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Rapid Response Briefing Paper
**Crying out for clarity: unpacking the prospect experience in the
wake of the Covid-19 crisis**

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SUMS is a membership-based higher education consultancy, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation that provides expert consulting to universities across all professional service areas. We have been talking to university leaders about managing the Covid-19 crisis and their visions for the future. With views gathered from a series of one-to-one interviews, SUMS' Community of Practice Groups meeting virtually, along with student surveys, SUMS is able to take a service-by-service review of university operations. It has found a sector eager to change and seeing positives in adversity.

Here, Felicity Gasparro, SUMS Associate Consultant, shares original research findings from a survey of prospective undergraduate students considering their university options in the wake of Covid-19.

The perfect storm

The storm clouds had been on the horizon for the 2020 undergraduate recruitment cycle long before Covid-19 ever emerged.

With the number of available recruits at the bottom of the demographic dip, set in the context of increasingly challenging financial times for HEIs, 2020 was already going to be incredibly competitive with universities striving to fulfil as many offers as possible.

In the run up to the end of 2019 there was increasing scrutiny of the methods being used by universities to secure the best students, and it was widely reported that the Office for Students had warned universities to '*not use inappropriate inducements*' to lock the highest achieving students into opting for their institution as their top choice.

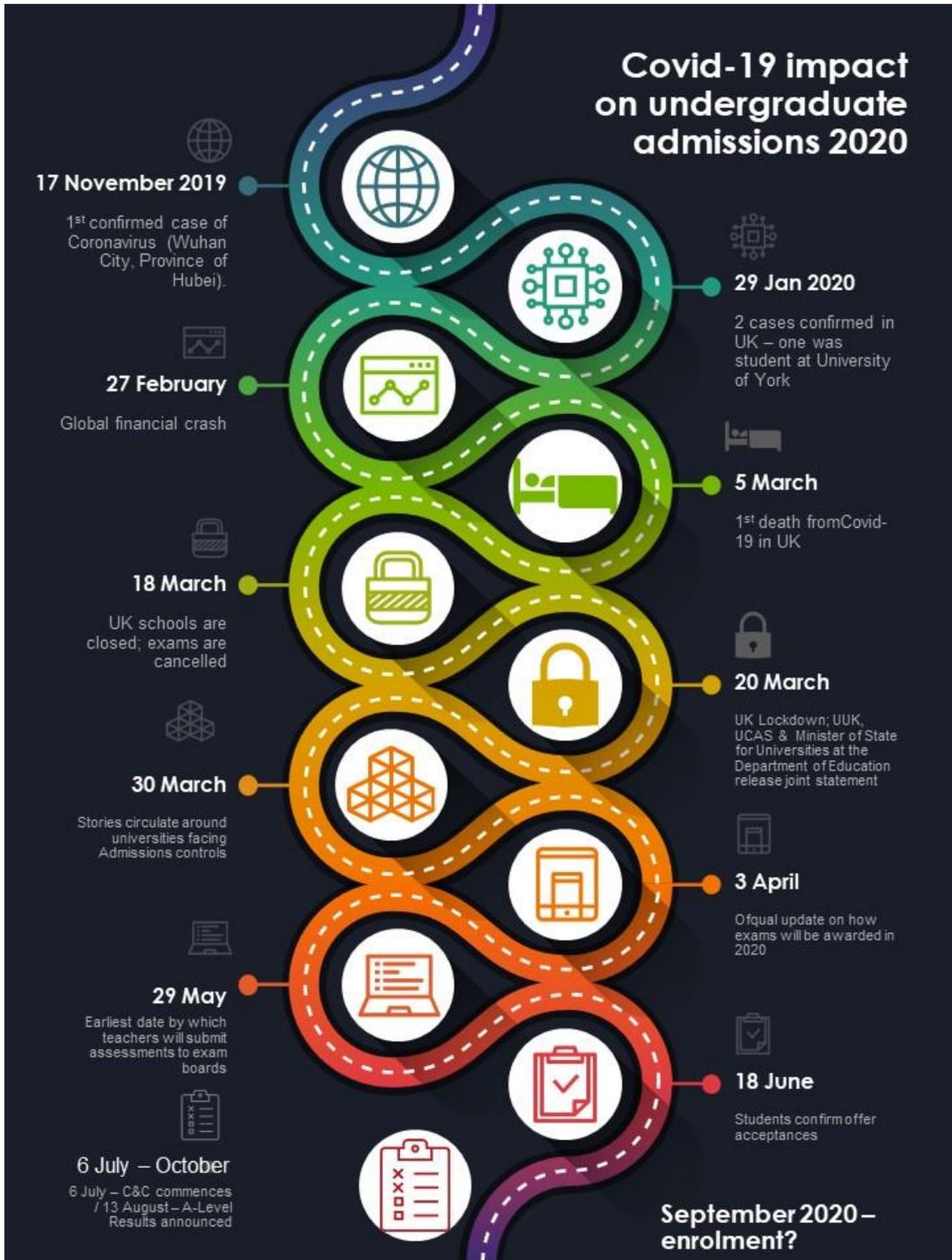
A news story published by the BBC in January 2020, which focused on the impact on UK universities of government funded Chinese students, highlighted a rise of 34% of Chinese students choosing to study in the UK in a five-year period. The Chinese financial contribution is key to financial viability due to recruits paying two to three times more than the typical UK undergraduate.

