



A Level Results & University Access 2020

Covid-19, assessed grades and university admissions - Polling Overview

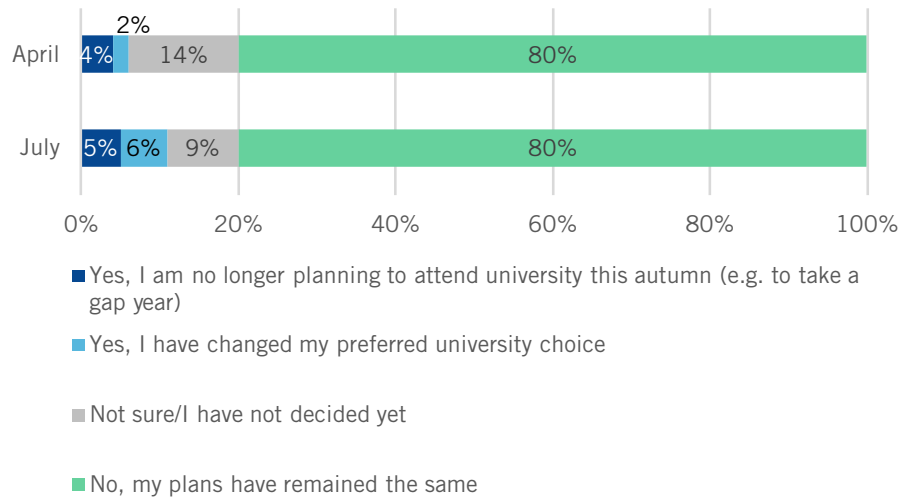
UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS 2020

In April this year, shortly after the closure of schools and the announcement of the cancellation of this year's A Levels and Scottish Highers, we [surveyed young people](#) applying to university through UCAS. This revealed significant worries about the grading process and how that would impact their chances of getting into their preferred university and course. It also showed significant uncertainty about the best course of action, with 20% of applicants reporting that they had changed their mind, or were now uncertain about their plans due to the pandemic.

A new survey of applicants, conducted in late July,¹ shows that uncertainty and worries still persist. As shown in Figure 1, 20% overall have changed their plans or are uncertain about attending university this autumn, as a result of the pandemic, consistent with April. The main change is that some of the 'unsures' have shifted towards decisions to not attend or change their university preference. Nonetheless, a significant number remain unsure about their plans, just weeks ahead of A Level results day on August 13th. Figure 4 shows that 32% of applicants say the pandemic has made it less likely that they would begin university this Autumn, but just 5% so far have made the decision to defer attendance.

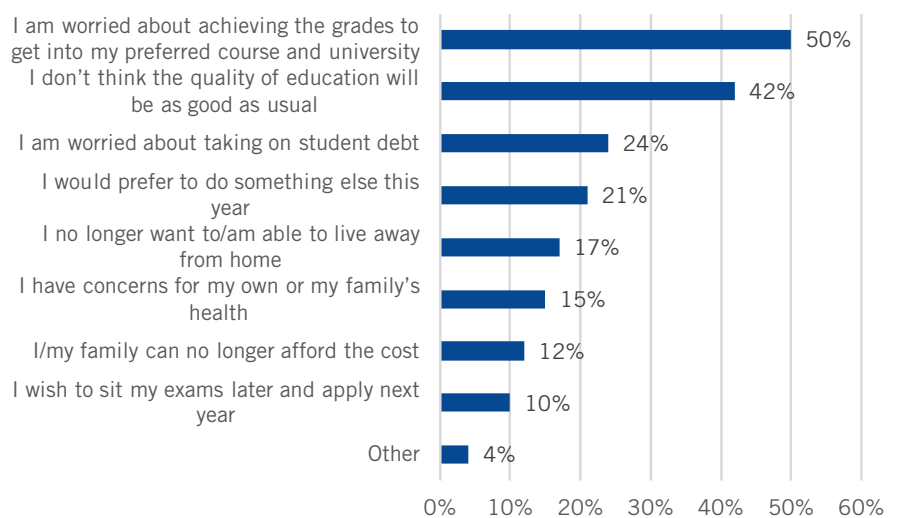
Among the 20% who have changed their mind or are not sure about their plans, there are a number of factors influencing this (Figure 2). The largest group (50%) cite worries about achieving the grades to get into their first choice course. Back in April 43% of applicants reported they felt that changes to the grading system this year due to the

