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Briefing Paper

The class of 2020: graduating through Covid-19

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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. Here, Felicity Gasparro, SUMS Associate Consultant, shares original research findings from a SUMS Survey of final year students on how their last year has been impacted by Covid-19.

Introduction: being a final year student in 2020

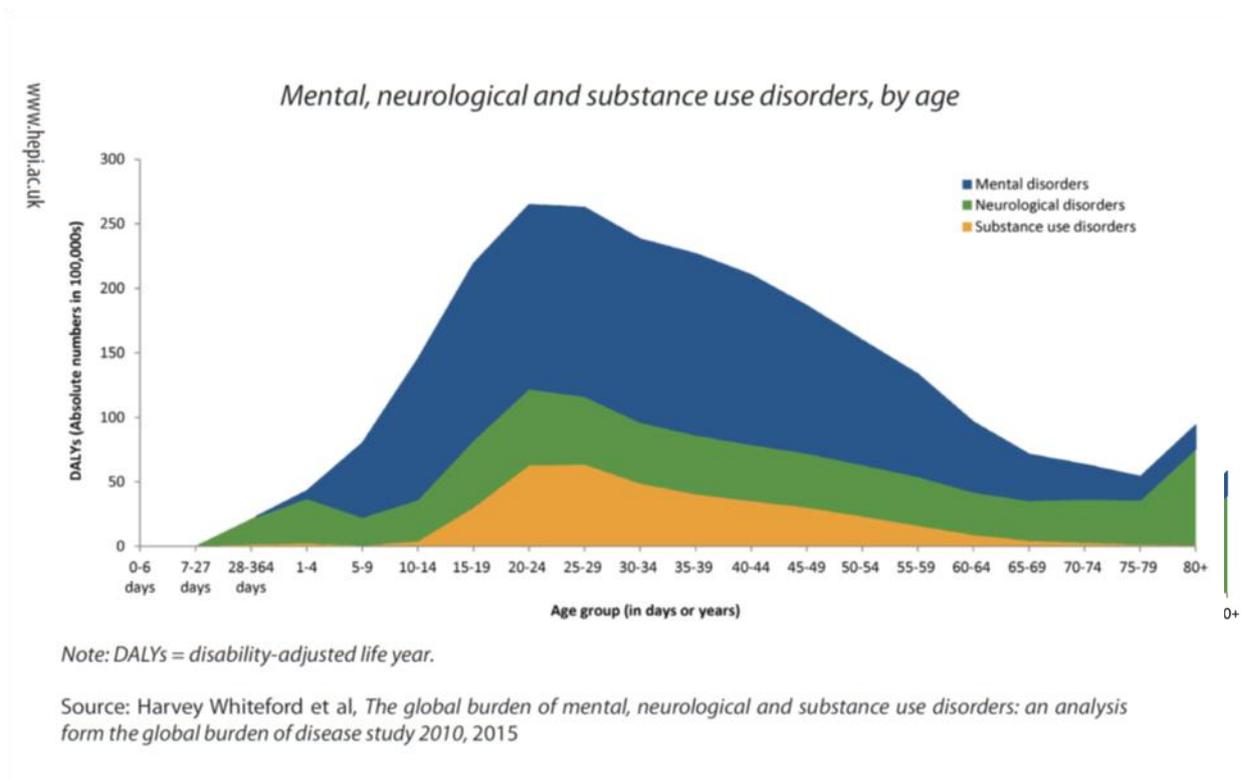
A final year at university is a special time for most students, either PG or UG. In this report, we sought to find out what it was like for those students completing their finals and graduating through the Covid-19 pandemic and emergency social distancing procedures enforced as a result. While this paper presents an overall perspective from final year students, we will be exploring widening participation and challenges relevant to our BAME students in the weeks to come. It will be particularly important to consider, going forward, the challenges BAME populations face in accessing all available PG options.

