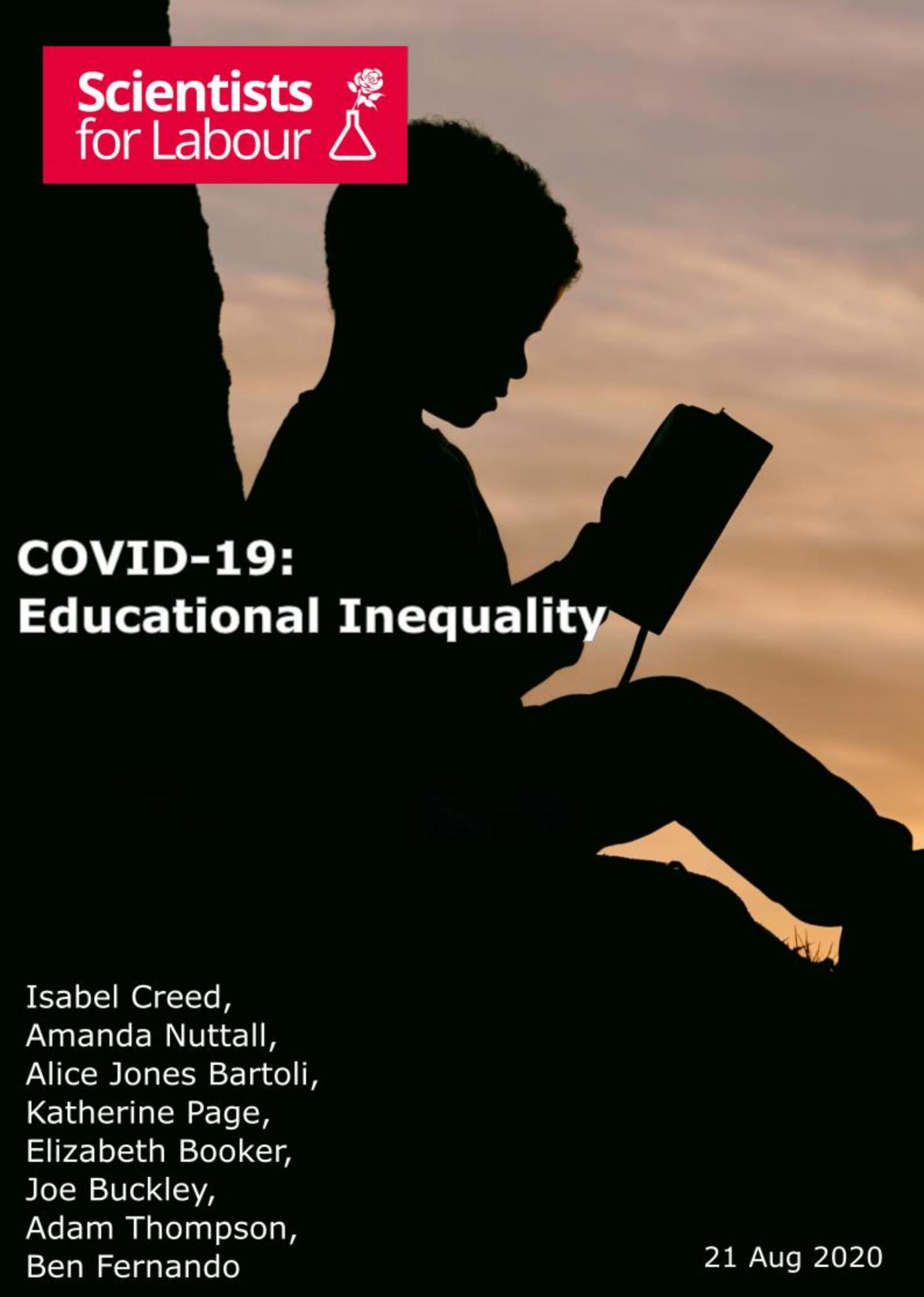


**Scientists  
for Labour** 



**COVID-19:  
Educational Inequality**

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21 Aug 2020

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## Scientists for Labour

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Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Scientists for Labour are preparing briefings and summaries of the latest research into coronavirus for Labour Party representatives and their staff. If you would like to receive these briefings or have any other queries, please contact Benjamin Fernando: [chair@sfl.org.uk](mailto:chair@sfl.org.uk).

