University of HUDDERSFIELD
University of Huddersfield Press

Fields: journal of Huddersfield student research
Available open access at: https://www.fieldsjournal.org.uk/

FIELDS Journal of Huddersfield student research

An investigative study into the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the educational experiences of university students living in Kirklees

Wiktoria Idzikowska

University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 November 2025
Received in revised form 15 June 2026
Accepted 15 August 2026

Ethical approval:
Ethical approval was sought from the School of Business, Education and Professional Development Ethics Committee in accordance with appropriate guidelines for research approval, including activity involving human research participants.

Keywords:
Coronavirus pandemic
Higher education
Policy
Agency
Students
Youmg people
Disruption
Lived experiances
Mental health
Impact

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the educational experiences of young people living and studying at university in the Kirklees area of England. Its findings challenge ongoing debates about the difficulties young people faced as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic lockdowns and restrictions. This study adopts qualitative research and data analysis methods in the form of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to encourage and facilitate young people to share their experiences from their own perspectives using their own individual voice. The key findings in this article suggest that the Coronavirus pandemic had an overall negative influence on the educational attainment of young people in higher education, leaving them feeling determined and motivated to continue studying in hopes of improving their educational outcomes. The restrictions imposed as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic appeared to have caused young people to experience turbulent and challenging transitions into higher education. Young people also reported a lack of trust in the ability of policymakers to act in the best interest of students due to their voices not being considered in the development and implementation of pandemic educational policies and emergency provision throughout the course of Covid-19. The findings presented in this article hope to inform the professional practice of policymakers by highlighting and establishing the importance of young people being viewed as agents and experts in their own lives, so that they receive better suited support in the event of future pandemics or similar events.

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic and its effects on not only the lives but also the physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being of young people continue to be a pressing issue in today's world, five years on from the initial outbreak (Wood et al., 2025). This is the case globally and nationally, evidenced by many local communities in England which are still recovering from the chaos caused by the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak (Potter et al., 2025). The effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the education sector have been widely acknowledged as

Published under Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0
University of Huddersfield Press unipress.hud.ac.uk

devastating (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023), with school closures causing significant delays in children's learning, hindering their ability to meet developmental milestones (Pensiero et al., 2024) as a direct result of a lack of access to new knowledge and leading to a loss of progress (Engzell et al., 2021). It is estimated that 1.5 billion young people experienced disruption caused by the Coronavirus pandemic worldwide (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). Of those, 10 million are in England (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

This study focuses on the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the lives and educational experiences of young people living in the Kirklees geographical area of England. Currently there are an estimated 47,200 young people living within this area (Kirklees Council, 2021). This article explores the experiences of a small group of students currently in higher education at a local university. The purpose of the study is to better understand the extent to which these students faced challenges during the Coronavirus pandemic, how this impacted their daily lives and well-being and the effects that this had on their educational experiences. Furthermore, the purpose of the findings presented in this article is to challenge current debates surrounding the local and national governments in England who continue to shift the blame for their failures and shortcomings in supporting young people in education during the course of the pandemic onto young people themselves by refusing to take accountability and responsibility for the effects that their lack of action had on the life chances of the affected young people (Mawson, 2022). Throughout this study, participating young people were encouraged to voice their challenges to help reflect on their individual experiences in a bid to build a clearer picture of how the Coronavirus pandemic affected their lives and educational experiences and how this was perceived from their individual perspectives.

Much of the current research surrounding the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on young people's lives fails to form accurate representations, as the research is carried out on young people rather than *with* young people and therefore lacks their individual perspectives on their personal experiences and recollections of the pandemic (Learning and Work Institute, 2023). Research on young people forms conclusions based purely on the assumptions and opinions of others about young people and their experiences, which does not necessarily form an accurate understanding (MacDonald et al., 2023). Most existing research surrounding the Coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the lives and educational experiences of young people consistently pushes the blame of clear government failures which caused the ongoing difficulties and hardships that young people face each and every day following the pandemic onto the affected individuals themselves (Matthews & Heesambee, 2024). Labelling them the 'Covid generation' (Fivush, 2025) and going as far as stating that young people should simply 'be more resilient' (Oxfordshire Mind, 2025).

Since the emergence of Coronavirus and its classification as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in 2020, concerns among scientists, educators, researchers and policymakers increased in regard to the implications that the pandemic and the disruption it caused would have on the cognitive and psychosocial development of children and young people (Bell et al., 2023). Research on the implications and effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the development and life chances of children and young people began almost immediately following the first outbreak, with the vast majority of research studies in the field being underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theoretical framework. O'Regan et al. (2022) discuss the relevance of applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to research surrounding the effects of the pandemic on the younger generations. O'Regan et al. explain that the pandemic clearly had negative implications on the entirety of the ecological systems framework, making reference to young people's homes and social environments (microsystem) coming to a standstill overnight because of the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. School closures were linked to the disruption of both the mesosystem and

exosystem environments and the widespread changes in regulatory provisions having a significant influence on the cultural aspects of everyday life causing clear hindrance and leading to disrupted macrosystems and chronosystems, which resulted in the pandemic negatively affecting the emotional well-being of children and young people. Bronfenbrenner's theory has also been cited many times to support previous studies on epidemics as well as health and financial crises to help researchers gain a more informed understanding of the impact of those events on young people in the past (Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012).