Figure 1. Have university applicants' plans changed as a result of the pandemic, April and July



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 16th-22nd July and 9th-14th April

Figure 2. For those changing their mind or not sure, what are the main reasons (multiple selections allowed)



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 16th-22nd July

cancellation of exams would negatively impact on their results, with 72% feeling that the grading system is less fair than a normal year. Worries about grades are still prominent in young people's minds. This is likely to have increased in the aftermath of the release of the SQA grades in Scotland

at the beginning of August, which caused [significant controversy](#) given the impact on some pupils' grades, particularly those attending schools in more deprived areas.

Among other motivations, 42% are worried about the quality of educa-

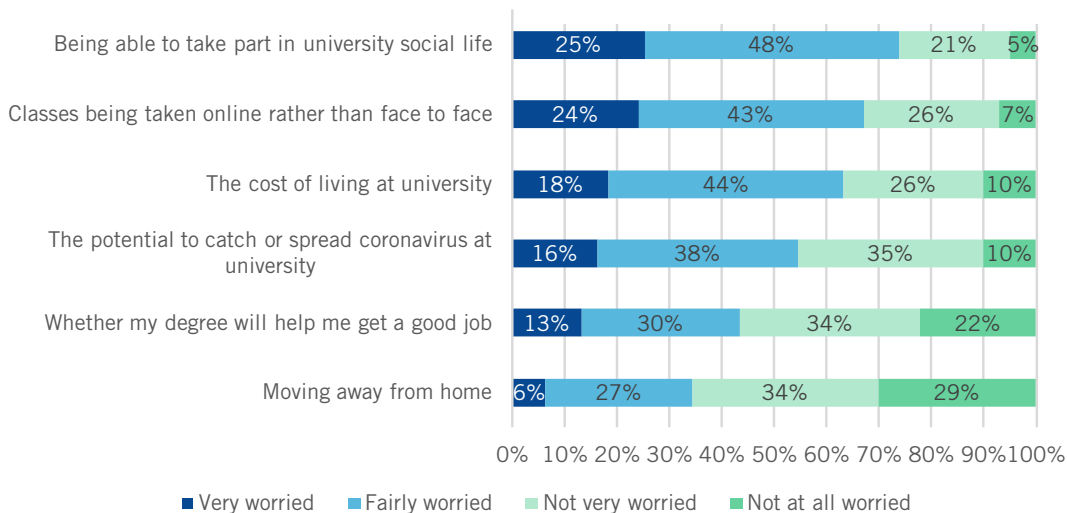
tion on offer this year, while other factors cited include worries about student debt (24%), health concerns (15%) and changes in the ability or willingness to move away from home (17%). Those from working class backgrounds appeared to be more likely to cite issues around affordability, debt and moving away to university, but the sample sizes in this category were small.

This reflects very difficult decisions ahead for young people. While on the one hand the university year may be disrupted, and the level of education on offer is likely to be different to a normal year, with many universities saying that much or all of their tuition will be online for the first term at least. On the other, given a difficult economic climate worldwide, and ongoing travel restrictions, the usual opportunities for those taking a gap year will be significantly restricted. Furthermore, we are still in a 'demographic dip' in 18 year olds in the UK, which will [start to rise again from next year](#). Coupled with the danger that some universities may [go out of business altogether](#), university admissions in 2021 could be an extremely competitive environment, with more young people competing for fewer places.

