Sink or Swim

The impact of COVID and how to bridge the widening inequalities gap

Our Expert Panel

To guide this project, Pearson assembled a panel of experts from across education, employment, politics, and regional, employer, professional, and youth bodies.

They were:

Rt. Hon. Anne Milton, Chair, Minister of State for Education (2017-2019) and Minister for Women (2017-2018)

Cindy Rampersaud, Former Senior Vice President of BTEC & Apprenticeships, Pearson plc

Kate Ambrosi, Assistant Director of Education, Baker Dearing Educational Trust

Sir Nic Dakin, Director of Skills and Training, Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce, Shadow Minister (Education) (2015-2016)

Dr Darrell DeSouza, Principal and Chief Executive, Harrow College & Uxbridge College (HCUC)

Jeff Greenidge, Director for Diversity, Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and Association of Colleges (AoC)

David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges (AoC)

Yvonne Kelly, Principal and CEO, Barking & Dagenham College

Janet Legrand QC (Hon), Chair, The Children's Society, Senior Lay Member of Court at the University of Edinburgh

Siân Owen, Director of Stakeholder Management, BTEC & Apprenticeships, Pearson plc

Siobhan Randell, Senior Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Manager, Multiverse

Kathy Slack OBE, Chief Executive, Enterprise M3 Local Enterprise Partnership

Denise Wilson OBE, Chief Executive, Hampton-Alexander Review

Supported by:

Francis Dearnley, Author, former Chief of Staff to the Chair of the Prime Minister's Policy Board

Hayley Dalton, Researcher, Head of Vocational Design and Research, Pearson plc

Our Expert Interviewees

Further to our expert panel, we also invited testimony from a number of leading experts on each of the groups we focus on in this report:

Naomi Clayton, Deputy Director for Research & Development, Learning & Work Institute (LWI)

Tea Colaianni, Founder and Chair of WiHTL (Diversity in Hospitality, Travel & Leisure) and of Diversity in Retail

David Conway, Gatwick Airport, HR Director

Pavita Cooper, Founder of More Difference, Deputy Chair of the 30 Percent Club, Chair of CMI Race

Hannah Harniess, Deputy CEO, Care City

Heather Melville OBE, Director of Client Experience, Chair of CMI Women

Ammar Mirza CBE, Managing Director at AmmarM Ltd, Chair of Business Growth Board North East LEP

Kate Nicholls OBE, CEO, UKHospitality

Dr Hugh Raymond-Pickard, Chief Strategy Officer and co-founder of IntoUniversity

Janet Tidmarsh, Head of Diversity & Inclusion, Whitbread

We are also immensely grateful to the many interviewees we spoke to about their experiences of the pandemic and whose testimony is woven throughout this report. To protect their anonymity, we have not included them on this page, and all their names have been changed in the report.

It should be emphasised that the opinions expressed in this report, and its final actions and conclusions, are not necessarily representative of individual members of our expert panel, the leading experts we spoke to, or the interviewees.

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Foreword

By Rt. Hon. Anne Milton and Cindy Rampersaud

There's an old saying that 99 percent of all statistics only tell 49 percent of the story. This is exactly what we found.

Since last Autumn the amount of data being released has been overwhelming. Some of this data is lifesaving, some of it speculative, some of it impenetrable. But little of it captures the lived experiences of those affected by the pandemic.

This report seeks to draw breath: pooling together statistics on COVID-19 and overlaying them with human experiences, bringing to life its impact on a diverse group of individuals across society.

To do this, we narrowed our focus on those groups we knew to be the most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19: young people, women, and people from minority groups. We compiled research and undertook unique polling of two thousand people. We also carried out in-depth interviews with those experiencing the statistics first-hand.

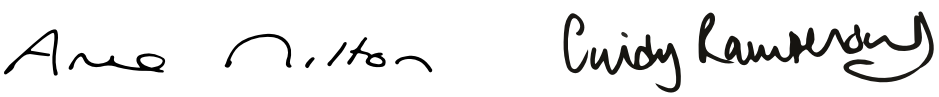
The testimonies we heard left a lasting impression on the expert panel brought together to compile this report. Together, in the context of our findings, they revealed a startling truth: that the impact of the pandemic cuts far deeper than is commonly understood and is likely to be felt for decades rather than just in the coming months or year ahead.

Whilst there is time for us to reduce the growing inequalities gap, this gap is currently narrowing too slowly. The report offers a list of urgent actions not just for government, but for businesses, educators, and many other organisations who can make a positive difference.

These actions will be too bold for some and not bold enough for others, but they are a representation of our experts' collective outlook. We believe that if they were implemented swiftly, they would go some way to alleviating one of the worst crisis in our lifetime – one which, as our report has shown, will only grow in severity unless we act now.

Behind every number is a human story. Every one of them makes up the true economic and societal cost of COVID.

How many of these individuals will sink or swim is up to us as a society. The only question is whether we care enough to act now.



Prologue

At exactly 8.30 on the evening of March 23, 2020, at the moment when the Prime Minister began delivering his statement introducing lockdown, Kirsty, a trainee chef in London, had just got home to her shared flat after a long shift, and decided she wanted to change her career. At the same time, Charlotte, a manager in a cosmetics company in Sussex and mother of two young children, was pouring a hard-earned cup of tea after getting her boys to bed. Femi, born in Guinea and studying at a college in Birmingham, was busy preparing for his classes the next day, not knowing they would be his last for the foreseeable future.

At the time of writing, one hundred and thirty thousand people have died as a result of the pandemic. These three consider themselves among the lucky ones. Yet none of them on that cold evening in March had any idea how drastically their lives would be transformed by COVID; how the 'new normal' – restaurants closed, shops shut, all classes going online – would change their access to learning and employment, and that of their family, friends, and colleagues.

This report seeks to shine a light on their experience, and the millions of others who have shared in the incommunicable trials of the past eighteen months. For three of the most affected groups and areas highlighted in this report – young people, women, and individuals from minority groups – findings show the inequalities gap has widened considerably, deepening existing trends and creating new ones. Earlier this year, for instance, young people accounted for nearly half of the total fall in employment, despite only representing one in nine of those in work.[1] Female redundancies in the UK hit 178,000 between September and November 2020 – 76% higher than the peak reached in the 2008 financial crisis.[2] Likewise, the reduction in working hours for young Black people (49%) is three times higher than that for their White peers (16%).[3] The north of England, like other regions of the UK, has experienced levels of unemployment not seen since 1994, with profound consequences for learning and the labour market.[4]

Yet statistics alone too often come at the expense of the human story. Not only did we conduct unique, independent polling of two thousand individuals, but over the course of our five sessions that made up the project, we prioritised hearing not only from experts but those who have lived, and are still living, the data first-hand. This approach illuminates how small factors can often have a big impact on outcomes. Only when one considers how, for example, a young adult actually goes about applying for an apprenticeship, or how a woman with both a job and children tries to juggle both without childcare support, or how discrimination at work impacts those from ethnic minorities, can one clearly identify actions that could make a measurable impact in the real world.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to fall into the trap of seeing everyone as a 'victim'. Whilst many have been severely disrupted in their learning or career, many are still managing or thriving in a more self-directed virtual environment afforded by the pandemic. Indeed, one of our key takeaways has been the resilience of those we interviewed, and how the flexibilities and innovations stimulated by the crisis have helped some of those previously marked as 'disadvantaged'. Nor do we shy away from questioning some of the common language and terms used for differentiating between certain groupings of people. But the time to act is narrow, and narrowing. Just as the economic impact has been uneven across sectors for those most severely affected, to not do more in the short-term will have ramifications measured in decades rather than months.

The question we were often asked was: do we care enough to act now?

Our Actions for Bridging the Widening Inequalities Gap

After considering the powerful testimony we heard in our six sessions, factoring in the experiences of Kirsty, Charlotte, Femi – and utilising the polling we conducted of two thousand others – our panel was able to offer a list of actions which could be implemented by government, business, and local leaders across the country now to alleviate some of the worst impacts of the pandemic.

Whilst some of these steps are specifically targeted at one of the three specific groups focused on in this report – young people, women, or minority groups – the majority are actions that will assist all three. As such, it is logical to break these down by the stage of intervention – whether at the learning or employment phase – rather than by age, gender, or ethnicity. In a third section, we posit suggestions on how we can make better decisions when deciding upon, and implementing, such steps – including what data we acquire and how we can better facilitate 'investment' from those targeted groups.

1. **Actions in Education and Learning**

2. **Actions at the Employment Stage**

3. **Actions Relating to Methodology, Data, and Application**

1. Actions in Education and Learning

1.1 Develop a high-level targeted mentoring scheme.

Well supported jobs/careers advice and preparation for employment can significantly boost life chances among those from disadvantaged groups. While most schools, colleges, and other providers already run coaching and mentoring programmes, more must be done in light of the time learners have lost with such vital services.

A mentor scheme should be put into place – supported by central Government and driven by the National Careers Service and the Careers and Enterprise Company – connecting learners with mentors who can offer advice, grow their confidence, and widen their networks. Working alongside schools and colleges, mentors should be drawn from the local community and could be a mix of college staff, higher level learners, and other individuals – those in retirement but able and willing to take on such a role, for example. Similar, smaller schemes have successfully driven up retention, achievement, confidence building, and networking skills in learners.

1.2 Build on the increased interest in new careers to fill the widest gaps in subject selection and attainment through targeted investment.

There are numerous examples of significant gaps in subject selection and attainment based on gender and ethnicity which will have significant ramifications for individuals long-term. One crucial example is the drop in girls taking STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects at the age of 13, which has profound implications for the number of women who enter these growing industries between the ages of 18 and 24. A survey of 11-19 year-olds by Engineering UK found that for some young people, particularly young women, the pandemic has raised the importance of having a job that will enable them to make a positive societal contribution, resulting in their becoming more interested in a career in STEM.

Mentoring (1.1) and better careers advice (1.4 and 1.5) will help with this, but more should be done to take advantage of the increased interest to bridge these gaps, such as expanding the CareerTech Challenge – a £5.5 million innovation programme led by Nesta and Nesta Challenges in partnership with the Department for Education.

1.3 Continue to promote the vocational route as a valuable option and boost access to business and enterprise activities for learners.

For many, the perception of the vocational route is that it is less 'valuable' than the academic one, no matter what the individual's aspirations. Long before the onset of COVID-19, the value of the vocational route was gaining more recognition and the pandemic only served to heighten this. We saw positive innovations in the development of accessible and flexible options, and a heightened appreciation of the value of vocational education as a means for individuals to access greater opportunities.

However, more can be done to promote the value of the vocational route and to showcase the progression pathways it can lead to. Targeted campaigns should be run involving social media influencers, role models, and prominent figures working in vocational industries. Local businesses and consortiums (LEPs, chambers, trade and sector bodies; the FSB and the CBI) should be empowered to support communities by providing work-related and enterprise activities. Finally, there is a danger that the Level 3 reforms could negatively affect well-established progression routes into employment and graduate employment – any change needs to be carefully managed to ensure no learners are disadvantaged.

1.4 Build a joined-up system of jobs and careers information, advice, and guidance for young people and employers, both locally and nationally.

We know that young people will bear the brunt of the economic impacts of COVID-19 yet too many remain poorly informed about the world of work and especially those sectors that are likely to define the jobs and careers of the future. Recent improvements to the quality of careers advice such as the establishment of the National Careers Service and the Careers and Enterprise Company need to be built upon to ensure careers education is a priority for schools, colleges and providers, delivered by professionals.

An official, comprehensive web portal that people can use to help them navigate the world of work, apprenticeships, and traineeships – and to discover external resources and organisations – is essential. The portal should be driven by data on what the local economy and wider country requires. In time, educational institutions such as schools, colleges, providers, and universities should not be seen as the only "official" gatekeepers of knowledge about jobs, careers, and employment. Wherever people are accessing the system, they need to be signposted to information – in other words, a "No Wrong Door" approach – a wider referral network – that can help them for as long as they need it, tracking their progress.

1.5 Design an official online platform where people can more easily identify their skills and 'match' with employers.

The pandemic accelerated existing trends in the future of work – an increased move to remote work, a growth in e-commerce, and faster shifts to automation. More workers than previously estimated will need to switch occupations. Individuals need to be supported in this new world to recognise the skills they have, and more easily identify the ones they need to switch occupation.

In conjunction with 1.4 and following the examples set by Unifrog and others, an online service should be developed where people can more easily identify their skills and establish which ones they might want to work to acquire, modelled on the 'gamification' of learning seen by software such as Duolingo. In turn this could be used to 'match' employers with those looking for work, mirroring popular dating apps. Long-term, we should strive for a system where people are able to switch jobs and careers more easily, recognising their transferable skills and being signposted as to how and where to upscale for the jobs of the future.

1.6 Bridge the digital divide and promote online learning.

A major barrier to those already facing greater disadvantage during lockdown and the ensuing period of blended learning was poor or no access to a computer, digital device, or the internet. In a world where access to online learning has now become a necessity, it is time to view access to the internet for learners in the same way we view access to books/libraries and electricity.

Learners of all ages need to be supported to buy a computer device of some kind, and where necessary with the relevant software installed, given they are essential now to learning effectively and developing digital literacy. Those who cannot afford a digital device at all, or internet access at home, should be supported to do so using pupil premium funding or an equivalent.

We should also promote the recording of lectures and lessons before the initiative/capability to do so is lost in schools/college/universities. Learners with learning difficulties, poor English, or who suffer from periodic bouts of illness (including COVID) should be able view lessons again at their own pace, especially if they are still expected to self-isolate for long periods.

2. Actions at the Employment Stage

2.1 Halt the attrition of women from the workplace, at the same time as supporting women's recovery, re-entry, and onward progression in work.

Government at the highest level, in conjunction with business, needs to invest and take swift action to stop the number of women permanently leaving the workplace. Some of the hardest hit sectors – including hospitality, travel, retail, healthcare, and cleaning – are sectors that predominantly employ women. Women experienced inequalities in pay and promotion prior to the pandemic, have been overrepresented in furlough and redundancies in the last 18 months, and have often taken the brunt of home-schooling, childcare and domestic responsibilities in the home.

A short, medium and long-term plan is needed with supporting policies, programmes, and funds to re-build and boost women's contribution to the workplace and ensure working parents can jointly and equally participate in the caring and education responsibilities of the next generation. A hybrid model will almost certainly see more women choosing to work more at home, (which many women will prefer) but it must not be allowed to create a two-tier workplace where – once again – women are held back.

2.2 Create a more flexible and affordable childcare system.

With the reduction in childcare support during the pandemic, analysis shows that women have, on average, been carrying out two-thirds more childcare than men during the pandemic. Many women left employment or greatly reduced their hours to care for children, setting trends that are likely to continue unless urgent action is taken. The current model was already not fit for purpose in a 7-days-a-week economy – it was too inflexible and too expensive.

In a world where a hybrid working model is likely to become more common, the current system – offering only 5 days 7am-6pm cover – is too restrictive and will indirectly lead to childcare costs spiralling for millions who will be expected to work a less regimented rota. We might want to consider a system whereby, if you work, your childcare needs are funded through the taxes you pay. Similarly, more should be done to support unpaid carers of elderly relatives and others: they are largely forgotten yet saved the state £530 million every day of the crisis.

2.3 Consider – and incentivise where appropriate – the benefits of hybrid working.

If employers want a diverse, successful workforce reflecting the society we live in, a permanent shift to some sort of hybrid model in certain industries will need to be part of the conversation. Another obvious benefit of more flexibility during the pandemic was that caring responsibilities could be more easily shared.

Whilst more research needs to be done in this area, employers should be encouraged to consider the clear benefits of home working for millions, especially to carers (the majority of whom are women) and people with special educational needs and disabilities (many of whom were previously locked out of the workforce entirely). At the same time, there must be recognition of some of the negatives of more home working (on career progression, mental health etc.), and an awareness of how they can be alleviated – though a hybrid model would likely assuage some of the most severe consequences experienced during the lockdowns.

2.4 Ensure business leaders offer support to their most vulnerable employees.

UK business has a key role and responsibility to support the recovery from the pandemic, ensuring it happens swiftly, evenly and comprehensively across the workforce.

In the near term, business leaders need to identify vulnerable groups in their employee-base whose financial health and physical and mental wellbeing have been most impacted by the pandemic, ensuring they are offered the support they need to regain – as a minimum – a pre-pandemic level of wellbeing and financial health/stability. Business leaders need to equip themselves with new leadership capabilities, not least a more human-centric approach to employees. They will need to assess how existing policies and work practices have disadvantaged certain groups of employees, and ensure by embedding hybrid, technology-enabled ways of working employees retain a level of flexibility, autonomy, and choice in how they work without creating two-tier working and further disadvantage.

2.5 Do more to encourage people from minority groups, or who are disadvantaged, to access apprenticeships and support schemes.

