



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
Moray House School of
Education and Sport



Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry

The Delivery of Education and Certification, Impact on Children and Young People:

Overview

Final Draft

Professor Gillean McCluskey

Dr Ian Fyfe

Rosa Murray

Dr Zoè Robertson

Dr Annie Taylor

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Disclaimer:

This report was commissioned by the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry as scoping research. It was written to assist the Inquiry with the shape and direction of its investigations, and is published in the interests of transparency. The Inquiry is grateful to the author[s] for their work. The Inquiry is an independent body, and is carrying out its own investigations in accordance with its Terms of Reference. The research represents the views of those who wrote it, and nothing in it is binding on the Inquiry. The research is one of many sources which will be considered by the Inquiry during the course of its investigations.

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Executive Summary

Aim and Focus of This Study

This Report updates the findings of the earlier study [The Delivery of Education and Certification, Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People](#), led by Professor McCluskey in 2022. It aims to assist the Inquiry with its detailed investigations of *The Delivery of Education and Certification, impact on children and young people*. We have undertaken a comprehensive desk-based analysis of relevant national and international literature and research evidence reporting on issues relating to education and certification in the context of the pandemic. The findings of our investigation are the outcome of a robust assessment of a) the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of education and certification for *all* learners at all stages of education in Scotland, and b) the impact of COVID-19 on identified groups of children and young people known to face particular disadvantage within education.

Key Issues

The evidence base is still emergent. The initial months of the pandemic produced an unprecedented level of research. This has declined rapidly and there are indications that research on education and certification has ‘moved on’ from its focus on COVID-19. The number of publications reviewed for this report is therefore lower than for the 2022 Report. However, overall, research from the past year supports and strengthens findings from the 2022 Report and we are confident that our updated findings identify key and current issues. These are summarised below.

Schools

- COVID-19 has worsened existing inequalities, vulnerabilities, and disadvantage.
- Schools are reporting high numbers of ‘distressed’ children and young people.
- Long-term impacts of COVID-19 on younger children's development are not yet fully understood, but there are concerns about language, mobility, and social development.
- Workload pressures, administrative burden and lack of human and material resources have increased stress among school leaders and classroom staff.
- There is a renewed policy drive to close the poverty-related attainment gap, but also debate about potential unintended and negative consequences of this.

Colleges and Universities

- Much of the newly published evidence still relates to the acute phase of the pandemic¹ (March 2020 - April 2022).
- There has been a disproportionate impact on some groups of students and staff; the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities.
- It is difficult to disentangle the impact of the pandemic from other social issues. There appears to be a lack of evidence around the cumulative impact of austerity, Brexit, COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis.
- Student satisfaction increased in 2022 but students’ life satisfaction was still lower than pre-pandemic levels.

¹ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, *Transitioning Beyond the Acute Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Stockholm: ECDC; 2022).

- There appears to be a lack of UK and Scottish evidence about impacts of the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and financial disadvantage.

Youth Work

- There has been a disproportionate impact on some groups of young people: the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities based on e.g. gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and financial disadvantage.
- Mental health and wellbeing of young people and youth work practitioners is a growing concern.
- There are significant and particular challenges for the youth work sector's recovery from COVID-19.
- Impacts of COVID-19 on some young people's learning and development appear to be compounded by effects of financial austerity and the current cost of living crisis.

Introduction

The right to education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right has been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. UNESCO estimates that nearly 1.6 billion (91.3%) learners in 194 countries experienced closures of schools and universities. In response, education practitioners at all levels adapted to an ever-changing context, utilising technology and finding new and creative ways to meet young people's needs.

However, an increasing body of evidence indicates ways in which the impacts of COVID-19 have not been equally distributed. We know that children and young people living in the most disadvantaged circumstances experienced the most significant impact (Holt & Murray, 2022)². Inequalities have been exacerbated and amplified by COVID-19 and responses to it, creating periods of uncertainty, pressure and instability for young people in families already living with the trappings of poverty and the current cost of living crisis. The loss of contact due to COVID-19 restrictions and periods of isolation increased vulnerability for some children and in the most serious of cases, led to direct harm including increased levels of abuse at home and online (NSPCC, 2020)³. Concerns about the mental health of young people have been a constant focus for our collective attention. As a cohort, young people have been less likely to fall seriously ill but have felt the full force of changes to the education landscape on their learning, academic progress, personal health and wellbeing overall.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic here in Scotland has been vast and deep. Although education practitioners here have used technology and found new and creative ways to meet the needs of learners, the pandemic, and responses to it, have profoundly affected the lives of children and young people.

This report updates the findings of our earlier study [The Delivery of Education and Certification, Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People](#), led by Professor McCluskey in 2022. It summarises the evidence on events and key impacts in the summaries at the end of Sections 1 (Schools and Certification), 2 (Further and Higher Education) and 3 (Youth Work Sector in Scotland) to cover the period February 2022 to end of March 2023; and draws the Inquiry's attention to subsequent important research in areas covered by that initial paper. In this way, this research aims to support the overall aim of the Inquiry: to establish the facts of, and learn lessons from, the strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland. It covers only the strategic response of the devolved administration in Scotland.

² L. Holt & L. Murray (2022), 'Children and COVID-19 in the UK', *Children's Geographies*, 20/4, 487–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1921699>

³ E. Moore & G. Churchill (2020), 'Still Here for Children: Experiences Of NSPCC Staff who Supported Children and Families During COVID-19: Understanding The Impact of the Pandemic on Children and Families', NSPCC (London), <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2020/still-here-for-children-experiences-of-nspcc-staff-during-coronavirus>

Methodology

We have undertaken a comprehensive, systematic desk-based review to provide in-depth analysis of the most recent relevant national and international, qualitative and quantitative empirical research reporting on issues relating to education and certification in the context of the pandemic.

