



## **Executive Summary:**

- There is wide variation in how different universities and courses have been able to rapidly reorganise and effectively communicate drastic changes to teaching and assessment, and in ensuring that less-privileged students aren't disadvantaged by the changes.
- Continued uncertainty and ongoing delays in communication have significantly raised stress and anxiety levels, compounding the effects of recent lecturer strikes on student morale and motivation.
- At a time of great economic uncertainty, students were concerned about not being able to secure a job upon graduation. Work experience, networking events and internships were being cancelled, with students fearing that if these opportunities were permanently lost, they would be at a double disadvantage to those with existing networks to rely upon.
- University teaching and assessment has typically moved online where practical or been cancelled, with mixed success in terms of student learning, often related to the type of course and its adaptability to remote delivery or whether lectures are live and interactive or pre-recorded.
- With most students returning home, 35% of respondents did not have adequate internet access to access university lectures or resources, or properly participate in replacement virtual employer events.
- Many cited not having a suitable place at home to study due to being in a crowded house, having no desk or separate room to work in and with multiple distractions and noise from siblings. A small minority said their university had been very supportive offering deadline extensions, exam deferral and resit opportunities and taking into account mitigating circumstances (such as home study environment and internet access).
- Loss of part-time work affected many, adding financial pressures (although some had gained extra hours).

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## 1. Introduction:

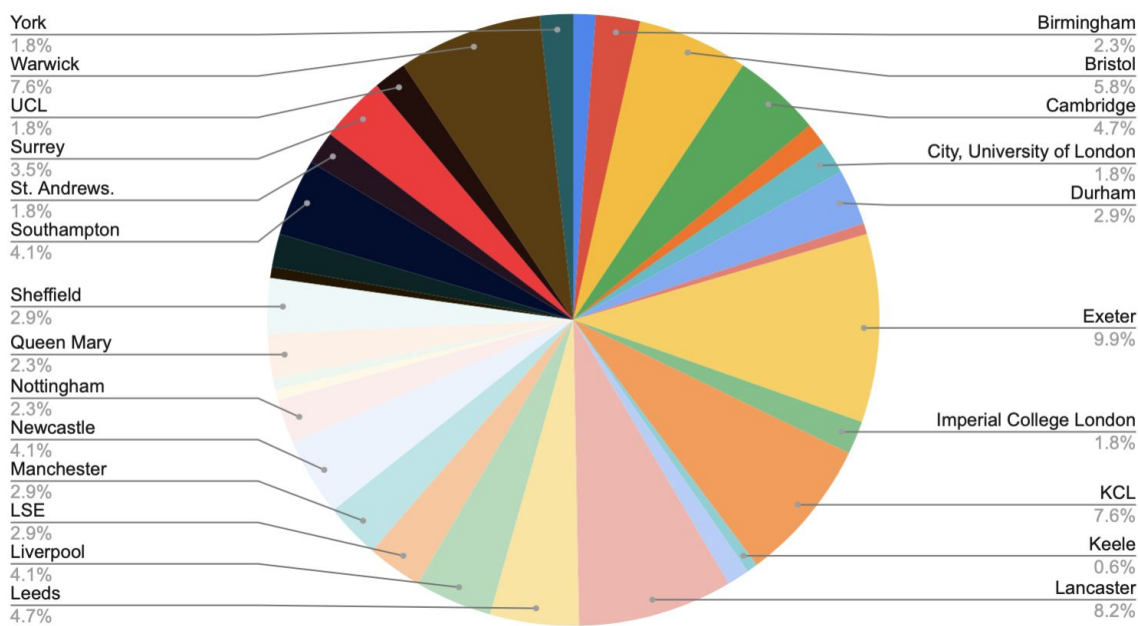
upReach conducted a survey of disadvantaged undergraduates from across the UK between 20th and 23rd March 2020 to understand the impact of the Coronavirus on their academic experience, career and life in general. All c.1,500 students currently supported by upReach (“upReach Associates”) were invited to participate with over 11% completing the survey.

This Report is aimed at those who work with or support students or set policies that affect them, providing a voice to those who currently feel that at a time of necessarily drastic change, their concerns aren’t always being listened to or properly taken into account.

