



Post-18 opportunities and aspirations

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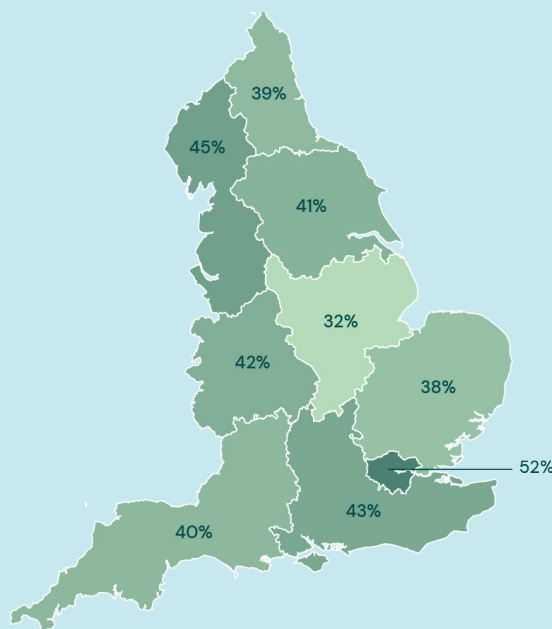
Highlights

- Opportunities available to young people to do the types of jobs and training that they want to are not equally spread across the country. Those from the most urban areas are among the most likely to report there being good opportunities available to them (48%), while those from the most rural areas are more pessimistic (37%). Those living in London are most likely to report there being opportunities to train/do the job they aspire to (52%), while those from the East Midlands are the least likely (32%).
- Over four in five (85%) have now been able to access formal information, advice and guidance (IAG) since the beginning of Year 12. Looking at career related IAG provided in schools, those attending private schools are significantly more likely (93%) to have received such support compared to state secondary schools (80%), sixth form colleges (79%) and FE colleges (66%).
- Only around one in twenty (6%) are currently engaged in an apprenticeship scheme. Attitudes to their apprenticeships are generally positive. But while the majority (54%) think that apprentice pay was either 'good' or 'very good', there is a risk that this may change if pay does not keep pace with the cost of living.
- Like for previous cohorts, the vast majority (68%) of young people say that they plan on studying at university. Despite pandemic

disruptions to education, those intending to apply to university were very confident about their prospects of getting a place, with over nine in ten (94%) indicating as such.

- The percentage of the cohort reporting that their main activity is studying at school/college dropped by five points compared to the same time last year, from 92% to 87%. Those with parents in routine/manual occupations are twice as likely to have left education after Year 12 as those from professional/managerial households.

Percentage positive about career and training opportunities in their locality, by region



Notes. N = 10,500. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

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Context

As part of the Wave 1 findings of the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study, we examined the education and career plans of the COSMO cohort when they were in Year 12 (aged 16–17).¹ A key finding from this analysis was that over three in five young people changed their education or career plans due to the pandemic. Following this group into Wave 2 of the study, we are now in a position to say more about what the repercussions of this have been. For some, the education and career pathways set upon last year will have remained on course; for others, instabilities in their lives precipitated by the pandemic may have resulted in further change – above and beyond what they reported in Year 12.

Looking at the period when the cohort were establishing their post-18 plans, we continue to explore their education and career plans. For those who remained in education, their final year of school/college will have, in part, been spent planning what they are going to do when they leave school; whether this is to go straight into employment, enrol in higher education (HE), or head into other forms of training. To this end, research suggests that students' exposure to early career guidance at school has a lasting impact on both accessing careers information at university and subsequent career pathways.²

Access to high quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) is key to informed decision-making around future education and career plans. When, at Wave 1, young people were asked about school-based IAG, access had been hampered by pandemic disruptions to schooling. Given the emphasis on the role of early advice on careers and educational choices in future outcomes – and that access tends to vary in accordance with disadvantage^{3,4}, – it is important to further explore access to IAG for the COSMO cohort after the pandemic. This is especially so during Year 13, when many young people are making decisions that will set them off on new educational and career pathways.

For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, factors beyond aspiration and ambition can be important to their education and career plans. Whether or not it is financially viable to go to university may figure in decision-making around further study. Findings from Wave 1 COSMO analysis suggest that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have had their educational progress

affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic. Those from households finding it most difficult to get by were, for example, more likely to report that they had fallen behind their classmates.⁵ Since the height of the pandemic, the cost of living crisis has had a major bearing on household finances. Evidence suggests that challenges such as this, combined with disruptions to education and careers guidance, have particularly affected widening participation (WP) students who have been exploring pathways into HE.⁶

State school students were 2.6 times more likely to commute from home to university than their private school counterparts.

For those who decide to go on to higher education, inequalities have previously been found to drive differences in university and course choice among different groups. For example, more than three times the number of students from lower social class backgrounds commute from home when studying at university than those in the highest social group (45% compared to 13%).⁷ Similarly, state school students were 2.6 times more likely to commute from home to university than their private school counterparts. Those from ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi students were also most likely to commute. Similarly, choice of degree programme may be influenced by socio-economic background. For example, research shows that young people from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to choose a subject based on perceptions of future jobs and employment.⁸

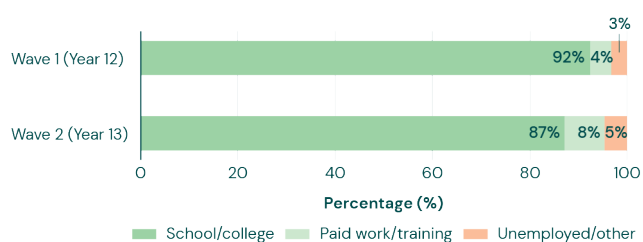
Having access to good information and guidance is central to young people being able to consider the wide range of opportunities available to them and reach their potential. What they are doing at the age of 17–18 – whether they are still studying at school/college, or already developing workplace experience – can both open and shut doors. Through analysis of young people's experiences and perceptions we are able to shed new light on how their backgrounds interact with the decisions that they are taking around university, training, and the workplace, as well as their sense of the level of training and career opportunities available to them in their local area.

Current activity at age 18

The decisions that young people take aged 16–18 are formative life choices that can both open up and restrict opportunities available to them in terms of both education and work. In England, 16–18 year olds are required to do one of the following until the age of 18: stay in full time education, start an apprenticeship or traineeship, or spend 20+ hours a week working or volunteering while in part-time education or training. The route that young people choose may be informed by a variety of factors, whether this is about opening up pathways to their chosen career, giving themselves time to make decisions about what they want to do next, or otherwise being shaped by their personal circumstances (such as health and family).