Theoretical underpinning: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The research presented in this article draws heavily on the theoretical underpinning of the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In his theory Bronfenbrenner conceptualises human development as being greatly influenced and shaped by the events and conditions that occur during the historical period that a person finds themselves living in (O'Regan et al., 2022). The ecological systems framework is centred around the immediate environment that directly influences the development of an individual (microsystem), the relevance and connection of one ecological system to another and how experiences within one system are likely to influence others (mesosystem), the indirect influence of factors that an individual does not have direct contact with (exosystem), the cultural beliefs and values that shape an individual (macrosystem), and finally the transitional events that take place during an individual's lifespan (chronosystem) (Painter et al., 2024). This study focuses on how pandemic-related disruptions influenced young people and their development by considering the impacts that the Coronavirus pandemic had on not only their educational experiences but also on their immediate environment such as home life and family relationships; their external environment, such as the transition from face-to-face to online learning and the loss of access to in-person educational resources and services, as well as their cultural environment, for instance, their personal beliefs and how those in turn shaped their lived experience during the pandemic, affecting their higher education experiences as a direct result.

Study aims

Considering the misrepresentation of young people's pandemic experiences in current research, this study is heavily influenced and underpinned by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC). Article 12 of the UNCRC sets out fundamental rights for all children and young people in relation to their right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them and to have their views considered and taken seriously (UNICEF, 2019). This study is designed to facilitate and encourage young people to talk about and voice their experiences of living through the Coronavirus pandemic in order to help society develop a better understanding of the difficulties and hardships young people face as a result of failures caused by local and national governments during the course of, and after, the Coronavirus pandemic from the perspectives of the affected young people themselves. The NSPCC, along with numerous other charities, argues that urgent reform is needed for the UK's children and young people to have access to a better quality of life and life chances that will reduce the extent of inequalities and adversities they faced following the Coronavirus pandemic.

The overall aim of this study is to investigate and explore topics including the effect of the Coronavirus pandemic on the educational attainment levels of young people living in Kirklees. Young people's experiences of preparing for higher education during the pandemic and how young people perceive that the Coronavirus pandemic continues to affect and influence their educational experiences today. This study aims to influence national governments and policymakers to implement necessary meaningful change that will better support all young people affected by the Coronavirus pandemic, helping to break the stigma surrounding 'the Covid generation'.

Research questions

Every question asked within this study considers and explores the different factors that have influenced and affected the lives of young people during the Coronavirus pandemic.

1. How did the Coronavirus pandemic affect the educational attainment of university students?

This research question focuses on the use of predicted grades in place of examinations; the fairness of results achieved due to the use of predicted grades and the effect that this had on the overall levels of motivation and determination experienced by young people during the surge of the pandemic.

2. Following the pandemic, what were the experiences of young people in preparing for higher education?

This research question concentrates on young people's experiences of preparing for the transition from further education into higher education following the Coronavirus pandemic, with particular emphasis on how prepared young people felt to begin higher education.

3. How do young people perceive that the Coronavirus pandemic has influenced their current educational experiences?

The third question looks at how young people perceive that the Coronavirus pandemic continues to influence their educational experiences five years on from the initial outbreak, placing emphasis on the opinions of young people about the government's attitudes and responses to young people's experiences of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Educational deficits experienced by children and young people as a result of the pandemic have received significant backlash from communities across the UK. This resulted in governments worldwide implementing contingency policies warranting the introduction of recovery strategies such as summer schools and additional school tutoring in a bid to reduce the extent of learning deficits experienced among children and young people in primary, secondary and further education settings (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023). However, despite the implementation of contingency policies in support of children and young people in Key Stage 2 through Key Stage 5, there is one demographic of young people in the UK education system who have been left 'broken' and defeated' (Blackall & Mistlin, 2021). Unlike primary, secondary and further education settings, higher education institutions received very limited attention and support from either local or national governments to help tackle the adversities and inequalities faced by university students because of the pandemic (Ahlburg, 2020). Despite this, public officials claimed that every effort was made to minimise disruption to the higher education experience and course delivery to university students (House of Commons Petitions Committee, 2021).