## Executive summary

This report examines the effect the current COVID-19 pandemic is having on education inequality in the UK. The recent A-Level results scandal exposed the deep inequalities in our country's education system. Ofqual used schools previous exam performance as a predictor of current student's grades - this led to 40% of exam grades being downgrading, with this disproportionately effecting state school students from disadvantaged areas.

Despite the government's recent U-turn, this does not take away the fact that our school system unfortunately widens the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils from an early age. The current COVID-19 pandemic is likely to only exasperate this situation.

These concerns are discussed in the context of all educational groups, from early years through to higher education. Pertinent questions on topics that we feel the government ought to provide an answer are also discussed in the final sections of this report.

*For more information on schools, see the Scientists for Labour report on schools and COVID-19: [www.scientistsforlabour.org.uk](http://www.scientistsforlabour.org.uk)*

## 1. Introduction

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Horace Mann referred to education as the ‘greatest equaliser of the condition of man’, with a good education somewhat equalising people’s chances later in life<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, the converse is also true. **Education inequality** is defined here as the **unequal distribution of academic resources to a particular group, such as school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, books, and technologies**. In this report, we will examine in detail the extent of education inequality across the UK, and the effect the current pandemic has had on these inequalities.

We will first discuss the extent of pre-pandemic education inequality in the UK in terms of factors including: socio-economic background, geography, gender, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and ethnic background. We will also discuss the overlap between these factors. In the latter part of the report, we will then discuss in detail the effects the current pandemic is having on education inequality.

### 1.1 Terminology

The following terminology will be used throughout this report, as defined here:

- Early years: students aged 0 – 5;
- KS1: Years 1 – 2 in England, students aged 5 – 7;
- KS2: Years 3 – 6 in England, students aged 7 – 11;
- KS3: Years 7 – 9 in England, students aged 11 – 14;
- KS4: Years 10 – 11 in England, students 14 – 16. GCSEs are taken at the end of KS4;
- KS5: Years 12 – 13 in England (Sixth Form), students aged 16 – 18. A levels are taken at the end of KS5;
- Higher education: Students over 18 studying in universities or other places of higher education for an academic degree; and
- Further education: Students over 16 studying at colleges or other places of further education (including apprenticeships).

Recent policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities in the UK include<sup>2,3</sup> the following. It should be noted that **education is a devolved matter**, and as such post-devolution some topics discussed in this report are not the responsibility of the Westminster government.

### 1.2 Past efforts

- **SURE START**<sup>4</sup> was introduced in 1998 as a multi-departmental programme for early years intervention. This programme included the creation of children’s centres in deprived areas and free childcare for under 4s. Since 2010 funding to the Sure Start programme has been cut by two-thirds, resulting in over 500 Sure start centres closing. The number of free childcare hours has, however, increased from 15 to 30 hours for eligible parents.
- **STATUTORY EDUCATION ACTION ZONES** were introduced in 1998 to improve education in areas of social deprivation. Each education action zone, which can be in a rural or urban area, is operable for 3 years, with the possibility of extending for a further two years. Each zone is essentially a loose partnership of schools, further education colleges, local authorities, businesses, voluntary bodies and parent organisations, who get additional funding of up to £1M. The funding many of these education action zones have now ended.

- **EXCELLENCE IN CITIES** was funded from 1999 to 2003. The programme aimed to tackle underachievement in schools by introducing learning mentors, developing learning support centres, and talent programs
- **THE ETHNIC MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT GRANT** was introduced in 1999 for students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL) or were from an underachieving ethnic background.