Much as we found in Wave 1, the vast majority of young people in the cohort (who are now in Year 13) remain in school or college. Just under nine in ten (87%) are still in education, compared to just over nine in ten (92%) who said this in Wave 1 (Figure 1). However, there were increases in the overall shares of young people reporting being either in paid work or training (8%, up from 4%) and those who were unemployed or doing something else (5%, up from 3%). Those who were in work or training at Wave 1 were twice as likely (15%) as those who had been in education (7%) to have changed status by Wave 2.

Figure 1: Main activity in Year 13 compared to the previous year



Notes. N = 11,451. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

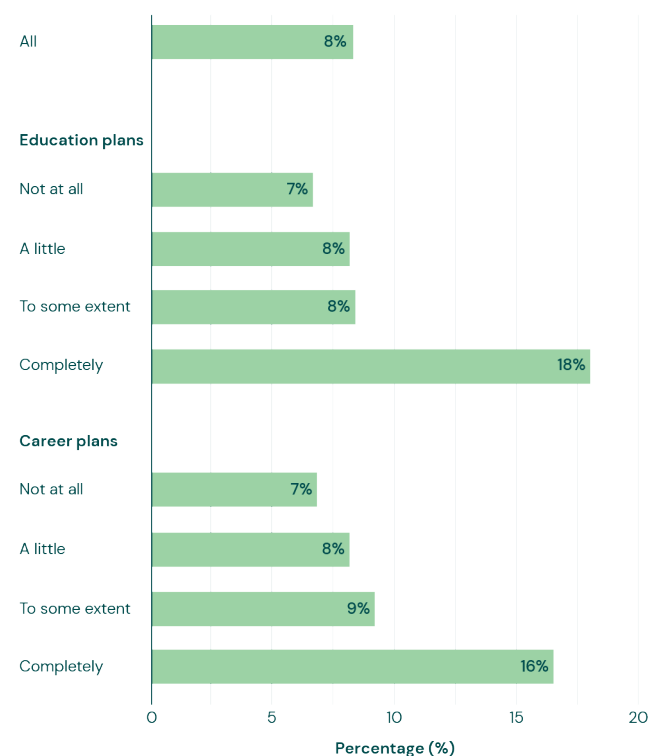
The socio-economic backgrounds of young people are predictive of these changes in education and employment status. Those whose parent reported working in a routine or manual profession (or who have never worked) were more likely to have changed status (12%) compared to those whose parent works in a higher managerial/professional occupation (5%).⁹ Looking specifically at those whose main status in Wave 1 was that they were in education, a similar pattern emerges.

Just 4% of those with parents in higher managerial/professional occupations had left education, compared to almost one in ten of those whose parents reported being in either an intermediate profession (9%) or a manual/routine occupation, or who have never worked (9%).

The socio-economic backgrounds of young people are not the only thing that are correlated with these reported changes in whether they are primarily in education, work/training or doing something else. Experiences of the pandemic – and its impacts – may have also played a part. In Wave 1, most young people reported that they altered their education plans (64%) and career plans (60%) as a result of the pandemic.¹⁰ Among these, the extent to which plans changed varied. At the extreme, almost one in ten (8%) young people described their education or career plans, respectively, as having changed ‘completely’ due to the pandemic.

And these changes due to the pandemic appear to predict ongoing flux in young people’s main education/employment activity. Those who reported complete upheaval in their plans at Wave 1 were around twice as likely as those reporting less dramatic changes to have gone on to report a change in their status at Wave 2 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of young people who changed their main activity, by the extent the pandemic led to them changing their education/career plans



Notes. N = 9,477. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

Almost one in five (18%) of those who said their education plans had changed completely as a result of the pandemic reported a change to their main education/employment status at Wave 2. This compares to just under one in ten (8%) across those who reported either no change in their education plans due to the pandemic, or that they had changed “a little” or to “some extent”.

Not all changes to plans are necessarily negative. For some they may be borne of re-evaluating education and career priorities or successfully completing a course, while for others they may come from instabilities in their lives. The pandemic was a major source of external instability for many. This, in turn, may be part of what is reflected in the association between the impacts of the pandemic on young people’s education and career choices and changes in their current education/employment. As a result, there is a risk that changes precipitated by and attributed to the pandemic may have become embedded.

Access to information, advice and guidance (IAG)

In forming their plans for further education or future careers, young people making informed decisions is important. One of the challenges that the pandemic posed was that access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) – to inform such decisions – was harder to deliver due to the restrictions to face-to-face learning and access to resources at schools. Understanding young people’s access to IAG during and since pandemic restrictions were lifted is important to understanding the context in which they were making crucial decisions for their futures, especially for those in an important transitional period, as the COSMO cohort were.

As in Wave 1, we asked young people whether or not they had participated in a range of IAG activities at their school, college or training provider.¹¹ In Wave 1, around seven in ten (70%) young people reported ever having participated in school-based IAG (see the Wave 1 briefing on Future Plans and Aspirations¹²). Updating this picture at Wave 2, more than eight in ten (85%) reported that they had participated in at least one IAG activity since the start of Year 12.

Not all changes to plans are necessarily negative. For some they may be borne of re-evaluating education and career priorities or successfully

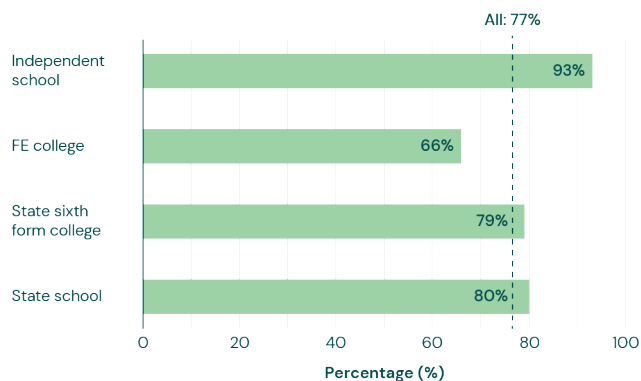
completing a course, while for others they may come from instabilities in their lives. The pandemic was a major source of external instability for many. This, in turn, may be part of what is reflected in the association between the impacts of the pandemic on young people’s education and career choices and changes in their current education/employment. As a result, there is a risk that changes precipitated by and attributed to the pandemic may have become embedded.