Apprenticeship numbers have fallen considerably since 2016/17. They saw some growth in 2018/19 but fell again in 2019/20 and continue to do so post-pandemic. This may be due to a lack of awareness about what they offer, though other factors also play a role.

Recent employer incentive schemes have resulted in some success in addressing falling numbers, however government might want to consider increased incentives for employers who take on Level 2 and Level 3 apprentices, especially from the cohorts impacted by the pandemic. In addition, there should be more research into how the way that benefits are calculated might indirectly be deterring young people from applying for apprenticeships. An apprenticeship is counted as household income meaning a family can lose Child Benefit as well as wider Universal Credit, which may not be an attractive option for young people in unstable times.

Whilst furlough take-up has been high across all groups, evidence shows that there is considerably lower take-up of other support schemes among those from ethnic minority and disadvantaged groups. This is likely due to a lack of awareness, and more should be done to promote them by targeted campaigns through the relevant channels.

2.6 Give local leaders more say over the allocation of funding to target employment strategies by locality and national need, fostering dialogue between local and national organisations.

In too many parts of the UK there are knowledge gaps about the skills needs of businesses/ industries in the communities in which they are located. The pandemic – forcing individuals and industries to look closer to home for employment/recruitment – offers an opportunity to bridge these gaps.

Further to the educational dialogue above (1.4 and 1.5), more should be done to formally bring together national organisations (for example, the Education Training Foundation, the Association of Colleges, and Awarding Organisations) and local bodies/businesses (for example, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and small and mid-size enterprises) to encourage the recruiting of local people in industries where there is a national need (like in hospitality, care, and industry). These organisations enable things to happen. The new Local Skills Improvement Plans will support this work by helping to align the courses on offer to local employers' needs but often national funding rules do not allow for the flexibility needed to develop solutions to meet local skills and labour market needs, and local leaders should be given more say in how funding should be used to support initiatives to improve local business development and talent retention. Unified action rather than uniform action – promoting equal outcomes for people living in underinvested places and not just national strategies improving places generally – should be the way forward in the post-Brexit, post-pandemic landscape.

3. Actions Relating to Methodology, Data, and Application

3.1 Ensure the codesign of actions with the beneficiaries of those actions.

By actively seeking out individuals belonging to groups who were the focus of this report, our insights into the impact of the pandemic were greatly enhanced.

In the same way, responses need to be more directly informed by those who will experience the proposed changes brought forward by government, business, and other bodies. We need to be more intentional – more democratic – as a society about listening to and hearing people's experiences and involving them in the solutions to achieve results that work.

3.2 Conduct further research into the long-term financial impact of the pandemic on women and minority groups.

Whilst data has been compiled on the economic implications of the pandemic for young people (see 'The Economic Costs of a Failure to Act' in the first chapter) there is far less available on the profound costs for women and individuals from minority groups.

Were such information currently available, it would likely underline the urgency to act – what gets measured tends to be what gets acted upon.

3.3 Collect more nuanced data on minority groups in the UK.

We need to facilitate a more honest debate about how and why certain groups (commonly defined by their ethnicity) have better economic and educational outcomes. To do so, such broad terms such as 'BAME' should be faded out and replaced by more specific data sets which reveal the true complexity of the impact of one's ethnicity in the UK.

3.4 Bring together national and local authorities to provide future-focused data on needs and opportunities within the economy.

Not enough data is collected or made available as to the needs of the economy on both national and local scales. Were such information available, it would likely galvanise many bodies into action and hugely strengthen the information, advice, and guidance and skills matching support outlined in 1.4 and 1.5, and local decision making proposed in 2.6.

Kirsty's Story – the Impact of COVID on Young People

A Tale of Lost Learning and Employment

Falling Apprenticeship and Traineeship Numbers

Our Witnesses' Experience of Finding Employment

Too Many 'Locked Doors'

The Digital Divide

The Mental Health Impact

The Young Winners and Losers of COVID

The Economic Costs of a Failure to Act

Conclusion

Case Study

'I'd trained to be a chef for two years when the lockdown started – I'd never wanted to go to university. I'd moved to London and worked at a very fancy restaurant, but it wasn't for me. I decided I wanted to change my career. I didn't have A-Levels, so an apprenticeship seemed to be the perfect option, having hands-on experience within an organisation, getting paid and a qualification. I looked at my options and I went on a government website. I applied for local opportunities, but the colleges weren't great. I never heard back from any of them. I got an email the other day saying, 'You've not got one,' and it had been a year since I applied.'

A Tale of Lost Learning and Employment

Young people like Kirsty – a 21-year-old from Leicestershire – have borne the brunt of this crisis. Not only has their learning and training been massively disrupted, but they account for the majority of the fall in employment. This is partly due to the sectors young people are more likely to work in – including retail, hospitality, and leisure – but also that those less likely to be without formal qualifications were more likely to have been furloughed or lose their job entirely. In cities like London, young people have been particularly hard hit. During the third lockdown, 830,500 jobs held by those aged 24 or under were on furlough – 22% of all eligible jobs. Almost two million jobs held by young people, and almost half of all eligible jobs, were furloughed at some point between March and the end of July.[5]

Youth labour markets are volatile places even in prosperous times. In periods of economic disruption, research shows that young people are first to lose jobs and last to find employment as the economy rebounds.[6] Nevertheless, we can say with confidence that the disruption caused by COVID *is* having a disproportionately negative effect on younger people in the UK. Even with the lockdowns fully lifted and steadier economic conditions, there are very likely to be ongoing, profound consequences for young workers. We also know a prolonged period of unemployment does considerably more harm for a young person that it does for someone older. OECD analysis shows that even when young people do find work following an economic downturn, they are more likely than prime-age workers to have jobs that are low paid and offer limited labour market stability, social protection, and opportunities for training and career progression.[7] Layer onto this the implications for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who possess reduced means of support beyond the post-compulsory education phase, and this complex picture becomes increasingly fragmented for the UK. In short, this is a generation in peril.

Falling Apprenticeship and Traineeship Numbers

Apprenticeship starts have also steadily been falling since 2016. The first two quarters of the 2020/21 academic year saw an 18% drop from the same period in 2019/20 for all ages and all regions. Lockdowns contributed to this fall, but the graph shows this is part of a trend in declining apprenticeship starts,[8] something which looks set to continue based on the data so far:

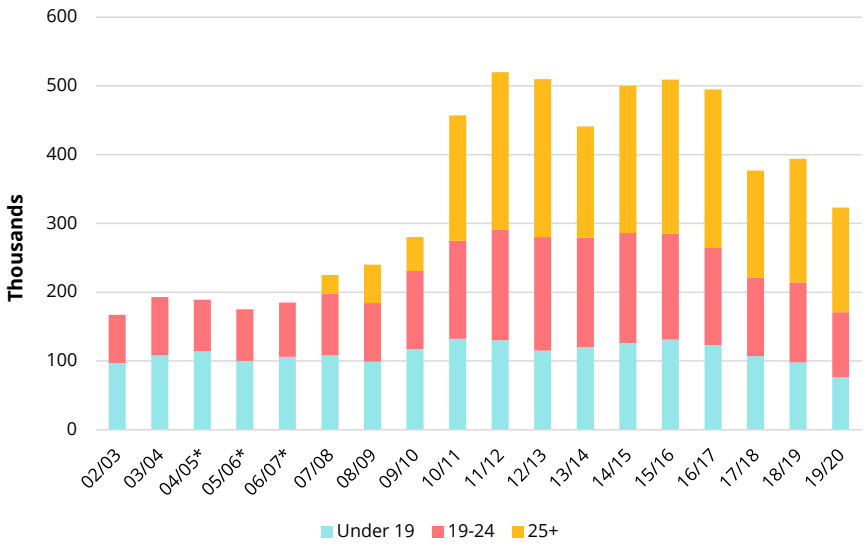


Figure 1: Apprenticeship starts by age (England) | *Source: DfE Data (*2004-2007 <1000 starts per year)*

The region with the largest fall in apprenticeship starts was the North East with a 27% drop in starts in 2020/21 compared to 2018/19. London, by contrast, saw the smallest falls, with just an 8% drop:

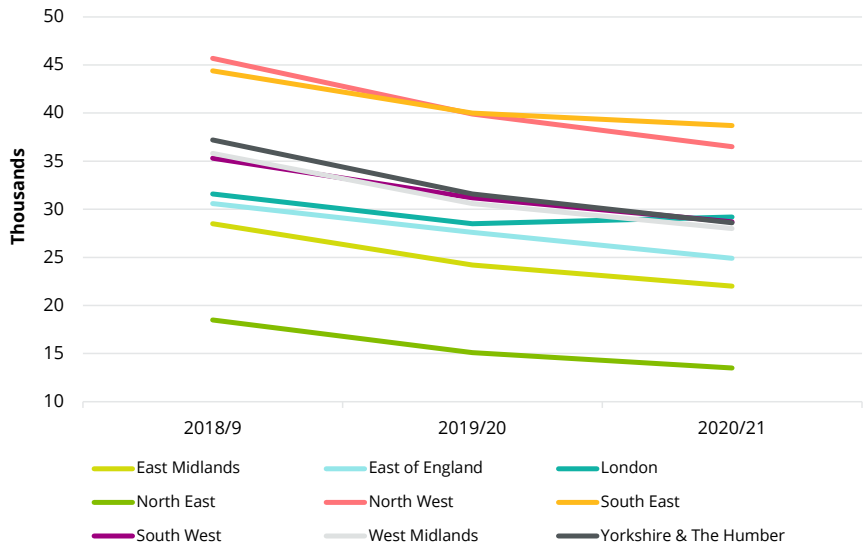


Figure 2: Apprenticeship starts by region (England) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

It is worth noting that a young adult starting an apprenticeship – because it is counted as household income – can affect benefits; a family can lose Child Benefit as well as wider Universal Credit income. This may have played a role in an unstable time when families did not want to risk their revenue streams.

In July 2020 the Chancellor announced a 'Plan for Jobs', setting out a number of initiatives aimed to protect employment – including apprenticeships and traineeships – with three key initiatives aimed at young people:[9]

- Additional funding for employers supporting traineeships in England.
- Extra payments for employers taking on apprentices in England.
- The Kickstart Scheme offering 6-month placements at minimum wage for young people at risk of long-term unemployment and financial rewards for employers who take them on.

In April 2021 CIPD analysis suggested there was little evidence of significant increases of traineeships or apprenticeships over the period compared to the previous year. In October 2021 however, government produced statistics showing that as of 29 September 2021, the number of apprentices for whom incentive claims have been submitted by employers totalled 101,460. 76% of which are 16- to 24-year-olds. Take-up for the Kickstart scheme, whilst seen more favourably by employers, has been slow.[10] DWP data (May 2021) showed that just 16,500 young people had started a placement under the scheme. The ambition is to create more than 250,000 jobs in the UK by December 2021.

Our Witnesses' Experience of Finding Employment

The experience Kirsty faced when initially trying to find an apprenticeship is far from unique. Our polling found that 58% of those aged 18-24 applied for a new job during the pandemic. The vast majority of 18-24-year-olds (70%) found getting a new job during the pandemic more competitive whilst only 22% thought it was around the same and only 2% found it less competitive. All the witnesses we interviewed attested to the struggles they found in navigating their employment options, many of them for the first time. In August 2021, The Health Foundation published the results of a survey carried out on 2,000 young people in the UK: 86% said the pandemic had negatively impacted their opportunity to achieve the right skills and qualifications for their chosen career.[11] 86% also felt that it had impacted their ability to develop the right relationships and networking opportunities to help enter or progress in the working environment.[12] In our own polling, 31% of 18-24 year-olds had experienced furlough at some point during the pandemic compared to 19% of 55-64s, and 14% had experienced losing a job compared to 4% of 55-64s. We also found that those who had been furloughed were considerably less confident about retaining their job over the next 12 months.

The most common complaint among our witnesses was of the absence of any obvious 'starting point': an official, comprehensive web portal or resource that young people could use to help them navigate the world of work, apprenticeships, and traineeships, and to discover the resources and organisations available to them. Applications like Unifrog and LinkedIn were mentioned, but every interviewee seemed to feel that their experience had been 'chaotic' and 'stressful'.

> ***'Even before COVID, there was only one careers adviser at my school for a thousand pupils, and I never crossed paths with him. We had one careers event, but it was almost entirely university-focused. Once I started looking elsewhere, I found so many resources that are out there to help young people. I don't think young people are made aware of these options though. They need to be to ensure we provide everyone with the best chance they can to succeed.'***

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of 18-24 year-olds had experienced losing a job compared to 4% of 55-64s.

> ***'Personally, most of those resources you mentioned I've never heard of. They're not promoting it enough, clearly, if I've never heard of them. Because I looked hard after the first lockdown.'***

> ***'The advice seems to be better in higher education than it does in primary school, secondary schools, and colleges. When I was at college, I don't think there was anything, really. In secondary school we had a careers advisor, but it was just like 'what do you want to do?' – questions like that – it wasn't really productive, and then the school didn't continue with it.'***

> ***'My school careers meeting was useless. It was five minutes, and then if you said 'I'm into the Humanities', they would counter-argue with, 'Yes, but Maths is your highest grade, maybe you should take that for A-Level?' Then you couldn't talk with them again. At my friend's school they've already started doing drafts for personal statements, their CVs, and interview plans. It depends on the school, and I find that unfair.'***

> ***'After leaving school, I could tell you exactly how to calculate the circumference of a circle, or to work out Pythagoras' Theorem, but I couldn't tell you how to interview well.'***

Similarly, our witnesses – including Kirsty – spoke of the challenges in identifying their own transferable skills and acquiring them in the first place. Many felt that due to the pandemic employers had become less flexible in who they hired, and more demanding in their skill expectations, not having the time or finances to train on the job. Evidence does suggest that young people are being disproportionately impacted by current hiring patterns.[13] A survey by The Health Foundation in August 2021 found that the majority of young respondents (54%) felt most of the jobs they had seen recently that they were interested in were temporary or contract positions. A further 35% said that it would be difficult to find secure work that is fairly paid and has scope for career growth and development in the next six months.

> ***'A lot of young people have transferable skills, it's just they need to be taught to recognise them, especially as we enter a new careers environment after the pandemic. As a young adult, you doubt yourself a lot, but you do have skills. Working in a shop, it might seem very minor and not that great to you, but you've got to show reliability, organisation, teamwork, and I think people just need to be made aware they've got them.'***

> *'There's so many jobs now that have got such specific requirements – you've got to have this experience; you've got to have that qualification… How are young people supposed to get them when we can't work? We are young, we've not had the time to do it, but we need the jobs. You're saying there's not enough young people that are in employment, well, make it easier! They should say 'we will hire you, you'll get training, and you can work towards a qualification'. Right now, you can only get jobs in restaurants and stuff. Not everyone wants to do that; we have bigger goals but can't get through the door.'*

Too Many 'Locked Doors'

It's one thing for young people to know what 'doors' there are to walk through, and another to have the keys to open them. Yet the perceived 'gatekeepers' of knowledge and advice about these doors remain in the hands of a too narrow a pool of institutions – namely schools, colleges, training providers, and universities. Whilst both our experts and witnesses agreed that more should be done to ensure that schools, colleges, and higher education institutions make young people aware of the opportunities available to them – ideally working with employers and businesses, many of which are also confused by the learning and employment programmes on offer – many emphasised that such a model is outdated for a world where upskilling (through new initiatives such as the Lifetime Skills Guarantee[14]) is being promoted. Once people leave school, college, provider or higher education, there is a lack of clarity about where to go next. While many institutions are committed to supporting their alumni long-term, for many jobseekers or potential 'upskillers' this needs to be addressed. In the words of one expert:

> ***'What if you've moved cities? Where do you go? Guidance at a local level would make a lot more sense, or digitally. Wherever people are accessing the system, they need to be signposted to additional information: in other words, a "no wrong door" approach – a wider referral network not reliant on just schools, colleges, or employment support providers – that can help them for as long as they need it, tracking their progress. The system is impenetrably complicated, leading to a divide between those 'in the know' and those who have no idea where to start.'***

There are also considerable existing inequalities across regions with regards to disadvantage and access to higher education. Variable rates of attendance at school or college are likely to have compounded existing trends, with some regions seeing much larger rates of self-isolation amongst learners, in turn impacting educational performance and progression. For example, in October 2020 Liverpool and Knowsley saw COVID case numbers of over 600 per 100,000, with secondary school attendance rates falling well below 70%, compared to South West England which maintained an average of over 90%.[15] The following table speaks to the divergence in educational experience during the pandemic:

