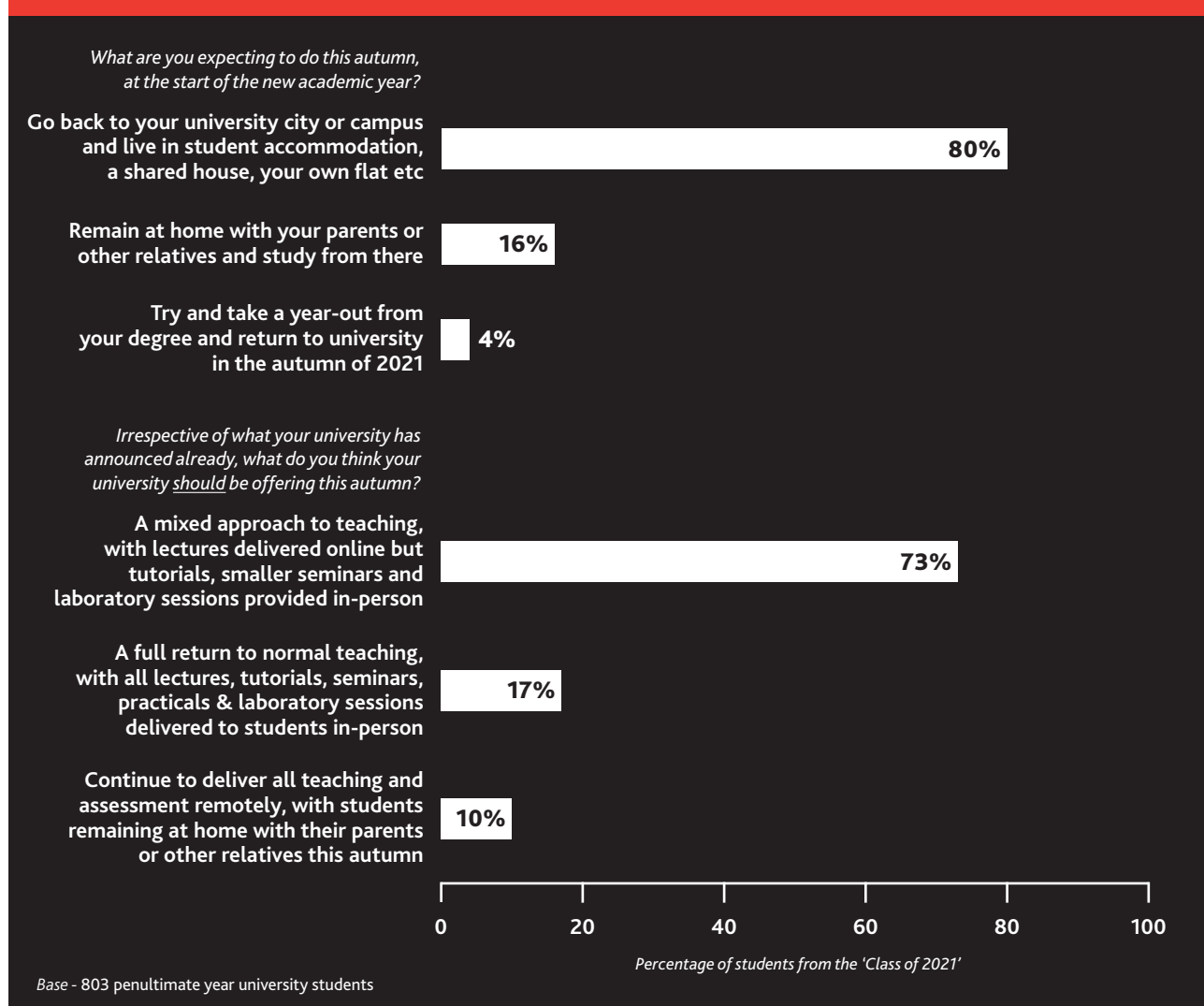
Returning to University in Autumn 2020

Since mid-May, a number of UK universities have begun announcing their plans for teaching in the autumn. The University of Manchester was one of the first to declare its plans on May 11th, notifying students by email that lectures and some “other aspects of learning” will be online when the new academic year starts in late September. And a week later, the University of Cambridge made its widely-reported announcement that there would be no face-to-face lectures during the 2020-2021 academic year but that lectures would be available online and “it may be possible to host smaller teaching groups in person” if they meet social distancing requirements.

This latest research with university students shows that despite the prospect of online lectures, a sizeable majority of students intend to return to their university town, city or campus in the autumn. Four-fifths of all students plan to go back to their university accommodation in time for the start of the new term (see *Chart 2*) – equating to nine out of ten students who were living away from home before the onset of the Coronavirus crisis. Just 4 per cent of students are considering trying to take a year-out because of the disruption to their studies and return to university in the autumn of 2021.

There is widespread support for universities to deliver lectures online this autumn but provide tutorials, smaller seminars and laboratory sessions in-person. Almost three-quarters of students believe that this is the approach that universities should take for the autumn, with only a sixth of students expecting universities to make a full return to normal teaching at the beginning of the new academic year. A tenth of students – half of whom were already living at home with their parents for the duration of their university degrees – think that all teaching and assessment should continue to be delivered remotely this autumn.