However, gaps in access to IAG remain. Specifically, differences in young people’s access to IAG activities by type of school/college attended have not improved since Wave 1. Those who attended a private school were still much more likely to have accessed IAG activities, with almost all (97%) of them participating in at least one type of school/college based IAG activity since the beginning of Year 12, compared to just under nine in ten (85%) across state schools and colleges.

There were also differences by pupils’ ethnic backgrounds, with White or ‘other’ pupils still less likely to have received IAG support (83% and 82%), while Black pupils were still the most likely to have received such support (86%). This pattern is consistent with what we saw in Wave 1, where 71% of White pupils and 67% of those who identified as ‘other’ accessed IAG activities, while 78% of Black pupils received IAG support. However, the gaps in receipt of IAG activities in terms of ethnicity have narrowed.

But, does receipt of IAG make a difference to young people’s attitudes toward their careers? To shed some light on this, we explore how their access to school-based career-related IAG activities, specifically, predict young people’s attitudes towards their future careers.¹³ Overall, about three-quarters (77%) of cohort members accessed at least one type of career-related IAG activity organised by school or college since the beginning of Year 12 or equivalent. Access to career-related formal IAG activities also varied by disadvantage, especially post-16 institution type. More than nine in ten (93%) pupils who attended a private school participated in at least one type of career-related IAG activity, compared to eight in ten (80%) of those who attended a state secondary school (see Figure 3 below).

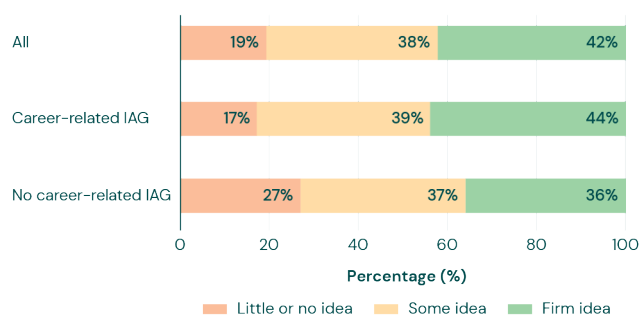
Figure 3: Access to career-related school/college-based IAG activities, by post-16 institution type



Notes. N = 9,618. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

Young people who accessed career-related IAG activities were more likely to say they know what jobs or careers they are interested in. Over two in five (44%) who participated say they have a firm idea of what jobs or careers they are interested in, compared to just over a third (36%) of those who did not access this support (see Figure 4). However, there is no statistically significant difference in young people’s confidence in achieving their career aspirations by whether they accessed IAG activities or not.

Figure 4: Pupils report having an idea of what jobs or careers they are interested in, by access to career-related school/college-based IAG activities



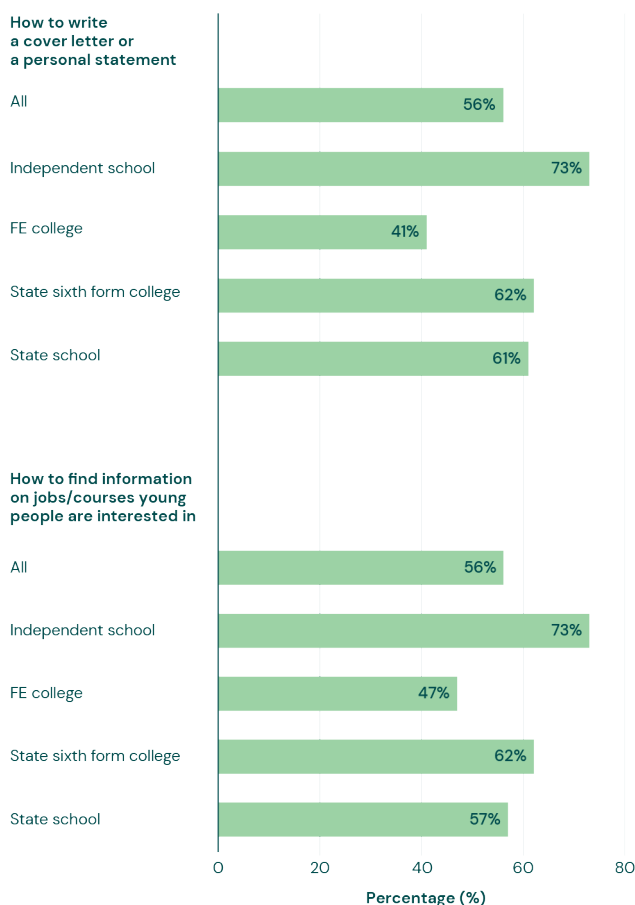
Notes. N = 10,675. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

Access to help with job skills

When asked, more specifically, about being offered help with job application related skills by their schools or colleges, more than half said they have been offered help with how to find information on jobs or courses they are interested in (56%), and how to write a cover letter or a personal statement (56%).

Young people’s access to help with these job skills varies by their institution type. Those who were privately educated were consistently more likely to have been offered help with all these three job skills, compared to their peers from other types of institution (see Figure 5). For example, 73% of young people who attended a private school have been offered help with how to find information on jobs or courses they are interested in, compared to 57% of those who attended a state secondary school, 62% of those from a sixth form college, and 47% of those at an FE college. This pattern across different institution types reflects the one seen above for general IAG activities.

Figure 5: Young people being offered help with job skills, by post-16 institution type



Notes. N = 9,618. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

Access to informal advice and guidance

Not all information, advice and guidance that young people receive comes formally through their school, college or training provider. Rather, informal advice and support may be received from family, friends and other key figures (such as teachers). More than four in five (83%) received advice and guidance from parents or guardians and about half got informal advice and guidance from friends or a partner (52%) or a teacher (49%) (see Table 1).

Those who were privately educated were much more likely to receive informal advice and guidance from a teacher (80%), compared to their peers from a state school or college (53%).

Young people having advice from parents or guardians varies by family background. 92% of young people whose parents have a degree reported that they received information, advice and support from their parents, while this figure for those whose parents do not have a degree is 81%.

There are also differences in whether young people received informal advice and guidance from a teacher by their post-16 institution type. Those who were privately educated were much more likely to receive informal advice and guidance from a teacher (80%), compared to their peers from a state school or college (53%).