Brexit would be likely to have an impact on the decisions of EU students to study in the UK, at least in the short term.

Validating the criticality of getting the recruitment cycle and admissions process right for 2020, SUMS Consulting had been engaged by several member and non-member institutions to evaluate and optimise their recruitment, admissions and clearing processes, keen to fine tune well-trodden paths, ensuring they were ready to receive, process and enrol applicants.

The paradigm shifted overnight

The plans and strategies that had been formed by universities were impacted with the arrival of Covid-19 when GCSEs, A/S and A-Level exams were cancelled on 18 March. It was apparent that what was already a pivotal year for university recruitment and admissions would become even more so because of the pandemic.



Policy decisions have since been taken about how Year 13 A-Level students will be assessed, and the past performance of students, their teachers' judgement and mock exams will inform the grades awarded. Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, has stated assessments should be:

'...fair, objective and carefully considered judgements of the grades schools and colleges believe their students would have been most likely to achieve if they had sat their exams, and should take into account the full range of available evidence.'

SUMS Consulting's research

Further to the change of approach to examinations SUMS Consulting has conducted its own survey of a small sample group of randomly distributed current Year 13 students, who until a few short weeks ago, were preparing to sit A-Levels in the Summer, 79% of whom were working towards securing a university place in September 2020.

UCAS and Ofqual have updated students and schools on the approach to this year's examinations, but for the young adults on the receiving end of this complete change of direction, how does it really feel, and what do they need now from schools and universities to make the next five months as stress-free as possible?

Although a certain level of information is in the public domain, students are still feeling in the dark and as though they have lost control over their ability to perform and earn their place at university. News stories which suggest there may be caps to university entry to level the playing field add to further student anxiety, although perhaps this would likely be good news for some institutions.

Our approach

We approached our research through three lenses:

1. How students were being supported by their schools, and whether the schools were equipped to help by the emerging decisions and policies;
2. How universities are reaching out (or not) to applicants, and what is helpful and / or unhelpful about this;
3. What could be put in place now by schools, universities, or other agencies to help alleviate the pressures being experienced.