### 1.1. Extent of Socio-economic inequality

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) found in 2019 that the socio-economic status of students had a large effect on academic attainment<sup>5</sup>. This report forms the basis of much of the discussion in this section.

This report defined disadvantaged students as those eligible for student premium funding, and persistently disadvantaged students as those eligible for **free school meals** for 80% of their time at school. The EPI measured the attainment gap by the months of learning of Maths and English that different groups of students differed by on average.

The EPI report found that the attainment gap grows substantially through the schooling system:

- In 2018, the **early years** attainment gap for disadvantaged students was 4.6 months. There appeared to be no significant reduction in this attainment gap since 2011;
- In **KS2**, the attainment gap for disadvantaged students was 9.2 months, which had reduced from 10.6 months in 2015;
- The **KS4** attainment gap for disadvantaged students was 18.1 months, which has partially increased in recent years;
- Since 2015, the predicted number of years required for the attainment gap to disappear as increased from **43 years in 2015 to 562 years in 2018**;

### 1.2. Extent of Geographical inequality

The EPI report also examined the effect a student's geographical location had on the difference in academic attainment between disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers, here denoted as the **disadvantaged attainment gap**. They found that in general, "disadvantage gaps still tend to be larger, and growing, in parts of the north of the country".

Disadvantaged students were again defined as those eligible for student premium funding. The disadvantaged attainment gap was measured by months of learning lost.

- Out of the 17 local authorities where the disadvantaged attainment gap was largest in early years, the majority were clustered in the North West of England
- The largest disadvantaged attainment gap at 16 years old was just over 2 years of learning
- The biggest increases in the KS2 disadvantaged attainment gap since 2012 were just over 3 months

### 1.3. Extent of Gender inequality

The academic achievement of girls at school has for some decades exceeded that of men, who were historically on average better performing<sup>6</sup>. There is, however, **an underrepresentation of women in certain fields**, e.g. the sciences<sup>8,9</sup>; which is perpetuated and amplified in the transition from school to higher education. The factors behind these gender-based gaps are numerous and complex<sup>7</sup>.

2018 UCAS data suggested that progression into higher education showed significant gender disparities, with 28% of male students and 38% of female students leaving school to attend higher education institutions<sup>10</sup>.

### 1.4. Extent of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) inequality

SEND Students can be grouped into those who have an **Education HealthCare Plan (EHCP)** and those who do not. An EHCP is typically given to students with more complex needs<sup>11</sup>.

The EPI report in 2019<sup>5</sup> used months of learning in Maths and English as a measure of the academic attainment gap and found that:

- SEND students without an EHCP were 24.5 months behind students with no known SEND by the end of secondary school
- SEND students with an EHCP were 40 months behind students with no known SEND at the end of secondary school
- SEND students were behind students with no known SEND requirement from early years to the end of secondary school; with the gap in attainment between these two groups of students increasing roughly monotonically with age.

It should be noted that those without a EHCP are generally considered to be able to manage within the mainstream system with support.

### 1.5. Extent of ethnic education inequality

Ethnicity can have a substantial impact on the achievement of students throughout the school system<sup>5</sup>. Some particularly large gaps are highlighted here:

- By the end of primary school students from a Chinese background are 12 months (note small sample sizes) ahead of White British students, while students from an Indian background are 7 months ahead. These gaps more than double by the end of secondary school
- By the end of primary school, students from a Gypsy/Roma background are 18 months behind, students from Irish traveller background are 14 months behind, and students from Black Caribbean background are 5 months behind their White British peers, respectively. Many of these disparities roughly double by the end of secondary school
- Since 2011, the gap for students from Black Caribbean background has increased by 2.2 months

## 1.6. Effect of education inequality

The effect of a poor education has on someone's life cannot be overstated. Links have been found between poor education and earning, life expectancy, and mental health problems.