Key Questions

This report offers a rigorous and robust updated assessment of:

- a) The impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of education and certification for all children and young people at all stages of education in Scotland, and
- b) The impact of COVID-19 on identified groups of children, young people and students known to face particular disadvantage within education for reasons associated with e.g. poverty, mental health, trauma, learning difficulties or disabilities, rurality, and digital exclusion.

Research Design

Search Criteria

The terms 'education' and 'certification' are necessarily broad and, while recognising the challenges of definitional agreement, we include here issues related to the following: formal and informal education including youth work; school structures and environment; leadership; teaching and teachers; staff wellbeing and welfare; access to schools and other educational establishments; teacher education, pedagogies (including digital literacies); assessment and attainment, formal and informal curricula; inter-professional and cross-disciplinary partnership working; personal and social aspects of education; pastoral care; transition arrangements; support for college and university students. In addition, we include measures of performance such as attainment levels and other accredited learning, rates of attendance, absence and exclusion.

The search included:

- Literature published in English since approximately February 2022, and by 31 March 2023, relevant to Scotland.
- Literature focused on children and young people between ages 5 to age 24.
- Literature focused on the delivery of education and certification in general, including achievement (attainment and accreditation).
- Literature focused on experiences and outcomes of identified groups of children and young people known to face particular disadvantage within education for reasons associated with e.g. poverty, mental health, trauma, learning difficulties, disabilities, rurality, and digital exclusion.
- Literature including national surveys and statistical datasets, empirical research (qualitative and quantitative), meta-analyses, relevant legislation, policy guidance and briefings, trades unions and professional association documents.

The following were excluded from the search:

- Literature not published in English.
- Literature related to pre-school education.
- Literature with a clinical focus.

Data Sources

Data sources included: national surveys and statistical data sets on e.g. achievement, attendance, exclusion, qualifications and accreditation; and national, UK and international research studies relating to education and certification, published in the period February 2022 to the end of March 2023, in the context of existing literature on the impacts of COVID-19 and broader historical

patterns and trends, relevant national legislation, guidance and briefings, trade union and professional association documents.

Search Strategy and Analysis

The search included analysis of national surveys and statistical datasets, empirical research (qualitative and quantitative), meta-analyses, relevant legislation, policy guidance and briefings, trade union and professional association documents published before 31st March 2023. This search has taken full account of the methodological rigour, reliability and generalisability of each source.

Search terms included: Scotland, children, young people, student, school, college, further education, higher education, COVID-19/pandemic, education 5 to 18 years, community, family, key worker, youth work, disadvantage, vulnerability, disruption, attendance, exclusion, attainment, achievement, accreditation, online/remote/home learning, isolation, lockdown, recovery, school/college/university building closure, digital access/exclusion/poverty, additional support needs/special needs/disability, wellbeing/health/mental health, teacher, education workforce.

Coding and thematic analysis adopted approaches from Braun and Clarke (2019)⁴. A coding frame was developed based on the frame used for Phase 1 of the study, and extended to include a review of all newly available data. Emerging themes and sub-themes were cross-checked against search criteria and, through an iterative process, used as a basis to create thematic summaries and identify key findings.

Limitations

It is important to recognise that desk-based research, even as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, often still draws on early findings because the pandemic itself is so recent and, at the time of writing, still a major global issue. It is important to note again that there was a pre-existing paucity of large-scale qualitative research generally in the field of education and this is true also in relation to the delivery of education and certification. Furthermore, our analysis in the Report prepared in Phase 1 revealed how quickly some of the available data has become obsolete and how quickly assumptions made, e.g. about school closures, financial and resource costs, have been overtaken by the rapidly changing shape and impact of the pandemic. These limitations notwithstanding, the updated study provides a necessary and invaluable synthesis of the most recent evidence available.

Ethical Considerations

This research study has been subject to the detailed scrutiny and approvals process of the Moray House School of Education and Sport's research ethics, integrity and governance committee. As the study is focused on secondary data analysis rather than primary data collection, issues of confidentiality and anonymity are relatively unproblematic. Nonetheless, ethical considerations have remained central throughout, centred on ensuring that the greatest possible good comes from the study. Following the guidelines provided by the Ethics Guidance for Scottish Government Social Science Researchers (2015)⁵, and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018)⁶, our duties were: to ensure we were transparent and explicit about choices and decisions in relation to methodology and findings, to protect the integrity of the study undertaken, conduct this research to the highest standards, to be open to and engage with critical analysis and constructive

⁴ V. Braun & V. Clarke., 'Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11 (2019), 589–597, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

⁵ Scottish Government (2015), 'Ethics Guidance for Scottish Government Social Researchers', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-social-research-publication-protocol/>

⁶ BERA (2018), 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (4th edn), <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

criticism aimed at improving research practice and knowledge, and to protect but also extend understanding of existing research related to education and certification in Scotland overall during the pandemic.

Quality Assurance

Professor McCluskey has been responsible for all aspects of quality assurance and data management, including responsibility for data collection, quality and management and the overall data management plan as well as data storage, security and back up requirements. Professor McCluskey has also been responsible for ensuring all ethical approvals.

Section 1: Schools and Certification

Summary

- COVID-19 has worsened existing inequalities, vulnerabilities, and disadvantage.
- Schools are reporting high numbers of ‘distressed’ children and young people.
- Long-term impacts of COVID-19 on younger children's development are not yet fully understood, but there are concerns about language, mobility, and social development.
- Workload pressures, administrative burden and lack of human and material resources have increased stress among school leaders and classroom staff.
- There is a renewed policy drive to close the poverty-related attainment gap, but also debate about potential unintended and negative consequences of this.