About our sample group

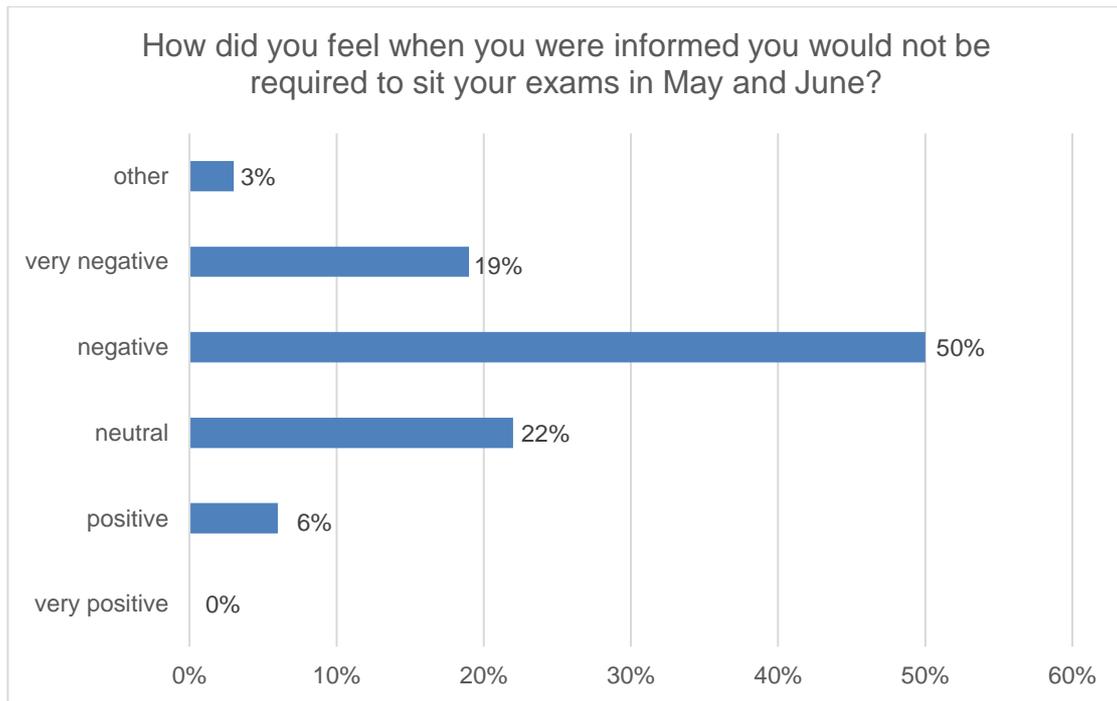
32 A-Level students participated, and of the students surveyed they were applying to a broad range of UK universities. The top first choice institution was Bristol, the top second choice institution was joint between Liverpool and Sheffield, and the top third choice institution was Birmingham. From the sample group 28% were hoping to study Law, 12% aiming to study economics, 9% psychology, and 9% marketing, management, business related degrees. All responses were anonymous. Note, we did not survey students working towards vocational or technical qualification.

Our findings

Reaction to the cancellation of examinations

I'm really annoyed by the cancellation of exams. All my revision and plans have gone to waste.

Our sample of students were largely disappointed not to have the opportunity to sit their exams in the summer, with 69% feeling negative or very negative about this decision.