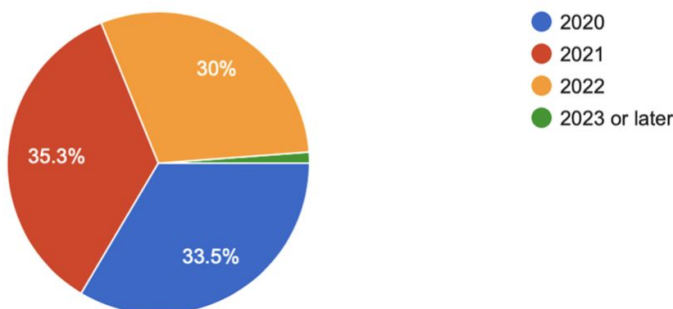
## 2. Respondent Profile:

- 170 undergraduates from 32 universities completed the survey, all upReach Associates, previously educated at state schools and with low household income.

### By University:



### By Graduation Year:



### **3. How has the teaching and assessment of courses changed?**

- There is wide variation in how different universities and courses have been able to rapidly reorganise and effectively communicate drastic changes to teaching and assessment, and in ensuring that less-privileged students aren't disadvantaged by the changes.
- University teaching and assessment has typically moved online where practical or been cancelled, with mixed success in terms of student learning, often related to the type of course and it's adaptability to remote delivery or whether lectures are live and interactive or pre-recorded.

**With the approach taken often differing by course within each university, as well as by university, rather than generalise, a representative summary based on the full range of responses is provided below.**

- Lectures:
  - Online - usually live or pre-recorded, sometimes simply documents to read.
  - Frustration that some lecturers are simply uploading last year's lecture rather than doing something live or new.
  - "Loss of engagement" during lectures, less people turning up, not much learning taking place, many now cancelled.
  - "No advice given on how to attend lectures or connect with lecturers."
- Seminars/Labs:
  - Often moved online or turned into podcasts.
  - Some cancelled with no replacement offered.
  - "Missing out on valuable face to face time."
  - Reduced support offered compared to being on campus.
  - Impact on practical/lab based courses, e.g. needing to use supplied data rather than experimental data due to practical sessions being cancelled.
- Dissertations and Coursework:
  - Deadlines often extended, but sometimes not.
  - Field trips cancelled, some essays/projects too.
  - "Constantly changing deadlines and assessment criteria"
  - Some work already submitted is not being marked and won't count.
- Exams:
  - Online, cancelled, or unsure at present (maths hard to examine online / some courses have confirmed but others at the same university haven't)
  - Change in style of assessment, e.g. open-book exams or extended essays, often testing other types of learning than traditional exams.
  - Frustration that some will cheat and it's unfair.
  - Want a delay in exams taking place, given disruption and that some will get ill.
  - Not knowing the format of assessment is "causing much anxiety amongst the student cohort" particularly when timing has not been confirmed or shifted back.
  - Some universities have offered an opportunity to defer or resit exams if they cannot do them online.
  - No provision offered for those with Dyslexia.

**The survey respondents expressed a feeling that they were disadvantaged compared to others on their course by not being able to participate as effectively in the new formats for teaching and assessment:**

- With most students returning home, 35% of respondents did not have adequate internet access to access university lectures or resources.
- Many cited not having a suitable place at home to study due to being in a crowded house, having no desk or separate room to work in and with multiple distractions and noise from siblings. A small minority said their university had been very supportive offering deadline extensions, exam deferral and resit opportunities and taking into account mitigating circumstances (such as home study environment and internet access).
- Students expressed how this had compounded the effect of strikes this academic year on their learning.
- A small minority said their university had been very supportive offering deadline extensions, exam deferral and resit opportunities and taking into account mitigating circumstances (such as home study environment and internet access). However, while acknowledging these were unprecedented times and decision-making inevitably took time, most students were frustrated at what they felt was slow communication or contradictory messages. They were “stressed” because of unextended deadlines creeping up, and anxious because unannounced changes might adversely affect them.
- Raised stress and anxiety levels due to continued uncertainty and ongoing delays in communication are compounding the effects of recent lecturer strikes on student morale and motivation.

