



ASPIRES 3 PROJECT SPOTLIGHT 1: COVID-19

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON 20/21 YEAR OLD POST-MILLENNIALS IN ENGLAND



IN 2020, COVID-19 AFFECTED EVERYONE'S LIVES. NEW RESEARCH SHOWS THAT EVEN GENZ, ARGUABLY THE MOST DIGITALLY CONNECTED GENERATION, WERE NEGATIVELY IMPACTED BY THE LOCKDOWN, MISSING OUT ON WHAT WAS MEANT TO BE THE "BEST TIME OF THEIR LIVES".

This Spotlight offers an insight into the impact of the 2020 lockdown on the lives of 20/21 year old post-millennials (GenZ), at the start of their adult lives, with their whole futures ahead of them. The ASPIRES project is a unique, long-term mixed-methods research study of the science and career aspirations of 10-23 year olds in England. The findings in this report are drawn from 48 interviews, taking place during the UK lockdown, with young people who have been part of the study for over 10 years.

The majority of young people's lives had been substantially impacted by the pandemic and lockdown. On balance, young people identified more negative than positive consequences. **Over 87% of young people in our study experienced a detrimental impact** on their emotional wellbeing, financial situation, social lives and/or had increased levels of anxiety about the future. However, **56% of young people also identified some positive outcomes**, such as time to reflect, grow and recuperate from their busy lives.

THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS ARE BASED ON THE VIEWS OF THESE YOUNG PEOPLE:

To support GenZ students in Higher Education (HE), there is a need to:

- 1 Provide targeted financial support for HE students who have lost essential employment and income (both holiday and term-time) as a result of the pandemic and lockdown.
- 2 Address inconsistencies across universities and degree subject areas in supporting:
 - I. the move to online learning, with regular, interactive, virtual contact hours;
 - II. students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and students with mental illnesses;
 - III. access to specialist equipment and resources, including science laboratories, or alternative appropriate provisions;
 - IV. students' preparedness for different assessment formats;
 - V. clear, regular communication to students.
- 3 Support students' emotional and social wellbeing by ensuring key rites of passage can be experienced, even if online.

All GenZ young people (in education and employment) need:

- 4 Government, employers and other organisations to take active steps to learn from the views and experiences of GenZ, to meaningfully inform their policies and support social change for the better.
- 5 Greater and easier access to mental health and youth services, especially for those who are no longer in formal education, to help address the impact of the pandemic and recession on well-being and employment.
- 6 Careers support, advice and guidance to reach all GenZ workers, especially those who are self-employed and/or working in SMEs.

WHY FOCUS ON POST-MILLENNIALS?

As the latest emergent generation of young adults, post-millennials are a subject of widespread interest. Yet relatively little is known about them.

Sitting at the transition between education and employment, their lives, experiences and views are of particular importance for those working in the fields of higher education (HE) and early-career employment and skills development.

Each generation tends to be stereotypically associated with distinctive characteristics and concerns – such as the hard working, ‘moral authority’ Baby Boomers, the individualistic, competitive, work-addicted GenX, through to the idealistic, ‘coddled’, ‘snowflake’ ‘me, me me generation’ of Millennials. GenZ are widely recognised as being the “the first true digital natives” [1], whose lives are shaped by social media influencers, and who have no memory of a world before smartphones.

A major US social trends study suggested that post-millennials were “on track to be the most diverse, best-educated generation yet” [2]. Since then, the Black Lives Matter movement, COVID-19, and economic recession have swept the planet, creating major new opportunities and challenges for all ages, with particular implications for the post-millennial generation who are at the cusp of entering a very different world of social life and employment [3, 4].

THE ASPIRES RESEARCH STUDY

ASPIRES 3 is the third phase of a 13-year longitudinal research project to explore young people’s science and career aspirations. To date, over 40,000 young people have taken part in the research, including large-scale national surveys and in-depth interviews.