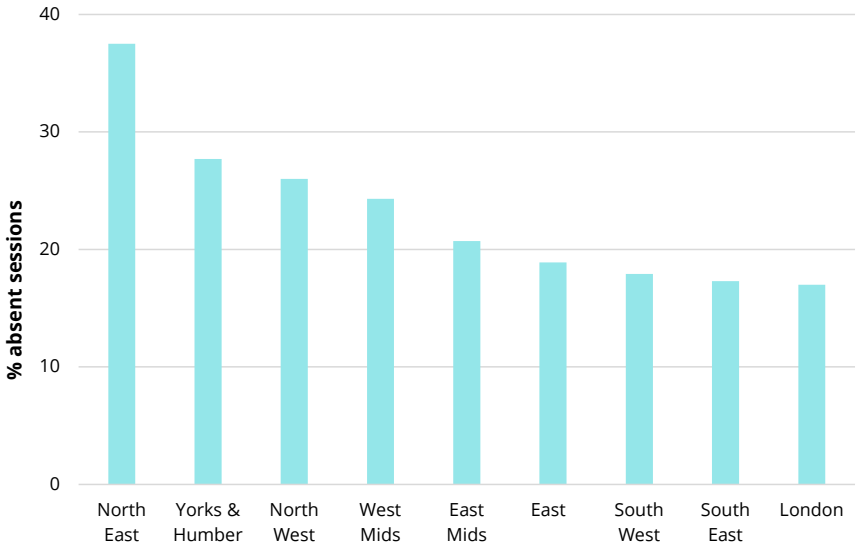

Figure 3: % school sessions missed (all absences) Y7-10, week ending 09/07/21) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

The Digital Divide

Another fissure widened by COVID – already much discussed[16] – has been the so-called 'digital divide' between people who have full access to digital technologies (e.g., the internet and computers) and those whose access is limited or hindered by the sub-optimal working environments available to them. A growing trend in favour of digital technology was already changing how society functioned before the pandemic, but the crisis has accelerated the shift, with digital devices playing an essential role in allowing people to access both work and study. Likewise, digital literacy – the ability to use technology – has now become so essential that anyone not fluent in its language is now in danger of being locked out of society altogether. In the words of a recent study by Cambridge University, digital exclusion should now be considered 'a new form of social deprivation, exacerbated by and contributing to existing lines of inequality and poverty.'[17]

Although being permanently home-based may bring specific advantages to some (see 'The Young Winners and Losers of COVID'), emerging data and analysis suggests young people are undergoing proportionately greater negative impacts when switching to home-based work. A small independent survey commissioned by Studio Graphene, for example, showed that early in the pandemic, Millennials were more likely to face negative impacts from working at home, including physical discomfort from workstations, poor broadband connectivity, and a feeling of lack of support from their employer.[18] A Business Insider article also examined the lack of face-to-face networking opportunities offered to those working remotely, disadvantaging young people when making connections is most beneficial to those early in their careers or starting new jobs.[19] Moreover, Ipsos Mori research demonstrated younger people are more likely than any other age group to experience issues with their wellbeing from being at home permanently.[20]

Kirsty – and several of our other witnesses – all had personal examples where they, or others they knew, faced more difficulties due to the divide and the requirement of switching to online working for study or employment.

> ***'When we went into the first lockdown not everybody had access to Zoom, or video calls, or online college; it was hard. Having no access to Wi-Fi put people at a huge disadvantage.'***

> ***'I struggled because my course is graphic design and animation, and we had a new building with many resources that we couldn't use because of COVID. I feel like it let down a lot of people; you not only needed to have a laptop but a strong Wi-Fi connection to be able to use Zoom, and on top of that some needed advanced programmes installed on their devices, which wasn't possible for everyone. If you needed to borrow a laptop they'd only let you do so for 24 hours, which wasn't realistic.'***

There is a regional dynamic to this too. Although the UK has comparatively high availability of superfast broadband, 1.5 million premises (5%) still do not have access to superfast speeds, with significant consequences for some types of online learning. These premises are generally the most expensive or difficult to reach with new infrastructure – 58% are in rural areas.[21] And although superfast broadband is sufficient for most household needs, the demand for services that use a lot of data, such as online video streaming, is increasing. The Government's target is for at least 85% of UK premises to have access to gigabit-broadband by 2025. In September 2020, 27% of UK premises had a gigabit-broadband connection available, according to telecoms regulator, Ofcom. However, only 1.4% of postcodes were receiving gigabit speeds. A UK Parliamentary Paper in December 2020 cited concerns of how lack of access to high-speed internet can have negative outcomes, not only in terms of accessing education and work, but also healthcare.[22]

The Mental Health Impact

Inevitably linked with the shift online have been the profound mental health consequences caused by the pandemic. Although young people have had relatively few health impacts from COVID itself, the lockdowns affected young people's health in a number of ways. Research by Imperial College suggested a third of 16-24-year-olds were experiencing poor mental health following the first lockdown in March 2020.[23] More recently, a survey by The Health Foundation found that 80% of young people agreed the pandemic had made their mental health worse, with 69% saying there is less support available for those experiencing mental health issues.[24] In our own polling, 63% of younger respondents said they experience stress on a weekly basis in their current job compared to only 35% of 55-64 year-olds. Whilst many education providers may offer access to mental health support for those who are learners, Youth Employment UK argue mental health factors can be a barrier to employment for young people, as there is little evidence of comprehensive support for mental health for young people at work.[25] This was attested to at first-hand by one of our witnesses:

63%
of younger respondents said they experience stress on a weekly basis in their current job compared to only 35% of 55-64 year-olds.

> ***'I knew someone who wasn't in work for six weeks because his mental health got really bad. I think it was anxiety. But there was nothing in place for him at work. The only help he got was from the NHS, which was good, but he has no support from the employer. My manager, who's only a few years older than him, messaged him and said, 'Listen, if you want to speak any time…' and that made him feel better, and he eventually came back to work. I feel like something should be in place in workplaces: a process that people can rely on; 'duty of care' is often just an empty phrase. People go through things, especially now, when a lot of people find it hard to return to normality and find jobs.'***

According to research by the Children's Society, wellbeing in young people was already falling for the decade before COVID and is expected to reach record levels following the pandemic.[26] The UK's young people already have the lowest wellbeing in all of Europe.[27] This is partly due to the UK having a higher rate of child poverty, and more generally a higher fear of failure among young people. Wellbeing and mental health are directly linked to educational attainment and employability prospects, with potentially long-term consequences for those who have left education or employment for the duration of the pandemic. Many will never return to the learning pathways they were on, with significant economic consequences for themselves and the country at large (see 'The Economic Costs of a Failure to Act').

Even for those who have remained in education, the mental burden has been considerable. In the words of one of our experts:

> *'Many young people have suffered immensely during this period of time because there's been a complete isolation from their family and their friends, some of which has carried through. On top of that, many were worrying about their grades. We talk about more mature people learning to handle pressure but forget that is learnt behaviour from someone in primary school, junior school, nursery school, right the way up to Sixth Form. They're used to learning in a group, and the best way to learn and bounce off each other is in that way, and they were trying to do that from their bedrooms.'*

As Kirsty put it, describing her experience:

> *'The mental health challenge has been one of the biggest things. Financially, a lot of young people are very worried. In 1997 you had to save for three years to afford a house. Now it's 23 years, which is a long time, and it's scary as a young adult. I don't know how I'm going to be able to move out. Mentally that's quite draining because you're working so hard, yet that progression in life is hard to see; you don't know how you're going to be able to afford anything in the future.'*

The Young Winners and Losers of COVID

Just as the mental health burden on young people has not been equally shared, the consequences of the pandemic – positive and negative – have not been evenly split. Whilst 'young adults' as a broad category is helpful for analysis, it can fail to capture some of the nuances in the data, especially in terms of gender, race, and geography. Research shows that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than others to be 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and also less likely to re-enter education or employment once they leave.[28] ONS data shows in January to March 2021 an estimated 10.6% of all people aged 16 to 24 years were NEET, and when 16 and 17-year-olds were removed, the total number of young people classified as such is 679,000 (12.6%). Of the total 728,000 young people (16-24) who were NEET, 413,000 were men and 315,000 were women.[29] In many, but not all, parts of the country, the percentage of younger NEETs has been steadily increasing:

Figure 4: Proportion of 16 and 17 year old NEETs avg of Dec 2020-Feb 2021 compared to previous period | *Source: ONS, 2021*

During the lockdowns, many of these disadvantaged children lost their only means of 'escape' from their home situation for any period of time – including children at risk of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. There was also a significant number of young people 'trapped' in unregulated accommodation or in care. We also know that the pandemic has accelerated the disparity between state and private schools. For example, whilst every type of state school saw A or A* grades at A-Level increase in 2021, analysis released by Ofqual showed a 9.3% rise in the total number of A and A* grades issued to independent school pupils, higher than for state comprehensives, academies, and grammars.[30] In total, selective schools saw an increase of 7.5%, free schools 6.6%, comprehensives 6.2%, academies 5.7% and sixth form colleges 3.8%.

Many explanations have been postulated, from the additional resources and teaching hours available to privately-educated pupils, to the pressure applied on teachers from parents. Whatever the cause, by this metric and others, young people from middle-class backgrounds have been disproportionately advantaged by the pandemic.

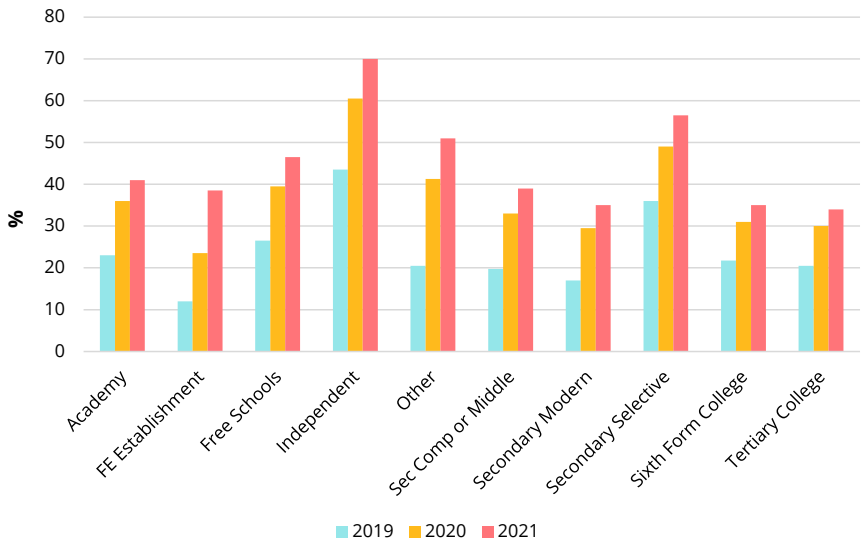

Figure 5: A level results at grade A or above (all students in England 2019-21) | *Source: FFT Education Data Lab, 2021*

Yet it is not all doom and gloom. Our young witnesses – many of whom were from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds – spoke candidly about certain positives afforded by COVID. These included more time to reflect on what they wanted to do with their lives – especially those who were on furlough for a sustained period – and the feeling of 'freedom' proving that working from home was a viable option. Several commented that they had always found the obligatory morning commute 'illogical' in an increasingly digitised world, hoping that the future would afford a more flexible alternative to the 'rat race' they and their parents had grown up with. Others in employment said that whilst they had missed organic face-to-face interactions with colleagues in the office, there was also something more 'democratic' about remote working: given the software layout of Zoom or Microsoft Teams, they would have equal prominence in meetings, as well as being invited to more than would have been in the case in the office. Likewise, seeing their superiors broadcasting more informally from homes made them feel less nervous about communicating with them.

Students in higher education cited similar advantages in respect to their relationship with their teachers. Some also stated being able to 'attend' lectures remotely (with their webcams off) came as a great relief to those coping with poor mental health; they preferred the flexibility it afforded and wanted to see it as a long-term option. Many also praised the increasing tendency for lectures to be recorded, allowing students greater flexibility in how they learnt, especially for those whose first language is not English.

> *'The good thing about recordings was that if you missed anything you can just go on the video and re-watch it again. Before, if you went to a class, when you missed or did not understand what the teacher had said, it had gone forever, so you had to ask afterwards; but with video, you can re-watch it any time you want, which is a big positive, especially if your comprehension isn't as strong.'*

Many young people with disabilities likewise described themselves as benefitting considerably from remote working and studying:

> *'On the whole, remote working has been positive for young disabled people, but it's also been really frustrating: for the last 20 years, disabled people have said, 'if you just make reasonable adjustments so we can do X, Y and Z online, we can work for you,' and businesses wouldn't accept that. Then suddenly overnight the entire world goes online, and we saw that they could do it and just weren't interested enough in getting disabled people to come and work for them. It's even more frustrating now to hear government and business saying 'online has to end', because it's given so many disabled people so much education and opportunities to work, to be social, that they wouldn't have had if it wasn't for things moving online. They speak about these opportunities as if they want to put them behind us like it never happened, like they were a bad thing.'*

The Economic Costs of a Failure to Act

On an individual level, the implications of prolonged unemployment in terms of one's prospects and finances can be stark. For the country as a whole, however, the economic cost of youth unemployment is forecast to rise to £6.9 billion in 2022, with the fiscal cost – in the form of lower tax revenue and higher benefit spending – forecast to be £2.9 billion next year. The long-running scarring cost to young people entering the labour market in 2021 – in terms of lost earnings and damage to employment prospects – is predicted to be £14.4 billion over the next seven years.[31]

As discussed, mental wellbeing has suffered during the pandemic, especially among already disadvantaged young people, with significant ramifications for employment and further study. Currently, the estimated 12.6% of young people who are NEET ('Not in Education, Employment, or Training') are a considerable economic cost to the Exchequer. During the 2008/9 recession, the figure reached a high of 17%, with that additional 5% costing the taxpayer as much as an additional £20 billion. When coupled with the slower uptake in apprenticeships, this alone is a major incentive for the government to do more.

Lastly – and perhaps most concerning – are the long-term financial implications of the lost learning caused by the school and college shutdowns. Whilst the impact in the UK is not yet known,[32] prolonged research into countries around the world that have had to close their whole school system down due natural disasters has shown considerable damage, often lasting decades. For every three months lost learning, there is an average of a 3% depression in annual earnings for those learners who lost out. This does not factor in the high percentage of cancelled opportunities for young people to engage with employers, nor does it include the inter-generational impact: the disadvantages that people have get passed on to their children. In educational and financial terms, we will feel the impact of the pandemic for generations. However, if urgent action is taken to alleviate the worst symptoms, then the consequences may not be as severe.

Conclusion

45%
of those aged 18-24 agreed with the statement "My chances of a good career have been damaged by the coronavirus pandemic", compared with 39% of those aged 25-34 and 30% of those aged between 35 and 44.

Between 2020 and 2030 there will be an additional one million 18-year-olds in the UK. For the disadvantaged among them their routes into learning and the labour market will become even more competitive. The story of the pandemic so far is one of severe shocks and aftershocks to education and employment: lost learning, falling apprenticeship and traineeship numbers, a widening digital divide, and a serious cost to young people's mental health and wellbeing, all with profound and protracted consequences for the economy. Our polling found that 45% of those aged 18-24 agreed with the statement "My chances of a good career have been damaged by the coronavirus pandemic", compared with 39% of those aged 25-34 and 30% of those aged between 35 and 44. Yet perhaps what was most revealing during our conversations and research was the degree to which the pandemic shone a light on pre-existing issues, in particular regarding the lack of joined-up support at local and national level for those seeking apprenticeships, traineeships, and employment, the inflexibility of our current education system and its ingrained antipathy to vocational and non-academic ways of learning, the stark consequences of failure for learners, and – perhaps most pivotal in the context of employment – its deficiencies in educating young people about the world of work and the opportunities available to them.

In an ironic parallel, just as our educational model has not changed significantly for 40 years, neither had our model in the workplace until the lockdowns. Here too, young people have been short-changed by the pandemic, with fewer jobs and fewer opportunities for training and support within the workplace. In both education and employment, young, bright, and capable people with great skills have ended up being underemployed and undervalued, and in turn, have been become deeply cynical about the system, and less likely to persevere. This is doubly tragic because young people have so much offer: a diversity of ideas, a fluency in technology, an adaptability bred from a fast-changing world, and a strength of character born from an increasingly competitive job market. Millions have proven their versatility during the lockdowns, with some – especially disabled young people – discovering a newfound liberty in a culture that promoted home working for the first time in their lives. For all its horrors, it is still true to say that COVID and the accompanying digital transformation at an accelerated rate has afforded us a unique break with convention. But until the messaging shifts for both young people and employers about mutual opportunities – enabling young people to more clearly identify their skills and possible pathways – then the moment will be lost.

Kirsty's story is ultimately one of hope. After not hearing back from those local apprenticeships she applied for, she persevered, finding a tech start-up offering a range of tailored apprenticeships she could start online during the lockdown. After initial scepticism, she is glad she made the decision to leave hospitality, and is relishing the opportunities afforded by her new role. But it was far from an easy journey, and one cannot help but wonder how many Kirstys would have long given up, let down by a system ill-tuned to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Case study: Multiverse and Level 3 Business Administration Apprentice at the New Schools Network, Annabel May

The following case study is taken from Chapter 1 of the Multiverse White Paper - 'The outstanding alternative - how to deliver excellent education and training remotely'.