**Some of the specific responses are shown below:**

*“Online lectures are supposed to be coming but are yet to materialise. Exams are cancelled but it is not clear what the replacement is.”*

*“All face to face teaching and exams cancelled. We have only been told that exams will be online but have been given no indication as to how this will work. Many of my modules are mathematical and require calculations and specific formulas and symbols so I am confused as to how an online exam would work for this. The not knowing part is the most frustrating bit.”*

*“Lack of communication has been the biggest issue. The uncertainty has made this difficult time even harder.”*

*“I think they've communicated to the best of their ability, as they themselves do not know what will happen in the future.”*

*“My university have done their very very best in this situation and have done well in the situation.”*

*“They have created online exams without consulting students as to the way it will be conducted.”*

*“Teaching: All lectures are now online; which means that I have to go to the local library to watch them as the videos are not available on our phones; and we do not have a laptop or computer at home. With*



*the new lockdown, it means that I am finding it extremely difficult to learn the content as I have to now rely on YouTube videos, which is not covering all the topics needed for the exams.*

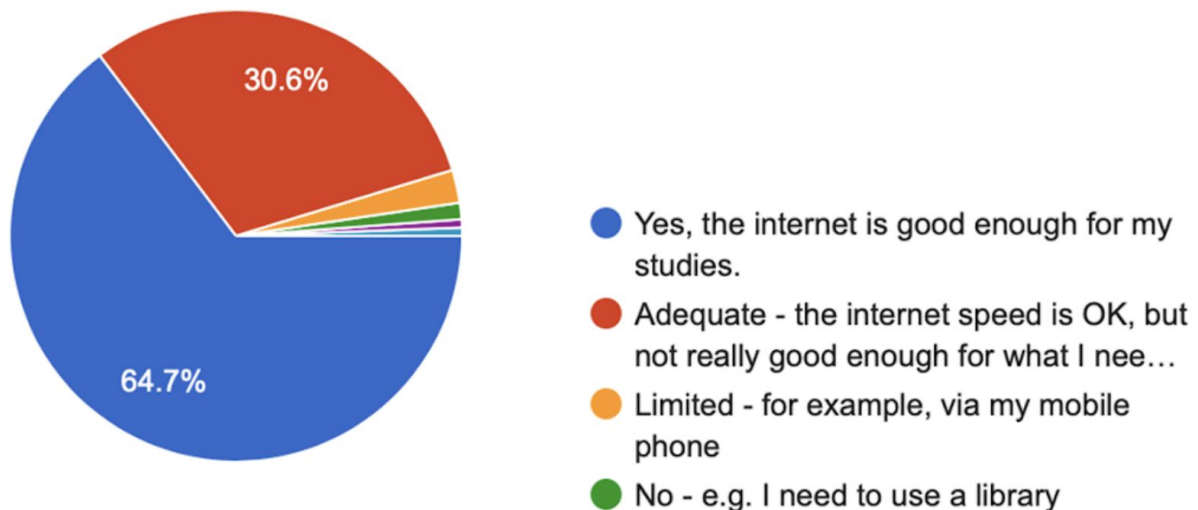
*Exams: There is still a lot of ambiguity around exams as my cohort is yet to receive the exam timetable; receive any information on how we will be examined; and the format of the exam. Now, granted these are unprecedented times but having some information about the exams would aid so much in helping me prepare."*

*"It is definitely a considerable change in what we are used to in general. Obviously, across an online platform, it is less accessible than being face to face and so there is not a general learning experience that you would usually be used to in the same room and asking questions, whether it be after a lecture or during a seminar. Previously, a group project submitted before this whole closure is now not going to be marked so the opportunity for feedback has been lost. Exams being cancelled and essays is an interesting result. The cancellation of exams means I actually automatically pass the modules now. I find now I have less to do (I do not mind at all because I can focus on other things) but I do understand that in general exams and assessments are set to test and build my academic skills, so there are downsides to these occurrences for people who feel that a lack of testing means they feel they do not have a chance to mark their progression in an exam environment. I feel that I would have done well in any case having submitted decent drafts during the year and with good results during semester one exams. Obviously, others will not feel the same way as I do and those voices should be listened to."*

**4. Do students from disadvantaged backgrounds have adequate internet access to participate in new formats of teaching, assessment and employer engagement?**

With the move to online teaching and assessment, and most students returning home, differential access to the internet is a major barrier to fairness.

