

# The trials of the Class of Covid-19

## A Conversation with School Leavers about the Coronavirus Crisis

A year ago, Anderson Anderson Brown Consulting brought a group of 17-year-olds together, embarking on their final year at school, to help us examine the question of the expectation versus the reality of higher education – we were particularly interested in the views of those not already in the system. There were certainly some strong themes that emerged that would challenge the present design of the student experience.

A year on, and our Class of 2020, is now undoubtedly the Class of Covid-19. A cohort who are about to embark on a significant life change within unprecedented conditions. In working closely with Higher Education institutions, we are acutely aware of the transformative changes that are having to be orchestrated in order to allow institutions to function when the new semester starts.

We've spoken about possible approaches to connect with these students in a recent [blog](#). This inspired us to go back to our cohort and ask them how things were – we asked them about their plans, their concerns and whether they had any ideas that would make the transition easier.

There were six strong themes that emerged, helpful in understanding the mindset of this cohort, and which we believe institutions should consider in their present planning:

1. The importance of location.
2. The learning experience, addressing embedded norms.
3. Financial planning
4. Psychological impact of the current environment and its affect on plan-making.
5. The disruption of the old and new social networks.
6. The information and communications vacuum.



## The Importance of Location

When it comes to choosing how and where to spend the next chapter of their life, there are so many aspects to consider. Work versus study. Living at home versus going away. Academic versus vocational courses. Certainly, the theme that underpinned most of our respondents' choices was the 'scope for future success' (65%) out-stripping by far their thirst for further education or subject specialism.

Whilst the attractiveness or desirable features of University life for those on that path vary largely in terms of individual preferences, we found that picking the right location was the most important influencing factor for our prospective students.

With this in mind, the question now is what if the ability to move to a new location during their first year of study becomes compromised. What if a second Covid wave enforces them to 'stay home'? Can universities compensate and adapt to the expectations of those young people that have already missed out on so many important milestone events such as prom and school graduation ceremonies, when the greatest adventure of all, moving away from home for the first time, falls away.

The University of Cambridge has already announced that all its lectures will be online next semester. As other universities follow suit, and campus life becomes restricted, how will this affect our cohort's plans? The indicators are there - 38% indicated to us that they would make alternative plans rather than accept that they can't have the student experience they want in their location of choice. Most are anxiously watching and waiting to find out the newest developments.



## The Learning Experience

Despite acknowledging and expecting that exams, coursework and living arrangements may have to change, the young people in our cohort expect to receive traditional modes of teaching through lectures, tutorials and workshops. Would a significant change in this model drive the 'alternative plans' alluded to, or are our cohort comfortable being the vanguard of digital learning.

Certainly, our findings align with a recent study by MyUniChoices where 37% of school leavers were reconsidering their plans in light of the anticipated change in the student experience.

*"I hope degrees might become more flexible, lifting restrictions on what subjects you can do."*



Universities are clearly rapidly addressing their present learning model, but for many institutions, with years of under-investment in new technology or ways of working, it's rather like building a plane while flying it. This leads to a lack of clarity around the new model, which, coupled with a lack of collaboration with the end-user, makes it a hard sell to the incoming student population. It also may miss the opportunity for other areas of potential modernisation that may be incredibly desirable - for example subject or calendar flexibility. Or to improve employability by building in more vocational elements or internships.

More profoundly, will the resultant teaching mix cause our cohort (and those in further teaching years) to seriously question the value of a University education?

## Financial Planning

*"Young adults mostly manage their money by budgeting or planning short-term savings, thinking ahead only until their next pay cheque. Very few think further ahead than 12 months"*

Public opinion and the internet are full of statements like the one above. However, we have repeatedly found the opposite to be the case. A study by Raddon (2017) regarding the financial literacy of Generation Z, found this group relatively financially savvy - they have had personal finance classes and an early bank account in place way before Millennials at the same age.

Regardless of the generational difference, our study revealed a confidence in approach, with 100% of respondents having a clear idea of how they will fund the next phase of their life. Whilst most who will go on to study will rely on savings, parents and SAAS for the majority of costs, our cohort are planning to mitigate the expense of their student lifestyle with a plan that includes part-time work alongside educational activities. Perhaps they've been aware of stories of enduring student debt. Perhaps being surrounded with so much uncertainty, by sorting out their finances, they are adding some constant and confidence to an otherwise extremely unstable equation. Whatever the reason, this fiscal maturity will stand them in good stead through a lingering recession that is undoubtedly coming our way, and likely to persist beyond graduation.