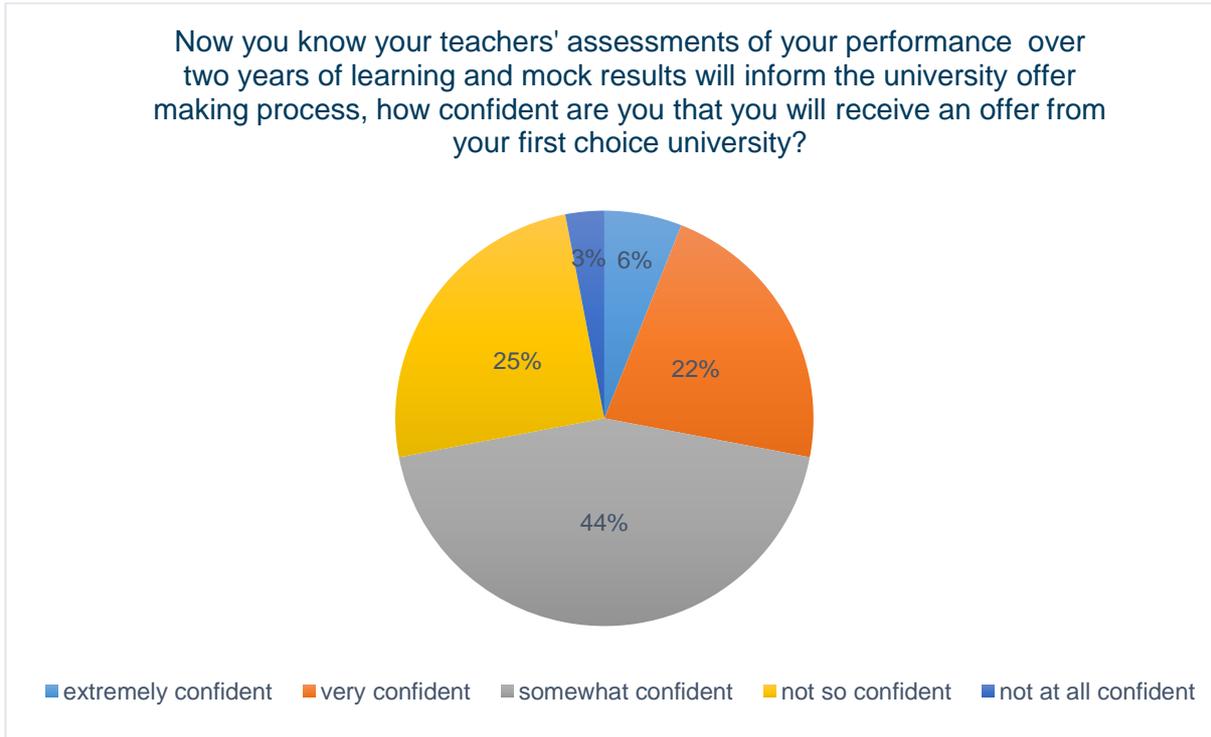


63% of students felt they could get support from their Head of Year if needed, whilst 37% did not. From our sample, 72% of students were aware of the changes to the university admissions processes, but 25% were not.

Just feel I will get no sense of satisfaction or achievement from this whole experience - Covid's fault, not anyone else's.

Confidence in securing a place at their first-choice university

We asked whether students felt confident with the approach to exam assessments, and this was more hopeful, with 28% feeling very confident or extremely confident, and 44% feeling somewhat confident.



Nevertheless, 28% were not so confident or not confident at all, and when we drilled into this by asking whether, if they were not confident, they had discussed this with a teacher and what advice had been received, we detected an undertone of deep concern about the coming months from some students.

Students and their teachers

Most students had been able to discuss their concerns with a teacher, although 5% said they had not. There was a sense that the ‘teachers will do their best’ for their students, but a frustration that they could not submit additional work to supplement the decision-making process.

Reassurance was an obvious but key offer from the teachers, and several students reported they had been told not to worry, and that they would secure the place they deserved. There was also some commentary that the teachers themselves had limited information about what would happen next, and this exacerbated the anxiety of the student base.

We need to know that the teachers know what they are doing and what will be asked of them

The new awards process

Give us a final answer as soon as possible as waiting for the offers is just an added stress with everything else going on.

More than half of the students polled wanted greater clarity over the way in which their work will be assessed, including detailed visibility over the decision-making process with a clear timetable as to when key activities would occur, the appeal process, and the opportunity to re-sit.

'It is a bit confusing what will happen if we are not satisfied with the grade we receive. Many of us want to start university in September 2020 so how can we retake exams by then? And does that mean we won't get a place at the university we like because our predicted grade wasn't high enough?'

There was a marked concern over the weighting of previous exam results (GCSEs and mocks), where students felt their performance in their A-Level exams would have been far stronger.

'I know my mock results are of much lower grades than I would have got in the exams. I have discussed this with some of my teachers, however they cannot change those grades....'

'There is a lot of conflict concerning the manner that exam boards decided to award their grades. As previously stated, GCSEs should not be a pre-determining factor as it is something which occurred in the past... Some students are able to develop their academic abilities over two years...'

Although our own survey shows a degree of optimism by students that they will still get into their first-choice university, a larger survey sample conducted by 'The Student Room' highlighted 66% did not feel they would receive fair grades this summer.

Stress and anxiety

With mental health a key area for concern during the education of young people of university age, we recognise schools and universities will be putting in place strategies to support students who already identified as vulnerable, or who are displaying signs of distress. This is made more challenging given the lockdown arrangements, but with virtual contact methods available we recommend that schools and universities put out proactive and clear channels for concerned students to seek reassurance and information. The proactive sharing of online resources and clear signposting of who to contact either at the school or the applicant's university would be advantageous, and as a minimum, schools and universities could signpost links to services highlighted by the Office for Students.

It is such an unsettling and uncertain time.

I think it's more stressful than older people think it is for us.

Very unsettling especially with applying to medicine, I have already sat extra exams and had multiple interviews. Finally get offers and everything is thrown up in the air. It is such an unsettling and uncertain time.

The role of the universities

We asked the sample group a few questions relating to what they expected and needed from their chosen universities and what they have seen the universities they have applied to do so far.

87% of universities had been in touch with applicants. However, in a small minority of cases this was highlighted as lacking or poor by some students.