- The National Literacy Trust<sup>12</sup> found that “A boy born in Stockton town centre (which has some of the most serious literacy challenges in the country) has a life expectancy 26.1 years shorter than a boy born in north Oxford (which has some of the fewest literacy challenges)”
  - Another recent report<sup>3</sup> found a strong link between psychiatric disorders in children and literacy levels
  - In the UK the hourly wage is strongly associated with reading proficiency<sup>14</sup>. Education inequalities are thus heavily tied to economic inequalities in both the directions of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’.
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## 2. The effects of the pandemic

### 2.1. Early Years

**Alongside schools and colleges, centres providing early years provision were asked to shut in March to all children except those of key workers.** Since June 2020<sup>15</sup>, early years providers have been invited to reopen alongside schools, **but not all have been able to reopen for all children.**

Temporary changes came into force in April 2020, meaning that early years settings only need to use reasonable endeavours to deliver the learning and development requirements set out in the **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**. The EYFS<sup>16</sup> sets standards for learning and development between birth and 5 years old, with children typically being assessed by an early years’ practitioner or health visitor at 2-3 years old.

These temporary changes include the removal of requirements for a progress check on children at age two or for provision of a final EYFS profile for those about to start reception. The potential repercussions of this decision are likely to include missed opportunities to refer children to appropriate services for assessment and support, for example speech and language therapy.

The progress made in early years development is important for laying a foundation for future growth, including developing skills that are needed for the start of school<sup>17</sup>. It is, therefore, crucial that suitable provisions are put in place to ensure that young children are reaching their key milestones. This will entail providing clear signposts for specialist assessment and support.

### 2.2. School aged children

**The majority of schools were closed at the end of March for all children except those of key workers, children with social workers and/or those with an EHCP<sup>18</sup>.** A rapid change in the place of education for the majority of children from school to a home environment, meant that resources available at home determined to a much greater extent the progress students could make during the lockdown.

A number of reports<sup>19, 20</sup> have been written on the availability of online tuition and the amount of work students are completing daily in terms of the demographic characteristics of the students. Due to the

subjective nature of these studies, they do not all necessarily come to exactly the same conclusions regarding the extent to which different groups are continuing formal education. All, however, **agree that the pandemic will increase education inequality in the UK**, undoing some of the progress made in the last 20 years.

A report from the Sutton Trust<sup>19</sup> found that only 23% of students attended online lessons daily. Additionally, they found that 30% of state school students from middle class families attended online lessons, compared to only 16% of students from working class families. By contrast, over half (51%) of primary school and 57% of secondary school privately educated students were able to attend online lessons each day. 44% of children from middle class families, compared to 33% of those from working class families, completed 4 hours of work a day. These results are likely to increase the state school/private school gap which has narrowed in recent years.

The availability of teachers to provide material was necessarily impacted by their own home circumstances. Many teachers were also home-schooling their own children, managing safeguarding and the needs of vulnerable children and families, and teaching in school when required. **The majority of teachers had no experience of online teaching** and needed to consider safeguarding and students' own IT access in their decisions about how to provide learning materials to families<sup>21</sup>.

**The level of education of a child's parents also determined how well they felt they could direct their child's learning.** 75% of parents with a postgraduate degree and 60% of those with an undergraduate degree felt equipped to deal with their child's learning.

**When schools did set work, the amount returned to teachers heavily depended on the socio-economic status of the school**<sup>19</sup>. While 50% of students from private schools returned three-quarters or more of the work provided, only 27% of students from more advantaged state schools and 8% of those from less advantaged state schools did. 24% of teachers said they received less than a quarter of the work supplied back.

Similar disparities in terms of geography also exist<sup>20</sup>.

### 2.3. Students with SEND

**The majority of students with SEND have not attended school since March 2020** and some have conditions which may make them more vulnerable to infection.

**The Coronavirus Act (2020)**<sup>22</sup> temporarily amended the 'absolute' duty to make provision in an EHCP to a 'reasonable endeavours' duty. During the specified period of notices made under the Act (currently 1 May - 31 July 2020), local authorities should do whatever they reasonably can to put provision in place, but not being able to do so would not necessarily put them in breach of the law. This amendment also includes timeframes for new assessments and annual reviews, which may be delayed.