Key Events and Related Changes to Relevant Educational Legislation, Policy and Guidelines

Scottish Government’s COVID-19 Education Recovery Group concluded its work in March 2022. No further significant policies or guidance specific to COVID-19 were issued to schools. However, other key events have punctuated the education landscape, including:

- Publication of the report ‘*Putting Learners at the centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education*’ (2022)⁷, commissioned by Scottish Government from Prof Ken Muir, University of West of Scotland.
- The ‘Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment’, which began in summer 2022 with final report to Cabinet Secretary due end of May 2023.
- Scottish Government’s launch of a ‘National Discussion on Education’, September - December 2022, due to be followed by a ‘call to action’ in summer 2023.

These significant consultations and reports are part of a larger reform agenda in Scottish education, which has inevitably been influenced by, and reflects the impacts of, COVID-19.

Impact on Learning of the Generality of Children and Young People

Impacts on many aspects of teaching and learning have been and continue to be widespread, affecting both the formal and informal curriculum of the school. For some this meant a reduction in practical skills and opportunities, or fluency gaps in language learning; for others, a narrowing of the curriculum as a consequence of increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy⁸. This is perhaps unsurprising giving the newly amplified focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, to be evidenced through measures of performance outcomes. This is particularly evident in the launch of the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge with its associated ‘stretch aims’ and ‘plus stretch aims’ to accelerate progress and recovery⁹.

⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/>

⁸ HM Inspectors (May 2022), ‘Local Approaches to Recovery: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/what-we-do/inspection-and-review/chief-inspector-report/national-thematic-inspections/local-approaches-to-recovery-a-thematic-review/>

⁹ Education Scotland (Dec 2022), ‘*Scottish Attainment Challenge – 2022/23 Local Stretch Aims for Progress in Raising Attainment and Closing the Poverty-Related Attainment Gap*’, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-attainment-challenge-2022-23-local-stretch-aims-progress-raising-attainment-closing-poverty-related-attainment-gap/>

At the same time, there is concern about important aspects of social development, building relationships, play, movement, and, for some, developmental delays¹⁰. Delayed or missed referrals and diagnoses have left some students without necessary support, either materially (through for example assistive technologies) or without specialist support and input from relevant professionals^{11, 12}.

Alongside this, schools have been identifying increased numbers of ‘unsettled’ and/or ‘distressed’ children and young people across school settings (HM Inspectors, 2022)¹³, who may struggle to focus, work on and complete tasks, and manage relationships with peers, often interrupting the learning of others and unable to effectively self-regulate behaviour and emotions^{14, 15}. Many young people continue to report mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing challenges following their return to schools, feeling anxious, demotivated and lacking in confidence in their own abilities¹⁶. Teachers have reported a significant decline in students’ communication skills, social confidence, and ability to work through social challenges. Those with pre-existing mental health challenges are deemed to be at greater risk from social exclusion and low resilience levels¹⁷. There has been an impact on mental health and academic progress due to the pandemic and home learning. Young people have expressed concern about a lack of expertise within schools to help address these challenges and highlighted a need to prioritise mental health and social and emotional development in any catch-up planning, rather than just focus on academic attainment and assessments¹⁸. Anxiety levels among young people have increased alongside loss of confidence and self-belief in their capacity to achieve their potential¹⁹.

Prior to the pandemic, concerns regarding mental health and well-being were already present, particularly in socially and economically disadvantaged areas. Additionally, curricular areas which foster social, emotional, spiritual, and moral development and associated skills in children and young people were often deprioritised during lockdowns and remote learning, impacting many students but exacerbating the challenges for some children and young people from low socio-

¹⁰ L. Colucci-Gray (2022), ‘Reviewing the Impact of COVID-19 on Children's Rights to in and through Education’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2057961>

¹¹ Z. Picton-Howell (2022), ‘The Unintended Consequences of School Closures during COVID-19 on Children and Young People’s Physical Health Rights -What Are They and How Can They Be Mitigated?’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2057956>

¹² Cross Party Group on Children and Young People (3 May 2022), ‘Pandemic Impact Survey’, *Scottish Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/cross-party-groups/children-and-young-people/030522-cpg-children-and-young-people-minutes.pdf>

¹³ HM Inspectors (May 2022), ‘Local Approaches to Recovery: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/what-we-do/inspection-and-review/chief-inspector-report/national-thematic-inspections/local-approaches-to-recovery-a-thematic-review/>

¹⁴ HM Inspectors (May 2022), ‘Local Approaches to Recovery: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/what-we-do/inspection-and-review/chief-inspector-report/national-thematic-inspections/local-approaches-to-recovery-a-thematic-review/>

¹⁵ HM Inspectors (Mar 2022), ‘Health and Wellbeing: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/media/rwrgl3jz/health-and-wellbeing-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

¹⁶ HM Inspectors (Mar 2022), ‘Health and Wellbeing: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/media/rwrgl3jz/health-and-wellbeing-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

¹⁷ Outward Bound Trust (Apr 2022), ‘Reconnecting Relationships, Reawakening Minds and Restoring Confidence’, <https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/assets/pdf/uploads/Impact/Reconnecting-relationships-reawakening-minds-and-restoring-confidence-impact-report.pdf>

¹⁸ YoungMinds (London, 2021), ‘Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs’, <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf>

¹⁹ HM Inspectors (Mar 2022), ‘Health and Wellbeing: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/media/rwrgl3jz/health-and-wellbeing-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

economic backgrounds²⁰. Research suggests that loss of this relational, social / emotional development and collaborative learning has left some children and young people feeling overwhelmed and anxious and losing the ability to play, co-operate and manage friendships²¹.