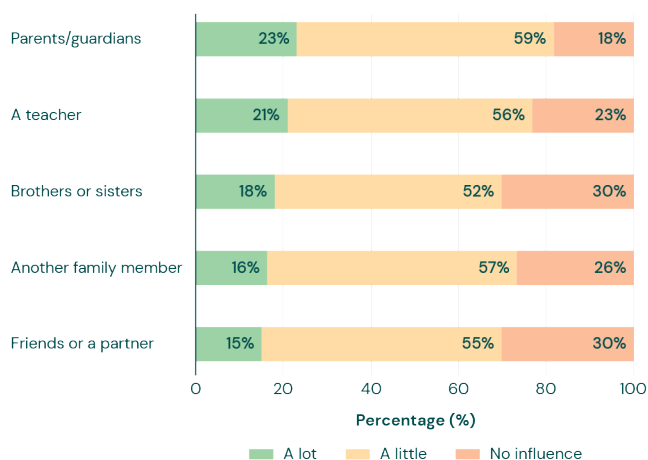
Table 1: Proportion of pupils having accessed informal advice and guidance from different sources

Source	%
Parents/guardians	83
Friends or a partner	52
A teacher	49
Brothers or sisters	34
Another family member	28

Notes. N = 11,451. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young people non-response.

When asked about the influence of different sources of informal advice and guidance on their decisions about future plans, young people reported that parents, guardians or teachers were more likely to have influenced what they might do compared to advice from others (see Figure 6). More than three quarters said that advice from parents or guardians or a teacher had some influence on what they might do in the future.

Figure 6: Levels of influence of informal sources of advice and guidance on what young people might do in the future, among those who received advice from each source



Notes. N for parents/guardians = 8,795; N for a teacher = 5,518; N for brothers or sister = 3,932; N for another family member = 3,009; N for friends or a partner = 5,896. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

Young people with at least one parent or guardian educated to degree level were only slightly more likely (84%) to say that the advice from their parents or guardians had influenced what they might do in the future than those without a graduate parent (81%). There was no statistically significant difference in the influence of teachers by post-16 institution type.

Those from a working-class background were more likely to say that the informal advice that they received from friends or a partner had some level of influence on their future plans (74%) compared to their peers from professional/managerial homes (69%).

Apprenticeships

As in Wave 1, young people were asked about the different pathways that they are either considering or actively pursuing, be these vocational (such as an apprenticeship) or academic (such as higher education) routes. For some, the option to combine training with work is an attractive one – offering earlier entry to the workplace, while developing skills on the job. Wave 2 data on apprenticeships enables us to understand not just the take-up of apprenticeships in the cohort, but also young people’s motivations to pursue this route, and shed light on some of the challenges that they face.

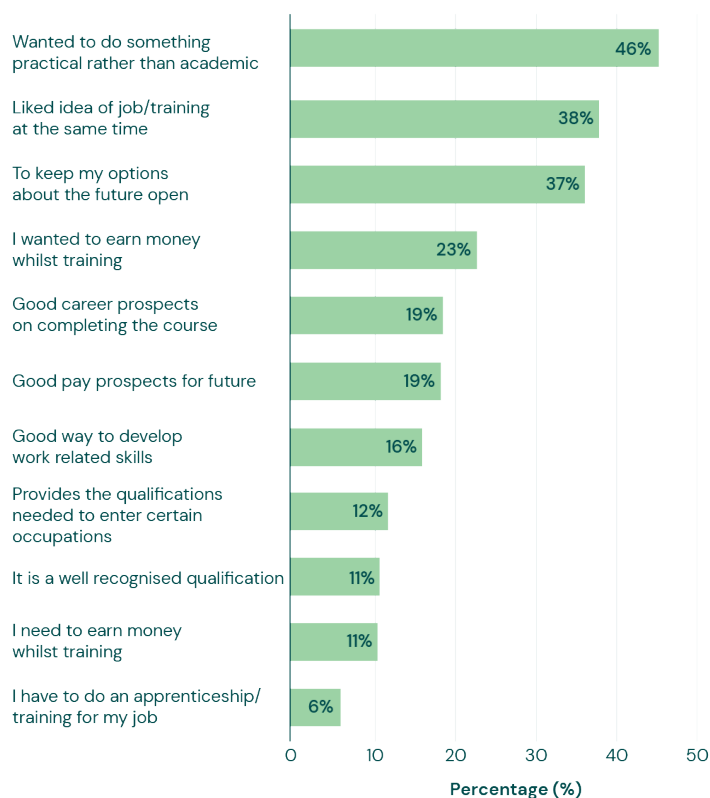
While there has been a growing policy emphasis on apprenticeship programmes as an important pathway into the workforce, the proportion of those engaged in an apprenticeship at this age remains relatively small. Just over one in twenty (6%) young people in this cohort were engaged in an apprenticeship. Of these, half (50%) were working towards an intermediate apprenticeship (Level 2) and around two fifths (41%) an advanced apprenticeship (Level 3). A small number reported working towards a higher level of qualification, with 7% indicating a higher level apprenticeship (Levels 4–5) and 2% a degree level apprenticeship (Level 6+).

There is existing evidence of a socio-economic dimension to apprenticeship uptake, both overall and by qualification level,¹⁴ and this is reflected in the COSMO cohort. Looking at uptake overall, those with parents working in higher managerial/professional occupations were slightly less likely (5%) to be on an apprenticeship programme, compared to those from routine, manual and non-working backgrounds (6%). Likewise, those with parents educated to degree level were significantly less likely (4%) to be doing an apprenticeship, compared to those with parents with lower qualifications (7%). A similar pattern also emerges in terms of the level of apprenticeship that young people are working towards. Among those with a parent educated to degree level, the rate of apprentices working towards a Higher or Degree level apprenticeship (14%) is higher compared to those whose parents are not educated to degree level (7%).

Apprentices were also asked about their reasons for choosing this route, as well as their impressions of their apprenticeship so far. The three most commonly cited reasons for choosing to pursue an apprenticeship were: wanting to do something

practical (46%), wanting to learn and train at the same time (38%), and keeping options open (37%). Only a small percentage of young apprentices (6%) indicated that they had done it out of necessity – i.e. that they had to do an apprenticeship or training as a requirement for their job (see Figure 7).