It's worth highlighting some background context about the experiences of this particular cohort of students:

- Many have had their studies impacted by a series of staff industrial actions over pensions and terms and conditions, leading in some institutions to the loss of lecture time and a sense of loss of value for money.
- The debate over funding for degrees has been resurrected by the new Labour Shadow Universities and FE Minister, Emma Hardy, but this debate has been rumbling along for several years and is clearly close to the hearts of students who feel they may not have received the maximum from their university experience.
- University fees have increased considerably over the last 10 years, but has the value of the degree and the experience of the student improved accordingly?
- They have experienced two General Elections, the most recent of which saw a Conservative landslide, giving a mandate for the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and kicking Corbynism (something many of this cohort supported), to the kerb.
- They are witnesses to challenging political debates and trade negotiations with Europe and other major nations, which could impact on extra-UK job accessibility in the short to medium term.
- They are consciously engaged in the diversity, equality and inclusion movement and are likely to be highly motivated by social justice.
- They've lived through a series of terror attacks, some of which have been targeted at young people, and one of which took place at a University of Cambridge-run event in London.

We can now add to that list, completing their finals during a pandemic and experiencing the lockdown we've all been subject too.

Called by some, the snowflake generation, it can't be denied it's been a tough few years. You could forgive this cohort for feeling that somehow their experiences of university and steps into independent living weren't quite what they thought they would be when they took up their rooms in halls of residence across the country in 2016 or 2017. Rising statistics and tales of poor mental health and wellbeing amongst this group bear testament to this point, and were highlighted as a particular challenge by **HEPI in a report in 2016**:



From the Article – ‘The invisible problem? Improving students’ mental health’ – author **Poppy Brown**

When I look back to my own experience of being a UK UG finalist, and contrast this with that of those undergraduates working through their finals right now, it's easy to draw out the differences at a surface level. But I was curious to know whether there were any positives to this new scenario. Were there any themes and trends we could draw out and share back with our members to enable them to shift the dial on what has been an incredibly difficult path to tread for students and staff alike? And what does graduating during Covid-19 and a looming economic crash actually mean for those finalists? Will they retain their job offers, cancel their plans to travel or work abroad, or decide to stay on and complete postgraduate qualifications causing a boom in course take-up?

News stories such as a recent article in *People Today* highlight that more than half of the private sector is implementing pay freezes. We have seen some well-established businesses fall. You just have to look at the mass redundancy schemes announced by BA, Rolls-Royce and Bentley to know that the recruitment market is going to be treacherous. Are there any clues from the past we can identify which might enable this cohort of finalists to find their way through the pandemic?

What are finalists saying?

We surveyed students from SUMS member universities, as well as posting the survey on social media. The results provide useful insights into the future, which universities can use to apply to their current and future plans for the finalist student experience. We also drew on a number of articles which help to add further context to the current circumstances, and questioned whether we had been here before, and how people graduating in challenging times managed and have 'turned out'.

The response rate to the survey was robust. We attracted 479 people to take part, and this figure was reduced to 328 past question 2 – **we have therefore applied 328 as our baseline respondent figure.**

Our respondents were from universities representing a range of mission groups and geographical areas. Students from a broad range of academic disciplines participated with Accountancy, Business Management, Biomedical Sciences, Criminology, Law, Music, Education (teaching / early childhood studies etc.) and Psychology being the most popular courses amongst our sample.

We asked students when they were required to submit their final work– the largest proportion of work submission deadlines by far, with 85%, was work to be submitted in May.

'When is your final work due to be submitted?'



A large proportion of students were not expected to complete final exams, with assignment-based work being the most popular form of final assessment. Of those not required to sit a final exam, **for 140 members of our sample**, this had been a change of approach – they had initially been required to sit final exams, and were now required to adjust to a different method of evidencing learning. They told us:

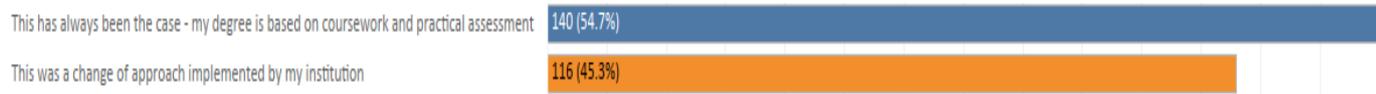
"I was supposed to be [completing finals] but due to the virus they were turned into assignments...they've been changed to online essay format"

"We have been provided with alternative assessments in the form of additional coursework that will cover the exam percentage of the module".

'Are you required to sit final exams?'



‘If you are not required to sit final exams, has this always been the case or has your institution changed approach since the Covid-19 lockdown?’



And for those taking final exams, perhaps unsurprisingly 92% of students’ exams had been switched to online, with 88% taking place in May 2020.