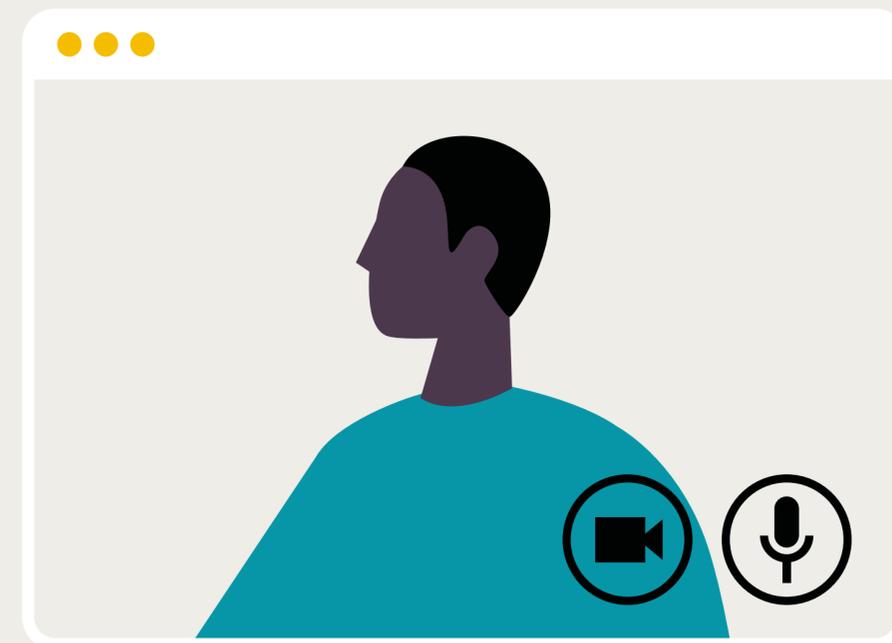
The first phase of the ASPIRES study tracked the development of young people’s science and career aspirations from age 10 to 14 (from 2009 to 2013). ASPIRES 2 continued to track young people until age 19, to understand the changing influences of the family, school, careers education and social identities and inequalities on young people’s science and career aspirations. The third stage of the research, ASPIRES 3, is tracking the young people as they move into adulthood and employment, from age 20 to 23.

The views included in this report are **taken from interviews with a subset of 48 young people who were born between Sept 1998 and August 1999, who have been a part of the study since 2010.** The interviews took place online or by telephone between 6 May and 27 July 2020. All participants’ real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to keep their identities private.

THE PANDEMIC IN ENGLAND

For the purpose of this report, it is important to note the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in England.

The UK government advised all organisations and individuals in England to work from home where possible on 16 March, triggering universities to close campuses and halls of residence. From 26 March 2020 a national lockdown came into effect, asking individuals to stay at home, leaving only for essential shopping, exercise, to help someone or if they were a key worker. These restrictions continued until the introduction of gradual easings from May onwards, such as the reopening of non-essential shops, restaurants and other businesses and more freedom to socialise.



KEY FINDINGS: NEGATIVE IMPACTS EXPERIENCED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

The majority of young people's lives had been substantially impacted by the pandemic lockdown. On balance, the young people in our study identified notably more negative than positive consequences. Our data revealed that over 87% of 20/21 year olds experienced some form of negative impact on their lives, identities, learning and/or wellbeing. Negative impacts were experienced by young people irrespective of their social class, gender and ethnic backgrounds – although the small number of young people who felt that the impact had not been, or would not be, too severe were generally more likely to come from more affluent families.

KEY NEGATIVE IMPACTS INCLUDED:

- Even from the early days of lock down, young people reported experiencing **financial hardship** as a result of the pandemic. This included changes in family circumstances, having to live at home longer due to loss of work opportunities and in the case of some HE students, acute problems caused by the loss of the part-time, casual and holiday employment that they depended on to be able to afford to attend university. As Luna (HE student, identifies as a white, working-class woman) explained *“I don't have any help from my parents [...] I really rely on having a job and working pretty much full time over [holidays] to be able to afford to pay for university, like just living costs.”*
- The pandemic and lockdown generated **feelings of stress, anxiety and sadness** among many young people. Some experienced forms of loss (of people, experiences and opportunities). HE students who completed their degrees during this period also described the loss of rites of passage, such as graduation. As Samantha (HE student, identifies as a mixed (white/ South Asian), middle-class woman) put it, *“I kind of didn't get the end of my third year at uni, so that was definitely [...] like you don't get graduation, you don't get like kind of grad ball and ... like stuff like that. So emotionally I think it's been quite taxing because you don't really get another third year of uni.”*
- The young people described **missing friends, family, grandparents and partners** whom they could not see in person during lockdown. Some also described their feelings of loss and sadness at missing out on what they felt is “meant to be” the most sociable and fun time of life.