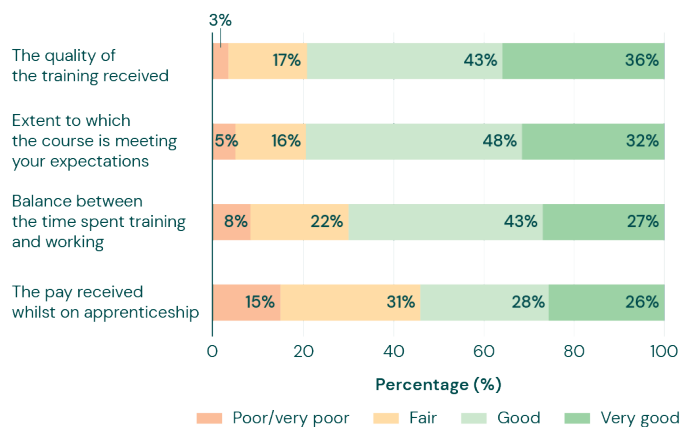
Figure 7: Reasons for doing an apprenticeship



Notes. N = 544. Only young people who indicated that they were currently on an apprenticeship scheme were asked for the reasons they selected that pathway. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

Turning to the advantages and challenges of doing an apprenticeship, young people who had started an apprenticeship before the age of 18 were relatively positive across the board, with the majority indicating each element was either good or very good. Levels of satisfaction were highest for the quality of training that they have received so far, with just under four in five (79%) indicating this was good or very good (see Figure 8 below). While a majority indicated that they thought that apprentice pay was good or very good (54%), this rated lower than the other factors that apprentices were asked about. And, indeed, low pay has been identified as a barrier to access in research elsewhere.¹⁵ Increases in the cost of living, not met with commensurate increases in pay, may mean the outlook with respect to this is less positive moving forward.

Figure 8 : Attitudes to apprenticeships



Notes. N = 468. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

The profile of the level of apprenticeship qualifications and sectors that these are being pursued in is likely to change as the cohort gets older, as may patterns of access and the opportunities and challenges that prospective apprentices face. Looking ahead, we hope that future waves of COSMO will be able to engage with these ongoing issues as well as better understand uptake and attitudes towards apprenticeships in light of government policy.

Post-18 university plans

Evidence from Wave 1 of the COSMO study suggested that, for most young people who were studying for their GCSEs as COVID-19 took hold, the pandemic had a bearing on their future plans for both their education and careers.¹⁶

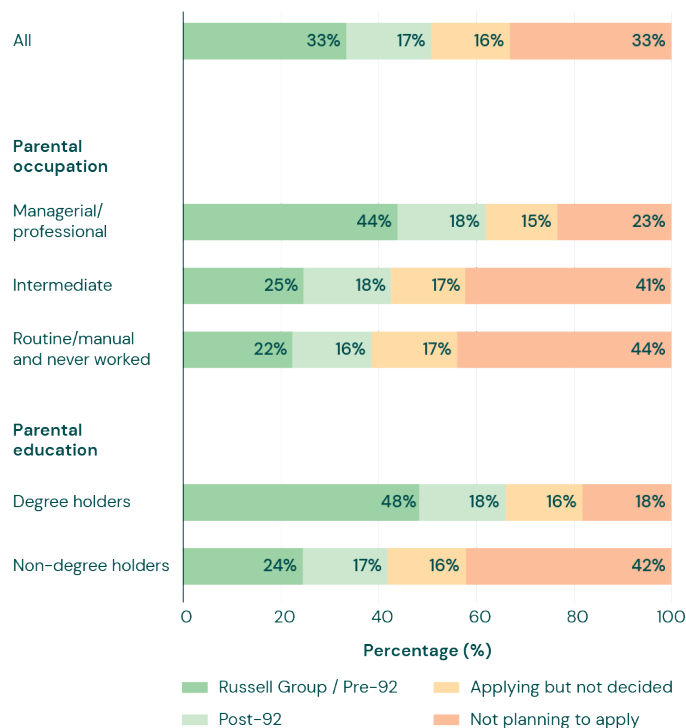
When asked in Year 12 (Wave 1) whether or not they thought they would apply to university, over two thirds (70%) thought that it was likely they would do so. When asked what they pictured they would most likely be doing in two years' time, just under three in five (56%) thought they would be studying full-time towards a degree qualification.

In Wave 2, young people were once again asked about their plans and expectations for applying to study at university. Indeed, as they have got closer to the point of making these applications, many young people's plans will have begun to crystallise. For many, this includes having either started or submitted an application for university. Over two thirds (68%) of young people indicated that they were intending to study at university and

had either started/submitted an application (47%) or were likely to apply to university, even though they had not started an application already (21%). This is only a 2%pt. decline compared to Wave 1, although this is slightly larger than the decline (0.5%pts. – 57.1% down to 56.6%) seen between comparable waves of Next Steps (2006–08).¹⁷

We showed in Wave 1 – as has been found for previous cohorts – that there is a strong association between socio-economic background and expectations to go on to university. Once again, there is a clear socio-economic gradient to both intent to apply, as well as the types of universities that young people see themselves attending (see Figure 9 below). Among those planning to apply to university, those with parents who work in a higher managerial/professional occupation are around twice as likely (44%) to target admission to a Russell Group or Pre-1992 university as those whose parents work in a routine/manual occupation, or who have never worked (22%). In the same vein, young people with a parent educated to degree level are also around twice as likely (48%) to hope to study at a Russell Group or Pre-1992 university as those with parents not educated to this level (24%).

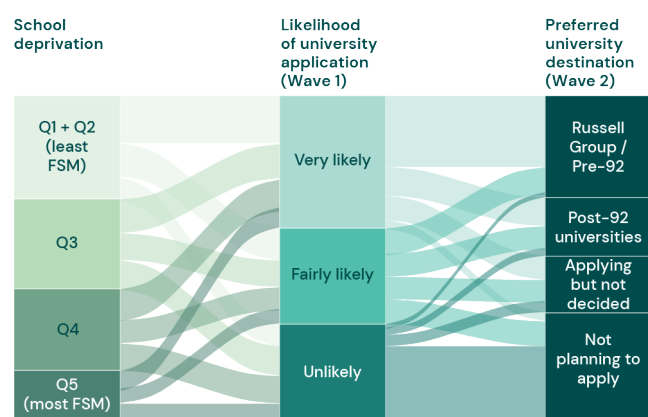
Figure 9: Expected university destinations by household backgrounds



Notes. N = 7,999. The analysis is weighted for survey design, as well as young person and main parent non-response.