Multiverse is a provider of professional apprenticeships, founded by Euan Blair in 2016. Their mission is to create a diverse group of global future leaders, and to achieve this, provide high-quality apprenticeship programmes that combine work, training and community. Since starting in 2016, Multiverse has grown across the UK, training over 5,000 apprentices in partnership with more than 300 of the world's best employers and this year launched in the US. Focusing on the skills of the future, the programmes on offer range from business operations to data science and software engineering.

At Multiverse, the move to remote learning offered an opportunity to expand their reach across the UK and into the US.

This section from their White Paper explains how the ability to deliver a human-to-human applied education experience to anyone – regardless of background or geography – is a significant boost to their mission, and an inspiring example of how both young people and adults are supported to succeed.

We also had the chance to speak to Annabel May, a Level 3 Business Administration Apprentice, placed by Multiverse and working at the New Schools Network, about her experience of finding an apprenticeship during the pandemic and the support she received from Multiverse.

Multiverse

How we adapted to a fully remote apprentice experience

As the gravity of the situation around COVID began to emerge, we, like every organization, had to seriously consider the way we worked. How could we continue to deliver outstanding programmes without the ability for people to meet in person?

At the core of our professional apprenticeships is our applied learning model which focuses on what apprentices can actually do, in the real world, with what they learn.

At the heart of all of this work is outstanding Multiverse coaches: individuals who teach and bring our programs to life; coach apprentices on where they individually need to improve; see the whole of the person and help them address any and all gaps to professional success; and

are able to radically transform individuals over the course of their 12+ months on program. We knew we needed to keep coaching at the centre of our work, regardless of delivery model.

We focused on four guiding principles:

- Remote-first
- Scaling quality
- Economic inclusion
- Human connection and community

These principles helped us develop the most powerful delivery model possible, effective regardless of fluctuations in government policy, and have continued to guide us as we emerge from the worst of the crisis. Throughout, we have relied on the strong collection and monitoring of data to ensure that apprentices are being well served.

A truly remote-first approach

Before the pandemic most Multiverse coaching sessions took place in the workplaces of our apprentices, but we were already building a range of remote models and offering blended delivery. As our organisation grew in scale, and with a desire to serve any individual regardless of geography, these options were becoming increasingly important – and a fully remote service was in the pipeline.

We also knew we couldn't just move our delivery online and carry on as before. Instead, we needed a truly remote-first approach.

With this in mind, we spread sessions and workshops over two mornings rather than one full day. We also gave more scope for apprentices to grapple with key concepts before sessions. This meant they could come armed with questions, which can be discussed as a group or one-on-one in breakout rooms. We also explored different ways to engage apprentices when coaching through online methods: warm-up activities, ways for less extroverted apprentices to raise hands to be included and more.

It was important to us to maintain a human-to-human model, delivered human-to-tech-to-human from the start of the pandemic. While distance separated us physically, technology brought coaches and apprentices together in a way that continued psychological safety, rigorous challenge, empathetic coaching, social learning and, importantly, fun.

Scaling quality: no drop off or change in apprentice success

Transitioning to a fully remote offering required investment. At a base level, we needed to ensure all our coaches had the right technology. This includes double screens, Slack classrooms, and full Zoom functionality. Coaches also have technical assistants to help run their sessions.

On top of this, we launched a series of 'Leadership in Crisis' sessions to support apprentices on our leadership program, as they led through some of the most unusual circumstances of their career. We also offered these sessions to their managers. These sessions contained advice

on managing remote teams and strategies for helping teams experience clarity, security and greater predictability during COVID.

Importantly, we needed a model that would allow us to rapidly meet increasing demands of employers, as well. Multiverse experienced substantial growth from April 2020 to the present day. A stable, effective, consistent fully remote model allowed us to do that.

Training for coaches is ongoing and designed to give them the expertise and confidence they need to recreate impactful in-classroom experiences together online: video calls are not like in-person interactions.

> ***"If in-person is like theatre, online is like cinema."***
> **Adel Hanash**, Online Learning Consultant

We took inspiration from film and TV to help coaches find the ideal set up for their online classrooms. Providing tips on background, lighting and framing, we also offer advice on performance.

We also ensured apprentices experience moments of stress release - which has been so important in a particularly stressful time. Most delivery sessions begin with fun music playing and engaging "do now" activity for apprentices to post their responses to a question. We found that it can be more natural to create these moments of joy in a remote context.

Economic inclusion: increased reach and increased support

As we moved fully online, all apprentices were partnered with a dedicated coach. We now provide greater data visibility to coaches and their managers, so they know right away whether an apprentice has missed a session. By providing tailored support like this, we can be sure all our apprentices are properly set up to work from home – even when employer resources are tight.

We also increased our wraparound support for apprentice wellbeing. Using existing data to identify which apprentices were most at risk, we offered pre-emptive support rather than waiting for issues to develop. We kept a careful eye out for added pressures of financial challenges due to COVID, challenges for apprentices who had moved back home or had many people working from home, and isolation.

Mental health was a huge consideration. Not just for younger apprentices, but for those established in their careers who were now suddenly juggling full-time remote learning with full-time childcare.

All staff in regular contact with apprentices – including coaches and community team members – were offered mental health awareness training. Coaches and apprentices were also given mental health 'crib sheets' and access to mental health first aiders.

Building on these initial actions, we also entered into a partnership with Self Space. This allowed apprentices to access six-week therapy courses.

With economic inclusion one of our Multiverse values, we not only considered how to support all apprentices in accessing their apprenticeship but also how we could reach apprentices regardless of geography. The move to fully remote delivery has transformed Multiverse from a London-centric institution to one that can now deliver high-quality professional apprenticeships to individuals literally anywhere in the US or UK. Pre-Covid 32% of our UK apprentices were outside London. That has risen to 49% for those currently on program. Meanwhile we went from delivering in 186 Local Authorities to 275.

Human connection and community

Our aim is to bring our members together and create long-lasting, meaningful connections.

During these physically isolating times, we knew community would be more important than ever. At the very start of the pandemic, we launched an online platform for our community of apprentices, allowing members to easily connect with each other, access our comprehensive schedule of live workshops, roundtables, and webinars featuring world-class speakers and take part in professional development programmes. It facilitates live interactions and opportunities for members to both make and receive contributions.

We host 15-20 events a month designed to inspire and connect apprentices. They include workshops and events designed to equip apprentices with the tools they need to be productive, innovative, healthy and successful at work. From mindfulness to resilience, nutrition to positive self-talk, our workshops and training provide apprentices with the skills and behaviours to excel in their professional career and beyond.

We also launched dedicated support groups and events for those community members facing shared challenges, for example, working parents.

We also launched a virtual mentoring program to provide structured career-focused connections. It's now used by around 250 apprentice mentors and mentees every 4 months.

Annabel May, Level 3 Business Administration Apprentice at New Schools Network

When we spoke to Annabel, she was completing her Level 3 Business Administration Apprenticeship at the New Schools Network. She was placed in her apprenticeship by Multiverse in July 2020, during the COVD-19. In her spare time Annabel is a panel representative at The National Society of Apprentices (NSoA), and The Organising Bureau of European School Students Union (OBESSU), she also takes part in the Multiverse Community Leadership Programme as an Outreach Leader, speaking in schools and other community settings to inform and inspire young people about their next steps. Currently, Annabel is also launching a campaign to lower the pension auto-enrolment age for apprentices and lower-paid workers.

This is what Annabel had to say about her experience of finding an apprenticeship during the pandemic and the support she received from Multiverse.

> ***I was thrilled to be invited to speak as a witness at the Pearson Forum. I am currently studying a Level 3 Business Administration apprentice at New Schools Network, arranged and delivered through Multiverse during COVID-19. The experience meant I was able to share with the Forum what helped me to make that change and how I think other people in my position could be best supported.***
>
> ***The environment I found myself in during the pandemic gave me the time to reflect on what I wanted from my career. I used it to move from training to be a chef to starting a new career I knew I would enjoy.***
>
> ***The first key challenge I came across was that I did not know enough about apprenticeships. I was always given the impression that university was the obvious next step after school, yet I knew it wasn't for me. Once I started looking, I found so many resources that are out there to help young people. I don't think young people are made aware of these options though. They need to be to ensure we provide everyone with the best chance they can to succeed.***
>
> ***The second main challenge was that I did not feel I had the skills I needed to be able to sell myself in the workplace – to 'show off' in that way. I knew I had valuable transferable skills, but I did not have the confidence to talk to professionals for example.***
>
> ***Through my apprenticeship I have developed this, but it would have been useful to have these opportunities earlier. I have the confidence now to know that I bring something different and valuable to the workplace – I know for example what the next generation want out of a business – and it is rewarding to be making an impact.***

Charlotte's Story – the Impact of COVID on Women

Equal Opportunities, Unequal Struggles?

A Short History of Women in the Workplace

Minding the Gender Gap

The Impact of COVID on Health and Employment

Groups Most Affected: (i) Mothers

Groups Most Affected: (ii) Carers

Groups Most Affected: (iii) Individuals from Minority Groups

The Impact of COVID on the Gender Pay Gap

Conclusion

'My abiding memory of lockdown? Guilt. I'm the main breadwinner in my house, but also have the responsibility of mothering duties. Needing to work to pay the mortgage whilst also juggling your little ones' learning – remembering the burden of that rests on you – was incredibly difficult. I kept thinking 'I'm not doing any of these tasks very well'. I sometimes had to email their teachers and say: 'I'm really sorry, they haven't done this work today because I've been in meetings; they've been babysat by Netflix.' My 8-year-old briefly regressed into a 2-year-old again because his brother was the only company he had. But at least I was able to work from home. COVID just proved to me that if you are unable to afford childcare costs it's impossible to support your children adequately working full time in an office.'

Equal Opportunities, Unequal Struggles?

The number of women in employment like Charlotte has changed beyond recognition in the past 50 years. In the UK, the proportion of women in work has risen from 57% in 1975 to 78% in 2017. This growth has been seen largely in full-time employment and is strongly linked to structural and cultural changes in society. As people choose to co-habit and start families later in life, workplace trends show significant growth in women in their mid-20s to 30s in the workplace and many mothers continuing with jobs and careers. Despite this, women still do the majority of care for children and older relatives, leading many to wonder – as one of our interviewees put it half-jokingly – whether women had inadvertently exchanged one form of bondage for another.

From a health perspective, women have statistically fared better under COVID, but societal factors mean that the pandemic has hit women particularly severely economically and socially. A record low of 9.4% of women were 'NEET' ('Not in Education, Employment, or Training') between January and March 2021. Women make up the majority of the workforce in sectors such as hospitality and the arts, shut down for around 7 months in total. They are also the majority in key occupations such as care work and retail where homeworking is not usually an option. Evidence shows women have taken on the bulk of the home-schooling duties and additional childcare in the past year, which – as Charlotte's testimony shows – was considerably more demanding than in normal times. As with young people, COVID has exacerbated pre-existing problems, but – more worryingly – may have also started rewinding the progress of recent decades, for instance in terms of the falling number of women in senior positions, unwilling or unable to juggle the intense demands of high-level work with the burden of childcare. The risk is that as the economy recovers many of the hard-fought gains around equal pay and access to jobs could rescind as employers look to restructure for the recovery. Which immediately poses the question: how should we act to alleviate the worst impacts?

A Short History of Women in the Workplace

Before we do so, however – and before we consider the consequences of COVID for women in more detail – it is worth examining the long-term evolution of women in the labour market, and the state of play prior to the pandemic.

Women's participation in the workplace in the UK grew significantly from the early 1900s until the end of World War II. In spite of this, successive government, trade union, and other campaigns during the 1950s swiftly returned men to the workplace and women to the home. Since then, the representation of women in the workplace has gradually increased, profoundly reshaping the economy. There have been many gains, yet living costs remain consistently high, partly due to this shift. High-cost housing was already fuelling the need for dual-earning households, but as the market adjusted to demand house prices inevitably increased to match higher household incomes, creating a vicious circle. The cost of childcare also remains prohibitively expensive. Nonetheless, the rise of women in work has been particularly high among single mothers and mothers of younger children.[33] As such, the UK is now ranked 8th amongst all OECD countries with a female participation rate of 72.1% in 2020: an increase from 62.8% in 1995.

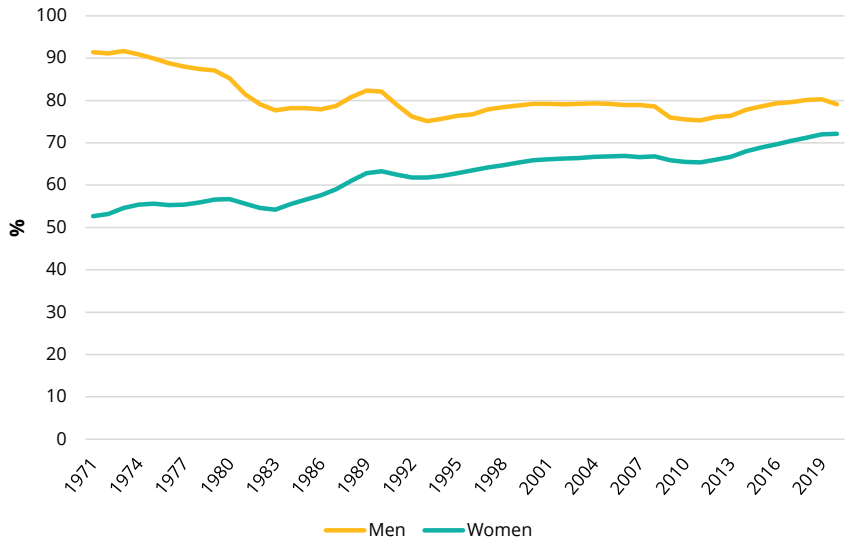

Figure 6: Employment rate for women and men (1971-2020, age 16-64, seasonally adjusted) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

In February 2021 the fifth and final report from the Hampton-Alexander Review – an independent, voluntary, and business-led initiative supported by the government – was published. Its goal was to increase the representation of women in senior leadership positions and on boards of FTSE 350 companies, and is seen as a 'bell-weather' indicator for progress of senior women in business, capturing over 23,000 leadership roles in Britain's largest listed companies, covering the board level and two leadership layers below. The UK's voluntary

approach to improving women's representation at the top table is arguably the biggest and most ambitious of any country; prior to COVID, the UK had made reasonably good progress on women's representation in the workplace at board level. In 2016, the Review set a target of 33% women on boards and in leadership which – at the time – appeared ambitious and stretching. However, five years later FTSE 350 Boards met and *exceeded* the target on average:

- 220 (65%) FTSE 350 companies achieved the 33% target of women on boards, with a further 15 committed to do so in coming months.
- 85 (30%) FTSE 350 companies achieved the target of 33% of women in leadership, with Women in FTSE 350 leadership roles increasing by almost 20% in the five-year period, albeit the FTSE 350 fell just short of the target on average.

Nevertheless, according to the most recent assessments in June 2019 – the last time the data was recorded prior to the pandemic – only 29% of directors of FTSE100 companies were women. According to House of Commons analysis, women were also less likely to run businesses than men: fewer than 17% of SMEs with employees were led by women in 2015 and men are more likely than women to be involved in 'early-stage entrepreneurial activity'.[34]

Lastly, it is worth underlining how certain sectors employ more women than others, including – most significantly for the pandemic – hospitality, travel, and leisure industries. In many such companies, it is not uncommon for 60-70% of the workforce to be made up of women. Furthermore, due to childcare responsibilities, a majority of women in these industries work part-time, with some of them on guaranteed hours arrangements and others on zero hours contracts. A similarly high percentage of the health and care workforce are female, with a very sizeable proportion – sometimes 85% or more – working on zero hours contracts, compared to a national average of 50%. This leaves them more susceptible to the impact of the pandemic on employment.