‘Assuming your exams are now taking place online, has this always been the plan, or has your institution implemented an online approach due to lockdown?’



Aggregating the survey participants whose final submission had been changed due to Covid-19, **46% students have reported that the mode of completing their finals had been affected**. This is a substantial number and demonstrates a high level of agility by the universities involved in the survey to change approach at pace when needed. However, it also indicates how quickly students were required to adapt and re-frame their own approach to finishing their studies. For some, this will have been ideal, not a problem. For others, the change would have been stressful, and this is borne out by our survey. Of the 40 students now taking their exams online, 27.5% felt either “not at all confident” or “not so confident” with the online approach. When we link this back to our knowledge of the vulnerability of this cohort, the support provided by universities will have been more important than ever.

‘How do you feel about taking your exams online?’



We asked students to comment on their feelings towards taking their exams online, and there was a wide range of responses including:

“I feel that an online exam more tests [sic] the understanding of the subject, rather than the ability to just recall information. I've always struggled with remembering key facts in an exam that in a workplace I can just simply look up”

“I liked the idea at first. But I was nervous about technological difficulties (like Wi-Fi going down) making it difficult for me to hand work in on time. Luckily my university gave us two weeks to write the exams and it was a very relaxed approach”

“It is very stressful”

“As a languages student, I do not believe that an online exam can appropriately and fairly test our range of skills”

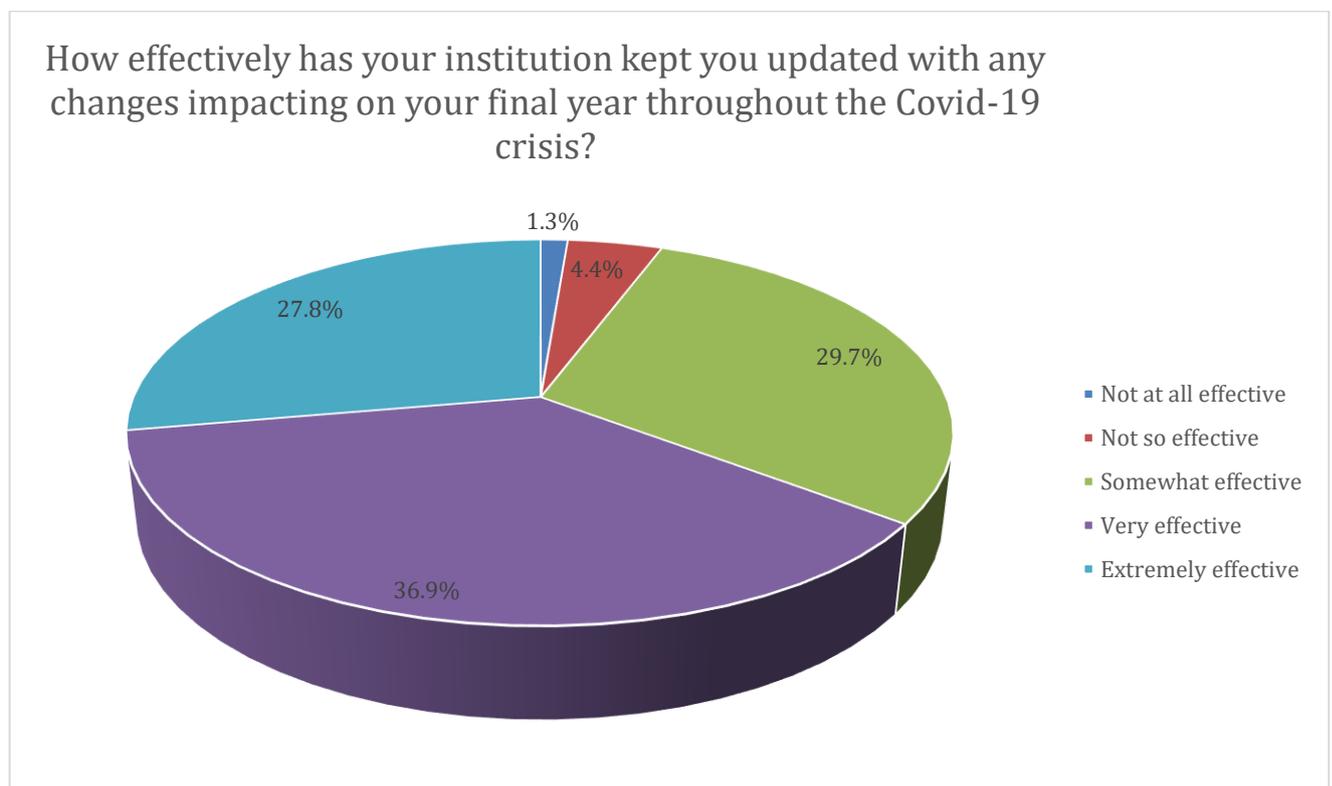
“It is easy to cheat, makes it unfair for those who are opposed to cheating on exams”.