In contrast to other educational settings, the government's response and advice to higher education institutions regarding the Coronavirus outbreak was generic and rather briefly contained within a significantly delayed singular guidance document which stated that the advice within was strictly for guidance purposes only (House of Commons, 2020). This makes it clear that higher education institutions were under no obligation to implement restrictions that would warrant institutional closures or the suspension of face-to-face teaching delivery (Watermeyer et al., 2022). Watermeyer et al. (2022) further argue that it was the responsibility of individual higher education institutions to carry out risk assessments and to make decisions regarding staff and student safety as well as whether teaching would be delivered face-to-face, online, or through a blended approach, at their own discretion (Department for Education, 2022). In contrast to contingency policies implemented with the intention to help support children and young people in other educational settings which offered long-term recovery strategies to help reduce the gap in learning deficits, higher education institutions were left to devise their own unregulated recovery strategies to support their students, as all government-issued guidance was short-lived and swiftly withdrawn at

the start of 2022 (Rasli et al., 2022).

The lack of support for higher education students has been widely criticised as university students in the UK are perhaps among the most adversely affected compared with disadvantaged educational demographics worldwide, having suffered profound challenges due to being let down and failed by national and local governments amid the Coronavirus pandemic (Sodha, 2021). Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, higher education institutions had to implement substantial changes to academic provision to ensure staff and student safety while dealing with the ever-growing pressures of the pandemic. The vast majority of higher education institutions made the decision to limit or close access to facilities completely, implementing social distancing measures where face-to-face teaching was set to continue, with most universities introducing blended learning or moving to online learning completely by the start of 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2024). The introduction of such changes to academic provision saw a major reduction in the quality of teaching and learning received by students. Such changes also had a significantly negative impact on the wider student experience of university – a crucial element of developing skills necessary to successful graduates (The Sutton Trust, 2021). Students attending higher education institutions within the Kirklees area of England reported that their higher education experiences varied significantly from what they had expected of the traditional university experience. The vast majority stated that the challenges of online learning negatively impacted the quality of teaching they received. Students also reported that pandemic restrictions limited the quality of their higher education experience by reducing social interaction, increasing loneliness and weakening a sense of belonging among the student community.

It is evident in previous research that the Coronavirus pandemic negatively affected all crucial aspects of higher education including quality of teaching, university life, student experiences as well as rates of student satisfaction between the academic years of 2020 and 2022 (McGivern and Shepherd, 2022). Office for Students (2022) reports that between the years of 2020 and 2022 student satisfaction rates have been steeply declining when compared to pre-pandemic levels, with the current level being 4 per cent lower than any rates prior to the pandemic. Although universities made conscious efforts to minimise the levels of disruption throughout the pandemic, it is clear that the Coronavirus pandemic did in fact cause a rather negative shift in young people's attitudes to higher education between the years of 2020 and 2022, with more young people no longer expressing the desire to enter higher education after witnessing the adversities that university students had to face and conquer as a result of the pandemic (Jurikova et al., 2024).

Research strategy and methods of data collection

This study has been underpinned by qualitative research. Qualitative research is understood to be a range of research methods used to gather non-numerical or statistical data using a semi-structured or unstructured approach to reach informed, insightful conclusions (Tenny et al., 2022). The qualitative research methods used to carry out this research are interpretive and phenomenological. Phenomenological research focuses on building an understanding of the universal lived experiences of research participants from their own perspectives (Dodgson, 2023), while interpretive research refers to the researcher analysing and interpreting the collected data based on their own understanding of participant responses (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The data collected as part of this study was gathered using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a method of qualitative research that uses a set of predetermined open-ended interview style questions to gather participant responses in a discussion style manner about relevant topics with the opportunity for participants to expand on their responses to topics in more detail throughout. Semi-structured interviews benefit phenomenological research methods as researchers can gather relevant, reliable data while simultaneously obtaining potentially unexpected insights from in-depth participant responses that are triggered during the open discussion element of the interview

process (Naz et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews help facilitate participant voices in research in accordance with Article 12 of the UNCRC as the open tone of the discussion encourages participants to freely express their views on the matters in question, doing so at their own pace, and gives them the opportunity to elaborate on their responses while the predetermined questions simply act as a conversational guide (Bearman, 2019). Semi-structured interviews prove particularly beneficial when used in research studies such as this one, where the research sample is small. In small-scale participant samples, semi-structured interviews offer the researcher the opportunity to open questions to further discussion so they can better understand participant experiences while having the flexibility to revisit topics throughout the discussion if required.

Sampling strategy

The participants for this study were selected using the purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling entails the intentional selection of a small group of research participants based on their suitability, knowledge or ability to offer experience relevant to a particular research topic (Robinson, 2014). All participants selected to participate in this study were students in their first or second year of higher education during the Coronavirus pandemic, living in the Kirklees area of England between the years of 2020 and 2022. The participants comprised a mixed group of individuals who shared both positive and negative educational experiences during the Coronavirus pandemic. This study was carried out with a group of five participants.

Table 1
Participant demographic table.