Minding the Gender Gap

There are many complex impediments that cause the considerable numerical gender gap in the workplace: some obvious, some subtle. Women face personal and social barriers such as gender stereotyping, 'micro-aggressive' behaviours, and the double burden of a higher ratio of domestic responsibilities in the home, all of which have been recorded to hinder progression. Structural and cultural barriers in and outside the workplace prevent women from fully utilising their skills and energy. As one of our male interviewees admitted:

> ***'My wife is a solicitor, and whilst her work has increased substantially – and I try and lean in as much as I can – she's more responsible for the care and welfare of our two and eight-year-old. I'm quite a modern liberal individual, and try and do a fair share, but I admit that she has certainly does far more, and is working into the evening – sometimes nights to prepare for cases – whilst getting up in the early hours to tend to our two-year-old vampire. I think it's sadly very common.'***

Even if one factors in the biological differences between men and women that may cause divergent behaviours which transcend cultural trends, there can be little doubt that there are still many reasons why women are less likely to reach the top. While a sizeable percentage sacrifice ambition to raise a family, and women remain more likely to take early retirement in order to take up caring responsibilities for ageing relatives, many are impeded by deeper cultural impediments, in some cases reinforced by their school or college experience. Indeed, in an unexpected overlap between our interview session on women and our session on young people, Kirsty and others spoke of how too often girls were encouraged to 'not show off' in the classroom, which in turn had a negative impact on their overall confidence and ambition in their formative years, despite the fact their grades were often higher than those of their male peers:

> ***'I don't know whether girls 'not showing off' is preconditioned, but I do know that schools reinforce it. If you ask girls at school what they're most terrified about, number one is often having to stand up and talk in front of other people. A lot of things go with that. If it doesn't go right – say people don't seem to be very attentive when you're speaking – then you tell yourself, 'Well that confirms my basic belief of myself: I can't do this.' It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I might appear confident now, but I always used to go bright red when I was public speaking at school. I had to have cue cards for everything. Maybe we weren't encouraged to do enough of it, unlike in America for instance. It wasn't until I started speaking to professionals and employers – a rarity in schools – that I became much more confident in work environments, whilst most of the boys I knew just seemed more comfortable.'***

Another common impediment in schools and colleges that has an impact on women's jobs and careers – one flagged by several of our experts – is the consistent statistical drop in girls taking STEM ('Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects at the age of 13. This has implications for the number of women who enter connected jobs and careers between the ages of 18 and 24, as revealed in this table showing the static participation rates in STEM subjects at higher education level:

STEM subjects taken in HE – female graduates		
2015	22,020	25%
2016	22,340	24%
2017	22,950	25%
2018	24,000	26%
2019	24,705	26%

Table 1: STEM subjects taken in HE - female graduates | *Source: STEM Women, 2021*

Given the predicted growth in those industries in modern times, this propensity may have a measurable impact on the overall statistics of women in business long-term. Male-dominated sectors such as technology, infrastructure, and green energy were growing six times faster even prior to the pandemic,[35] something which may have accelerated in the past 18 months.

Nevertheless, we should not downplay the profound changes that have taken place in the decades prior to the pandemic. In something unthinkable only twenty years ago, Department for Education data shows the number of women and men starting apprenticeships in 2019/2020 were almost identical (51.2% men compared to 48.8% women). Even more remarkably, whilst registrations for both men and women decreased in 2019/20 from the previous year, the fact that the decrease was larger for women (39,710) than for men (31,070) ended almost a decade's trend for more female apprenticeship starts.[36]

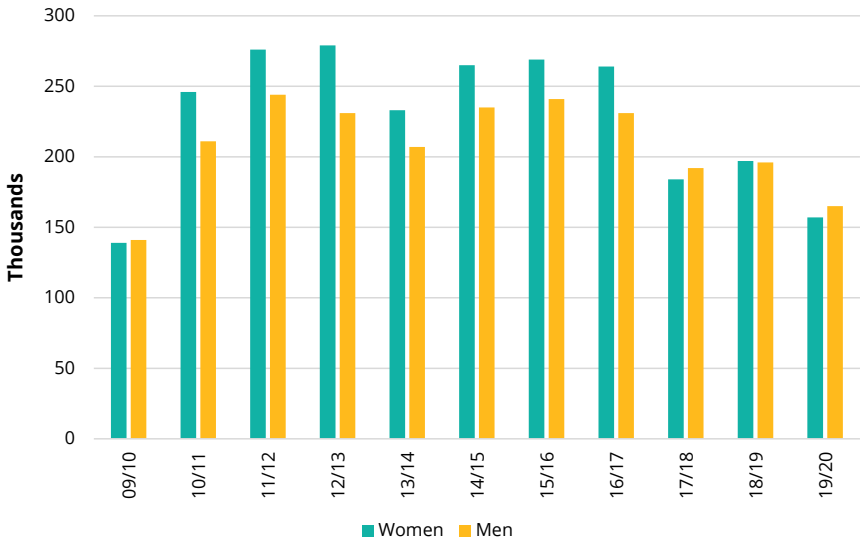

Figure 7: Apprenticeship starts in England by gender (2009/10-2019/20) | *Source: gov.uk, 2021*

Similarly, in higher education, analysis shows female participation reached 56.6% in 2017/18,[37] with research stating that 85% of women gain 'positive net lifetime returns' from higher education. On average across men and women, higher education leads to an increase in net earnings of about 20%. But the gender difference is stark: the estimated gain to the exchequer of individuals attending HE is around £110k per student for men and only £30k per student for women.[38] This speaks to both the financial implications on a woman's career of having children, as well as the less lucrative jobs or careers women are more likely to end up in compared to their male counterparts.

The Impact of COVID on Health and Employment

By some metrics, women have fared better during COVID than men. Women have a lower mortality rate and chance of severe symptoms, and due to the high number of women working in key sectors such as health and care have a greater likelihood of their jobs being protected. Yet these facts in isolation are misleading: when the experience for women is examined as a whole – considering the impact on home/work life, finances, and mental health – data shows that women, like young people, *have* been disproportionally affected.

In employment terms, at the end of 2020 15.49 million women aged 16 or over were in employment, down 117,000 from 2019 – a drop of 0.6%. Whilst the fall was higher for men (1.9%), this does not account for the fact that of the third (34%) of workers not 'working normally' by the first week in April 2020 (and the almost a quarter 'temporarily away' from their work altogether, often on furlough) the majority in both cases were women. Indeed,133,000 *more* women than men were furloughed in the first lockdown peak.[39] Between July and October 2020, of a total of 15.3 million jobs furloughed in the UK, 52% were women, despite women only making up 48% of the workforce:

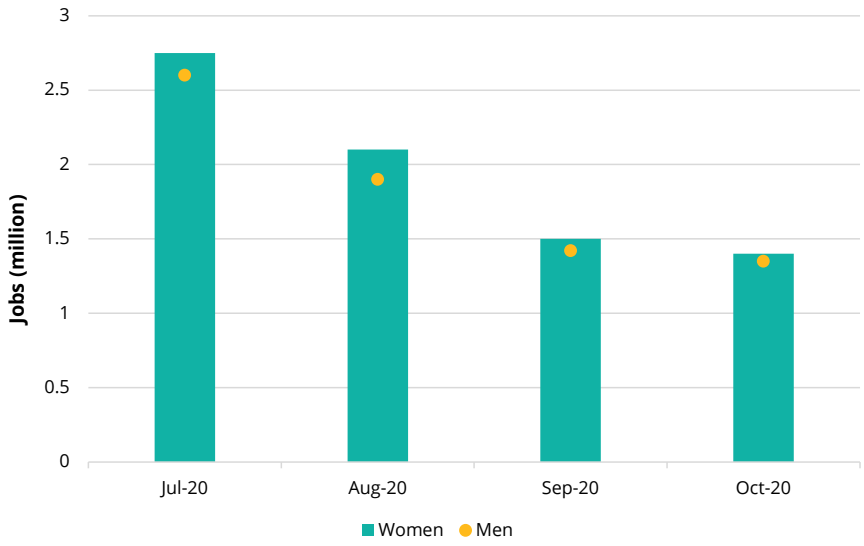

Figure 8: Number of furloughed jobs in the UK (by gender) | *Source: PWC, 2021*

Although redundancy levels between men and women are similar, relative to men, women also experienced higher levels of job loss during COVID than in previous periods of economic downturn. TUC analysis shows female redundancies in the UK hit 178,000 between September and November 2020 – 76% higher than the peak reached in 2008 financial crisis, when female redundancy levels reached 100,000. In the same 2020 period 217,000 men were made redundant – 3% more than the peak of male redundancies during the financial crisis. Analysts

anticipate redundancies will continue throughout 2021 with business feeling a delayed shock as assistance schemes wind down.

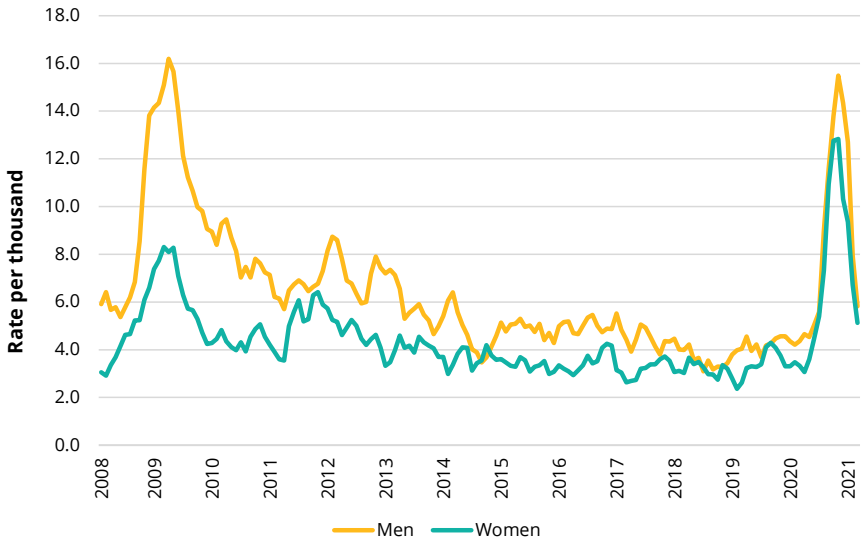

Figure 9: Redundancy rate (rolling 3 month average) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

Furthermore, the industries hardest hit are those whose workforces are predominantly female. As referenced above, women make up the majority of the workforce in sectors such as hospitality and travel, retail, and the arts – those closed during the lockdowns. The hospitality sector saw the largest drop in employment, with jobs falling by 243,000 in the 12 months up to December 2020, where women accounted for 60% of the total job losses. Similarly, in wholesale and retail, women accounted for 58% of the losses (88,000 out of 152,000).[40] These two industries combined account for around a fifth of all employment in the UK. In retail too, women make up the majority of the workforce where homeworking is not typically an option.

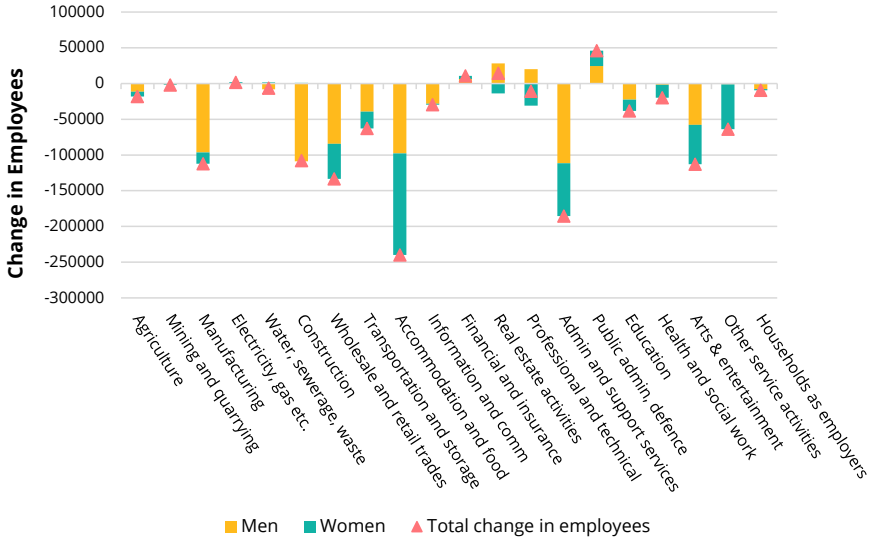

Figure 10: Change in employees (Dec 2019 to Dec 2020) | *Source: TUC, 2021*

Lastly, women account for a greater number of keyworker roles, especially in the NHS and care. These are the roles that have faced intense pressure and have seen the highest occupational mortality rates from COVID. Care home workers and retail shop assistants, for instance, have seen a higher percentage succumb to the virus, both of which are positions disproportionally held by women.

Of particular concern to our experts was how the pressures experienced by women like Charlotte appear universal and not exclusive to those working at the lower-rungs of the employment ladder. As one interviewee highlighted:

> ***'What is staggering to me is the number of visible female role models and mentors we have lost. We have not just lost women at entry level and customer-facing roles, we have lost them at board level as gender diversity dropped down the priority list. In hospitality for example, women are more likely to be working on an area of the company whose profits have been impeded so they're an easy target for redundancy. Some I know personally and have gone as part of a series of restructuring. Others have chosen to drop off the labour market completely because the absence of support for childcare and lack of flexibility prevents them from returning. Unless there's more support from a childcare perspective, they will stay away from such employment. Others are leaving because they want jobs in less risky industries.'***

A final interesting discovery in our polling found that whilst women are only slightly more likely to say that they would need training to get a better paid role in their sector (53% compared to 47% of men), considerably more believe that they would require it for a more senior role (61% compared to 52%).

53%

of women say that they would need training to get a better paid role in their sector (compared to 47% of men). Considerably more believe that they would require it for a more senior role (61% compared to 52%).

Groups Most Affected: (i) Mothers

As we have heard, Charlotte attempted to juggle working full-time and caring for her two children, the latter being a major reason for a higher number of women leaving employment during the pandemic, possibly never to return – the longer someone doesn't work, the less likely they are to find employment in the future or seek it out. Analysis shows that women have, on average, been carrying out two-thirds more childcare than men.[41] Thus mothers are one of the groups of women most severely affected by the pandemic.

The IFS have shown mothers are 1.5 times more likely than fathers to have either lost or left their job since March 2020. Similarly, the Fawcett Society found 35% of working mothers have lost work (or hours) due to lack of childcare support.[42] A London School of Economics (LSE) paper claims 20.3% of households with dependent children (aged 15 or below) are headed by single mothers, against 3.3% headed by single fathers. Hence, for single parent households, women are far more likely than men to be the sole providers of the sharp increase in childcare during the lockdowns.[43] In the words of one interviewee:

> ***'The last 18 months have been about survival. The burden of looking after the children fell on me. We don't have the mental health services to support women, so I think there are millions who, like me, couldn't – and can't – even think about seeking a promotion at work. We talk rather idealistically about what women can achieve with role models, mentoring and sponsorship but actually, for God's sake, I've just survived this! The thought of progressing on is a distant thing that I will have to take a couple of years to think about.'***

Despite the immense challenges posed by childcare during the pandemic, it is important to add that several of our interviewees – in an example of something that has been observed nationally – said they deeply valued the increased time they spent with their family. Some commented that it was the first time their male partners had been able to spend prolonged periods at home with their loved ones, something that they had cherished. As such, some commented that they did not wish to see a return to working full time in an office:

> ***'My boss was quite adamant that we are an office-based business and that we function better as an office-based business. Then he retired and we have a new CEO who has a very different perspective on the way of running things; now we are moving more towards a blended working approach. Perhaps as a society we've started to understand the benefits of a hybrid model for people like working mothers, who are now saying 'You know what? I can now do the school run a couple of days a week – I don't have to pay for expensive childcare and I don't have the commute times that we had before.' Businesses are sitting up and listening to people saying, 'Actually this works better for me and I feel more productive because I'm not spending an hour a day in the car'.'***

Paradoxically, however, it was noted by our experts that a hybrid model – facilitating a culture of less regimented work hours – may, without measures in place, indirectly lead to an *increase* in the need for expensive childcare services, especially if working hours became less fixed than they are now.

Groups Most Affected: (ii) Carers

The pandemic has also put additional pressure on the 13.6 million unpaid carers in society, 58% of which are women. Falling particularly on women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, around 1 in 4 women aged 50-64 have caring responsibilities for older or disabled loved ones.[44] These carers are also more likely to be providing 'round the clock' care, with 60% of those caring for over 50 hours a week being female. Women are also more likely to be 'sandwich' carers – caring for young children and elderly parents at the same time. Ultimately, women have a 50:50 chance of providing care by the time they are 59, compared with men who have the same chance by the time they are 75 years old. Additionally, a higher percentage of unpaid carers than non-carers are disabled (32% compared with 23%), with unpaid carers aged 16 to 34 years and 45 to 54 years more likely to be disabled than non-carers of the same age groups.[45]

During the height of the pandemic, more unpaid carers avoided physical contact with others when outside the household (92%) compared with non-carers (88%); [46] they were also more likely than non-carers to have life events, work, access to health care and treatment, and their health impacted. For example, unpaid carers were more likely to leave the house to go shopping for food or medicine than non-carers. Remarkably, and for a sense of scale, it is estimated that unpaid carers saved the state £530 million every day of the crisis,[47] often to the detriment of their own professional life. As one of our experts observed:

> ***'The scale of unpaid care is a remarkable untold story. We need really enhanced support for carers to access training and the labour market, especially around digital inclusion and mentoring. We also need to develop clearer career pathways within social care – right now it's far, far too fragmented.'***

Groups Most Affected: (iii) Individuals from Minority Groups

Whilst the next chapter is dedicated to the experience of men and women from minority ethnic backgrounds, it is worth noting that The Fawcett Society found 50% of employed women from minority ethnic groups and 43% of women from White ethnic groups were concerned about job or promotion prospects because of the pandemic, compared to 35% of employed White men. As we will see in the next chapter, the higher number of women from minority ethnic groups working in the hardest hit sectors had a disproportionate effect on their experience. Likewise, just under one-third of women from minority ethnic groups said they had been unfairly denied access to training and development opportunities, rising to one in two for disabled women (52%) and 38% of women aged 25 to 34 in this category.