- 35% of respondents did not have adequate internet access to access university lectures or resources, or properly participate in replacement virtual employer events.
- 5% of respondents had no internet access at home, or very limited access (e.g. through their mobile phone).
- While we do not have a comparison group for the student body as a whole, it seems reasonable to assume that students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to have inferior access to adequate internet.
- Equal access to teaching and learning resources is one key reason why academic success at university is considered to be more of a level-playing field than academic success at school (where those at private or high performing state schools may have access to more specialised teaching or smaller class sizes than those at a low performing school where few students achieve top grades). With the new format of teaching, differential access to the internet will likely impact outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.



*“The Internet connection at home is very weak and the environment is very noisy as I have younger siblings. Our house has no office or quiet space to work, and no libraries or study spaces in my town are open. “*

## **5. How has the coronavirus impacted the living situation of disadvantaged students?**

**Most of those students who before the outbreak lived away from home have returned home, but many are staying on campus (indeed since the survey closed, the latest advice is that they should).**

- Those returning home face considerable challenges trying to achieve their academic and career goals.
- Many cited not having a suitable place at home to study due to being in a crowded house, having no desk or separate room to work in and with multiple distractions and noise from siblings.
- Those staying at university report feeling isolated, often living alone in student houses or in empty accommodation blocks with most services closed.

**Examples of typical responses are shown below:**

*“I am still staying in student accommodation. I have been advised not to go home due to unnecessary travel and potential virus at home.”*

*“I live with an elderly woman and I have to self quarantine in my room to avoid her as she is of high risk. This of course has a huge mental impact and affects motivation and ability to study. Also as I have no functioning computer I cannot partake in Skype sessions and live lectures.”*

*“I am at home and so is my sister as she can no longer go to school or work. Coronavirus has made my family want me home but I cannot work here, there isn't the space and there are no longer the public spaces I would go to for this. My mum also works for the NHS so there is a lot of stress at home.”*

*“I've moved back home so I can look out for my father who is vulnerable. In my house you can only access the internet in the living room and the kitchen which makes it incredibly hard to focus. In addition to this the shutdown of things such as gyms and restaurants have made it hard to get away from the coronavirus situation and focus on work. Normally the gym is my way to clear my mind and get away from revision for a bit. This whole situation has been incredibly hard. It's also important to stress that I am quite lucky in my situation as a lot of people will be worse off, this is something I feel like the government and universities are not considering.”*

*“Social distancing has meant I have been away from peers and have not been able to engage in my studies as strongly as before.”*

*“I usually prefer studying at uni but now i have to adapt to studying at home.”*

*“The lack of a library, along with the academic resources that come with it, have really impacted the way in which I work. Furthermore, the closure of public spots have limited my ability to engage in peer group work, which is more productive in person than online. For many students, the home is associated with relaxation rather than work, and it has not been easy trying to adjust to the new standard.”*



**6. How has the Coronavirus impacted students' ability to succeed at university in other ways?**

**It is not just the changes to the format of teaching and assessment that has impacted students, but the broader impact that financial pressures, disruption and isolation are having on morale and general mental health.**

Some of the responses are provided below.

*"As a result of Coronavirus, I believe I will not gain my expected 2:1, as I suffer from depression and anxiety which have been heightened understandably, despite medication. One of the effects of my condition is that I find it hard to study. One way I have combatted this in the past is creating a timetable of studying, studying in the library with friends to ensure I am not isolating myself and using my friends as a support network. With the Coronavirus, I have been unable to do this, and it has had a toll of my mental health."*

*"I am under a lot of stress with my family. I come from a single parent low income family and my mum lives paycheck to paycheck. I have been sending over £170 a month home each month for the last 2.5 years to support with her bills as she usually falls short. She is having to take unpaid leave due to her place of work closing. Due to all of this, she is worried about paying her rent. To ensure that my family is financially secure during this time, I am working overtime to ensure I have enough saved up to pay my family's bills if need be. In turn, my attention has been taken away from my studies."*

*"The coronavirus has created a lot of uncertainty, as a uni student that comes from a low income household, and hearing family members are now out of a job creates a level of pessimism. As I find it hard to focus on studying when I'm becoming increasingly worried about surviving with my maintenance loan. I must place emphasis on how being from a low income household (single parent) can be detrimental to me as a student. As I begin to worry about trying to help make ends meet at home (plus ensure that I'm doing well), as well as my studies, which is not ideal as a student."*

**7. How has the Coronavirus impacted students' ability to earn money working part-time, and how is it affecting them?**

Previous research from upReach has demonstrated the reliance on paid part-time work that many students from lower-income backgrounds have. Loss of part-time work has affected many of the survey respondents, adding to financial pressures. Some respondents stated they had gained extra hours due to working in supermarkets or other areas of demand.