To the final point, once universities start awarding degree results, the sector will either see:

- Satisfaction from students who feel their grade reflects their overall performance
- A backlash from students who feel they’ve been underrated and will appeal their decisions
- Scrutiny of grades awarded and a return to the hot topic of grade inflation.

This places many universities precariously - the appeals process takes up a substantial amount of leadership time, at the same time as managing the pandemic and return to university strategy. In addition, many senior leaders are deeply concerned about their ability to recruit 2020/21’s intake of fresh students with the promise of blended learning, and perhaps limits on the social benefits of attending university in the first semester, at least. There is also the imposed government cap on admissions to consider. UUK has recently published a set of nine principles to guide universities on effectively returning to study and work in September.

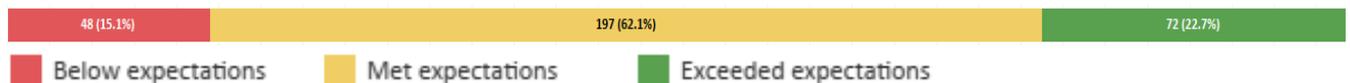
Pleasingly, 65% of finalists believed their institution had been extremely or very effective in communicating with them during the crisis, with a very small group of 6% believing communication had not been effective.



We know that 92% of communication between institution and student was via email, and perhaps this is understandable given the circumstances and time pressures involved. However, only 3% of communication has been via video conferencing and perhaps most concerning, finalists highlighted only 2% of the communication they received was with their academic tutor. It is possible respondents interpreted the question as asking about broad corporate communication messages, as opposed to individualised 1:1 communication. However, the absence of the academic tutor communication is worth exploring further. The under-utilisation of video conferencing is also a surprise, especially as in the world of work we hear of people bouncing between Teams, Zoom, WebEx and Skype meetings all the time.

Fifteen percent said communication frequency was below expectations and therefore 85% stated that either the universities had met or exceeded expectations on communication frequency.

'Has the frequency of communication from your institution met your needs and expectations?'



The comments supplied by respondents somewhat undermined these statistics. We asked students what more their university could do right now to enhance their experiences, and responses said:

"I would like them to strive to do the best possible thing by the students in the sense of the no detriment approach and take into account the stress of at home learning and the at home exams. I also hope they keep their promise of a graduation at some point as well"

"I wish we had been provided better resources and lectures during lockdown. While the majority are fine there have been some substantially unsatisfactory lectures"

"I feel like that [sic] due to the nature of my course, I am missing out on vital skills and learning. Since I study media, much of my course is learning how to use software and equipment. Sadly, those resources are no longer available, I believe the uni should be putting alternate learning in place for practical courses"

"More support with completing assessments as the whole process is more stressful now"

"More support and video lessons"

"Fees refunded"

"Improve communication: -lecturers should make an announcement when uploading a lecture (some did and it was very helpful) -module leaders should provide online 'lectures'

to support students with the alternative assignment , which would be an effective way of answering a lot of questions at once and helping students do well in the assignment , which is unprecedented”

“I think the university handled it brilliantly”

“Actual support. We were told our graduation has been postponed as an afterthought in an update email. We haven’t been told how this whole situation will actually impact us and our futures. There hasn’t been enough support for final year students in situations where they can’t meet deadlines or extension deadlines other than being told we will get mitigating circumstances but what that means hasn’t been explained”

“Give us an actual graduation”

There was a strong sense from the plethora of comments supplied that communication and consideration for the finalists hadn’t been in line with need or expectation. The subject of fees bubbled up several times, and the lack of access to academic tutors was also highlighted. A handful of students praised their institution’s efforts, but the overall feel from the comments was that institutions could have done more to help them at a pivotal point in their studies.