The trajectories of the cohort from their Year 11 schooling, to beginning to think about whether they aspire to study at university, through to having an idea of the type of university they see themselves studying at are visualised in Figure 10. This demonstrates that students who, in Year 11, attended non-selective comprehensive schools with the lowest rates of free school meals (FSM) eligibility were much more likely to indicate at Wave 1 that it was highly probable they would apply to university than those who attended a school with a higher rate of FSM. Layering on survey responses at Wave 2 we can now see the further disaggregation to the university choices that young people are making. Those who viewed themselves as very likely to apply to university, when asked at Wave 1, were the most likely, at Wave 2 to see themselves attending a Russell Group or pre-1992 university.¹⁸

Figure 10: University plans over time by socio-economic background



N = 9,810. State comprehensive school students (Year 11) only. FSM quintiles are based on school-level FSM uptake at the school attended during Year 11. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

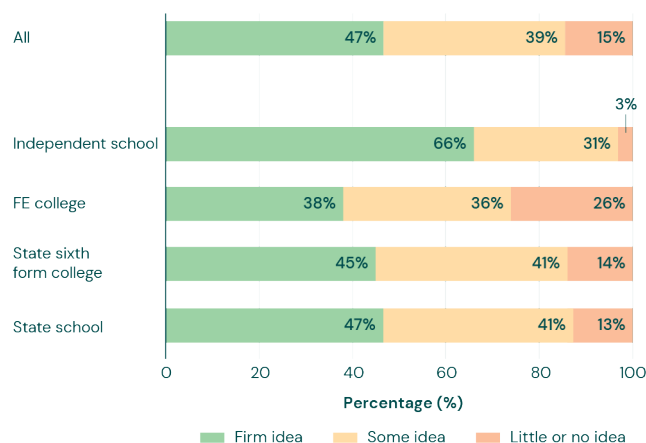
University and university course decisions

For young people planning to attend university, the choice of institution and course are vital in shaping their experience and subsequent outcomes. Such decisions are not independent of socio-economic background. Indeed, research shows that low SES students are more likely to 'undermatch' their university choices considering their grades. The result of this is that high attaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds end up applying to and enrolling at universities that are less selective than might be expected for their level of academic attainment.¹⁹

To understand such decisions, we asked those who had already applied or were planning to apply to university, whether they had a preferred institution at which they would like to study, and likewise for their planned course. Among this group of young people, nearly half of them (47%) had a firm idea of the university at which they would like to study, while 39% of had some idea about this and 15% had little or no idea. They had stronger ideas of what course or subject they plan to study at university, with 69% having a firm idea, 25% having some idea, and just 6% little or no idea.

These plans are also stratified by their family background characteristics and post-16 institution type. Young people whose parents are in professional or managerial occupations are more likely to have a firm idea of the university at which they would like to study than those from working class families (49% vs 38%). Pupils who attended a private school post-16 are much more likely to have a firm idea of this (66%), compared to their peers at a state secondary school (47%), a sixth form college (45%) and a FE college (38%) (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: University decisions, by post-16 institution type



Notes. N = 7,337. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response. The sample is restricted to those who already applied or planned to apply to university

Similar patterns are found for young people's university course decisions. 75% of the young people whose parents are in professional or managerial professions have a firm idea of what course or subject they have decided to study at university, compared to 59% of those from working class families. Meanwhile, over nine in ten (92%) of those who attended a private school have a firm idea of their university course decisions, compared to significantly

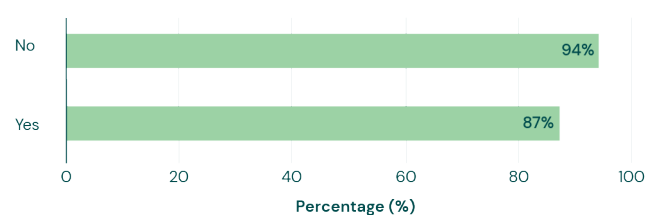
fewer of their peers at a secondary state school (72%), sixth form college (69%), and FE college (58%).

Confidence of getting into university

Among young people who had already applied to university or thought it was likely that they would do so, we also asked how likely they thought it was that they would get a place. There is little change in this figure compared to last year, rising from 92% (see the COSMO Wave 1 briefing on Future Plans and Aspirations²⁰) in Year 12 to 94% in Year 13, which is a high level of confidence.

Similarly consistent with the patterns found in that Wave 1 briefing, young people’s confidence in obtaining a university place varies by socio-economic status. Young people from working class families are less likely to have confidence about getting into university than those whose parents hold professional or managerial jobs (92% vs 96%). Young people whose families are facing financial challenges also have lower confidence in getting into university. For example, young people from families who had used a food bank in the past year are less likely to be confident of securing a place if they apply (87% vs 94% for those that did not use a food bank; see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Percentage reporting being confident in obtaining a university place among those who applied or are planning to apply, by food bank usage in past year



Notes. N = 5,998. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response. The sample is restricted to those who already applied or planned to apply to university

Living at home

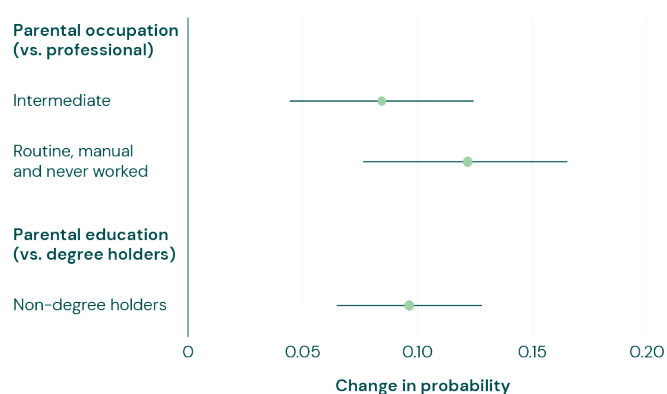
Of those young people who had already applied or planned to apply to university, one in five (20%) of them plan to live at home during term time if they are successful in getting into their preferred university. Young people’s planned university living arrangements, however, vary by their family background characteristics, with disadvantaged pupils much more likely to plan to live at home

than their richer peers. For example, young people from working class families (33%) were three times as likely as their peers whose parents are in professional or managerial occupations (11%) to plan on living at home. Similarly, those whose parents are not degree-educated (26%) were also significantly more likely to plan to live at home than those whose parents are degree holders (11%).

While there are stark differences in young people planning to stay at home across socio-economic background and financial challenges experienced by families, these factors are likely to be related to each other, so we could be seeing the same underlying difference in multiple ways. We therefore use regression modelling to estimate changes in the probability of young people planning to live at home related to each of these factors, while holding the others fixed, effectively comparing pupils with similar family background (parental education and occupation), food bank usage for the past 12 months, caring status, and region.