Parents of children with SEND reported both unique and more profound challenges<sup>23</sup> than those with neurodevelopmentally typical children. They noted that their children's educational needs may usually be met by a team of professionals with appropriate training, and parents reported needing specialist input. **Children with SEND are also more likely to experience mental health difficulties**, and this may be exacerbated during lockdown. **Lack of access to specialist input for both education and mental health needs for children with SEND is a clear source of further inequality.**

## 2.4. Higher and further education

Here, we examine in some detail the effect the pandemic is having on education inequality in higher and further education, separating the discussion by setting.

### 2.4.1 Higher education

There is already a keen awareness of patterns of inequality which tend to be reproduced in Higher Education (HE), including under-representation of ethnic minority and disadvantaged students at Russell Group universities, and reduced degree outcomes for these groups<sup>24</sup>.

UCAS reports that, at the current point in the recruitment cycle for **September 2020 admissions**, there are more firm offer holders compared with 2019<sup>25</sup>. However, slightly under a fifth of applicants (19%) are undecided about their university attendance for September, with disadvantaged students more likely to have changed their decision<sup>26</sup>. **Almost half of applicants (48%) are concerned that COVID-19 will have a negative impact on their transition to university**, with applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to report worries than their better off peers<sup>26</sup>.

Care must be taken to ensure that the exacerbation of inequalities in HE is minimised.

### 2.4.2 Further education

The further education (FE) sector has suffered significant budget cuts over the past decade. Lost learning time and instability in grading, due to the move to teacher-based grades rather than exam grades, are most likely to affect students in FE settings, who in turn are most likely to be disadvantaged students<sup>27</sup>.

**Further, there are concerns about the potential for unconscious bias in teachers' grading of under-represented groups.** Ofqual does not have a proposal in place to respond to unfair grading of individuals, only to review large groups of under-represented groups within a single educational establishment. This lack of provision means that students from low-income backgrounds, with SEND or from certain ethnic groups, could have their grades unfairly depressed.

Even with final exams cancelled, students would benefit from continued learning to support transition and preparation for academic study in September<sup>26</sup>.

### 2.4.3 Transition and wellbeing

The social and cultural knowledge and skills that support successful transition to HE/FE are easily accessible to 'traditional' (often white and middle class) students, but remain a complex field that can be difficult to negotiate for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or under-represented groups<sup>28</sup>. These difficulties arise even at the application stage: 38% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds report that applying to university felt 'intimidating', and 30% reported that even completing the application was difficult<sup>29</sup>.

Following the Widening Participation scheme and government aims to increase the proportion of disadvantaged students accessing HE, many universities have policies in place to support transition to university. These often address issues within the context of the formal classroom environment but in the informal spaces where students build relationships with peers, re-existing patterns of social inequality tend to be maintained or exacerbated<sup>30</sup>. **With a potential shift to more online teaching and less structured on-campus activity, there could be risk that social transition, building relationships, and subsequent wellbeing become increasingly difficult for under-represented and disadvantaged students.**

#### 2.4.4 Ability to work from home

It is anticipated that many students will begin, or continue, FE/HE programmes with a great deal of learning taking place online. **The majority of existing students report having sufficient access to technology in order to study from home but having a suitable space in which to study is less common. A small, but significant, number of students do not have sufficient internet access or sole use of a device for studying**<sup>31</sup>. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have the necessary conditions to work from home effectively and so will be disproportionately affected by increased online learning compared to their better off peers.

#### 2.4.5 Health risks

The areas of England which are ranked high on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)<sup>i</sup> scale experience an increased death rate from COVID-19, as do areas which are populated with a large proportion of people from ethnic minority backgrounds<sup>25</sup>. Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are unevenly residentially concentrated in urban centres<sup>26</sup> and deprived areas, further increasing health risks. As the ongoing threat of the coronavirus crisis will disproportionately adversely affect those from BAME and/or disadvantaged backgrounds, these students may take extra precautions when engaging with student life. For example, these students may avoid using public transport, shared dining spaces on campus or meeting with large groups of students in teaching spaces. Such restrictions on informal gatherings are likely to exacerbate existing inequalities.