Name	Gender	Year of Study	Key Stage 5 Place of Study	Higher Education Course Studied
Ava	Female	Second	College	BA (Hons) Childhood Studies
Bella	Female	Second	College	BSc (Hons) Professional Policing
Charlie	Female	First	College	BA (Hons) Childhood Studies
Dean	Male	Second	Sixth Form	BSc (Hons) Psychology
Emma	Female	Second	College	BA (Hons) Childhood Studies

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in research refer to a set of principles that govern what is considered right and wrong practice, while carrying out research in a way that ensures the dignity and protection of research participants throughout the research process (Abrar & Sidik, 2019). For the purposes of this study, all required ethical approval was sought and obtained in accordance with the university's procedures and regulations for carrying out research. Applications for research activity requiring human ethics consideration approval and ethical review were submitted to the School of Business, Education and Professional Development Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was granted prior to any recruitment of research participants. The study complied with institutional research guidelines and regulations. Participants were provided with information sheets outlining the purpose and nature of this study. The information sheets also informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Written informed consent was sought from participants in the form of consent forms prior to the commencement of data collection interviews. In research, anonymity and confidentiality go hand in

hand as both principles protect the privacy of participants while building rapport and trust between the participants and the researcher by upholding ethical standards (Kang & Hwang, 2023). For the purposes of this study all participants were encouraged to select pseudonyms by which they were referred to throughout the research process to protect their anonymity. This study was designed with the intention for all participant interviews to take place on a one-to-one, face-to-face basis. However, upon speaking with participants, everyone unanimously agreed that they would much prefer for the interviews to take place on a one-to-one, online basis via Microsoft Teams as they reported feeling more comfortable participating remotely. The preference for interviews to be carried out remotely demonstrates a positive shift in just how quickly young people were able to embrace and adapt to the ever-changing dynamic of the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic which led to the implementation of remote engagement and learning. This was initially believed to negatively impact both the quality of teaching and social engagement and interaction. However, participants of this study clearly favoured digital engagement methods over traditional face-to-face interaction. This shows that in contrast to the initial beliefs surrounding digital engagement in the education setting, for some young people remote engagement had a rather positive overall impact. The ability to connect from anywhere also supports inclusivity as participants can take part in the interview process via Microsoft Teams or any other digital means that is suitable to them. Prior to data collection, all participants were advised that they could decline to answer any questions they found uncomfortable and could pause or terminate the interview at any time. Data protection regulations were adhered to in accordance with the GDPR legislation and institutional data protection guidelines and procedures, all interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected device and backed up to a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account. All data was handled and accessed only by the researcher in charge of the study.

Findings

The analytical approach underpinning this research was inductive. The reason for this is the flexibility it provided. Inductive analysis allows researchers to actively engage with collected data during the process of analysis to identify codes, categories, patterns and themes prevalent throughout the collected data to form defining conclusions that in turn help explain research findings without the use of predetermined hypotheses (Bingham, 2023). To successfully engage in inductive analysis, I applied Braun and Clarke's model of thematic analysis. This method of data analysis supports the inductive data analysis approach as it involves the identification of patterns and categories in collected data which are then interpreted to understand the deeper meanings encoded in the data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2024). To identify prevalent themes, first I familiarised myself with the verbatim transcription of each semi-structured interview that was conducted as part of the research process with research participants by repeatedly reading and analysing participant responses. In doing so I noted initial observations. Engaging in thematic analysis this way allowed me to generate initial codes by identifying sections and patterns of the transcripts that related to recurring student experiences which best addressed the study's research questions. The initial codes were then reviewed, re-analysed and further developed inductively by being grouped into corresponding broader categories that reflected similar findings and ideas. These categories were used to develop potential themes. The potential themes were subsequently reviewed, refined and named to reflect their central focus. Following this data analysis process, four final themes emerged that best addressed the questions and aims of this research study. These themes are presented below.

Theme 1: Influence of Coronavirus on young people's motivation and determination to continue studying

When asked if they felt the Coronavirus pandemic affected their motivation to complete their studies and engage in education, the participants of this study answered as follows:

[Bella] '*It didn't affect my motivation. If anything, it*

made me feel more focused and driven to complete my studies. I did this by always engaging in work which was given out for students to complete and generally just trying to have fun with everyone, and the work given.'