Pupils with parents without a degree were more likely to plan to live at home, even compared to pupils whose parents have similar occupations and who live in the same regions, but whose parents hold a degree. This might be because young people who have access to family members who had experiences of university study are more likely to be ready to move away from home (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Estimated change in probability of young people planning to live at home while studying at university associated with family socio-economic status



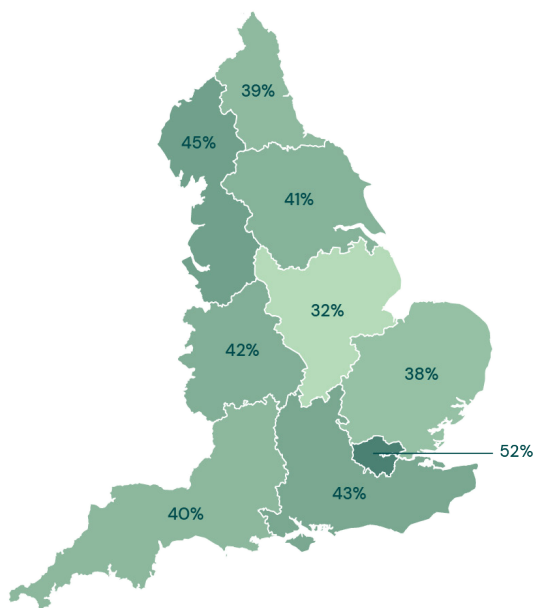
Notes. N = 4,091. Analysis is weighted to account for survey design and young person non-response. The estimated change in probability (marginal effects) is based on logistic regression modelling, which also controls for gender, ethnicity, young people’s caring status, region, and household food bank usage in the 12 months previous. Only young people planning to attend university are included in the model.

Local area opportunities

Young people’s decisions about the education and careers pathways to pursue are likely to be informed by the opportunities available in their local area. Those who plan to live at home while studying at university due to concerns over costs will be more limited in the range of institutions at which they can study. Placing other socio-economic barriers to one side, young people who live in large parts of the country outside London and want to study at a specialist institution (such as a music conservatoire) would have more limited options than those living in the capital, for example. Similarly, young people looking to pursue some career paths may find this difficult if relevant training opportunities are not available close to their family home.

In the COSMO Wave 2 survey, we sought to understand young people’s perspectives on the opportunities to do the sorts of jobs or training they wanted in their area. Overall, just over two fifths (42%) either agreed or strongly agreed that there were lots of opportunities. However, this varied substantially depending on the part of the country in which they live. Young people from London (52%) were far more likely to agree that there were lots of career and training opportunities for them than those from the East Midlands (32%), who were the least likely to agree (see Figure 14).

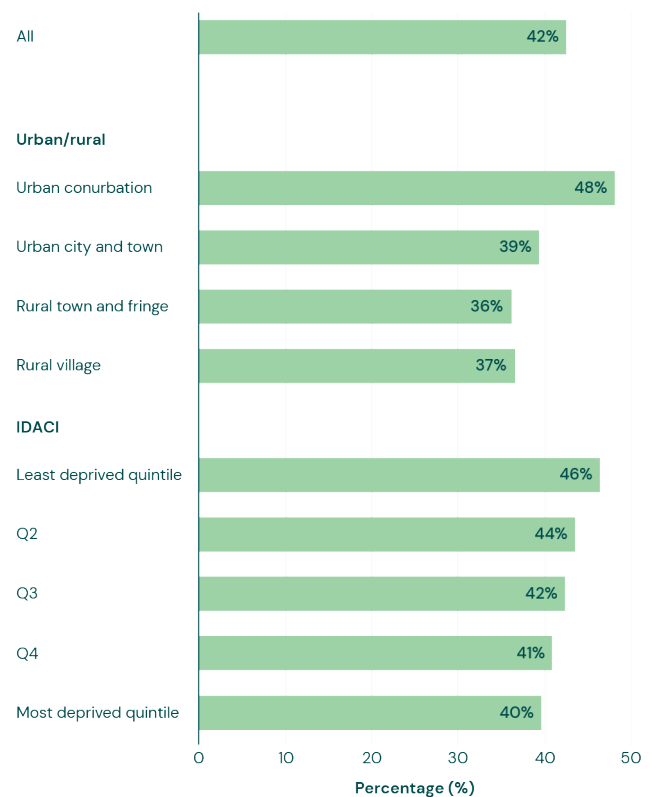
Figure 14: Percentage positive about local career and training opportunities in their locality, by region



Notes. N = 10,500. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response.

There is not a clear north/south divide as such. While region is associated with young people’s perspectives on the availability of opportunities local to them, other factors also underlie this pattern – with socio-economic factors, particularly, coming into play (see Figure 15). There is a clear gradient, for instance, with respect to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) – a measure of the level of child poverty in the local area that each participant lives. Around two in five (40%) young people in the most deprived areas, compared to approximately 46% in the most advantaged.

Figure 15: Percentage positive about local opportunities, by local area deprivation and urban/rural status



Notes. N = 10,482. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person non-response. Urban/rural status is measured at middle layer super output area (MSOA) level. Local area deprivation (IDACI) is measured at lower layer super output area (LSOA) level.

Family background is also strongly associated with young people’s perceptions of the level of opportunities available locally to pursue the career they want. Those with parents educated to degree level are more likely to be positive about opportunities in their area (46% compared to 40%). As, too, are those whose parents work in a higher managerial position (46%) compared to those in a routine or manual role, or who have never worked (39%). This more broadly reflects what we see

elsewhere in terms of things like whether young people plan to apply to university – which is also strongly associated with socio-economic backgrounds.

Very much linked to those factors examined so far – region, area deprivation and family background – is the type of built environment in which young people have grown up. Within the regions themselves, we can expect a great deal of diversity. The career opportunities available locally for a young person growing up in a small village in Cornwall are likely to look very different to those available to someone growing up in Bristol, even though both are located in the South West of England. This is evident when we compare perceptions of local area opportunities across different levels of urbanity. For those young people living in the most urban areas, just under half (48%) were positive about the opportunities to do the jobs/training that they want in their local area. This compares to 37% of those who live in rural villages (see Figure 15, on Page 11).

At a more granular level, living in a local authority that is predominantly urban is no guarantee that young people will report that there are opportunities to pursue the career they want in their area. Likewise, some areas which are less urban perform particularly well relative to their urbanity. Young people from places like Oxford and Cambridge, for example, tend to be more optimistic about the opportunities available to them locally. A variety of factors may well contribute to this, including general perceptions of local opportunities (such as areas being home to leading universities), the socio-economic makeup of the area, and the economic infrastructure. A young person who aspires to enter a career in biomedical science may be well better placed to do so somewhere like Oxford or Cambridge due to the scientific clusters that exist in these parts of the country.