Concerns and Impact

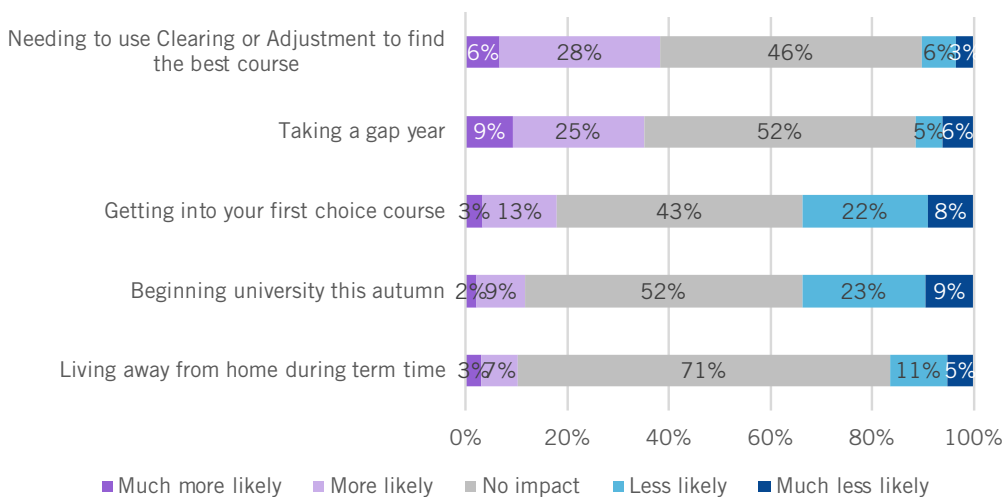
There are also a variety of concerns held by applicants, including those still planning to attend university in the Autumn, as shown in Figure 3. The biggest group, almost three quarters (73%) of respondents, are worried about being able to take part in university social life in the next academic year. With sporting and social activities under threat, along with the possibility of further national or local lockdowns, it seems inevitable that student life outside lecture halls will be just as different, if not moreso. The Sutton Trust will explore this issue in greater detail in coming months, but the life skills

Figure 3. To what extent are applicants worried about the following issues over the next 12 months



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 16th-22nd July

Figure 4. How has the pandemic affected applicants' likelihood of the following



Source: Youthsight survey of UCAS applicants for the Sutton Trust, 16th-22nd July

gained by taking part in sporting and other extra-curricular activities, along with study abroad programmes, play a significant role in the university experience and the benefits it can bring. Such activities can help to breed confidence, communication and teamwork skills.

Among other concerns, two thirds (67%) worried about losing face to face teaching. While many universities have committed to teaching fully or partially online in the first term at least, there is still a lot of uncertainty as to what will be possible to deliver in terms of face to face teaching, and, as we saw in March, this can change quickly. With worries about a second spike as we move into autumn, it is difficult at this stage to foresee an uninterrupted academic year. 54% reported worries about the

virus itself, in terms of either catching it, or spreading it further.

In an increasingly harsh economic climate, with many families suffering from hits to their income, and many jobs traditionally taken on by students to fund their study drying up, there are also substantial worries around financial issues. 62% are concerned about the cost of living at university overall, with those from working class households (66%) more likely to be concerned about cost than middle class households (58%).

While most applicants didn't have any concerns about moving away from home, for some students this is an issue. 33% overall were worried about moving away, reflecting concerns both about finance and about the virus itself. The overwhelm-

ing majority of this group were also worried about cost, with many also worried about catching and spreading the virus. BAME students were more likely to be worried about moving away from home (42%), compared to 30% of white applicants. Working class applicants were also more likely than middle class applicants to have concerns (36% v 30%). 20% of those from working class backgrounds also rated themselves as less likely to move away from home in light of the pandemic, compared to 14% middle class. This is potentially concerning from a social mobility perspective, as it could reinforce [existing inequalities](#) in access to leading universities.

But how else is the pandemic likely to impact university admissions and student decision-making this year? As mentioned above, 32% of applicants say the pandemic has overall made it less likely they will begin university this autumn, and 34% rate themselves more likely to take a gap year. Nonetheless, most have not yet made their decision, with much uncertainty remaining as we approach results day. Grades are also clearly an issue, with 30% believing that they will be less likely to get into their first choice course because of the cancellation of exams and the 'centre-assessed' grading system that has been introduced across all four nations in the UK. Similarly, 34% anticipate that

they are more likely to require UCAS' Clearing and Adjustment platforms to find a place. If the experience in Scotland is replicated elsewhere, this is likely to increase stress levels amongst young people substantially. While there will be some (limited) [routes for appeal](#), and students who feel their grades do not reflect their ability will have the opportunity to sit exams later in the autumn, it is vital in the short term that universities take into account the uncertainties of this year's grading process when making final offers. Young people who have narrowly missed their grade offer, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were more likely to lose out in Scotland, should be given additional consideration to reflect this year's circumstances. With many universities undergoing significant financial stresses, amid an anticipated drop in international student numbers, it may be that young people's worries prove unfounded. Nonetheless the coming days and weeks will hold difficulties, as well as relief, for many.