As the host institution responsible for receiving results, processing and matching applications, and enrolling students, as well as delivering Clearing, student expectations of the role played by the university is as demanding as of their school or college. There are parallels here, in that they want universities to be clear and transparent about the offer-making process, setting out detailed plans and delivering enrolment at pace after exam boards have confirmed grades.

Inform students how they will be supported in the process and provide information as to how the university will be making decisions

Students want clear access to the right person to respond to any questions they may have. More than 50% of our respondents highlighted email as the best channel to use for regular communication, but some admissions teams will have the capability to run multichannel messages, ensuring students are reached. Due to the changing circumstances it seems students want more contact from their chosen universities at

a far earlier point. Some students also called for a dedicated telephone line.

'Stay in touch with students as it is causing great anxiety to a lot of us if they take a long period of time to consider our applications.'

'Emails providing information and updates as to how they are responding to the events, how they expect these to affect us, and what sort of support will be provided in these uncertain times.'

To actively update on any developments occurring with the grade or entry requirements

Like schools, students highlighted the need for consideration for reassurance and overall student wellbeing. Although the responsibility clearly does not lie with the universities at present, compassionate communication and engagement is essential and could be a determining factor in whether a student chooses to attend an institution or not. Straightforward and honest communication is also preferred. One student had received an email from their chosen university stating it would be *'...as generous as possible with offers and be flexible given the circumstances.'*

[I need] clear options on my future. More support from universities on their amended criteria. How to deal with stressful and uncertain times.

One student highlighted Northampton as having taken proactive steps to connect with applicants and provide that important bridge of contact. Other universities have been taking similar steps and these have been very well received.

'A virtual uni day was set up. Applicants were able to contact the admissions team and specific subject lecturers to answer any questions concerning the course or what will possibly happen if the lockdown does not end by September.'

Another example of well received communication was confirmation by universities that unconditional offers would remain unconditional. For a small proportion of our participants, they can look forward to enrolling as normal.

If universities could do one thing to improve the situation...

We asked our survey sample how universities could make the single biggest difference. These were:

- Sharing clear and timely information
- Not making rash judgements
- Keeping things moving at pace and minimise the gap between awards being made by exams boards, and university offer making
- Keeping in touch and good, clear communication
- Providing advice on what to do if grades are not met, how this works with the offer process, and perhaps more clarity over Clearing
- Information on deferral or reversing the decision to defer because a gap year was no longer viable.



In summary

Universities, schools, and colleges; UCAS, Ofqual, UUK, OfS and the Department for Education all have large tasks and responsibilities in hand. Working through the creation of sound and viable policy decisions at pace, and with fairness, objectivity and care at heart is an unenviable job, especially when there is such a large degree of ambiguity about the future, and many impacting factors are out of

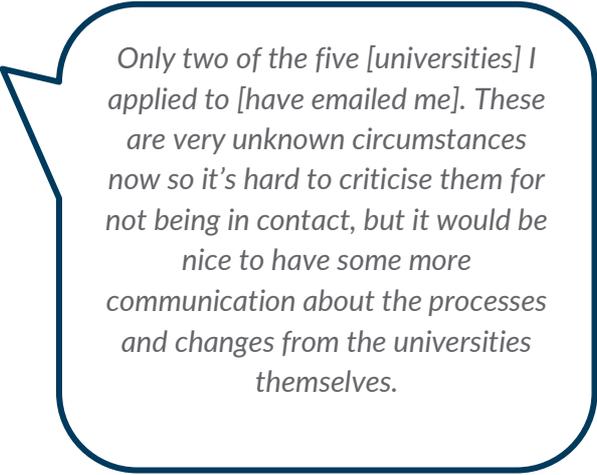
their hands. This said, the commitment to do things well and in the right way has been made. Key dates regarding consultation, teacher assessments, offer acceptance and 'results day', have now been made clear.

Some may read this report and have a reaction that Year 13 students need to take more responsibility for their own destinies, and to become more resilient. Those with that view may point to the wealth of useful information available through UCAS and gov.uk, with many universities using their websites as channels to share updates.