It is also worth noting that the expansion of online learning precipitated by the pandemic seems to have slowed, though variable access to digital technology remains an issue, with differential access to digital technologies, pedagogy, and infrastructure creating potential for inequality. It would seem that the school system has returned to pre-pandemic practices²² more generally, sometimes moving away from the kinds of creative free play and outdoor learning that are known to improve focus, skills and confidence in school learning²³. This in spite of recent research re-emphasising impacts on children's rights²⁴, wider impacts on both physical and health rights²⁵ and the wider civic and socially transformative role education can play²⁶.

Attendance

School attendance has emerged as a serious challenge since the ending of restrictions. This has led to increased focus on students with existing poor patterns of attendance^{27, 28}. This can be illustrated by reference to one urban local authority where there remains an increased absence rate particularly in the disadvantaged areas of the city²⁹. In 2020/21 the 'attendance – schools open' rate varied between 89.8% and 95.5%. This range in attendance rates compares with 92.0% attendance in 2020/21, and 93.0% in 2018/19³⁰.

Transitions

There has been concern that schools were unable to implement their usual transition programmes for children and young people moving to primary or secondary during remote learning periods. This has raised further concerns regarding higher anxiety levels among students about moving on to next stages, particularly for those who needed enhanced support to make successful transitions. There is evidence from HM school inspection reports that some young people are taking longer settling into school and require significant support³¹. For young people in, or transitioning from,

²⁰ D. Mifsud & S. Day (2023), *Teacher Education as an Ongoing Professional Trajectory* (Berlin: Springer).

²¹ Maynard, E. et al. (2022) Covid-19 and the lost hidden curriculum: locating an evolving narrative ecology of Schools-in-Covid, *Pastoral Care in Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02643944.2022.2093953

²² D. Mifsud & S. Day (2023), *Teacher Education as an Ongoing Professional Trajectory* (Berlin: Springer).

²³ Outward Bound Trust (Apr 2022), '*Reconnecting Relationships, Reawakening Minds and Restoring Confidence*', <https://www.outwardbound.org.uk/assets/pdf/uploads/Impact/Reconnecting-relationships-reawakening-minds-and-restoring-confidence-impact-report.pdf>

²⁴ K. Reid, E.K.M. Tisdall & F. Morrison (2022), 'Children's Rights Impact Assessments in Times of Crisis: Learning From COVID-19', *International Journal of Human Rights*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2061955>

²⁵ Z. Picton-Howell (2022), 'The Unintended Consequences of School Closures during COVID-19 on Children and Young People's Physical Health Rights -What Are They and How Can They Be Mitigated?', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2057956>

²⁶ D. Watt (2023), 'Out of the Crisis the New Future: Concluding Thoughts on Inclusive and Equitable Education for All with a View from Scotland', In Proyer et al., eds., *Education in an Altered World*, (London: Bloomsbury).

²⁷ HM Inspectors (Mar 2022), 'Health and Wellbeing: A Thematic Review', *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/media/rwrgl3jz/health-and-wellbeing-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

²⁸ Commission on School Reform (2022) CSR Briefing, *Absence and Attendance in School* <https://reformscotland.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CSR-absence-briefing-2022.pdf>

²⁹ Scottish Government (2021) *Absence and Attendance – Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2021* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/pages/7>

³⁰ Scottish Government (2021) *Absence and Attendance – Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2021* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/pages/7>

³¹ <https://education.gov.scot/media/fkgntm0d/local-approaches-to-recovery-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

secondary education, the pandemic has affected their work-related skills and opportunities, potentially resulting in a job skills gap³².

Echoing more general concerns about potential delays in child development, concerns have been raised more specifically about the decline or lack of development in the language and listening skills of students across the primary and secondary sectors and teachers worried that these students may not catch up to meet their expected levels in these areas. Students who have lost time for everyday interactions with peers and adults in schools and the wider world are now experiencing significant gaps in these skills³³. Research from English schools reports speech and language delays across all age groups. And, as some children spent less time outdoors and more time in sedentary activities, their physical development has also been significantly impacted. As disadvantaged children have missed more early childhood education and care than their peers, there has been widespread concern among early years teachers that the development gap is widening and that this could result in a further widening of the already-existing attainment gap between children from poorer backgrounds and their more affluent peers³⁴. Though this research was derived from schools in England it resonates with the Thematic Reviews from Education Scotland.

Disproportionate Impact on Particular Groups of Children and Young People

Many children and young people reported increased anxiety during school closures but research has indicated that this was compounded for children living with disadvantage and insecurity, post-COVID³⁵. Care-experienced children and young people, in particular, experienced a sense of exclusion and social isolation, which persisted upon their return to school and necessitated targeted support³⁶. There was also evidence that there were additional challenges faced by disabled children, some ethnic minority children, those from refugee families, those seeking asylum, students for whom English is an additional language³⁷ and Gypsy/Traveller children³⁸.

Impact on Assessment, Certification and Accreditation

One of the main accountability measures in the Scottish school system is the reporting of ACEL data (achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels) at Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7 and Secondary 3 in literacy and numeracy. The 2021-22 data shows that the percentage of children and young people achieving the expected level for their age/stage is still lower than it was at the last data point pre-COVID-19 (2018-19 outcomes)³⁹. It is reported that the impacts of COVID-19 may have severely 'reversed up to a third of progress made...in the last decade' in regard to closing the

³² F. Green, G. Henseke & I. Schoon (2022), 'Perceived Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', *Journal of Education and Work*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2092608>

³³ I CAN (2022) *Speaking up for the Covid Generation* <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/media/3753/speaking-up-for-the-covid-generation-i-can-report.pdf>

³⁴ Coram (2022) *Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care*, Coram Family and Childcare, London <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/covid-childcare-research-blog>

³⁵ Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2022) *COVID-19 Micro-briefing 4: Consolidating evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Young People* <https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/8848/PSGCPHCOVIDMicroBrief4CYP.pdf>