**Responses included:**

*"I've now had to stay at university for another 5 weeks because of risk of infection in London through parents - I have lost my job at uni which helped me cover food costs (cancelled due to no contact). So I am currently living in a situation where money is extremely tight."*

*"I work as a Student Ambassador and all of the open days, UCAS conventions and other jobs have been cancelled which means I have lost out on £500+ of work. I live one month ahead, earning for the next month, but I have been unable to do so for the past month due to coronavirus. I have less than £100 left to last me a month and I am really worried."*

*"I wasn't working before. But, now, I am caring for my grandad part-time. He needs 24/7 care due to having Alzheimer's, but a couple of his carers have had to drop out as a result of the coronavirus disruption."*

*"My job interview in London got cancelled. I am unsure whether to continue applying to jobs at present."*

*"All of my shifts have been cancelled. I work at football stadiums and there were supposed to be matches from now till August by all have been cancelled."*

*"Yes I tutor A level, now with the closure of schools my pupils no longer need my help. I needed the money to support my living costs such as food."*

*"All open days have been cancelled so I am unable to help out and get paid. This is increasing the financial pressure, particularly as I am running out of my second maintenance loan instalment."*

*"All my shifts got cancelled. I'm short on money until my loan comes in but extended family have lent me some which I will give back. Lending money is embarrassing and I feel a bit ashamed to have asked."*

*"Unlike all my friends who are getting laid off or losing hours, I work in a supermarket so my job is incredibly secure right now. I've been given a LOT more hours at work."*

*"I wanted to earn money during the summer holidays and spring holidays, to spend for the next academic year. However, this seems unlikely, due to the coronavirus."*

## **8. How has the Coronavirus impacted career plans?**

**At a time of great economic uncertainty, students were concerned about not being able to secure a job upon graduation. Work experience, networking events and internships were being cancelled, with students fearing that if these opportunities were permanently lost, they would be at a double disadvantage to those with existing networks to rely upon. Others were concerned that offers already made would be rescinded.**

### **Responses included:**

*"I am worried \*\*\*\*\* will pull my graduate job starting in June due to the virus."*

*"Spring weeks have been cancelled, all the hard work applying has been wasted."*

*"Every internship I have applied for has been cancelled, some were only available to second years so I will not be eligible to apply next year."*

*"Everything has been cancelled, and mostly not re-arranged."*

*"Don't know what will happen about summer internships which I worked very hard to get, some would say I put internships ahead of my Jan exam grades. With the prospect of internships not running and summer exams counting less, this isn't a great position."*

*"Programmes and exciting schemes have been cancelled - I was really looking forward to these experiences since they were of paramount importance to help me find my interests and jumpstart my career."*

*"Very worried about rescheduling of open days as I already have very little experience in my industry and was hoping the events at the end of the year would boost this."*

*"My internship is "under review", I have lost employment, I have lost volunteering opportunities, I have had employment and networking events cancelled."*

*"One way in which the virus has impacted my career plans is that I had a spring week that I managed to get into through upReach, and due to the virus, this has been postponed. This is quite frustrating as I spent a lot of time applying and working on my application. Thankfully this has only been postponed and not cancelled. Nevertheless, it is frustrating. In regards to speaking with my mentor, I have been able to call my mentor and have my meetings with him in that manner. I have only ever had meetings with my mentor face-to-face so this was certainly a change. However, I was still able to speak with him and gain the advice I needed."*

*"I planned on seeking to get an internship or possibly grad job this summer however this now seems wholly unfeasible. It is likely that I will now have to take out a year out. I am very worried that the economic climate after the disease goes will make it very difficult to get a job, especially after having not done work experience or an internship this summer."*