SCHOOL PUPILS AND UNIVERSITY - THE NEXT GENERATION

University plans

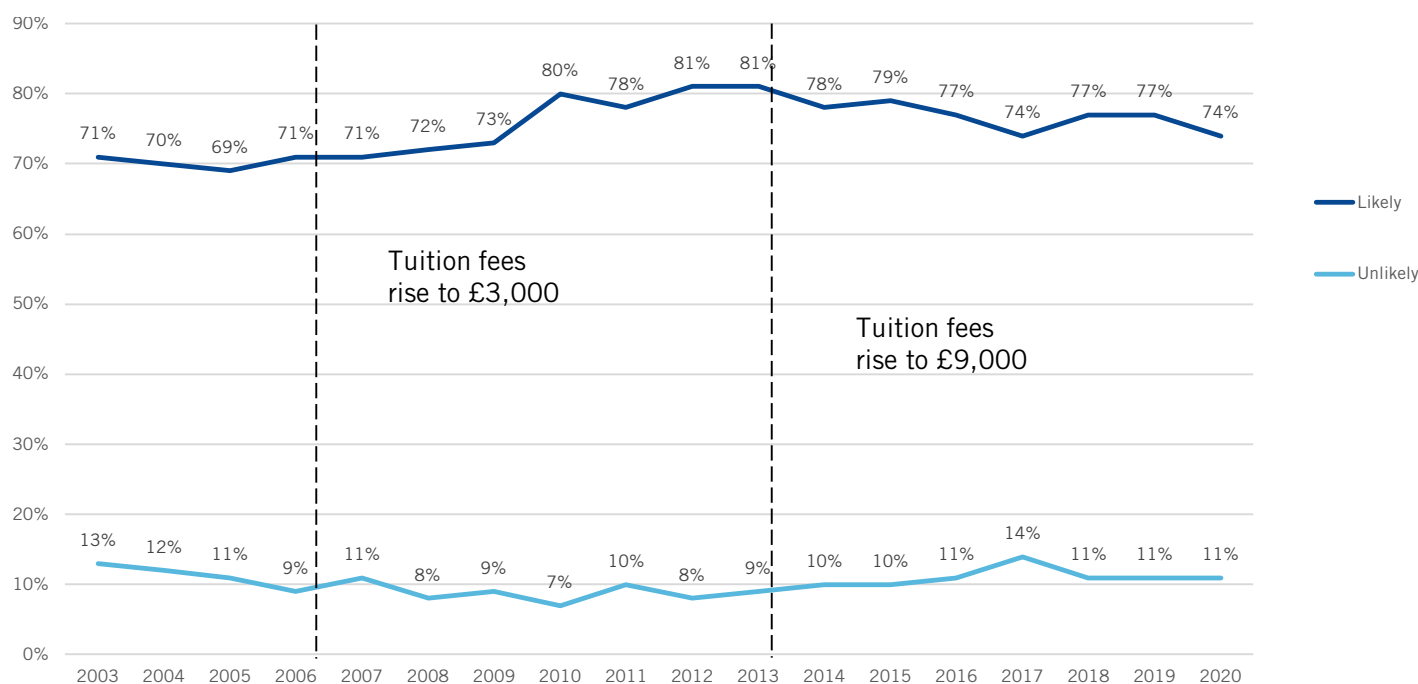
The Sutton Trust has polled young people aged 11-16 in England and Wales on their university aspirations and plans since 2003. This year's polling was conducted in schools before the Covid-19 shutdown of schools in late March.²

The proportion of young people saying they are likely to go to university has dropped slightly from 77% in 2019 to 74% (Figure 5). This is down from a high of 81% in 2013. While it rose consistently between 2003 and 2012, it has been in decline since then. The proportion saying they are 'very likely' to attend, which more closely matches the numbers who go to university after finishing school, is also down to 34%, from a high of 41% in 2009.