#### 2.4.5 Finance

It has already been documented that **better off students have made the most gains from the expansion of HE in the UK during the past 30 years**<sup>32</sup>, including the removal of student number caps and changes to tuition fees and maintenance loan financing.

It is common for students to take on part-time work alongside studies, but students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to work to cover basic living costs<sup>31</sup>. This factor is pertinent, considering that during the COVID-19 outbreak, young people and those of Pakistani, Bangladesh or Black ethnicity have been more affected by significantly reduced incomes<sup>33</sup>. Continued instability in employment opportunities – especially in part-time, precarious work related to hospitality industries, may impact on students' ability to finance university related expenses.

Further implications of predicted national financial difficulties include a significant reduction in financial support from parents. **While financial concerns appear common across all socio-economic groups, a greater proportion of students from poorer backgrounds report feeling much less able to finance their studies due to the impact of COVID-19**<sup>31</sup>.

National disparities in income mirror disparities in educational outcomes: much of England (outside of London in particular) has less than a quarter of the population educated beyond A level<sup>25</sup>. **Any reduction in students entering or continuing/completing HE programmes could therefore have long term impact in sustaining and possibly widening the income gap.**

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<sup>i</sup> The IMD is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in England. Each area is ranked from 1 (most deprived area) to 32,844 (least deprived area). The rankings are based on seven domains of deprivation: income, employment, education, skills and training, health and disability, crime, housing and services, and living environment.

### 3. Questions for the government

1. What assessment has been made by the government of the intersection between increasing educational inequality and other 'flags' for high levels of experienced adverse affects from the pandemic; including but not limited to disability and ethnicity?
  2. What metrics will the government use to assess in increases in educational disparity as a result of the pandemic, and how will these be different to those used in 'normal times' to account for the pandemic's unprecedented nature?
  3. How will the results of these studies be fed through into efforts to combat inequalities where possible?
  4. In the event of further national or localised lockdowns, what plans has the government put in place to ensure that education is standardised across the country and across all educational settings (including home learning) to ensure these students are not disadvantaged if at all possible?
  5. What steps have been taken to ensure schools and students have the resources necessary to do some or all of their teaching virtually in the future, as a contingency plan?
  6. How will children who are missing early years care (due to nurseries remaining closed or offering reduced hours) be adequately assessed and supported at key points?
  7. What measures have been put in place to support students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, on their transition to higher or further education, bearing in mind that many will not have had face to face teaching time since March?
  8. Given the elevated risks experienced by certain groups, who will therefore be less able to take part time employment to fund their studies in FE or HE, will be government consider one off means tested grants to students in these groups (e.g. shielding groups, moderate risk, BAME students)?
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### 4. Conclusions

**A high-quality education can be an opportunity and an equalizer, while a poor-quality education can significantly impact current and future quality of life. While the coronavirus crisis and associated measures have been challenging for everyone, there is a particular impact on children and young people during the formative points of their academic and social education.**

Even before the pandemic, differences were evident in education outcomes across geographies, socio-economic groups, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and students designated as having special educational needs or disabilities. Without access to face-to-face teaching, and with virtual or at home teaching relying on electronic resources, time and support, current research implies that these gaps are likely to widen significantly.

Disruption to transition years, such as KS5 students who would be moving on to higher or further education, leaves young people without the educational and pastoral support that would help them thrive in new environments. With the ongoing effects of the pandemic likely to change the higher and further education experiences significantly, these effects may be felt for many years.

**To repair the damage, the government must act immediately to minimise the impact of the pandemic.** However, it is also important in the medium term to properly assess the attainment gaps that exist, and the determine the best way of bringing all students up to the same level in the long term, as research from before the pandemic shows clear stagnation in closing these gaps.

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