*"I am worried it will make my CV appear blank and impact my likelihood of getting interviews."*

*“As someone who is still applying for graduate roles, I will have to see how employers are handling the recruitment process because I assume that employers are considering their headcount carefully, as well as redefining their business processes to suit the current requirements. But I have not encountered any issues due to the Coronavirus. However, the second thing I am cognisant of, after the significant loss of human life, is the economic fallout, which could result in ‘Too many graduates chasing too few jobs’”*

*“Companies taking longer to reply to emails inquiries”*

## **9. How is the Coronavirus impacting students' lives more generally?**

**Perhaps unsurprisingly, the responses demonstrated the massive impact on the lives of students, particularly their mental health, due to the drastic changes, uncertainty and isolation.**

### **Responses included:**

*"I have definitely had more breakdowns, my anxiety has increased, there is massive massive fear and uncertainty amongst students and the wider public. I usually am very emotionally strong and put together but this has taken a massive toll on me and my mental health."*

*"I feel like my life has suddenly stopped. Funnily, the only thing that hasn't stopped is my exams. I feel sad and a bit empty because this year was meant to be so good for me. I delayed my start date for work so that I could travel the world after graduation. Instead, I left uni without a proper goodbye. My friends and I had a road trip planned as well as fun things to do before we all part ways. Now, it may be years before I see them again, if ever. Most of them are international and are flying back to their home countries. I feel like memories have been robbed from me. If this continues, I will not be able to graduate in person. I am an only child of immigrants and this was their only chance to attend a graduation so I am more disappointed for them than I am for me. It's a weird feeling as there isn't anyone to blame, it's just terrible timing."*

*"It's overall just stressful and relentless. Regardless of the need to study, the news never stops talking about it. Also, as a food-insecure family, panic buyers mean that it's harder to find food to eat on a regular basis."*

*"Isolated, lonely, stress can't stop crying to be honest. Other students can move back to their family homes. I cannot, so I have to sort this situation out!"*

*"I feel isolated and I miss my friends. I am also unable to see much of my family as they are elderly. Hard to stay fit and healthy now gym closed."*

*"Adds to more stress as a uni student unnecessarily, as I'm worried about my family, myself, my career aspirations for this year and trying to secure a good degree mark. All of this is enough to make me feel hopeless at a time like this, but I'm trying to persevere."*

*"I miss my family and wish I could go home. I am scared for my health. I am scared for the economic instability - especially as I do not have that family safety net to fall back on."*

*"Constantly anxious, lots of arguments in my household as my father is continuing to work as we cannot afford for him to take time off, but we do not want to risk his health."*

*"Uncertainty, anxiety and staying at home is very difficult and bad for mental health. Added anxiety as parents worrying about income due to working low skilled low income jobs and measures announced by government not sufficient."*

**10. The changes at universities and schools are expected to adversely impact social mobility**

**The survey asked “Do you think the changes being made due to the Coronavirus will have an impact on social mobility? If so, why?”**

**The responses, some of which are shown below, were interesting, typically based mainly on their own experiences and of their peers, and sometimes with reference to published research:**

*“Those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are finding themselves having to choose between unsafe, unpractical or overcrowded home environments or incredibly isolated university environments. This will effects our grades more than those from more advantaged backgrounds.”*

*“A lot of course mates already have experience in our industry and with a lot of open days and experience focused events now being cancelled the people who are less connected to this industry through already established contacts have very little ability to gain experience and show interest in companies.”*

*“Absolutely there will be an even widened attainment gap because students have been placed back in their unequal circumstances, which already impacts them at university nevermind at home in the midst of it all.”*

*“If studies suggest that the biggest gaps in educational attainment occur during the summer holidays (Gershenson, 2013), what will happen to students from different backgrounds who experience an extended period without education? I think this is more significant for students who are at school or in further education, as I was dismayed to find out how poor some of my skills were upon coming to university. The reality is that students will, more than likely, spend this time doing what their peers are doing and this may result in a tragic natural education experiment, perhaps impeding the gains that could have been made.”*

*“Predicted grades are no good to a lot of people. I was predicted a 4 when I did my gcse but managed to get a 7. I was predicted this grade because the college I attended was not used to people getting high grades so they didn't teach me to a high standard.”*