The most common reasons for being unlikely to attend include not enjoying study (62%) and financial worries (50%), with 35% saying they are not clever enough to get into university.

While there has been a gradual decline in those expecting to attend university when they're older, there has been a more significant decline in those saying that going to uni-

Figure 5. Proportion of pupils age 11-16 expecting to attend university when they are old enough.



Source: Ipsos MORI survey of young people aged 11-16 in England and Wales for the Sutton Trust, 2003-2020

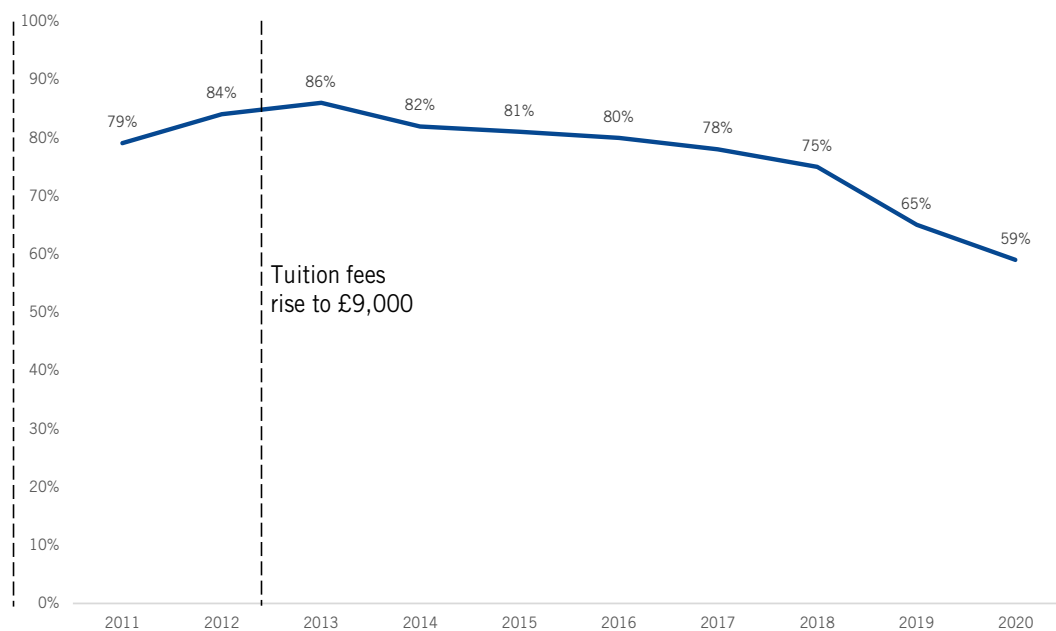
iversity is important for getting on in life (Figure 6). While 86% of young people in 2013 felt that it was, this declined to 65% in 2019 and 59% in 2020. This could reflect opinions that there are good alternatives to attending university, but also that university may not be enough on its own to provide a successful career. Greater numbers of young people say that being confident is key to getting on in life (82%), while 68% say knowing the right people is crucial. Nonetheless, more young people are interested in alternatives to university, with 61% saying they would be interested in doing an apprenticeship when they finish school, up from 55% in 2014. While six years ago, just 31% reported that they had discussed apprenticeships with a teacher, this has risen to 46% in 2020.

Social mobility and opportunity

This year we also asked young people for their perceptions on social mobility and equal opportunities, with mixed views. 39% agree that all young people have equal opportunities to succeed in life, but 36% disagree. Amongst adults, the proportion agreeing fell to 35% in 2019, from 40% in 2017 and 53% in 2008, a trend of long-term decline in optimism for equal opportunity.