- Many young people had already been **concerned about jobs and housing** before the pandemic but COVID-19 further heightened these worries, particularly as recession loomed. Davina (HE student, identifies as a white, middle-class woman), said, *“getting jobs and finding houses and whatnot is already hard enough [...] for people of my age [...] like my generation ... and then I think like obviously this whole thing [the recession] is going to make it probably [...] even harder.”*
- Young people in employment, like CheekyMonkey (employed, identifies as a white, working-class man) who was furloughed at beginning of the pandemic lockdown, felt that their **career progression** was already hampered *“I was getting there, [...] for promotion ... but now I think I’m going to have to give it [...] like another year to pick up another rung.”*

SPECIFIC NEGATIVE IMPACTS TO HE STUDENTS

HE students’ experiences of the shift to online learning varied considerably between individuals, being influenced by degree subject, university attended and what year of study they were currently in. While students appreciated the challenging conditions that universities had been faced with, overall, they felt that the shift to online learning and the way it was handled had negatively impacted their learning, engagement, motivation and achievement.

- Many students **struggled to maintain motivation and concentration** with virtual learning: *“I think the sort of lack of going outside has made it harder to concentrate. I find myself getting like very easily distracted at the moment, just cos I’m kind of always in the same place”* – Bob (HE student, identifies as a mixed (white/ Asian), middle-class man). *“I did a couple of [online lectures] but after a while I was like ‘Yeah I’m done, I’m just going to relax now’”* – Colin (HE student, identifies as a South Asian, middle-class man).
- The **loss of interactive learning** was felt to be particularly problematic along with changes in examination formats and lack of access to learning resources, such as libraries, appropriate study spaces and specialist resources (including science labs, music and performing arts spaces).
- Students with **SEND and/or mental health issues**, those experiencing chronic serious ill health (personally or in their families) and those experiencing financial precarity all felt **disproportionate negative effects** of the pandemic and changes to student life and learning. For example, one HE student, who “struggles with anxiety”, said *“this whole situation hasn’t really helped [exam anxiety] as much. I’m not doing exams at the moment, I’m doing basically coursework, but I’ve ended up having tons of coursework where it’s piled up.”*
- Students studying for STEM degrees were concerned by the **loss of practicals and lab work** (both this year and next). Hailey (HE student, identifies as a white, middle-class woman) said, *“it’s going to be more worrying like next year when we’re supposed to be learning more new techniques, but we might not be able to get into the lab to do them. And I think it will be quite difficult for like first years coming in that have like no experience, so I don’t know how they’re going to manage that. It does feel like it’s slightly less of a science course if you don’t get into Lab.”*

- A number of students described the negative impact of **losing key learning experiences and opportunities**. Bethany1 (HE student, identifies as a white, middle-class woman) felt that her “*time [studying abroad] was cut short*”, while others missed key modules during the summer term due to the move to online learning.
- Some students felt that the **transition had been poorly managed** and chaotic. As Gemma (HE student, identifies as a Black (African), working-class woman) also pointed out, learning had already been disrupted by the national strikes of HE teaching staff that had taken place between 2018 and 2020, before the pandemic. As a result, she felt that “*it really was not worth that 9K for the last year [...] I just still felt there was just something missing in third year as a whole.*”

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KEY FINDINGS: POSITIVE EXPERIENCES OF THE LOCKDOWN

While lockdown created many challenges and concerns, just over half of young people also identified ways in which it had enabled more positive experiences, namely:

- The pause in work or study provided some young people with **time to reflect**, “put things in perspective”, re-think life and feel grateful for what they **did** have. As Laylany (employed, identifies as a white, working-class woman) put it, “*I’m really glad actually; I know it’s a horrible thing, but it’s definitely made me think a lot more. Like not making unnecessary journeys [...] I’ve saved a lot of money [...] It’s definitely put a lot into perspective for me and I’m just enjoying my time and I don’t need all these [things] that I was doing before*”.