[Emma] *'No, I don't think so. If anything, I was more determined because I lost some people close to me and wanted to do it for them.'*

[Charlie] *'During the pandemic I was very demotivated. However, I felt as though after it was over I had to put extra effort in to compensate for the lack of effort during the pandemic to make sure I wasn't behind in things.'*

Theme 2: Predicted grades leading to unfair results

When asked how they felt about the use of predicted grades in place of examinations as their final results, which were used to determine their entry into higher education amid the Coronavirus pandemic, the participants of this study responded as follows:

[Ava] *'I was unhappy about this because I had been out of school since Year 10 due to personal issues. I had done so much work at home by myself, but because I didn't have any more recent exam papers, my grades were taken from years ago, which made me quite upset with my results.'*

[Bella] *'I hated this. I felt some students were predicted really good grades; however, due to the students not having to take a test, this made them get their predicted grades. I know people who have told me that they would never have got the grade they got if predicted grades wasn't (sic) a thing and they had to take a test. Alongside this, getting a predicted grade helps you get into colleges and university, therefore, they may not even be at the correct skill level to be on that course. I felt that the use of predicted grades was bad and that everyone should have taken a test, as I see it as being unfair to other students who have had to take tests and work hard for the grades they have got.'*

[Charlie] *'I was not happy about it, as some people's predictions were very low to what they could actually truly achieve. So I believe it was unfair.'*

[Dean] *'I thought that it was a double-bladed sword, it helped some and messed up others.'*

Theme 3: Varying experiences with transitions from further to higher education

When asked whether they felt prepared for university and how they found the transition period from sixth form or college to higher education, the participants of this study recalled:

[Bella] *'From high school to college, I found it very messy, as I wasn't sure what I wanted to do or the path I wanted to go down until I chose public services. When I then attended college, the process was difficult and confusing, as I was in two minds of whether to get a job or whether to go to university. There wasn't (sic) any challenges as such, more just my emotions and thoughts trying to figure out what was best for me to do in the situation I was in.'*

[Dean] *'After a long break between the two, I felt rusty with academic practice.'*

[Emma] *'My transition was quite a messy one because I had not prepared myself for how independent you have to be. After a while I realised, I didn't have to be alone, but from not even being able to walk to class without my support worker for safety reasons in college, being independent was quite an adjustment.'*

[Ava] *'I found it smooth sailing, as I was excited to start university and hadn't moved out of my town, so I was pretty comfortable.'*

[Charlie] *'I had left secondary school early, as we didn't sit our exams and just reviewed predictions, so I was excited to go to college and be face-to-face. However, first year of college was mostly online, which was disappointing, as I felt I wasn't getting a proper education. In terms of transition to university, I felt it wasn't too hard.'*

Theme 4: The silenced voices of young people

When asked how they felt about government attitudes to the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the educational experiences of young people and what they thought about the suitability of the government policy response during the pandemic, the participants of this study said:

[Bella] *'I feel the government needs to listen to young people, as they are still saying it affected our education and mental health, which has become a really big issue over the Coronavirus pandemic. I also think that they don't really understand what's happened because they wasn't (sic) in education themselves. However, I believe if they swapped positions, they would see from students' points of views that during the pandemic was a lot harder than what it seemed.'*

[Charlie] '*The government will never experience what we experienced during Covid, as they weren't in education. Covid had affected a lot of young people's mental health, and I feel as though the attitudes towards it are very unfair to the people that have suffered big consequences because of the pandemic.*'
[Dean] '*The government were completely oblivious to the true struggles of the younger generation just coming into higher education.*'
[Emma] '*I wish that the people who seem to have their loudest opinions of it could have experienced what we did. However, given that education has gone back to what they see as "normal", it doesn't surprise me that those are the prevalent attitudes.*'

Discussion

Upon analysis of participant data, what emerges from the themes discussed earlier is that despite other national (MacDonald et al., 2022) and global (Juntunen et al., 2022) research suggesting that young people have experienced a significant decline in feeling motivated to continue engaging in education and studying (Ofqual, 2021) throughout the challenging times of the Coronavirus pandemic (Henderlong Corpus et al., 2022), the participants in this research study report rather contrasting experiences with the majority of participants. They state that the challenges of the pandemic made them feel more motivated and determined to continue studying and engaging in education as they did not want the Coronavirus pandemic and its restrictions to dictate and influence their educational attainment and accomplishments.

The participants also collectively agree with the notion that the use of predicted grades in place of examinations during the Coronavirus pandemic was unfair, as predicted grades do not reflect an individual's academic and educational ability accurately. Participants argued that some young people were predicted results that were much higher or significantly lower than what they could possibly achieve if they were to sit examinations as normal. Algorithm-generated grades have shown to deprive young people of opportunities during the Coronavirus pandemic that would have likely had a positive influence on their life chances (Gray et al., 2025). Similarly, academic professionals have argued that due to the use of algorithm-generated grades the current generation of graduates lack the skills required to succeed in higher education and become contributing professionals as they need additional support to help bridge the gap between knowledge and essential academic skills caused by the Coronavirus pandemic (Ly et al., 2022).