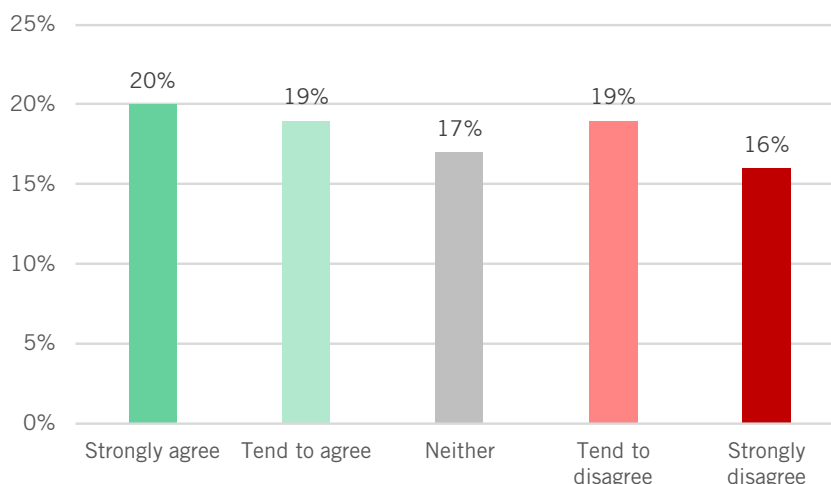
Young people were also asked for their opinions on how they felt their generation would fare in comparison to older generations. Amongst the proportion believing that today's youth would have a better life than their parents, this figure fell to 29% in 2019, from 43% in 2003, with 47% now believing young people have worse prospects. When it comes to young people themselves, even before the arrival of the pandemic, 30% of young people felt that their generation will have it worse than their parents' generation, up from 23% in 2017. But some optimism remains among young people, with 39% anticipating a better life.

Figure 6. Proportion of pupils age 11-16 saying that going to university is important for getting on in life



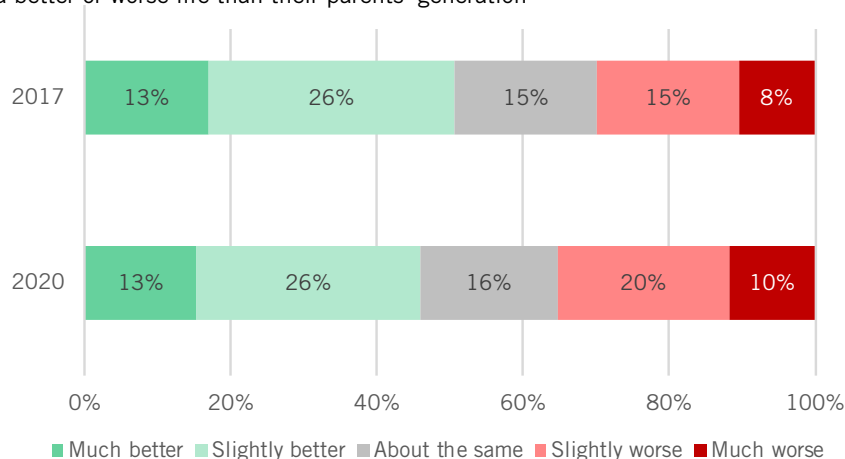
Source: Ipsos MORI survey of young people aged 11-16 in England and Wales for the Sutton Trust, 2003-2020

Figure 7. Do you agree or disagree that all young people have equal chances to success in life?



Source: Ipsos MORI survey of young people aged 11-16 in England and Wales for the Sutton Trust, 2003-2020

Figure 8. To what extent do young people feel whether their generation will have a better or worse life than their parents' generation



Source: Ipsos MORI survey of young people aged 11-16 in England and Wales for the Sutton Trust, 2003-2020

FOOTNOTES

1. YouthSight surveyed 502 young people across Great Britain who applied to university this year through UCAS, with polling carried out online through their applicant omnibus between the 16th and 22nd July 2020. The applicant omnibus is weighted to be representative by gender, age and school type.

2. Ipsos MORI surveyed 1,438 school children aged 11-16 in schools in England between 27th Jan-23rd Mar 2020. Surveys were conducted online. Data is weighted to be representative of the school population.