The time for supporting this cohort through their studies has passed, **but lessons can be learned from this feedback and applied to September 2020, as well as some recovery provision for those imminently receiving their results.** We will cover this in our recommendations.

Regrettably, the students surveyed generally felt the past few months have had a **moderate to substantial impact on their overall satisfaction with their university experience (74%)**. Covid-19 was out of the hands of the universities, but there are some examples of excellence in engagement in the sector. This wasn’t reflected in this survey, but does give us the opportunity to understand some of the aspects which were missing and make recommendations for the future.

‘How do you feel about graduating under these circumstances? Has this impacted on your overall satisfaction with your university experience?’



It is evident that the participants of this survey were unclear of their university’s approach to graduation. This may well have shifted in the month since the survey was launched, but even so, for finalists not to understand their university’s position on graduation as late as May, is less than ideal. Now, of course, the Covid-19 position changes daily and it’s impossible to make firm promises without fear of letting students down or having them feel misled. However, a general

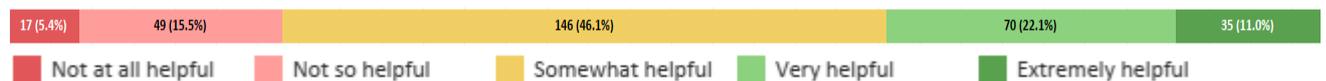
statement of intent and reassurance in line with UUK and OfS guidelines would certainly be welcomed by our participants:

‘What is your institution's approach to Graduation ceremonies?’



Participants generally felt they had been supported by their university in shaping future career choices, with one-third saying the university had been either ‘very’ or ‘extremely helpful’.

How supportive has your university been of helping you to shape future career or education choices, perhaps through student services?



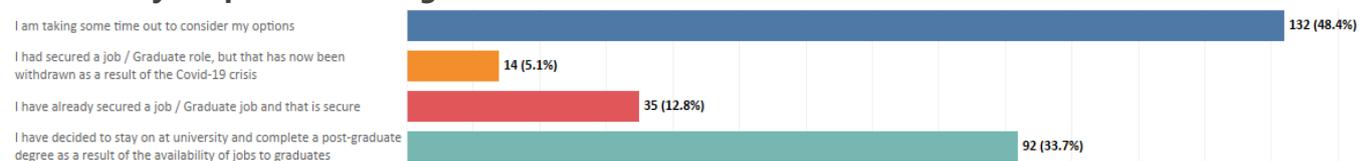
Those called out as being most supportive to finalists during this period include:

- Families and friends
- Academic support tutor
- Lecturers
- Careers service
- Student support hub
- Dissertation supervisor
- Online help.

Combine this strong feedback about the value placed on communication with the people highlighted here as being most helpful, and we could suggest that a further investment in personalised communication for this group of students would have been well received. Could it be that although completing the learning necessary to finalise the degree was important, the personal support on offer during and after that time was more important?

Finally, we wanted to know what finalists were planning in their first year following their graduation.

‘What are your plans following Graduation?’



Students commented:

"Trying to find a job, however, less companies are hiring due to uncertainties. May end up doing a masters if cannot secure a role for September"

"Masters degree was planned but delayed due to COVID-19 so taking time out to consider my options"

"Limited job prospects in my area"

"I was set to undertake a post-graduate degree however I have changed my mind as I have not had any support with online learning and would not be able to start a post-grad course without support"

"Had secured a role but has been put on hold- outcome currently uncertain".

The largest proportion of finalists were not clear on their next steps and have opted for some time out. Five percent, unfortunately, had the offer of a graduate job role withdrawn, 13% still held a job offer, and 34% planned on continuing their studies. Universities will be undertaking research in readiness for a boom in the PG uptake – maybe this is the year where the numbers of PG enrolment become as strategically important as the numbers of UG enrolment.

For the finalists who are choosing to take time out or seek to secure work rather than continue with education, there's no denying it will be difficult to secure a graduate role (depending on your field – medical and teaching professionals, for example, may find it most straightforward to step into employment). The BBC's Szu Ping Chan recently published an article based on interviews with students from the class of 2008 – those who graduated during the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the subsequent global economic crash. They callout a range of opportunities including:

- Don't rule out non-graduate jobs
- All work experience is valid work experience and demonstrates commitment to being in work and earning a salary
- Don't underestimate the power of your digital knowledge – how many firms really know how to use TikTok?