- A number of young people used the lockdown as an opportunity to exercise more and improve their health, learn new things (such as musical instruments) and to **develop skills or hobbies**. Finch (HE student, identifies as a mixed (white/ South Asian), middle-class man) reflected, *“I think [university] can get so busy I didn’t have enough of my own time – so now actually has been an ideal opportunity for me to do individual practice.”*
- A number of the young people, mostly in employment, described exhausting and hectic lives prior to the pandemic. Lockdown provided the chance to **‘have a break’** from work and/or study.
- Some young people described how lockdown had enabled them to **save money**, either because they were not spending so much on commuting to work or going out, and by being able to do additional paid work in supermarkets during lockdown.
- Several young people felt that lockdown had helped to **improve existing relationships**, both in their home lives, allowing them to spend more time with valued family members, and their working lives. One young person described how the challenges had led to closer contact between workers and management, *“we’ve had a lot of guidance and coordination from the top bosses over this whole situation [...] in a normal situation you don’t hear as much, so it’s kind of showing that everyone’s taking it seriously and everyone kind of cares about what’s going on in stores even if they’re not actually down there”* – Bethany2 (employed, identifies as a white, working-class woman).
- All HE students who attended universities that did not previously record lectures were unanimous in seeing the **new practice of recording lectures as highly beneficial** for their learning and hoped this would continue as normal practice in the future.

- Young people interested in and/or pursuing routes into biochemistry, teaching and medicine identified how the pandemic had **underlined the importance and value of particular fields** for society and had reinforced and confirmed their interest in following these routes. Joanne (HE student, identifies as a white, middle-class woman) is considering a graduate degree in medicine and said that *“Hearing about all the great research that’s been going on during COVID has made me think oh maybe that would be good [...] if anything it’s made me want to do medicine more.”*
- Many of the young people talked about their hopes that the pandemic will lead to societal change, reducing global environmental damage and improving **social equity**, particularly in terms of transforming systemic racism and valuing all Black lives.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings from this research provide insights and understanding of the experiences of this cohort of post-millennial young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown has impacted differently on each generation and our data points to specific challenges faced by GenZ that would benefit from targeted support.

The following key messages for policy and practice are based on young people's views, experiences and recommendations:

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT GENZ HE STUDENTS

- 1 There is an urgent need for **targeted financial support for university students who have lost essential income due to being unable to undertake employment (both holiday and term-time)** as a result of the pandemic and lockdown.
- 2 There is an urgent need to **address inconsistencies across universities and degree subject areas** in their ability to:
 - I. adapt to online learning, which provides regular interactive, synchronous and dialogic learning via virtual platforms;
 - II. support students with SEND and mental illnesses;
 - III. provide students with access to specialist equipment and resources (such as science laboratories, music, dance and art studios);
 - IV. better prepare students for a wider range of assessment formats;
 - V. provide transparent and up-to-date communication regarding campus closures and reopenings.

Planning could usefully be undertaken to ensure that these aspects are considered and addressed for future scenarios. For example, students who attended universities that did not already record lectures prior to lockdown, unanimously called for this practice to be retained after lockdown.

- 3 The emotional and social wellbeing of students could be supported by **enabling students to experience key rites of passage**, such as graduation, even if this needs to be done virtually.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT ALL GENZ YOUNG PEOPLE

- 4 Government, employers and a wide range of organisations should take active steps to **listen to and learn from the views and experiences of GenZ, to meaningfully inform their policies and decision-making**, and to support social change for the better.

The young people called for policymakers and those in power to connect with, listen to and learn from the voices of their generation. Organisations can take active steps in this respect by integrating meaningful youth consultation and advisory panels throughout their governance and decision-making structures.

- 5 Young people, but particularly those who are no longer in formal education, need **greater and easier access to mental health and other services** for youth to help address the impact of the pandemic and recession on their well-being and employment.

While GenZ are adept “digital natives”, they have been acutely affected by the loss of social contact with friends and family during lockdown. They are also facing uncertainty due to continued impact of the pandemic.

- 6 More effort is needed to ensure that **careers support, advice and guidance reaches GenZ workers, especially those who are self-employed and/or working in SMEs**.

Young people were highly concerned about their employment and career prospects, progression and development. After previously reporting patchy and patterned careers provision at school/college [5], we found no evidence that national or local careers support was reaching the young adults now in training or employment.

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