Chart 2 Students’ Plans and Views on Returning to University for the 2020-2021 Academic Year



Students' apparent enthusiasm for universities to provide lectures online but offer tutorials and other teaching experiences face-to-face seems to be based on a combination of realism and their experience of university teaching before the Coronavirus crisis.

If social distancing is still needed in the autumn – particularly at the currently-required 2m rule – then students accept that it will be impossible for university lecture theatres to accommodate hundreds of undergraduates to see academics delivering their lectures in person. But equally, it is clear that students are very used to watching some or all of their lectures online already – for much of the last decade lectures have been recorded at many universities, for students who don't attend the lectures to watch on a 'catch-up' basis.

It is evident that many students are very keen that universities should provide as much of a 'student experience' as possible in the autumn, rather than continuing with remote learning: *"being at university is such an important part of the learning process experienced as a student – if social distancing continues to be necessary, every effort should be made to provide teaching in person within the guidelines"*; *"it's really hard to focus and get work done at home, so I am really hoping we are allowed to travel back to university, even if not all teaching is back to normal"*, *"I think all students should have the option to return to university with full-scale teaching and the full-scale social experience, because we are not a risk group due to our age"*; *"remaining with remote learning would be devastating for our future, even with the risk of another outbreak"*; *"considering that most students are tied into housing contracts for the year ahead, it is essential that some teaching takes place in-person"*; *"if bars/pubs/shops are open I see no reason why a return to normal teaching shouldn't occur, as students would be mixing outside of lecture theatres regardless"*.

The majority of students who are planning to return to their university accommodation in the autumn appear to be happy to accept a hybrid approach to teaching, providing small-group tuition is available in person: *"lectures are recorded and put online regardless of Covid, so it's a format we are used to using to catch up on lectures – it's more important to me that seminars are face-to-face as this helps to consolidate my understanding of a topic"*; *"there is no reason why tutorials, seminars and small group teaching can not go ahead in person, whilst still observing social distancing"*; *"having a mixed approach will ensure that safety and as well as quality of education are maintained"*; *"I don't believe delivering all teaching virtually would be necessary and it seems to me that it would be a lazy option"*; *"although things will not have completely returned to normal by October, it should be safe enough by then to be able to continue in-person learning, with the appropriate measures in place to make sure that safety is a priority"*.

A number of students highlighted that with up to 14 weeks to go before the start of the new academic year, it is too early for universities to be declaring 'definite' plans for the autumn: *"universities should wait as long as possible before moving stuff online – I know people don't like them being vague on details but it's better than them jumping the gun and making our experience worse unnecessarily"*; *"I think it's too early for plans to be set in stone but if we continue as we are, I would be OK with going back with blended teaching"*; *"with schools already reopening and universities going back in September, I don't believe any universities can be justified in suspending all campus teaching and resources now – it would be disproportionate to the threat level when compared to the impact on our education"*; *"there should be multiple contingency plans in place depending on the situation in the autumn"*; *"the government has not set-out its plans beyond the next month, so with another 3 or 4 months until the new term begins, it's hard for universities to decide what will be permissible"*.

Students also expressed frustration about university tuition fees, with regard to next year's teaching: *"as a history student, I pay £9,500 a year for 6 contact hours a week and if I can't even use the library that I'm paying so much money for, then I will be fuming"*; *"an element of face-to-face interaction is imperative, not only to aid in understanding the content of each course, but also for students to feel as though they are receiving a university education that is actually value for money"*; *"if it's not full teaching, why are we paying three times more for a form of Open University?"*.

Summary & Conclusions

High Fliers Research surveyed a total of **803 students** who are due to graduate from 46 universities across the country in the summer of 2021. The research was conducted between 8th and 12th June, some eleven weeks into the UK's lockdown due to the Coronavirus and approximately three months before the start of the new academic year for universities.

Key findings from the research include:

- when the Coronavirus crisis began in mid-March more than **two-thirds of students went home to stay with their parents** or other relatives but almost a fifth opted to remain in their university accommodation
- more than **7 out of 10 students think their university has responded well** to the Coronavirus crisis, in terms of providing remote teaching and assessment during the lockdown
- **four-fifths of students plan to return to their university campuses, towns and cities** this autumn for the start of the new academic year
- three-quarters of students believe universities should provide **a mix of online lectures and face-to-face tutorials, smaller seminars and laboratory practicals** in the autumn but a sixth of students believe that universities should plan for a full return to normal teaching
- there is **widespread opposition to remote learning continuing into the autumn**, particularly as the new academic year isn't due to start until late September or early October

The research confirms that after university life came to an abrupt end three months ago, an overwhelming majority of university students are planning to return to their term-time accommodation at the beginning of the new academic year, in late-September.

There is considerable support for universities' plans to deliver lectures online this autumn, provided that students can take part in tutorials, smaller seminars and laboratory practicals face-to-face. Students' feedback suggest that most are well-used to seeing or hearing lectures online because for much of the last decade, universities have routinely recorded lectures, so that students who miss them in-person can access them on a 'catch-up' basis.

Although almost three-quarters of students think that their university has responded well to the Coronavirus crisis and has provided effective teaching and assessment during the emergency lockdown, there is substantial opposition to a continuation of remote learning into the autumn.

And whilst students are understandably keen to know what the arrangements may be for the academic year ahead, many commented that with up to 14 weeks to go before the start of the new term, universities shouldn't take final, irreversible decisions now about how teaching will be delivered in the autumn.