Transitions between further and higher education proved to be significantly more challenging for young people during the Coronavirus pandemic (Hood & Powell, 2022). With the pandemic limiting all aspects of social integration as a result of campus and institution closures, students also struggled to gain access to support due to all learning and services taking place online in digital formats (Allen et al., 2025). The participants of this study reported facing significant challenges after starting university. Each participant admitted struggling with various aspects of their transition due to differences in personal circumstances. Some found it difficult to adapt to being back in education after taking time out and remaining academically inactive for some time prior, while others struggled to maintain the level of independence needed to succeed in higher education during the pandemic. Some participants, however, reported that pandemic restrictions actually made the transition to university easier as it provided them with the opportunity to engage with their studies independently at their own pace, facilitating them to exercise responsibility for their own learning and academic success.

Finally, over the course of the pandemic, the level of confidence in the national government and policymakers' capabilities to act in the best interest of young people has severely declined due to the fact that policymakers failed to listen to the voices of young people and consult with them regarding their experiences during the Coronavirus pandemic (Parsons, 2020). Participants in this research study unanimously agree that the government response to the struggles of young people in education during the pandemic was inadequate and failed to take into consideration the needs of young people. All

responding participants argued that policymakers could not possibly develop policies that addressed the challenges young people faced as they had not experienced the difficulties of lockdowns and school closures first-hand, and failure to treat young people as experts of their own lives meant that the policies introduced in response to the Coronavirus pandemic did not reflect young people's views and opinions on the matter. The way in which the participants of this study reflected on the government approaches to their struggles throughout the Coronavirus pandemic is indicative of the importance for young people to be consulted as stakeholders especially in situations that will likely have a significant influence on their day-to-day experience, exemplified here through a global pandemic.

Conclusions and recommendations

The questions asked as part of this study centred around the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the educational attainment of university students, while looking at how young people felt the pandemic affected their preparation for university, finally assessing whether university students feel that the Coronavirus pandemic continues to affect their educational experiences today. The findings presented in this study suggest that participants view the use of predicted grades as unfair, as they argue that predicted grades do not offer an accurate representation of young people's educational and academic abilities which resulted in many young people missing out on opportunities. This suggests that participants perceived that the Coronavirus pandemic had a negative impact on their educational attainment. Similar findings have been evidenced in the 2020-2021 Kirklees Annual Educational Quality and Standards Report where it has been reported that the Coronavirus pandemic had a significant detrimental impact on the overall educational attainment levels of young people in the area in comparison to previous years prior to the pandemic (Kirklees Council, 2021). However, despite the challenges caused by the chaos of the Coronavirus pandemic, the majority of participants reported feeling increased levels of motivation and determination to continue engaging with and keeping academically active in their education to continue improving their academic development and success. Participant responses within this study went on to suggest that the Coronavirus pandemic had a significantly detrimental influence on students' ability to prepare for enrolment in higher education, resulting thereafter in challenging transitions that were significantly affected by participants' personal circumstances that were made more difficult due to the lockdowns and restrictions implemented as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Participant responses also indicate that the ways in which local and national governments and policymakers treated and approached young people and their agency throughout the course of the Coronavirus pandemic have resulted in young people feeling the effects of the inadequate policies that do not respond to their educational struggles years after the initial pandemic outbreak and it is likely that young people will continue to feel the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on their education for many years to come. Considering the aforementioned conclusions and based on participant responses, it is recommended that higher education institutions take action and develop policies and provisions to offer better support to young people in university as participants reported difficulties in preparing for and transitioning into higher education. Support strategies include: more transparent assessment methods as participants were concerned with the unfair use of predicted grades in place of actual assessments throughout the pandemic; improved access to necessary mental health support services as participants described facing emotional pressures and challenges during the pandemic in their educational experiences; equal access to digital materials and resources as participants reported difficulties in accessing support during the shift to online learning; better suited, more interactive and individualised academic teaching and support from academic staff to better reflect the varied experiences reported by participants. Furthermore, given that participants felt that their voices were not considered in decision-making, institutions should involve young people in the development of policies and support systems in the event of another

pandemic as the support offered during the Coronavirus pandemic was inadequate.

In practice this study could inform the development of future educational policies that have been co-constructed with young people by reflecting their voices, views, opinions and experiences. Policies that consider and include young people's views and opinions are more likely to better support and improve young people's education in the future.

Acknowledgements
I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Lindsey Watson for being a fantastic research supervisor and personal academic tutor who offered invaluable patience, support and feedback throughout not only the duration of this research study but my whole university journey.