³⁶ HM Inspectors (2022) *Local Approaches to Recovery: A Thematic Review*, Education Scotland <https://education.gov.scot/media/fkgntm0d/local-approaches-to-recovery-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

³⁷ HM Inspectors (Mar 2022), 'Health and Wellbeing: A Thematic Review', *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/media/rwrgl3jz/health-and-wellbeing-a-thematic-review23.pdf>

³⁸ Riddell, S. (2021) 'The rights of children from Gypsy/Traveller and Roma backgrounds in Scotland', *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 12/1, 37-51 <https://akjournals.com/view/journals/063/12/1/article-p37.xml>

³⁹ Scottish Government (2022) 'Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Levels 2021/22', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/achievement-curriculum-excellence-cfe-levels-2021-22/>

poverty-related gap⁴⁰. There is vigorous debate within the education sector about the extent to which the use of 'stretch aims' and other performance measures⁴¹ contributes to the aims of equity and closing the gap, or inadvertently acts as a barrier to the recovery of physical and mental well-being of children and young people as we emerge from the pandemic⁴².

COVID-19 has profoundly affected Scotland's high-stakes assessment system⁴³, prompting calls for transformation. The most significant impacts of COVID-19 on the examination system were reported in our first report to the Inquiry. The initial disruptions seem to have eroded trust in the current system due in part to perceptions of '*entrenched disparity*'⁴⁴, and a focus on and uncertainty about what will come next. There is debate about whether a return to pre-pandemic approaches will be sufficient⁴⁵, when the extent of impacts on young people is still not fully known or understood. Many have expressed a need for more time to manage assessment processes⁴⁶.

The Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) recognises that there are likely ongoing impacts of the pandemic and some modifications still required for exam diets. For 2023 this has been addressed through updated guidance on approaches to grading, but with none of the changes to topics or coursework put in place for 2022⁴⁷. The long-term effects on students' progression into further/higher education or employment remains uncertain. As Scotland now enters a new period of major systems reform in education, including reform of Education Scotland and the SQA itself, there is concern to ensure that lessons learned from COVID-19 and further research inform priorities and ensure a resilient and inclusive education system⁴⁸.

⁴⁰ Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2022) *COVID-19 Micro-briefing 4: Consolidating evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Young People*
<https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/8848/PSGCPHCOVIDMicroBrief4CYP.pdf>.

⁴¹ M. Shapira et al. (2023), 'Choice, Attainment and Positive Destinations: Exploring the Impact of Curriculum Policy Change on Young People', *Nuffield Foundation*, https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CAPD_Main_Public_Report_final_Feb2023.pdf

⁴² Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2022) *COVID-19 Micro-briefing 4: Consolidating evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Young People*
<https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/8848/PSGCPHCOVIDMicroBrief4CYP.pdf>.

⁴³ L. Hayward & M. O'Leary (2022), 'High Stakes Assessment in the Era of COVID-19', *Policy & Practice*, 29/5, 505–517,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2022.2139339>

⁴⁴ Scottish Government (Mar 2023), '*Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland: Interim Report*',
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/progress-report/2023/03/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report/documents/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report-march-2023/govscot%3Adocument/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report-march-2023.pdf>

⁴⁵ Scottish Government (Mar 2023), '*Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland: Interim Report*',
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/progress-report/2023/03/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report/documents/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report-march-2023/govscot%3Adocument/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report-march-2023.pdf>

⁴⁶ Youthlink Scotland (2021) *Lockdown Lowdown 3: What Young People Think as Lockdown Begins to Ease*,
<https://syp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/july2021-lockdownlowdown-v3-survey-report.pdf>

⁴⁷ SQA (2022) '*Update on National Qualifications*' <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/103249.html>

⁴⁸ Scottish Government (Mar 2023), '*Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland: Interim Report*',
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/progress-report/2023/03/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report/documents/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report-march-2023/govscot%3Adocument/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-scotland-interim-report-march-2023.pdf>

Impact on Staff

In the early months of the pandemic, head teachers reported a ‘permissioning’ to focus on relationships and recovery rather than narrow measures of performance outcomes^{49,50}. However, there are indications that the landscape has since changed. Although some of the specific demands and uncertainties created by COVID-19 have subsided, schools now face intensified pressure and accountability. This appears to be, at least in part, driven by renewed concern to accelerate progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap, as noted above. In light of this, one of Scotland’s most prominent education academics has noted that it is critical that schools keep a focus on ‘who and what matters most in the next phase of education’ (Harris, 2022, 433⁵¹).

School leaders have reported increased pressures and expectations, reduced funding, and issues arising from outdated pre-pandemic policies, and post-pandemic challenges⁵². The latest report from AHDS (one of the main trades unions for promoted teachers)⁵³ reveals concerns about working hours, intensified bureaucracy, and a decline in the attractiveness of the headteacher role, with potential long-term implications for recruitment and retention. The influential report ‘Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education’⁵⁴ has echoed these concerns and highlighted the significant issue of increasing bureaucracy and competing demands on time, which have further intensified since COVID-19. These issues are keenly felt here in Scotland but also internationally⁵⁵.

In the last report we highlighted research on emerging support available to headteachers, such as coaching sessions. There is as yet little evidence on outcomes or effectiveness, nor of these supports being sustained or resourced at scale.

The ongoing impact on classroom staff also continues across the system. Teachers and other staff members report exhaustion as they navigate the shifting demands of pivoting back from digital teaching, hybrid learning, and more general disruption to school structures. Policy pressures, coupled with increased student needs and reduced resources post-COVID-19, have left staff feeling undervalued and at ‘breaking point’. The largest teachers’ union in Scotland, the EIS, cites this alongside other factors as leading to the first period of industrial actions seen in schools in Scotland since the 1980s⁵⁶. Recent research indicates a specific impact on the resilience and retention of early career teachers⁵⁷. The situation also affects under-represented staff groups, e.g. pupil support assistants (PSAs), who often play crucial roles in supporting vulnerable students and/or those with additional support needs. Reduced budgets have created new levels of precarity for staff such as

⁴⁹ A. Mitchell et al. (2023), ‘The Changing Role of the Headteacher in Scottish Education: Implications for Career-Long Teacher Education’, In D. Mifsud & S. Day, eds., *Teacher Education as an Ongoing Professional Trajectory*.