The Impact of COVID on the Gender Pay Gap

Reporting on the gender pay gap was suspended during the pandemic, with the number of organisations submitting pay gap figures falling from nearly 11,000 in 2019 to 6,200 in 2020 – a 42% drop on the period before COVID. In 2021, only around 2,500 companies reported before the original April deadline – a quarter of the 10,000 companies that are eligible.[48] Nonetheless, official government data from November 2020 suggests that the gender pay gap continued to shrink in 2020. Among all employees the pay gap was 15.5% in 2020, down from 17.4% in 2019.[49] The gap remained close to zero for full-time employees aged under 40 years but was over 10% for older age groups. Utilising a larger sample, The Equality Trust in November 2020 found a small average decline in the overall gender gap reported of 0.5%, yet – strikingly – the reported average bonus gap between men and women was *up* by almost 200% in favour of men.[50]

42%
of men believe their income will increase in the next year, compared to just 34% of women.

Our own polling shows that men are more likely to believe their income will increase in the next year, with 42% saying so compared to 34% of women. Two-thirds of the 20 employers with the largest gender pay gaps in 2019 did not report voluntarily in 2020, which could store up further bad news for 2021 reports. Indeed, a recent CIPD study suggests that once post-pandemic adjustments are made to the data, the gender pay gap may increase.[51]

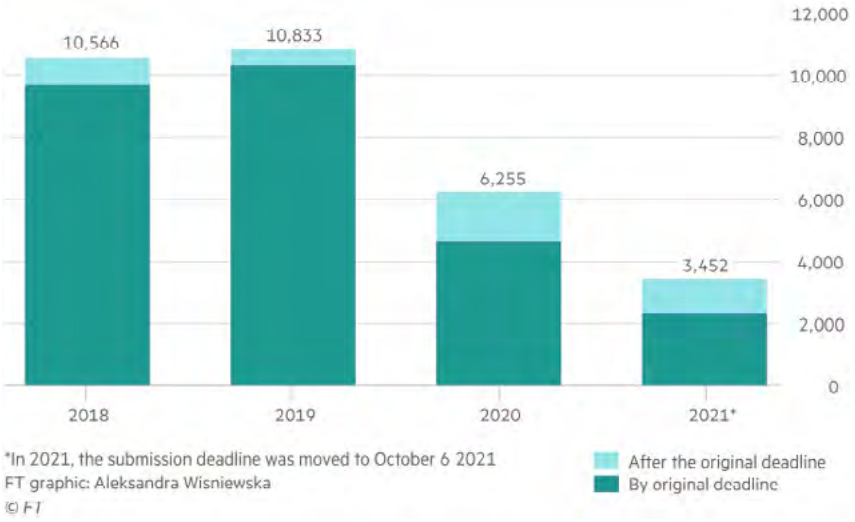

Figure 11: Number of employers reporting their gender pay gap after the suspension in 2020 | *Source: FT, 2021*

Whilst the requirement to report gender pay gaps was suspended in March 2020, analysis of the 5,822 individual employer reports already posted show a widening of the gap in 2020. The absence of accurate data has long been a barrier to achieving better gender representation, and since – as one of our experts put it – 'what gets measured tends to be what gets fixed', this may have significant ramifications long-term.

Conclusion

'When you lift up women, you lift up humanity' – so wrote Melinda Gates in her recent book on the liberating impact of empowering women. The road to gender equality in the workplace and in society is a long and ongoing one, despite the progress we have made so far. The impact of COVID has served to shine a further spotlight on the many areas we have yet to get right. Both the statistics and the anecdotes show how tough this has been for everyone, but in particular for women: they are more represented in redundancies and in furlough, work in some of the hardest hit sectors, and in many instances bear the double burden of work and caring responsibilities. Yet few are talking about this. COVID has worsened a situation in which we already needed to redouble efforts. As the economy begins to recover, there is a strong case to support women in the transition back to the workplace, involve more men both in the home and in the education of their children, and ensure the gains around equal pay and access to jobs, careers, and leadership do not slide backwards as employers look to rebuild for their recovery.

Many women support a hybrid model of working, giving them greater flexibility to look after children and care for relatives. While no doubt true for many men too, voluntary furlough was more commonly taken by women for this reason, and there is a high probability that long-term the gender divide will increase as many do not return to the labour market. Likewise, there is a possibility that – unchecked – under a hybrid system more women may choose to remain at home, with negative consequences for their career prospects, and ultimately the economy. Paradoxical as it sounds, a hybrid model might also inadvertently further increase the already inhibiting cost of childcare as it is likely to become even more expensive if working hours become less predictable and the demand is higher, further encouraging women to stay away from the labour market. Thus, if a hybrid model becomes the new normal, measures may need to be put in place to ease the financial burden of childcare.

If tackled robustly, women like Charlotte and the others we interviewed can thrive and progress, to the benefit both of themselves and the UK economy. But to make a real difference to those most affected, the time to act is now.

Femi's Story – the Impact of COVID on Individuals from Minority Groups

Why Race Still Matters

The Disproportionate Impact on Individuals from Minority Groups

Unemployment and Loss of Earnings

Economic Resilience and Access to Support

The Cost for Young People and Women

Disparities in Education and Possible Cultural Factors

The Role of 'Role Models' and Mentors

Conclusion

'One of the hardest things that happened during COVID was when the media reported ethnic minorities were more likely to get the virus. It caused problems for many groups, as some people thought that walking past a Black, Brown, or Asian person could give them COVID. What wasn't explained was that so many key workers in the caring professions – including doctors and surgeons, not just ancillary workers – were from minority backgrounds and so more likely to come into contact with the virus. Not only that, but it wasn't discussed how the impact of poverty impacted the likelihood of infection and mortality. Certain groups not only faced a higher number of bereavements but also faced stigma for it. Things got so bad that individuals within certain groups did not seek treatment for fear of facing racism.'

Why Race Still Matters

Born in Guinea and living in a multiracial, multicultural city like Birmingham, Femi's relationship with race is complex. On the one hand, he has found the UK a welcoming, forward-thinking place, yet the reality remains that even before the pandemic, he – as a black man living in the UK – faced considerable barriers, barriers that – as the pandemic recedes – are now in danger of becoming even harder to overcome.

Often the obstacles faced by individuals from minority groups are seen as predominantly economic in nature. The argument goes that since certain minorities are more likely to be poor, it is poverty, not race, that is the main cause of inequality. By this reasoning, focusing on race can be misleading, feeding a narrative that divides groups of people in negative ways. Yet as the above testimony shows, the experience of race in the UK is not simply a matter of economics: often people of different races are treated differently based on their ethnicity alone, with no consideration of their economic or social status. This treatment is, in too many cases, detrimental to individuals in these groups, especially when measured in terms of equality of opportunity and employment. Statistics show that the more marginalised a group is – with fewer economic or social opportunities – the more inward-facing that group is likely to become, with even less likelihood of breaking the cycle of inequality.

Nevertheless, measuring the impact of COVID on individuals from minority groups is challenging. The words often used have a tendency to oversimplify. Just as the term 'minority groups' is exceptionally broad, terms like 'Black', 'Brown', and 'Asian' conceal a wide variety of nuance and experience. None are perfect, but for want of better ones this report utilises some of the most frequently recognised statistical categories, in the hope that as discussions around race become more sophisticated the need for such broad terms will fade. Likewise, we have not focused on all racial groups, but those which are the most commonly discussed in relation to the question of equality.

The Disproportionate Impact on Individuals from Minority Groups

In August 2020, The British Medical Journal showed that COVID has disproportionately affected the 14% of people in the UK who are from minority groups, exposing longstanding inequalities.[52] As was widely reported, the risk of dying from COVID is substantially higher in people from minorities than those from White ethnic groups, with the highest mortality rates seen among people from Black and Asian backgrounds:[53]

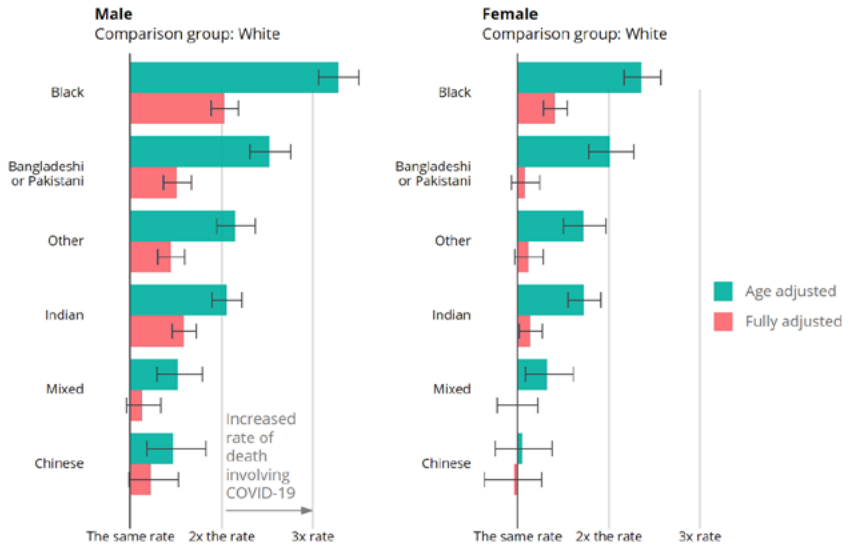

Figure 12: Rate of COVID-19 death by ethnic group and sex, relative to the White population in England and Wales (2 March to 15 May 2020) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

In time, more detailed data revealed how during the first wave of the pandemic, those from almost all minority groups had higher rates of death with COVID compared with the White population.[54] The rate of death was highest for those from a Black African background, followed by those from Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, and Pakistani backgrounds:

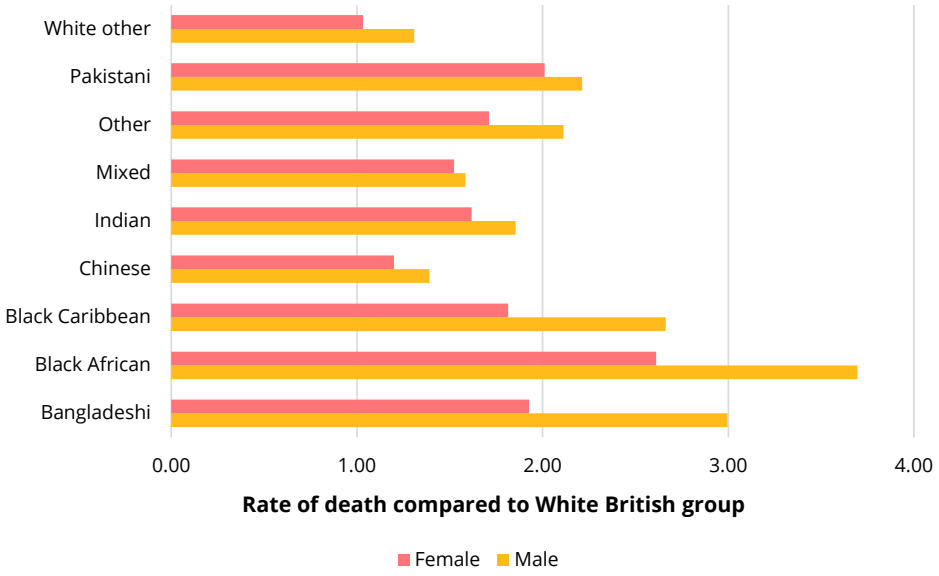

Figure 13: COVID-19 death rate (1st wave, England) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

In the second wave, the differences in mortality compared with the White British population increased for people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic backgrounds: the chances of dying were 5.0 and 4.1 times greater for men and women from Bangladeshi backgrounds respectively.

Emerging analysis suggests that the key causes of such discrepancies are complex, but that individuals from the minority groups most affected often reside in densely populated parts of towns and cities in geographical areas of poverty and social deprivation.[55] Many of these are in the north of England, where the unemployment rates are still high: for the three months ending June 2021, the lowest employment rate estimate in the UK was in the North East (71.6%); the North West likewise saw the largest change in employment rate estimate compared with the previous year, with a decrease of 2.0 percentage points.

There also a considerable number of individuals from minority groups in areas categorised as 'left behind'. A 2020 All Parliamentary Group (APPG) looked at the impact of COVID in areas of England designated as such. These areas are 225 wards in England, often located on the peripheries of towns and cities which rank in the top 10% of the multiple deprivation index but do not have the social structures in place to maximise benefits of public or lottery funds and initiate transformation. 'Left behind' neighbourhoods have a higher proportion of people in 'high risk' health groups, with a higher proportion of people with a limiting long-term illness (23.8%) than other deprived areas (21.3%), and England as a whole (17.6%). There is a higher prevalence of key 'high risk' health conditions including cancer, obesity, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in 'left behind' neighbourhoods than in deprived non-'left behind' areas and England as a whole. People in these neighbourhoods are also more likely to be working in the health and social care sector (14.5% of workers) than across other deprived areas (14%) and England generally (12.4%), leading to increased exposure to the virus. Unemployment has risen faster in 'left behind' neighbourhoods at the beginning of the pandemic (by 4.1%)

than the national average (3.4 percentage points over the March-May 2020 period). Indeed, more than one in ten (10.6%) of working age people living in 'left behind' neighbourhoods were identified as unemployed in June 2020, compared with 6.5% across England.

The higher percentage of multigenerational households among individuals from minority groups is also believed to have exacerbated the spread of the virus in the first and second waves. Partnered with the higher percentage of medical conditions referenced above – which include hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, and sickle cell disease more common among such groups – mortality rates among minorities spiked. As one of our interviewees remembered:

> ***'Not everybody was walking around in a middle-class bliss and doing Joe Wicks exercises, baking bread, and having a lovely time with the family. One of my Asian colleagues lost his mum and dad to COVID within a week, then was hospitalised himself. He had been their carer and contracted the virus. But despite his grief, he was soon back working from home. He had no time to mourn. People said to him: 'Oh, you don't look very happy – you're not smiling today.' You realise how few have any real understanding. I believe there's substantial education that needs to happen to people in organisations, so they understand culturally the different experiences that people have gone through.'***

Unemployment and Loss of Earnings

A range of structural factors have contributed to worse economic outcomes for individuals from minority groups during the pandemic. These include the likelihood of being engaged in frontline work, more precarious employment conditions, lower economic resilience, fewer employment rights, and less likelihood of having had the flexibility afforded by working at home. Overall, 15% of workers in the sectors most affected by the pandemic are from a minority ethnic group, compared to 12% of all workers.[56]

But the area where workers from minority groups have been most starkly negatively impacted is in unemployment. ONS data shows the unemployment rate for people from all minority ethnic background was 8.9% in January-March 2021, up from 6.3% in the same period the year before. By comparison, the unemployment rate for people from White ethnic backgrounds rose from 3.9% to 4.7% – an increase of 0.6%. Broken down by group, there are significant differences in unemployment growth from 2019 to the same period in 2020:

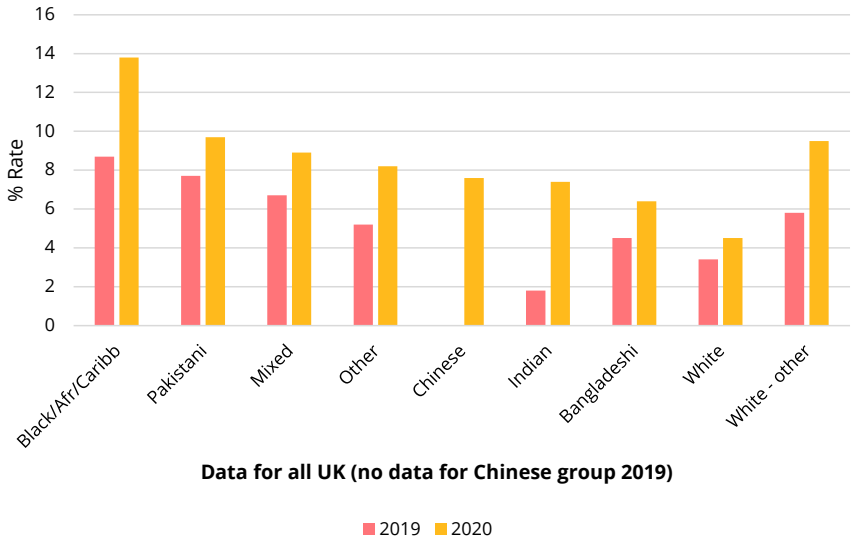

Figure 14: Unemployment by ethnic background (Oct-Dec 2020) | *Source: ONS, 2021*

In the 12 months to September 2020, the unemployment rate was highest for people from a Pakistani (9%), or Black (9%) background, and lowest for people from a White (3%), Indian (4%), or Chinese (5%) ethnic background, according to analysis by the House of Commons Library.