References

Abrar, M., & Sidik, E. J. (2019). Analyzing ethical considerations and research methods in children research. *Journal of Education and Learning*, *13*(2), 184–93. https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v13i2.6516

Ahlburg, D. A. (2020). Covid-19 and UK universities. *The Political Quarterly*, *91*(3), 649–54. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12867

Allen, R. E., Kannangara, C., Conn, C., Heyworth, B., & Carson, J. (2025). 'Everything was up in the air': A qualitative study exploring the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic for UK university students and post-Covid-19 recommendations. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *49*(7), 899–918. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2025.2509576

Bearman, M. (2019). Focus on methodology: Eliciting rich data: A practical approach to writing semi structured interview schedules. *Focus on Health Professional Education: A Multi Professional Journal*, *20*(3), 1–11. file:///C:/Users/W_Idz/Downloads/jodie_copley,+203+FOHPE+387-F4.pdf

Bell, I. H., Nicholas, J., Broomhall, A., Bailey, E., Bendall, S., Boland, A., Robinson, J., Adams, S., McGorry, P., & Thompson, A. (2023). The impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health: A mixed methods survey. *Psychiatry Research*, 321, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2023.115082

Bingham, A. J. (2023). From data management to actionable findings: A five-phase process of qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *22*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620

Blackall, M., & Mistlin, S. (2021, January 11). 'Broken and defeated': UK university students on the impact of Covid rules. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/11/broken-and-defeated-uk-university-students-on-the-impact-of-covid-rules

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2024). A critical review of the reporting of reflexive thematic analysis in *Health Promotion International*. *Health Promotion International*, *39*(3), daae049. https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daae049

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Department for Education. (2022). Higher education COVID-19 operational guidance. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62f121ad8fa8f50335b35e50/_WITHDRAWN__20220223_HE_guidance.pdf

Dodgson, J. E. (2023). Phenomenology: Researching the lived experience. *Journal of Human Lactation*, *39*(3), 385–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344231176453

Engzell, P., Frey, A., & Verhagen, M. D. (2021). Learning loss due to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Academic Science USA*, *118*(17), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2022376118

Fivush, R. (2025). The COVID generation: A commentary on how the pandemic altered adolescents' life course. *Journal of Research on Adolescence: The Official Journal of the Society for Research on Adolescence*, *35*(1), e13022. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.13022

Gray, N. J., Chabot, C., Manadhar, S., Backhous-Hoven, I. N., Beck, M., Carvalho, G. S., Alves, R., Tsai, M. C., Tomokawa, S., Jourdan, D., & Eikemo, T. A. (2025). Multiple impacts on adolescent well-being during COVID-19 school closures: Insights from professionals for future policy using a conceptual framework. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *77*(3), 524–31.

https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2025.04.009

Henderlong Corpus , J., Robinson, K. A., & Liu, Z. (2022). Comparing college students' motivation trajectories before and during COVID-19: A self-determination theory approach. *Frontiers in Education Educational Psychology*, *7*, https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.848643

Hood, S., & Powell, E. (2022). Supporting students with the transition to university in a Covid world: Expectations and reality. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (25). https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi25.991

House of Commons. (2020). Coronavirus: Easing lockdown restrictions in FE and HE in England. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8932/CBP-8932.pdf

House of Commons Petitions Committee. (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on university students. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1851/documents/18140/default/

Juntunen, H., Tuominen, H., Viljaranta, J., Hirvonen, R., Toom, A., & Niemivirta, M. (2022). Feeling exhausted and isolated? The connections between university students' remote teaching and learning experiences, motivation, and psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educational Psychology*, *42*(10), 1241–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2022.2135686

Jurikova, M., Kocurek, J., & Kacerkova, E. (2024). Changes in preferences and attitudes towards university selection in the post Covid era. *TEM Journal*, *13*(2), 1007–17. https://www.temjournal.com/content/132/TEMJournalMay2024_1007_1017.pdf

Kang, E., & Hwang, H. J. (2023). The importance of anonymity and confidentiality for conducting survey research. *Journal of Research and Publication Ethics*, *4*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.15722/jrpe.4.1.202303.1

Kirklees Council. (2021). 2020 Kirklees Annual Educational Quality and Standards Report. https://democracy.kirklees.gov.uk/documents/s41873/Outcomes%20report%202020%20draft%2008%20th%20June%20final%20final%20final%20final%20002.pdf

Learning and Work Institute. (2023). Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on young people across the UK: An evidence synthesis. https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Learning_and_Work_Institute_Understanding_the_impact_of_Covid-19_on_young_people_March2023.pdf

Lundberg, M., & Wuermli, A. (2012). Children and youth in crisis: Protecting and Promoting Human Development in Times of Economic Shocks. The World Bank Group. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/6434.pdf

Lv, X., Ma, J., Brinthaupt, T. M., Zhao, S., & Ren, X. (2022). Impacts of university lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic on college students' academic achievement and critical thinking: A longitudinal study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9643715/#:~:text=Conclusion,well%20as%20other%20potential%20situations.