*“I definitely believe so, when looking at the news, the fact that a-level and gcse grades are based on predicted grades is not entirely fair as I think it will limit people in moving up to better things. For example, in year 12 my predicted grades were BCD but I turned this around to AAB. If my grades were based on my predicted I would not have been able to progress to my desired course. I also really hope this doesn't happen, but for those who are fortunate, foul play is inevitable. Rich students can pay teachers for high grades.”*



### **11. Universities - Best Practice based on student observations:**

**Recognising it is incredibly challenging for large organisations to react to this unprecedented crisis, and communicate changes to students, we have produced this list of examples of best practice mentioned by students.**

- Aim to ensure that any changes to teaching and assessment formats are **inclusive, accessible for all**, and that no student is disadvantaged.
- Provide **clear and timely communication** of changes to teaching, assessment, living arrangements (where applicable) and other services.
- Offer **live, interactive lectures and seminars**, that are inclusive to all and suit a variety of learning styles, rather than old pre-recorded lectures from prior years.
- **Extend deadlines** for essays and dissertations and provide **additional support**.
- When changes to assessment are confirmed, offer a mechanism to **take into account individual circumstances**, including that many students may have limited internet access and not have a suitable place at home to study.
- Provide an opportunity for **deferral or re-sitting of exams** in person once the university reopens to give reassurance that students have another chance (a Cambridge student called the resit option “an incredible and important lifeline”)
- Actively **promote free access** to online academic and career resources, and mental health/wellbeing advice.
- **Offer extra support** remotely, recognising the impact of the lecturer’s strike on student’s learning this academic year.
- **Provide contact details** of lecturers, and offer “virtual drop-in sessions.”

#### **Student quote:**

*“Those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are finding themselves having to choose between unsafe, unpractical or overcrowded home environments or incredibly isolated university environments. This will affect our grades more than those from more advantaged backgrounds.”*

## **12. Graduate Employers - Key Recommendations:**

At a time of great economic uncertainty, employers are typically prioritising ensuring the health and wellbeing of their employees and that their business can continue to operate in rapidly changing circumstances. They share student frustration at having to cancel or postpone events, and are often at an understandably early stage in their decision-making about future programmes. Based on the student responses, we would recommend employers do the following where they can.

- Provide **clear and timely communication** to students about job offers, future events and opportunities they're participating in or have applied to. Even if it is unclear what changes will be made, if any, keep students informed with a "holding email" to reduce anxiety.
- **Recognise the impact of cancelling** work experience, insight or networking events on this cohort of students.
- **Redouble efforts to engage with students** from less-advantaged backgrounds in the next 12 months, acknowledging the greater impact of the crisis on the careers prospects of disadvantaged students.
- Where **work experience, insight or networking events** are affected or anticipated to be affected by the Coronavirus::
  - a) Where possible, run a **virtual or online event** instead of cancelling - and design the event so students gain as much value as from an in-person event.
  - b) Offer **post-event online networking** with employees, or promise to offer an in-person opportunity to these students so they don't miss out on valuable face-to-face networking.
  - c) **Alternatively, postpone the event rather than cancelling it**, and keep the event for the **same group of students** for which it was cancelled (rather than a future cohort) so they don't miss the opportunity.
  - d) If the event gets postponed to the next recruitment cycle, see it as an **extra event** for that cycle, not a replacement for an event you would otherwise run (otherwise, one cohort of students misses out on the opportunity).

### **Student quote:**

*"A lot of course mates already have experience in our industry and with a lot of open days and experience focused events now being cancelled the people who are less connected to this industry through already established contacts have very little ability to gain experience and show interest in companies."*

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**About upReach:**

*upReach is an award-winning social mobility charity supporting less-advantaged undergraduates to secure top jobs. Currently supporting over 1,500 students, upReach deliver a comprehensive programme of professional development, through partnerships with top employers and universities. upReach works to address the progression gap for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds into graduate jobs after university, aiming to reach its vision of a society in which everyone has the opportunity to reach their full career potential, regardless of social background. In October 2019, upReach won the Charity of the Year Award (income < £1m) in the prestigious Charity Times Awards.*

*Learn more at [www.upreach.org.uk](http://www.upreach.org.uk)*

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