Analysis by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) looked at the number of ways earnings have been impacted. Using a simple measurement – loss of earnings due to redundancy, reduced earnings due to furlough, or fewer working hours – the FCA found that whilst individuals from all ethnic groups saw an average drop in earnings, incomes of individuals from a minority group dropped 9.1% more on average than White workers. This difference remains substantially unchanged even when controlled for other characteristics such as age and education level:

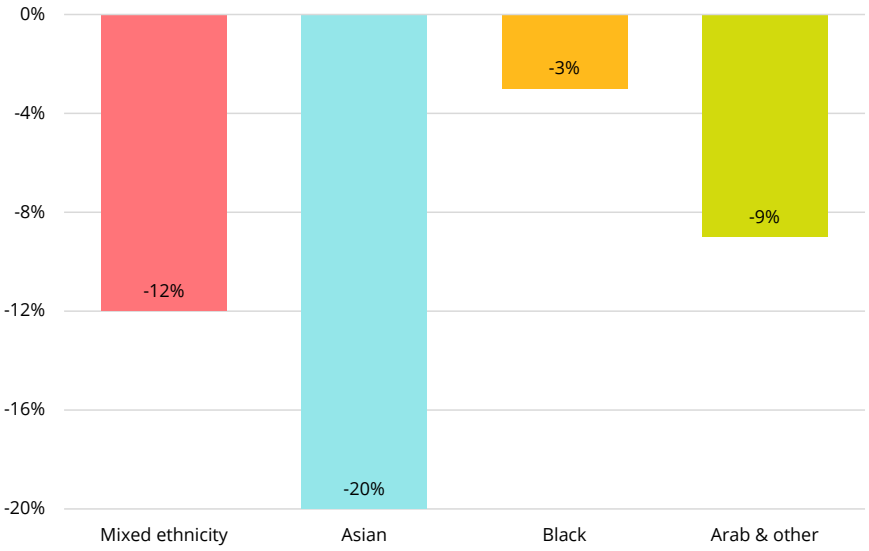

Figure 15: Average earnings loss relative to White workers (Feb-Jul 2020) | *Source: FCA, 2021*

These discrepancies in unemployment for different racial groups were not immediately recognised. As one of our experts described:

> ***'It took a long time for CEOs and business leaders to catch up with what was really going on in terms of racial disparity. We were suddenly faced with two-tier workplaces, where those who worked in more white-collar jobs had nice homes were able to stay working in that environment in a very safe, protected way, whilst those asked back into work were most at risk. In many instances this latter category were in lower paid employment and from a minority background. The other gap that started emerging very quickly was how people were feeling. Pre-existing disparities widened: because of the novelty of remote working, big companies asked how their newly remote employees were feeling, but not those still on the frontline, who felt they were receiving less communication and less support from their line managers. They felt out of the loop, increasingly excluded and marginalised.'***

The killing of George Floyd in the United States sparked increased scrutiny of racial disparities across the Western world, shifting the focus. Businesses became more pro-active about the experience of their employees from minority backgrounds and their recruitment, particularly with regard to Black employees. The absence of clear guidance, however, and the pace of the change, led to some uneasy questions and encounters, as one of our experts analysed:

'On the one hand there has never been a better time to be a Black professional – every organisation is trying to recruit you. On the other, there's a lot of tokenism, both professional and personal. As a small example, business leaders try and attach themselves to me and say I'm their friend. I have to reply: 'I have never been to your house. I have never met your children. You don't know my husband's name. You don't know my faith. You don't know anything about me. You shouldn't pretend.' Unless we create the right culture in these organisations – a range of education and inclusivity – I think we're going to go back to the '60s where things were quite bad. On this issue we have to seriously ask: what should normal look and feel like? What should we be expecting from our employers? What should employers be expecting from their clients? I always bring it back to clients because that always drives the activity and the change that organisations need to make because it's linked to their commercial outcome. I ask myself: how much change is commercial and how much of it is really sincere?'

Economic Resilience and Access to Support

Pre-pandemic labour market inequalities for individuals from minority groups can also seen to have been exacerbated. A 2020 report shows certain minorities are overrepresented in low-income self-employment[57] – notably 25% of Pakistani men compared to a UK average of 15.1%.[58] Overall, workers from minority groups have less employment security than their White colleagues. The TUC found that when compared to a national average of 1 in 17, "1 in 13 BAME employees are in insecure work, and 1 in 8 Black employees".[59] Our own polling supported this: individuals from minority groups were more likely to agree with the statement that their jobs were 'less secure' than White respondents (39% compared to 35%), and less likely to disagree (31% compared with 41%). A Runnymede Trust report from April 2020, found that while Indian households have 90–95p for every £1 of White British wealth, Pakistani households have around 50p, Black Caribbean households have around 20p, and Black African and Bangladeshi households approximately 10p.[60]

39%
of individuals from minority groups agree with the statement that their jobs were 'less secure', compared to 35% of White respondents.

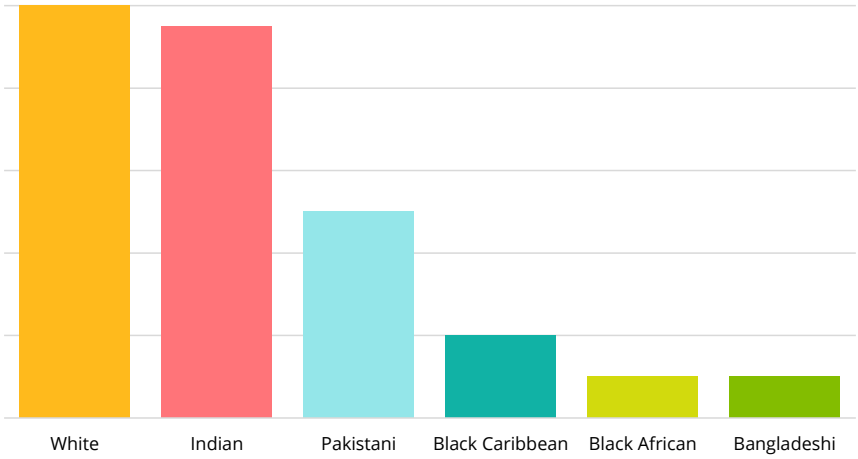

Figure 16: Relative wealth by ethnic group | *Source: Runnymede Trust, 2020*

40%
of individuals from minority groups say that training is too expensive, (compared to 33% of White respondents).

33%
say that fitting around family and caring commitments are the biggest barriers to undertaking such initiatives within work to support career growth (compared with 23% of White respondents).

Workers in insecure employment are unlikely to have an economic safety net and are therefore less resilient to short-term economic crises. Many on short-term or zero hours contracts do not meet the eligibility criteria for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). Despite this, the take-up of government support schemes is lower among individuals from minority groups than others, and a range of factors have been posited for this.[61] As one example, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) put in place to enable self-employed individuals to claim a taxable grant has a lower take up and is said to be "less well-understood" than the Job Retention ('furlough') Scheme.[62] In

a professional context, our polling found that individuals from minority groups were more likely than White respondents to say that training is too expensive (40% compared to 33%), and that fitting it around family and caring commitments are the biggest barriers to undertaking such initiatives within work to support career growth (33% compared with 23%).

The Cost for Young People and Women

As discussed in earlier chapters, by a variety of metrics young people and women have already experienced disproportional challenges before and during COVID. Nevertheless, it is worth underlining this is exacerbated when individuals are also from a minority background.

Across all ethnic backgrounds, unemployment rates are higher for young people than for older age groups; among people aged 16-24, unemployment rates between October 2019-September 2020 were highest for people of a Black (29%) or Bangladeshi or Pakistani (27%) ethnicity. This compared to a rate of 11% for people from a White ethnic background:

Unemployment rates by age and ethnic background (period to Sept 2020)

	16-24 (%)	25-49 (%)	50+ (%)	Total (%)
White	11	3	3	4
Black	29	7	6	9
Bangladeshi/Pakistani	27	5	5	9
Indian	17	3	2	4
Other ethnic groups	16	5	4	7
Total	12.4	3.1	2.7	4.1

Table 2: Unemployment rates by age and ethnic background (period to Sept 2020) | *Source: ONS/House of Commons Library, 2020*

Likewise, survey analysis carried out by the Fawcett Society in 2020 indicated that women in minority groups were particularly likely to experience economic and social challenges due to COVID.[63] One of our interviewees gave another example of where 'uncontrollable' factors that transcend economics – race, age, and gender – can trigger starkly different outcomes:

> ***'My younger cousin faces a lot of discrimination. She, like me, wears a hijab and looked for a job for a year, but nobody accepted her. Then her younger sister, who doesn't wear the hijab, applied and got accepted somewhere straight away. Recently, me and my friend did a little experiment in our town. My friend is white and brunette – a stereotypical British girl – and we applied to the same ten places. My grades were higher than hers, yet she got into seven out of ten places, whereas I only got into three. Those three places were the ones that the owner had a very different ethnic background, or just wasn't English. It was supposed to just be a fun little experiment, but it blew my mind.'***

Disparities in Education and Possible Cultural Factors

The Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities carried out research which found that working-class young people from Black and South Asian backgrounds faced additional barriers when accessing higher education. These included experiences of racism in education, and a lack of representation at school, college, in higher education, and in the labour market.[64] An example of the latter can be seen in the lower take-up of apprenticeships. In the 8 years to July 2019, whilst the percentage of apprentices from Asian, Black, Mixed and Other backgrounds went up from 9.7% to 11.8%, apprentices from minority groups are still underrepresented as a percentage of the population as a whole:

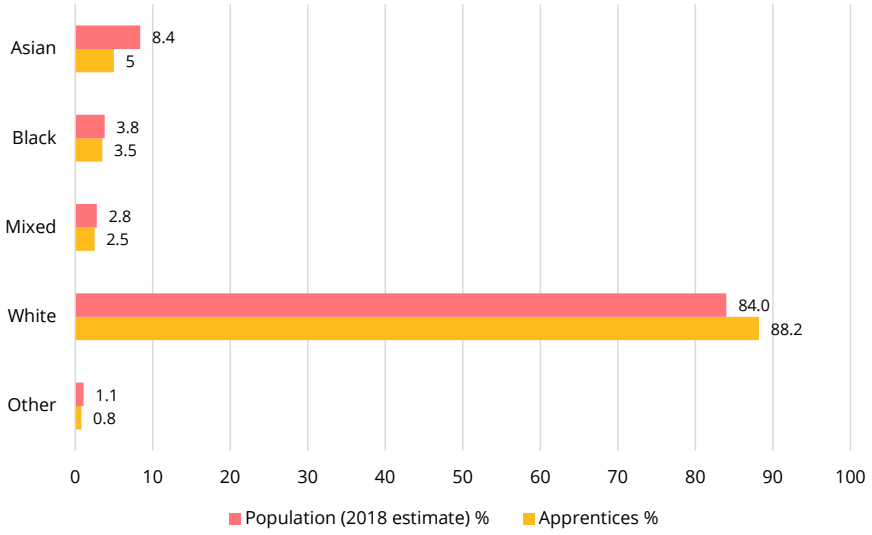

Figure 17: Percentage of people on apprenticeships, and percentage of the overall population, by ethnicity, in England (2018/19 academic year) | *Source: gov.uk, 2020*

Nevertheless – and strikingly – government analysis shows entry rates into higher education for most ethnic groups continue to rise at a faster rate than White students. In our polling, 23% of respondents from minority groups said they are considerably more likely to want a degree from a higher education institution as the option for further training compared to White respondents (9%). Entry rates for individuals from all ethnic groups were higher than in the previous year, and higher than in 2006. In 2020, 71.7% of pupils from the Chinese ethnic group secured a higher education place in the UK, the highest entry rate out of all ethnic groups. 32.6% of White pupils secured a higher education place and have continuously had the lowest entry rate since 2007.

23%

of respondents from minority groups said they are considerably more likely to want a degree from a higher education institution as the option for further training compared to White respondents (9%).

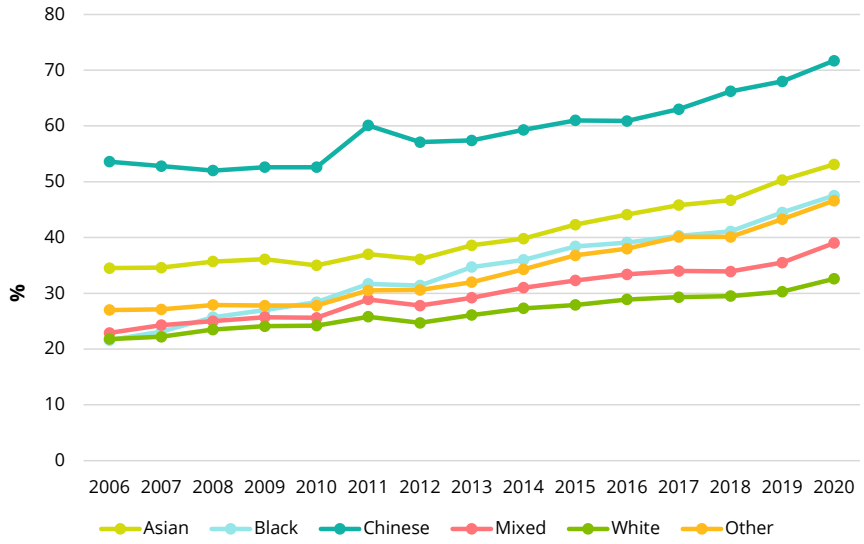

Figure 18: Percentage of state school pupils aged 18 getting a higher education place, by ethnicity over time, in England (2006-2020) | *Source: UCAS, 2020*

Between 2006 and 2020, pupils from a Black ethnic background had the biggest entry rate increase out of all ethnic groups, from 21.6% to 47.5%. Yet Universities UK analysis shows proportionately more students from minority groups receive a lower degree classification, even with some groups such as those from Chinese and Indian backgrounds bucking the trend with 76.6% and 70.5% of higher degree classifications respectively.

In the view of one of our experts, these historic discrepancies can partly be explained by societal assumptions – including around poorer working-class White children – and cultural attitudes more common within certain groups:

> ***'It's largely about society's expectation and aspiration, but also expectations and aspirations within groups. On the one hand you have teachers, assessors, and others making decisions at key points in a career about what a person can achieve. When we used to have O-levels, young black children were often told 'Well, you can only sit a CSE.' That's little to do with how poor you are or your parents: it's about society's expectations put upon you and restrictions about perceptions about how far you can go in life. Even later on, if you look at children from a minority background that are doing well up until the age of 16, they might be on a really positive trajectory but it often drops off really fast once they're in further education: that's also true in apprenticeships – where the drop off from level one to level two is significant – in higher education where few attain anything beyond a second-class degree. But parents and cultural practice also play a considerable role as well, with children of Chinese and Indian heritage often feeling less hamstrung by negative perceptions of what's possible.'***

As discouraging as such discussions often are, the ability to distinguish between different cultural attitudes towards education and expected outcomes is deeply relevant to this question. To not do so is not only to ignore the significant differences between individuals from minority groups in terms of educational outcome – seen below at higher education level – but is also to bypass the lessons we can learn about how those from minority ethnic backgrounds can succeed and excel. The table below speaks to the divergency of outcomes between different groups, and the questions it poses should serve as a basis for understanding where we go from here.