⁵⁰ J. Harvie, Z. Robertson & K. Brack (8–10 July 2022), ‘Be Prepared! – What Can We Learn About Leadership Preparation From the Lived Experiences of School Leaders During a Time of Crisis?’, paper presented to the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS 2022), Liverpool, UK.

⁵¹ A. Harris, C. Campbell & M. Jones (2022), ‘A National Discussion on Education – so What for School Leaders?’, *School Leadership & Management*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2134665>

⁵² L. Sanders Ed Scot paper ‘Paper 5 - Education Scotland - Headteacher Professional Learning - Think Piece - Headteacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group - 9 May 2023.Docx’.

⁵³ AHDS Member survey 2023 (forthcoming)

⁵⁴ K. Muir (2022), ‘Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education’, *Scottish Government* (Edinburgh), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/>

⁵⁵ Harris, C. Campbell & M. Jones (2022), ‘A National Discussion on Education – so What for School Leaders?’, *School Leadership & Management*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2134665>

⁵⁶ EIS (2023) ‘Why COSLA and the Scottish Government Need to Pay Attention’ <https://www.eis.org.uk/pay-attention/why>

⁵⁷ Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (2023) ‘Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education: Final Report’, <https://www.ucet.ac.uk/15023/measuring-quality-in-initial-teacher-education-final-report-april-2023>

PSAs, with some local authorities planning to reduce this resource⁵⁸ despite government intervention to protect these positions⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ Scottish Parliament (2023) 'Letter from COSLA to Scottish Parliament, Convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee', <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/local-gov/correspondence/2023/coslaletter16feb.pdf>

⁵⁹ Scottish Government (2023) Letter to Local Authority Chief Executives, 'Protecting teacher numbers, pupil support staff and learning hours' <https://midlothian.cmis.uk.com/live/Document.ashx?czJKcaeAi5tUFL1DTL2UE4zNRBcoShgo=rCZYMivcNrtw1WKtO46S2AqVUDwosDa5xyXwt1T4mxaR2daRwJf3Rw%3D%3D&rUzwRPf%2BZ3zd4E7Ikn8Lyw%3D%3D=pwRE6AGJFLDNlh225F5QMaQWCtPHwdhUfCZ%2FLUQzgA2uL5jNRG4jdQ%3D%3D&mCTIbCubSFfXsDGW9IXnlG%3D%3D=hFflUdN3100%3D&kCx1AnS9%2FpWZQ40DXFvdEw%3D%3D=hFflUdN3100%3D&uJovDxwdjMPoYv%2BAJvYtyA%3D%3D=ctNJFf55vVA%3D&FgPIIEJYlotS%2BYGoBi5oIA%3D%3D=NHdURQburHA%3D&d9Qjj0ag1Pd993jsyOJqFvmyB7X0CSQK=ctNJFf55vVA%3D&WGewmoAfeNR9xqBux0r1Q8Za60lavYmz=ctNJFf55vVA%3D&WGewmoAfeNQ16B2MHuCpMRKZMwaG1PaO=ctNJFf55vVA%3D>

Section 2: Further and Higher Education

Summary

- Research from the past year supports and strengthens findings from the 2022 report. Much of the newly published evidence relates to the acute phase of the pandemic.
- There has been a disproportionate impact on some groups of students and staff; the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities.
- It is difficult to disentangle the impact of the pandemic from other social issues. There appears to be a lack of evidence around the cumulative impact of austerity, Brexit, COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis.
- Student satisfaction increased in 2022 but students' life satisfaction was still lower than pre-pandemic levels.
- There appears to be a lack of UK and Scottish evidence about the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and financial disadvantage.

Key Events and Related Changes to Relevant Educational Legislation, Policy and Guidelines

In line with Scottish Government guidance⁶⁰, the Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges concluded its work on 15 June 2022⁶¹, and the Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advanced Learning Recovery Group concluded its work on 4 October 2022⁶². Universities and colleges returned to in-person teaching throughout 2022, with many utilising a blended model with some online and some in-person teaching.

Impact on the Generality of Students in FE and HE

The higher (HE) and further (FE) education sectors continued to be affected by the pandemic throughout the 2021-22 academic year. Students enrolling in college or university in 2021-22 had experienced two years of disrupted education, which was an additional challenge while working towards the gradual return of face-to-face teaching and exams^{63, 64}.

A UK-wide online survey of young people (16-25, fieldwork in 2021) found that those in education were significantly more likely than those in employment to say that the pandemic had a detrimental impact on their development of work skills. More starkly, 75% of those in education

⁶⁰ Scottish Government (2022), 'New "Stay at Home" Guidance Published', *Scottish Government*, <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-stay-at-home-guidance-published/>

⁶¹ Coronavirus (COVID-19) Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges (2022), 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges minutes: May 2022', *Scottish Government*, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advisory-sub-group-on-universities-and-colleges-minutes-june-2022/>

⁶² Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advanced Learning Recovery Group (2022), 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advanced Learning Recovery Group', *Scottish Government*, <https://www.gov.scot/groups/coronavirus-covid-19-advanced-learning-recovery-group/>

⁶³ Scottish Funding Council (2023), 'College Statistics 2021-22', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2023/SFCST012023.aspx>

⁶⁴ Scottish Government (2022), 'Wider Harms of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Learners, Students and Staff within Higher Education, Further Education and Community Learning and Development in Scotland, Scottish Government', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wider-harms-covid-19-pandemic-learners-students-staff-within-higher-education-further-education-community-learning-development-scotland/>

said their educational progress had worsened due to the pandemic⁶⁵. A large 2022 study of college students in Scotland found that 55% said the pandemic had negatively impacted their studies, while 44% said that they had not benefitted from the full student experience due to the pandemic⁶⁶.