In addition, we would add that since the pandemic there has been a noticeable shift in communities coming together to support one another – don't be afraid to ask for help. Also consider that charities and not-for-profit organisations are going to need more support now than ever as donations drop away whilst people have retreated into their own economic bubbles of survival. In addition, society has embraced the environmental benefits of the lockdown. What can you do to add your knowledge and expertise to addressing the climate emergency?

2. Student Services prepare a contingency strategy to seek out and support students impacted by major change (e.g – pandemic or financial crash level), and have a go-to support package which can be rolled out at pace.
3. Closely monitor the responses of students to their final grade award in terms of 'fairness' and be prepared for a large number of appeals should students feel their grade does not do their efforts justice.
4. Contingency communications plan for a wide-scale demand for fee refunds by finalists.
5. Explore the nature and frequency of contact between academic tutors and their students during this period. Consider how this compares to the expected level of support and contact in a 'normal' lead into finals. Assess whether levels of contact are in line with expectations.
6. Review the utilisation of video conferencing software, especially with a view to September's blended learning offer. Couple this with the availability of academic tutors to work with their students.
7. Consider the way in which degrees results are going to be communicated. Will this be via an email, or is it feasible to create a human connection through a voice or video call?
8. Review individual communications with students going through finals from relevant areas of the institution (Academic Registry, Student Support Services, School, Department, Faculty or College). Ensure communication is joined up, and where possible tailored to the individual. Much of student recruitment activity across the sector talks about really treating the student as an individual and being there for them – moments like this are when keeping that promise really matters. Consider if there is anything more you can offer to students now. And capture the lessons learned which can be built into future personalised student relations.
9. Urgently review the requirements for supporting students completing practical, scientific or creative courses where specialist equipment is normally supplied by the university ahead of September.
10. Consider how academic tutors and support services can establish and maintain personalised contact with all students and what it would take to invest in and support this to the end of the crisis. Then review what was successful about this approach and retain the most successful, scalable and efficient elements for future approaches to student engagement. Ensure a particular focus on two aspects:
 - The provision of mental health and wellbeing support for finalists
 - The provision of career and future planning advice for finalists.

Some of this could be modularised and online, but some should be face-to-face and personalised.

11. Maintain pressure on the government to support graduates into work. A report by The Resolution Foundation, published in The Guardian in May found that:

“...23% of employees aged 18-24 had been [furloughed](#) and a further 9% had lost their jobs completely. By comparison, among the least affected age group – those aged between 35 and 44 – 15% had been furloughed or lost their jobs”. The Resolution Foundation - Maja Gustafsson.

12. Review the percentage of UG finalists planning ongoing PG study balanced against the 5-year average; adjust PG course provision for this year’s cohort provision accordingly. Market targeted courses to secure strong PG enrolment which may help offset weaker UG enrolment in 2020/21.

Summary

The overarching theme emerging from this research is the need for universities to remain on point for this cohort of students, for as long as it takes: to see the majority make the next step to employment, further study, or positively choosing to take timeout, as opposed to this being an imposed decision.

Communication with students is obviously a linking theme, and personalisation and relationship building with academic tutors is crucial for future students, especially if learning is to be blended.

The provision of a graduation ceremony in-person, whenever that may be, is also vital to allow these finalists to end their university experience well. University leaders should be prepared to prioritise resources to invest in these events in the coming year.

Surprisingly, not much commentary came through about the vitality of the student network of support with just a couple of comments referencing Students’ Union being there to support students. Perhaps this is a symptom of the situation – those running the unions were themselves impacted and therefore outreach stopped? But there is definitely an opportunity to ask more of the students themselves to network and support one another, if this is not already in place.

And finally, we must keep front-of-mind that although we are discussing academia, graduation and ultimately positive choices at the end of the degree, what we are really identifying here is the need for universities to approach the engagement with finalists and all students, in a human

and connected way. Now is the time for leaders and anyone representing elements of the university which support students to really lean into the human aspects of how Covid-19 is having an impact, and to dial-up on relatability.

This time will pass, but in the words of one student, what they need most right now is:

“Comfort, support and clarity on graduation and about future plans and how there gonna [sic] make it for them as it is a major part in uni life. Paying a lot of money to the uni for my degree, graduating is a key role”.

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



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