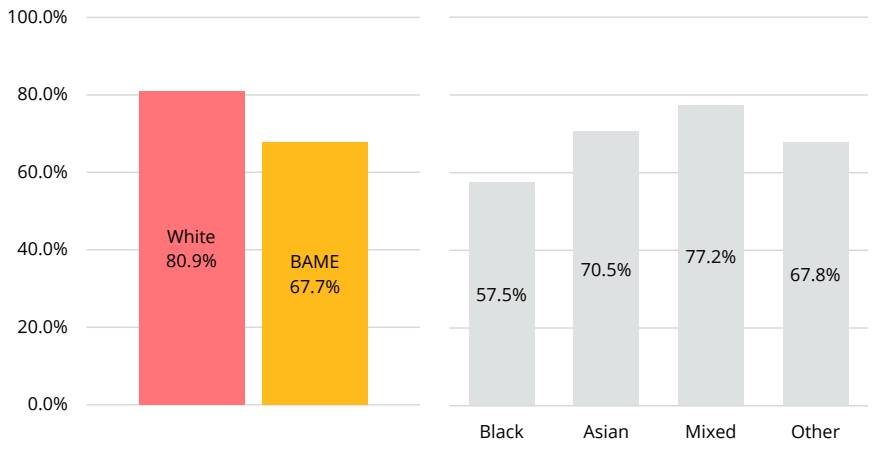

Figure 19: Proportion of home students at UK HEIs receiving First or 2:1 (2017-18) and breakdown by cluster | *Source: HESA, 2018*

The Role of 'Role Models' and Mentors

A final point proposed by one of our experts related to the question of 'role models' for individuals from minority groups. Whilst highly significant for changing attitudes within communities, it was observed that overt segmentation on the grounds of race – in culture for instance – is unlikely to offer a long-term solution and could even be doing more harm than good for integration. Instead, there might be more subtle and successful ways of thinking about their role:

> ***'Young people in my community want to be a YouTuber or a digital gamer; historically it was a popstar or a footballer. These examples can be good for integration, as they are common interests among all young people – they unify. I know my opinion is unusual, but I feel uncomfortable when I see culture or achievement cordoned off on the grounds of skin colour: something people can do nothing to change. Awards for Black high achievers are becoming increasingly common, but would we feel comfortable with White-only awards? A White-only Olympics or a Black-only Olympics? Surely, long-term, in an equal society, they are either both acceptable or neither are. That was Martin Luther King Jr's famous dream. To truly eradicate racism, our role models should exist within categories open to all races: that is what real change, real integration, looks like. We also tend to forget that if something isn't cool then people often aren't aware of it: if we really want to encourage people to work in digital, in hospitality, in leisure, then we need to make more household names of people who do these things, and also not in a way that draws attention to their racial difference. Sport is a perfect example of how integration can work well. Representation and presentation make things attractive. If it becomes attractive, you're promoting a journey that builds a positive mindset not just for certain groups, but the country as a whole.'***

Throughout this report there have been references to emerging trends in the workplace, including skills shortages and those jobs that will likely become increasingly significant in the future. If we are serious about making sure that UK plc can thrive, then role models and mentors for these industries will be vitally important, especially in alleviating disparities between racial groups in terms of academic attainment and career progression. But conversely, the way to do this in public discourse may need to be more sophisticated, not drawing attention too significantly to those factors that are beyond an individual's control as this can facilitate fragmentations as opposed to integrative practices. Instead, whilst recognising issues of the past and present, and in the short term doing everything we can to proactively end the inequalities, long term we may need to find ways that better build upon shared values and shared ambitions. In short, to focus on similarity rather than difference.

Conclusion

> ***'Despite the headlines, you don't just have to be a Black man to know what it feels like to suffer racism. I was running a group in a company when a young Chinese girl said to me, 'All this has made me face the things that happened to me as a child in this country growing up.' I had to have conversations with my own children to say: 'I used to get racist abuse hurled at me on the bus, and sometimes it still happens to me as an adult.' My cousin was stripped and tied naked to a pole on his way to school. Things that we'd all hidden and suppressed for a long, long time, all came to the surface, and it was very difficult to deal with it. Then you suddenly had White colleagues in the workforce saying, 'Oh, can we understand what it's like for you? Can you talk to us? Can you set up a resource group? Can you write our strategy on race? Can you go and talk to another one hundred people about what it's like to be Black?' when some of us are still dealing with this stuff. I don't think we can underestimate the degree to which things have happened, and are happening, to individuals from minority groups in this country.'***

As we have seen, race continues to play a considerable role in a person's life outcomes. Race, like class, can alone steer a child's path through school or college, and can likewise have a profound impact on one's employment prospects – sometimes positively, but more often the opposite. In the context of COVID, evidence suggests that such discrepancies between groups, and especially when compared to the White majority, have only increased. Unless we act now, this is likely to continue.

Nevertheless, the experience of the past year has cast a spotlight on the experience of those from minority groups in an unparalleled way. Whilst this has sometimes been haphazard and unnuanced, it has sparked important conversations about what more can be done to encourage more successful integration. As one of our experts posited, perhaps for too long our definition of 'equality' has permitted, indirectly, the division of people on the grounds of race within the context of society: a mantra, conscious or not, of 'equal, but separate.' But marginality is not to be gloried in; it should be brought to an end, so that more, and not fewer, people can enjoy the benefits of what has for centuries been denied those that have faced racial discrimination. Our goal, surely, has be to more ambitious, especially given the fact that – from a purely practical viewpoint – the UK has so much to gain by reducing the divergent experiences between its ethnic groups. Minority group demographics are projected to rise significantly (making up c.30% of the population by 2030) and estimates of the impact on GDP are profound. It is strongly in the interests of government and business to tackle

the pervasiveness of attainment and opportunity gaps, with a particular eye on long-term unemployment.

In short, we should aspire to create the same environment for those from a minority background as exists for everybody else: the same networks, the same opportunities, the same support infrastructure. As with young people and women, the interviewees we spoke to did not want to feel singled out or described as 'victims', rather they wanted to be given the same tools and opportunities to succeed. Access has broadly been available for decades; it is simply a question of *widening* access, and they will do the rest.

To achieve this, perhaps we need to start with a more sophisticated analysis when distinguishing between minority groups. Terms such as 'the X community' suggest commonalities in goals and outlooks within groups that are often a vast oversimplification of the reality, and alien to many supposedly within them. Similarly, such sweeping statistical categories such as 'BAME' neglect the nuances that evidently exist between minorities, as shown above in terms of educational outcomes.

So, changing the way we approach this question, and the data we use when discussing it, must be the first step. But we should not stop there. We need to take a number of steps for young people, women, and those from minority groups – initiatives which will support, and elevate, all three.

Epilogue

When we embarked on this project, we wanted this report to read differently, reflecting the unprecedented times it records.

Facts and figures are essential for such a project, but behind every one is an individual – nameless faces whose stories are so often stifled by statistics.

Kirsty. Charlotte. Femi. Their stories encapsulate the experiences of millions in the groups of which they are a part. Their challenges are our challenges, and the challenges of our neighbours, family, and friends.

From the very beginning, we wanted to bring their testimonies to the fore, contextualising them amid the swath of data which continues to flow from every corner of the country. We wanted to hear voices from businesses charities, schools, further education, training providers, and universities.

Combined, their message is resounding: without urgent action, young people, women, and individuals from minority groups – those long disadvantaged by the system – now face a far more challenging future than is commonly realised.

On current trends, these will be far more than just bumps in the road: they will be profound and lasting, measured in decades rather than months.

Young people missing their first steps on the job ladder. Women leaving work in record numbers. Individuals from minority backgrounds overstretched and marginalised.

Unless more is done to counteract this widening inequalities gap, then the good work of recent decades towards equality of opportunity will be squandered.

This is not to say that a rapid expansion of the public sector is necessary – many of our actions are examples of how relatively small initiatives could make a big difference: a web portal for jobs and skills being one example.

Neither does it mean that these groups must be seen and treated as victims. Quite the opposite. What was most striking was how many of those we spoke to asked only for the tools they need to help themselves.

These tools can be most succinctly defined by two words: ‘Access’ and ‘Awareness.’

Access – holding back the contraction of available opportunities in recent months, and instead giving people from all backgrounds the chance to succeed.

Awareness – making sure that there is no ‘sacred knowledge’ for finding a job or a course that unavailable to those without contacts or connections.

This year, ‘Equality’ and ‘Diversity’ have become watchwords – but were they replaced by these two terms – less abstract, more demonstrable – then we could arguably achieve something much more profound and lasting.

Diversity in the name of equality often has the opposite effect than it intends. Too much diversity can separate rather than unify. True equality is an equality of standards and principles, of behaviours and values, to which everyone can aspire. It is better to have one game we can all play than dozens with different rules. This is what a level playing field looks like.

This year, much ink has been spilled over the decisions made by central government during the pandemic, sadly at the expense of one of the most remarkable features of the crisis - the way the country came together to counter the threat. Walls, sometimes standing for decades, began to crumble. Communities built bridges. People looked to help those less fortunate closer to home and further afield.

It is in this spirit that we should remember the pandemic, and in this spirit that we should seek to move forward. This is not about ‘top down’ policies from central government - every company, college, and community should be asked, and seeking to answer, the question - what more can we do, together?

But to do that, they have to be aware of the facts and the experiences of their fellow citizens.

In a small way, we hope this report contributes to that vital conversation.

Panel Biographies

Members

Rt. Hon. Anne Milton, Chair, Minister of State for Education (2017-2019) and Minister for Women (2017-2018)

Elected as MP for Guildford in 2005, Anne served on the Health Select Committee, was Shadow Minister for Tourism, Gambling and Licensing, and Shadow Minister for Health, and Minister for Public Health in 2010 in the Coalition Government. She served 5 years in the Whips' Office from 2012, was the first female Deputy Chief Whip, and was appointed Minister for Skills and Apprenticeships in 2017 and Minister for Women. She resigned from her post in 2019. Anne was one of the 21 Conservative MPs who lost the Whip and stood as an Independent candidate in the 2019 General Election.

Anne now works with the further education sector and maintains an interest in Public Health. Anne was also a borough councillor for five years and trained as a nurse working in the NHS for 25 years.

Cindy Rampersaud, Former Senior Vice President of BTEC and Apprenticeships, Pearson plc

Cindy was responsible for the development of all Pearson's UK technical, vocational and apprenticeship qualifications which are delivered to circa one million learners a year. Cindy is passionate about the vital role learning can play in helping individuals make progress in their lives and driving social impact, as well as supporting economic growth and productivity.

A strong advocate of DEI, Cindy has been included on the EMPower Involve list for three consecutive years. She currently sits on the Board of Sage Housing, Speakers Trust, and The London Film School where she chairs the Audit & Risk Committee.

Kate Ambrosi, Assistant Director of Education, Baker Dearing Education Trust (Baker Dearing)

Kate is Assistant Director of Education for the Baker Dearing Education Trust which provides advocacy and support for England's University Technical Colleges (UTCs).

Kate started her professional life teaching in secondary schools in South London. After teaching in three very different schools she entered Local Government, taking senior leadership roles in education and economic development. She joined Baker Dearing in 2019, with the aim of supporting them to improve standards in their technical specialisms.

Sir Nic Dakin, Director of Skills and Training, Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce, Shadow Minister (Education) (2015-2016)

A former Labour MP and Shadow Schools Minister Nic chaired the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Skills and Employment. Before being elected as the MP, Nic was the Principal of a Beacon Sixth Form College, John Leggott College in Scunthorpe, for three years and prior to that he was Vice Principal of the College and Leader of North Lincolnshire Council for six years.

Nic now supports Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce as Director of Skills and Training. He took on the role of Head of Chamber Training in March 2020 and became director of training in October 2020.

Dr Darrell DeSouza, Principal and Chief Executive, Harrow College and Uxbridge College (HCUC)

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, Darrell grew up and was educated at St Clement Danes grammar school in West London and achieved a BSc Hons at Kings College, a PHD in Applied Genetics at Birmingham University and went on to complete a PGCE at Roehampton University.

Darrell has considerable experience in the further education sector in and around the West and South London regions. He has been involved in and has led a range of London based further education projects and initiatives. He is passionate about the role that further education plays in providing access points and pathways to a very diverse range of learners to enable them to engage and re-engage with the educational process in a way that allows them to thrive and realise their full potential.

Jeff Greenidge, Director for Diversity, Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and Association of Colleges (AoC)

Jeff's career began as a teacher in the South Wales Valleys, then as a civil servant developing the National Curriculum for Languages, before working for the Welsh Joint Education Committee. In 1999, Jeff joined Ufi to help set up the learndirect network retiring as UK Operations Director in 2015. He has since provided support to Governments, and Education and Training Businesses in the UK and internationally, and now works with the ETF and AoC to shape the diversity in leadership programme.

Jeff remains an advocate for Equity and Inclusion within education and training and maintains a keen interest in supporting adults in learning. He on the Board of the Learning and Work Institute, The Colleges of Wales, and the Institute of Employment Professionals, and chairs Groundwork Wales.

David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges (AoC)

David became Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges in September 2016. Before that he was CEO at Learning and Work Institute, a leading think

tank, research and policy organisation which was formed in 2016 from a merger he led between NIACE and Inclusion.

From 2000 to 2011, David worked in senior roles at the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). At the LSC and SFA David led the funding and improvement relationships with colleges and providers and successfully took on trouble-shooting roles to rescue crises in capital funding and Educational Maintenance Allowances.

Yvonne Kelly, Principal and Chief Executive, Barking and Dagenham College

Yvonne has been Principal and CEO of Barking and Dagenham College since 2016, offering vocational, technical and professional education and training, from entry to level 7 to prepare young people and adults for work or for university. The College is diverse and inclusive, reflecting the local community of Barking and Dagenham both in terms of its student population, its staff and leadership team.

Yvonne takes an active role as a trustee on the CITB, Creative and Cultural Skills, Care City and the Youth Zone Board, and is an advisor on the Pearson FE Reference Group and WorldSkills UK Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group.

Janet Legrand QC (Hon), Chair, The Children's Society, Senior Lay Member of Court at the University of Edinburgh

Janet is the former Senior Partner and Chair of the Board of DLA Piper, a global law firm, where she combined 20 years of senior leadership roles with substantial client mandates, latterly representing Governments in international disputes.

Beyond the law, Janet is Senior Lay Member of Court at the University of Edinburgh and Chair of The Children's Society, a major children's charity. Former roles include Deputy Chair of Council at City, University of London, Deputy Chair of the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission and Audit Committee member at the University of Cambridge.

Siân Owen, Director of Stakeholder Management, BTEC and Apprenticeships, Pearson plc

Siân heads up stakeholder engagement for the BTEC and Apprenticeship division within Pearson UK. She started her career in the education sector over 25 years ago in academic and vocational qualification development. This gave her a passion for the way learning can support and inspire everyone to develop their unique talents and find their own success in a diverse and changing world, and the vital role vocational learning plays within this.

In 1999 Siân worked in education and skills consultancy where she led on research and implementation projects with a range of clients including the Australian and Omani governments. From 2001 she moved to focus on learning and skills policy and stakeholder relationships. She holds a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics.

Siobhan Randell, Senior Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Manager, Multiverse

Siobhan is a social impact, diversity, equity and inclusion professional who is passionate about creating sustainable solutions to systemic challenges. As the Senior Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Manager at Multiverse, Siobhan works across the tech start-up to widen access to apprenticeships and to build an environment where every apprentice and staff member can thrive.

Prior to joining Multiverse, Siobhan was an Impact Manager at a social mobility charity and has worked in different educational and community settings supporting young people and their families to overcome barriers to education and/or employment. In 2020, Siobhan was recognised in the British Interactive Media Association's 100 most influential and pioneering individuals for her work supporting young people from underrepresented backgrounds into tech.

Kathy Slack OBE, Chief Executive, Enterprise M3 Local Enterprise Partnership

Kathy has over forty years of experience working with business and people to support economic growth. Her work with EM3 LEP in enterprise, skills and innovation helps businesses to flourish. She spearheaded work on the first skills strategy at the South East England Development Agency and supported work to encourage young girls into IT. This led to her passion to achieve greater diversity across all aspects of work. Her work across the South was recognised when she received an OBE in 2017.

Kathy has a passion for joining up people and initiatives. She is the lead Chief Executive for Catalyst South, an alliance of six LEPs, who champion the business community and the economy. Kathy is a governor at Activate Learning.

Denise Wilson OBE, Chief Executive, Hampton-Alexander Review

Denise is Chief Executive of the Hampton-Alexander Review. Denise has served as a Non-Executive Director of Ecclesiastical Insurance Group, Chair of the Remuneration Committee, Chair of the Royal Academy of Arts Friends and member of the Royal Academy Audit Committee.

Her previous appointments include Chief Executive of the Davies Review and various senior executive roles at National Grid, BG Group and British Gas. She is a business coach, mentor and passionate supporter of women in business.

Support

Francis Dearnley (Author)

Francis Dearnley was Chief of Staff to the Chair of the Prime Minister's Policy Board, processing its submissions to the Cabinet Office and preparing briefings for senior Ministers and Downing Street. Before this he was engaged by a consultancy firm on a range of projects across the Advocacy, Health, and Technology teams, coordinating a campaign for a multi-billion-dollar FTSE 100 company.

A contributor to The Telegraph among other publications, he is currently in the final stages of a book highlighting the cultural and political disenfranchisement of the young in Europe. Educated at Cambridge, he was asked by the Director of Communications to work on an important study of the University's external communications and strategic priorities and oversaw a six-month 'Vision and Purpose' review at his College.

Hayley Dalton Head of Vocational Research Pearson UK (Researcher)

Hayley started working life as a lecturer and manager in Further Education and Sixth Form colleges, specialising in vocational and life skills programmes for young people looking for second chances in education. Since moving to Pearson in 2005 she worked in qualification development before heading up the management of new pilot qualifications including the functional skills qualifications and onscreen assessments.

Hayley now leads vocational research projects in the Pearson UK Efficacy and Research Team supporting design, implementation, and impact analysis of BTEC qualifications. Areas of research interest include education and employment links, development of international qualification systems, vocational pedagogies, educational provision for disadvantaged groups and strategies to improve attainment in the post-16 phase.

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