Some reports suggest that students experienced decreased confidence and increased anxiety, struggling following progression between college years and in transition to FE or HE even when they were not working at the required level^{67, 68}. Some students and recent graduates were concerned about access to careers support⁶⁹ and graduate employment prospects⁷⁰ during the acute pandemic years.

HESA statistics suggest that 2021/22 UK data point to a '*levelling off or reverse of the changes which we saw in 2020/21*'. For example, 2021/22 data shows a decrease in the number of students living in their parents' or guardians' homes, an increase in the number of students living abroad, and a reduction in the number of students receiving first class honours⁷¹.

The 2021/22 student satisfaction survey found that overall student satisfaction had increased across full- and part-time college students and was almost back at pre-pandemic levels in Scotland⁷². In HE, the 2022 National Student Survey reported that results were broadly in line with 2021 results, except for a marked improvement in access to learning resources. Like other UK countries, student perceptions of teaching quality and overall satisfaction with course quality in Scotland are still slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels⁷³. Comments about the learning community were less positive than pre-pandemic. This is unsurprising considering that the survey was open to students in early 2022 when many restrictions were still in place in colleges and universities.

Impact of Online Learning

In line with earlier research, more recent studies suggest that for some students, online teaching and delivery of student-facing services enabled increased flexibility and participation, while others had disengaged with their learning or with student services due to a lack of face-to-face support⁷⁴.

⁶⁵ F. Green, G. Henseke & I. Schoon (2022), 'Perceived Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', *Journal of Education and Work*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2092608>

⁶⁶ C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

⁶⁷ Scottish Government (2022), 'Wider Harms of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wider-harms-covid-19-pandemic-learners-students-staff-within-higher-education-further-education-community-learning-development-scotland/>

⁶⁸ C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

⁶⁹ C. Orlando (2022), 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Young People's Experiences of Careers Support: A UK-wide and Youth-centred Analysis', *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 49/1, 27–33, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/hequ.12415>

⁷⁰ C. Orlando (2022), 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Young People's Experiences of Careers Support: A UK-wide and Youth-centred Analysis', *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 49/1, 27–33, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/hequ.12415>

⁷¹ L. Van Essen-Fishman (2023), 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 2021/22 Student data', *Higher Education Statistics Agency*, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/19-01-2023/impact-covid-19-2022-student-data>

⁷² Scottish Funding Council (2022), 'Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey 2021-22', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2022/SFCST072022.aspx>

⁷³ When comparing 2022 and 2018 data.

⁷⁴ Scottish Government (2022), 'Wider Harms of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wider-harms-covid-19-pandemic-learners-students-staff-within-higher-education-further-education-community-learning-development-scotland/>

⁷⁵. The move to online learning has led to the development of some innovative and creative ways of working^{76, 77, 78}, and recent research considers ways to systematise and improve the robustness of online provision^{79, 80}.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

Studies in the UK and Scotland have continued to report that younger people in general and students in particular were more likely than the general population to experience mental health difficulties during the pandemic^{81, 82, 83}. Recent ONS data suggests that although students' life satisfaction increased between 2021 and 2022, it was still lower than pre-pandemic levels, as it was for the general adult population⁸⁴. An international systematic review found that being a student during the pandemic was a risk factor for poor mental health that did not vary by country examined⁸⁵. Qualitative studies in Scotland and the UK have explored the impacts of the pandemic on students, pointing to the impact of loneliness and isolation, bereavement, and academic pressure, with support from family and friends a key protective factor^{86, 87, 88}.

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- ⁷⁵ H. Slack & M. Priestly (2022), 'Online Learning and Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Impact on Undergraduate Student Well-being', *Assessment & evaluation in higher education*, 48/3, 333–349, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2022.2076804>
- ⁷⁶ S. Bell et al. (2022), 'A Scottish University Prescribing Team's Experiences and Reflections During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of prescribing practice*, 4/10, 432–439, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/doi/10.1108/9781803821931>
- ⁷⁷ S. Bell et al. (2022), 'A Scottish University Prescribing Team's Experiences and Reflections During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of prescribing practice*, 4/10, 432–439, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/doi/10.1108/9781803821931>
- ⁷⁸ K. Campbell & F. McAdam (2022), 'Designing and Delivering an Online Transition Programme: A Practical Application of Zepke and Leach's Ten Proposals for Action', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 4/2, 107–125, <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/openu/jwpl/2022/00000024/00000002/art00007>
- ⁷⁹ M. Weller (2022), 'The UK Open University COVID Response: A Sector Case Study', *OTESA Journal*, 2/1, 1–13, <https://journal.otessa.org/index.php/oj/article/view/35>
- ⁸⁰ M. Hutchings et al. (2022), Practice-based Learning and the Impacts of COVID-19: Doing it for Real?', *British Journal of Midwifery*, 30/6, 305–357, <https://www.britishjournalofmidwifery.com/content/professional/practice-based-learning-and-the-impacts-of-covid-19-doing-it-for-real/>
- ⁸¹ L. Rosa et al. (2022), 'Predictors of Longer-Term Depression Trajectories During the COVID-19 pandemic: A Longitudinal Study in four UK Cohorts', *BMJ Mental Health*, 25/4, e3, <https://mentalhealth.bmj.com/content/25/4/e3.abstract>
- ⁸² Generation Scotland (2022), 'Anxiety and depression due to the pandemic could remain for years', *University of Edinburgh*, <https://www.ed.ac.uk/generation-scotland/what-have-we-found/latest-results/pandemic-mental-health>
- ⁸³ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2022), 'Personal Well-being in the UK: April 2021 to March 2022', <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2021tomarch2022>
- ⁸⁴ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2022), 'Personal Well-being in the UK: April 2021 to March 2022', <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2021tomarch2022>
- ⁸⁵ N. Di Fazio et al. (2022), 'Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19 Pandemic Period in the European Population: An Institutional Challenge', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19/15, 9347, <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/15/9347>
- ⁸⁶ M. Gogoi et al. (2022), 'University Students' Mental Health and Well-Being during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from the UniCoVac Qualitative Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19/15, 9322, <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/15/9322>
- ⁸⁷ L. Rosa et al. (2022), 'Predictors of Longer-Term Depression Trajectories During the COVID-19 pandemic: A Longitudinal Study in four UK Cohorts', *BMJ Mental Health*, 25/4, e3, <https://mentalhealth.bmj.com/content/25/4/e3.abstract>
- ⁸⁸ N. McGookin (2022), "'It was Kinda Like D.I.Y Closure": Using Photovoice to Capture the Experiences of Final Year Social Work Students Graduating Amidst the Pandemic', *Qualitative Social Work*, 1–20, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14733250221105081>