Conclusions and policy implications

Our analysis of new data from COSMO Wave 2 raises concerns that some of the instabilities in young people's educational trajectories brought about by the pandemic have become embedded. Those who changed their plans due to the pandemic are also more likely to report that their main education/employment activity had changed between Years 12 and 13.

Many young people in this cohort have already made – or begun making – decisions about their future education pathways. But there are still opportunities for targeted, high-quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) to be delivered to young people to help inform their decisions about education and future careers. Nonetheless, findings from COSMO suggest that there is a marked difference in access to career related IAG between those studying at FE colleges (66%) and other state schools (80%) and sixth form colleges (79%). Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) finds that, despite recent government spending reviews pledging more money for the sector, per student funding levels for colleges in 2024/25 will remain around

11% lower in real terms than they were in 2010/11.²¹ A return of funding to previous levels – particularly for FE colleges – may help to address the gap in IAG access that has become evident.

For those in cohorts close behind COSMO – whose educations and lives have been similarly affected by the pandemic – enhanced provision of IAG in schools and colleges (particularly in those with high rates of FSM eligibility) should be considered a key element of education recovery in the coming years.

Being aware of the different options available and, ultimately, helping young people to make informed choices around their futures are key tenets of IAG – whether this is delivered through schools, or more informally. In recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on technical qualifications, through initiatives such as the introduction of T-Levels, as well as highlighting apprenticeship pathways more generally. These measures have fallen short, particularly in terms of the number of apprenticeship starts, which have undergone a steady decline since 2015,

particularly among under 19s.²² Furthermore, the share of those working towards a degree apprenticeship (Levels 6+) aged 16–18 has declined significantly.²³

For those in the cohort doing an apprenticeship, we find that they are generally positive about both the conditions they have experienced on their course and the balance between training and work. In light of the ongoing cost of living crisis, however, it remains important that apprentice pay keeps pace to ensure that it does not become an increasing barrier to access for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As the cohort becomes older, the composition of those doing apprenticeships is likely to change – as too may the challenges they face while on their apprenticeship scheme. Looking into the future, we aim to track this in later waves of the COSMO study, as more young people undertake degree apprenticeships, among other options.

Of those planning to go on to higher education, young people are generally confident they will secure a place on a degree programme, with over nine in ten saying that they were confident of getting into university. That young people are so confident that they will go on to undergraduate study is good news, especially in light of some of the impacts of the pandemic that have been explored in COSMO. But, within this, evidence from elsewhere suggests that those from disadvantaged backgrounds may be prone to ‘undermatch’ their university choices for their given attainment level – something which can have negative repercussions in terms of career earnings in the long run.²⁴

Our analysis also suggests other socio-economic dimensions to some of the decisions that young people are taking around where they study. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are, for example, far more likely to plan to live at home while studying at university. For some,

this appears to be an economic decision – saving money by living in the family home, rather than bearing the expense of university accommodation or student housing. It is concerning if this means that the affordability of study may be getting in the way of young people making the best decision for them around the university and course choice. The student finance system needs to support those who need it most, with the reinstatement of maintenance grants for those from the most disadvantaged households being a key measure the government could take to address this. For those who started university in September 2023, many will have been under considerable financial pressure due to increases in the cost of living since the pandemic that have not been matched by commensurate increases in student maintenance loans.²⁵ The level of student maintenance support should be urgently reviewed to ensure that young people’s studies are not adversely affected by the wider economic context they face.

There are clear geographic differences in the opportunities young people perceive they have as they look ahead to their future careers. For some – such as those living in major cities – there are plenty of opportunities available locally to them to pursue the types of career and training opportunities that they would like. That said, the variation in perceptions of opportunities available to young people is not demarcated as simply as north versus south. Those living in urban areas across the country, for instance, are more likely to report that they have opportunities available to them locally. Industrial strategy has a key role to play in ensuring that opportunities are spread out across the country. And any such strategy should have the future workforce – including the COSMO cohort – in mind. It should also ensure that young people are equipped with the right skills, opportunities and advice/guidance to make informed decisions around their future careers.

About the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study

The COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities (COSMO) study is a new national cohort study generating high-quality evidence about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected socio-economic inequalities in life chances, both in terms of short- and long-term effects on education, wellbeing, and career outcomes. A representative sample of young people in England who were in Year 11 in the 2020/2021 academic year were invited to take part in the survey, with the aim of following them as they progress through the final stages of education and into the labour market. A sample of more than 13,000 young people was recruited in Wave 1. All young people who took part in Wave 1 were invited to Wave 2 when they were in Year 13, and over 11,000 took part.

Both waves of COSMO were supported by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Wave 1 as part of their COVID-19 response fund [ES/W001756/1] and Wave 2 by their Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Data Infrastructure Programme [ES/X00015X/1]. COSMO is a collaboration between the UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO), the Sutton Trust, and the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS). Our principal fieldwork partner for Waves 1 and 2 is Kantar Public.

Researchers can access data from Waves 1 and 2 of the study through the [UK Data Service](#).

Citing this briefing

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Sample and methods

The data for this briefing come from Wave 2 of the COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities (COSMO) study. COSMO is based on a probability sample drawn from the Department for Education's (DfE) National Pupil Database (NPD) (plus additional recruitment from pupils at private schools), with clustering within schools (for practicality reasons) and oversampling of certain groups using stratification.

Our analysis in this briefing is primarily based on descriptive statistics reporting averages, distributions and differences between groups. Analyses use weights to account for the over-sampling inherent in the study design, initial non-response at Wave 1, and attrition between Waves 1 and 2 by young people and, where relevant, their parents. Differences are only highlighted where these are found to be statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. Any statistical inference testing reported also accounts for the clustering and stratification in the study design.

While our full sample of young people has $N=11,523$, the parents of participants were not as likely to respond. For analysis that relies upon a parental response to Wave 2, the maximum available sample of participating parents with a corresponding young person is $N=10,204$. For analyses that rely on the presence of a parent response from either Wave 1 or 2, the maximum available sample is $N=10,787$. As noted above, young person and parental non-response have been modelled separately, with different weights to ensure (insofar as is possible) representativeness of our analysis sample to the intended population. Item-level non-response also results in variation of the sample available for specific analyses; we seek to minimise this variation within related analyses to ensure any differences in estimates are not caused by differences in sample. Analyses of some groups, for example those who attended special schools, have not been reported due to disclosure risk from small sample sizes.

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COSMO

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