*"The crisis has given me the opportunity to make a difference in people lives, raising money and morale during lockdown."*



## Psychological Impact

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has reported that its regular update on wellbeing showed the number of people over 16 reporting 'deep levels of concern and stress' had more than doubled since late 2019. As a subset of this population, our school leavers are definitely reporting negative emotions and concern. We asked them to describe, in one word, what they feel about their future plans, and though the resultant word cloud is not exclusively negative, it is worryingly bleak.



It was also clear from the verbatim responses that his particular cohort are suffering more due to the removal of 'coming of age' events; final exams, the last day of school, prom, first group holiday abroad. Events that would reinforce their independence and draw a line under their old life and provide resilience for the new.

Before the crisis began around 1 in 4 students reported having mental health issues. The MyUniChoices survey also found that the top reason for dropping out of University was because of mental health issues. If there is increased fragility in the incoming population then outcomes will surely be significantly affected. So it is incumbent on organisations and institutions to consider the impact of the current situation and how they can improve support services and outreach.

## Social Network

*"It will change my appreciation for my social life and life in general."*

Nearly half of respondents said that social life and networking was one of the most important considerations when making their post-school plans. A new life in a new place certainly puts pressure on to find a group of like-minded people. But as we've seen it also means saying goodbye to friends that have been consistently there through the school years. It is hard enough to make new friends in a new setting - now add in the 2-metre rule, online-only engagement and various other restrictions. Social interactions may feel superficial or formal at best - at worst may lead to worsening isolation. In this environment where our cohort are more socially adrift than ever before, how can institutions help?

Social 'bubbles' have been talked of - where students are restricted in both educational activities and recreation, to the same group of eight individuals. Although this may mitigate some of the issues, it feels very 'top-down' and the devil will be in the detail. It's hard to see how

social 'chemistry' will come into play in the design of this solution, and it flies in the face of the desired expansion of their social network.

Certainly, Universities can help by collaborating with students on finding adequate replacements for things like freshers' events, and reaching out into the community to encourage and endorse third party or local business events to link people together.



## Communications

It is clear that there is one thing that educational institutions can do for our Class of 2020, and that is engage with them. 62% of our respondents asked for up-to-date information, and around half asked for more information, more often.

*"I don't even know if it will be safe for me to stay in halls or attend classes."*

Understandably, many institutions have spent the last few weeks busily reconstructing their assessment and learning approaches, and even their fundamental infrastructure to take into consideration Covid demands. There are still likely to be more unknowns than certainties, but at the moment our school leavers simply need contact, to see some presence of the institution they will be engaging with to facilitate their new lives. In our experience, in a period of change, you can never communicate too often, ideally using as much of the broad media mix as possible.

## Conclusion

Our 'Class of Covid' will be a resilient lot. Many believe they will go through more social change than many previous generations. But there are clear issues surfaced in the research - such as mental health, social networking, communication and location - which, if not addressed in the plans of those organisations that will be welcoming this new talent, will make it harder for our cohort to create a new, fulfilling life. It calls, as most significant change does, for more collaboration and co-creation of solutions. This will generate increased understanding on both sides, and of course, better outcomes.

## Influencing factors for after-school study & work plans



### Scope for Future Success

was selected by **65%** of respondents. Only **31%** selected 'thrive for education', while more chose 'social life' and subject specialism (45% & 38%) respectively.

## Funding life after school

### 73% Planning to work part-time

Whilst there was a high dependency on SAAS funding (62%), most had a mixed funding model, with parents and savings also being important (both 38%).



## Impact of Covid-19 on after-school study & work plans

### For 38%, plans have changed

Covid-19 has had a significant affect on after-school plans. Only 14% were maintaining their previous plans, with the majority (48%) believing that it was still too early to say.



## What will be different about studying now?

### Biggest impact is social

**83%** believe that Covid-19 will significantly impact their social networking at University. Only around half identified that living arrangements, coursework and exams will change.



## Other influencers on after-school study & work plans

### Location, Location, Location

Location was the biggest influencer on choice (**52%**). Friends had very little influence (7%), more powerful factors were parents and financial self-sustainability (28% and 31%.)



## Teaching model expectations

### In-person Lectures

Despite Covid-19, most expected that teaching would primarily be done through In-person lectures. Though virtual lectures were expected, few believed that virtual working groups or online content would play a part.

## What if courses moved online, with closed campus?

### The 'Student Experience' is key

**40%** would change their after-school plans if courses moved online. **35%** would be unsure what to do, while only **26%** would stick with their plans.



## How could Universities do more?

### Communicate - please!

There's clearly an information vacuum. **62%** want up-to-date information, **48%** need information more often. Others felt Universities should offer alternatives, a helpline or that the entry date should move.