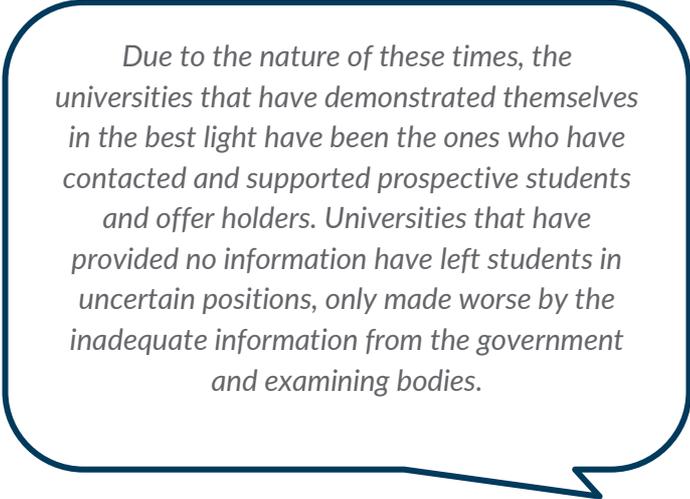
Perhaps greater resilience will be an unintended consequence of Covid-19, but right here and now, it's worth remembering that these young people, some of whom are still not legally entitled to vote or get married, most of whom are still living at home, haven't had the benefit of the A-Level exam experience to help get them ready for university. This rite of passage is a key ingredient to becoming ready to move away from home and take real ownership for attained results and the impact on their future. Many of these people are feeling even more out of control of their destiny, and their need for clarity and speed comes from a point of trying to regain a little of what they have lost. One student stated concern over not knowing how they would refer to their A-Level results in future CVs – and in the future, they will always be 'the 2020 Covid-19 cohort', who didn't get to sit their exams.

Clear, timely, detailed (where required) pragmatic and empathetic communication is the single most important component that universities can strive to deliver right now, alongside ensuring admissions processes are fit for purpose and ready to receive results.

Two participants make this point clearly:



Only two of the five [universities] I applied to [have emailed me]. These are very unknown circumstances now so it's hard to criticise them for not being in contact, but it would be nice to have some more communication about the processes and changes from the universities themselves.



Due to the nature of these times, the universities that have demonstrated themselves in the best light have been the ones who have contacted and supported prospective students and offer holders. Universities that have provided no information have left students in uncertain positions, only made worse by the inadequate information from the government and examining bodies.

Universities that understand the students' perspective well and are putting measures in place to reach out to their prospects, and truly lean in to creating a positive pre-results experience, will be likely to reap the rewards of their efforts in the 2020 recruitment cycle.

Even though much of the detailed information regarding this cycle is still unclear, just allowing an applicant to ask the question and hear that there is no answer yet is better than the student not being able to ask the question at all. Although current research by UCAS and YouthSight shows 90% of Year 13 students are still planning on enrolling at university in September, these are strange and changing times, and without greater clarity on what the next few months will look like, universities

need to be working even harder now to try to keep their prospects engaged. We are aware that many universities are beginning to scenario plan for the September term to begin virtually and not on campus until January 2021. A report published by McKinsey highlights how our counterparts in the US are predicting the next 12 months+ will play out and is worthy of the attention of strategy makers in UK universities. Our own research showed that 21% of respondents are planning for a 2021 enrolment.

How, precisely, will the possibility of not 'opening for business in September' impact on enrolment? Maybe a surge in deferrals, perhaps an uptake of international students prepared to study remotely (but visa restrictions may impact on this intent), or possibly the UK undergraduate deciding to simply defer – why sacrifice the full university experience, when they can stay at home and wait things out? This savvy subset of Millennials and Gen Z-ers could choose to swerve the academic route completely and select different employment routes through the crisis. The question universities need to use to challenge their response strategies with is: how do they make their proposition so attractive that the students will resist just going into paid employment / the gig economy (insta / influencers / bitcoin?).

Covid-19 has made the already perfect storm more treacherous, but not insurmountable, providing universities remain willing and able to step into the shoes of their prospects and truly connect with what matters to them most right now.

SUMS' consultants are gathering in-depth views from university leaders across the full breadth of university operations. We will be publishing their service-by-service findings later this month. **Register [here](#) to receive your copy of our full sector report.**

Other papers which have already been published include:

- Human impact: how policy, culture and people strategies have guided HE through the Covid-crisis and point to a more agile future (click [here](#))
- The impact of COVID-19 on Teaching, Learning & Assessment (click [here](#))



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