MacDonald, R., King, H., Murphy, E., & Gill, W. (2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and young people pressure before, pressure now and pressure to come. https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/The-COVID-19-Pandemic-and-Young-People.pdf

MacDonald, R., King, H., Murphy, E., & Gill, W. (2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and youth in recent, historical perspective: more pressure, more precarity. Journal of Youth Studies, 27(5), 723–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2163884

Mazrekaj, D., & De Witte, K. (2023). The impact of school closures on learning and mental health of children: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *19*(4), 686–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231181108

Matthews, J., & Heesambee, F. (2024). COVID-19 and figures of blame: Discursive representations of blame for COVID-19 and its impacts in UK online news. *Discourse & Communication*, *18*(3), 415–32. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17504813231219458

Mawson, C. (2022). Lost before lockdown – The hidden generation let down by compulsory schooling. *Childhood Vulnerability Journal*, 4, 99–119. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41255-022-00025-8

McGivern, P., & Shepherd, J. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on UK university students: Understanding the interconnection of issues experienced during lockdown. *Power and Education*, *14*(3), 218–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438221104227

Naz, N., Gulab, F., & Aslam, M. (2022). Development of qualitative semi-structured interview guide for case study research. *Competitive Social Sciences Research Journal*, *3*(2), 42–52. https://cssrjournal.com/index.php/cssrjournal/article/view/170/72

Newlove-Delgado, T., Russell, A. E., Mathews, F., Cross, L., Bryant, E., Gudka, R., Ukoumunne, O. C., & Ford, T. J. (2023). Annual Research Review: The impact of Covid-19 on psychopathology in children and young people worldwide: Systematic review of studies with pre- and within-pandemic data. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *64*(4), 611–40. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13716

Office for National Statistics. (2024). Population estimates for England and Wales: mid-2024. Office for National Statistics. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesforenglandandwales/mid2024

Office for Students. (2022). National Student Survey results show signs of post-pandemic recovery, though some subjects still lag. Office for Students. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/national-student-survey-results-show-signs-of-post-pandemic-recovery-though-some-subjects-still-lag/

Ofqual. (2021). Learning during the pandemic: Review of research from England. GOV UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/learning-during-the-pandemic/learning-during-the-pandemic-review-of-research-from-england

O'Regan, C., Brady, B., & Connolly, C. (2022). Building back better – Using an ecological lens to argue for strengthening mesosystemic connections for young people in a post pandemic world. *Child Care in Practice*, *29*(4), 358–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2022.2084364

Oxfordshire Mind. (2025). Resilience vs. Support: Rethinking Mental Health for Young People. Oxfordshire Mind. https://www.oxfordshiremind.org.uk/news-resilience-vs-support-rethinking-mental-health-for-young-people/

Painter, F.L., Booth, A.T., Letcher, P. (2024) Multilevel impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: A bioecological systems perspective of parent and child experiences. *Child Youth Care Forum*, *53*, 411–37. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-023-09761-

Parsons, S (2020). Trust in government and others during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial findings from the COVID-19 Survey in Five National Longitudinal Studies. https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Trust-in-government-and-others-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic-%E2%80%93-initial-findings-from-COVID-19-survey.pdf

Pensiero, N., Kelly, A., & Bokhove, C. (2024). Socio-economic differences in remote schoolwork during the COVID-19 pandemic: A trend analysis of the 2020 and 2021 school-closure periods using the UK Understanding Society data. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies. An International Journal*, *15*(3), 286–21. https://doi.org/10.1332/17579597Y2024D000000012

Pervin, N., & Mokhtar, M. (2022). The interpretivist research paradigm: A subjective notion of a social context. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, *11*(2), 419–28. https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i2/12938

Potter, J., Chatterjee,, A., Bristow, J., & Cant, S. (2025). Making up for lost time: University students' quest to reclaim missed opportunities while adjusting to post-Covid life in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *51*(5), 2142–60. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4165Digital Object Identifier (DOI)

Rasli, A., Tee, M., Lai, Y. L., Tiu, Z. C., & Soon, E. H. (2022). Post-COVID-19 strategies for higher education institutions in dealing with unknown and uncertainties. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.992063

Robinson, R. S. (2014). Purposive sampling. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (pp. 5243–5). Springer. 10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2337

Sodha, S. (2021, January 14). The government has failed

thousands of students in England. They deserve a refund. *The Guardian*.

Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G. D. (2022). Qualitative study. In StatPearls. StatPearls Publishing.

The Sutton Trust. (2021). Covid-19 and the university experience. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp content/uploads/2021/02/Covid-19-and-the-University-Experience.pdf

UNICEF. (2019). A summary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf

Watermeyer, R., Crick, T., & Knight, C. (2022). Digital disruption in the time of COVID-19: Learning technologists' accounts of institutional barriers to online learning, teaching and assessment in UK universities. *International Journal for Academic Development*, *27*(2), 148–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1990064

Wood, M., Pennington, A., Su, F., Laver-Fawcwtt, A., Gabriel, L., & Sinani, C. (2025). The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents' (11–18 years) mental health and wellbeing in the UK: A scoping review. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2025.2541785