Increased Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funding for wellbeing and mental health services led to an increase in services, although the year-by-year funding model has made it difficult for some institutions to recruit and retain staff. The pandemic raised the profile of and sometimes improved services in universities and colleges but institutions were starting at variable baselines, varying widely in mental health and wellbeing provision pre-pandemic^{89, 90, 91, 92}. Demand on mental health services increased overall but decreased in some institutions, possibly due to decreased contact with students⁹³.

Digital mental health technologies including online counselling, 24/7 crisis lines and mental health apps are now widely utilised by Scotland's universities and colleges, but few have developed formal pathways for referring students to community mental health teams, and the ratio of students to counsellors varies widely by institution⁹⁴.

Disproportionate Impact on Particular Groups of Students

Recent evidence continues to confirm the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on some groups of students. These are outlined below. It should also be noted that there appears to be a research gap around the possible intersectionality between race, disability, financial disadvantage, gender and sexuality in relation to the impact of the pandemic on students and staff.

Financially Disadvantaged Students

Financial hardship continued to impact students throughout the less acute phase of the pandemic, although it is difficult to disentangle the financial impact of the pandemic from the cost of living crisis⁹⁵. For the 2022/23 academic year the removal of the £4,000 cap on the FE discretionary fund continued in recognition of the continuing financial impact of the pandemic, in combination with current cost of living issues⁹⁶.

An NUS Scotland survey reported that a third of students who applied for Coronavirus Discretionary Funding⁹⁷ received the money they needed, with half saying they did not receive as much as they needed⁹⁸. A Scottish Government survey found that although three quarters of students

⁸⁹ C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial Findings from Scottish Colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

⁹⁰ A. Rich et al. (2023), 'UK Medical Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Interview Study', *BMJ Open*, 13/e070528, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/13/4/e070528.abstract>

⁹¹ F. dos Santos Sousa & A. Feeny (2023), 'University Counselling Services in Scotland: Insights and Perspectives Following the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Think Positive Scotland*, <https://thinkpositive.scot/resources/university-counselling-services-in-scotland/>

⁹² C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

⁹³ C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

⁹⁴ F. dos Santos Sousa & A. Feeny (2023), 'University Counselling Services in Scotland: Insights and Perspectives Following the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Think Positive Scotland*, <https://thinkpositive.scot/resources/university-counselling-services-in-scotland/>

⁹⁵ Student Minds & Alterline (2023), 'February 2023: New Research Findings on Student Mental Health', *Student Minds*, <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/insight-briefings.html>

⁹⁶ Scottish Funding Council, 'FE Discretionary Fund AY 2022-23', Scottish Funding Council, 2022. <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/guidance/2022/SFCGD112022.aspx>

⁹⁷ This funding was available to students impacted financially by the pandemic until July 2022

⁹⁸ NUS Scotland & F. Douglas Oloyede (2022), 'Broke: How Scotland is Failing its Students', <https://www.nus-scotland.org.uk/alarming-research-on-student-poverty>

experienced financial difficulties in summer 2021, most (70%) did not apply for any discretionary or hardship support, most commonly due to lack of awareness that it was available⁹⁹.

For the 2022/23 academic year SFC allocated £4.5m to help alleviate digital poverty across colleges and universities¹⁰⁰. Evidence from stakeholders across Scotland has emphasised that issues around connectivity, installation and running costs remain barriers to students from low-income households being able to fully engage in their education^{101, 102}.

Temporary provisions providing students in Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) with additional tenants' rights were suspended from July 2022. Evidence from within the housing sector suggests that partly due to experiences during COVID-19, private landlords are now turning away from student markets and toward long-term tenancies, contributing to a shrinking HMO sector and rising rents, and increased demand for PBSA which, due to its unique position with fewer tenants' rights, could have a disproportionate impact on financially disadvantaged students¹⁰³.

Black and Minority Ethnic Students

Qualitative research in the US and UK highlights that the pandemic exacerbated the marginalisation already experienced by Black students, the impact of systemic racism compounded by that of COVID-19 creating a 'pandemic within a pandemic'¹⁰⁴.

There were unintended consequences of amended assessment arrangements in 2019/20 for university applicants; those who would usually find a place through Clearing were disproportionately affected because there were fewer unfilled places available. On a UK level this meant that Black and South Asian students were less likely than others to get a place¹⁰⁵.

There has been a notable change across the UK in the make-up of the international student population, with the number of EU domiciled students decreasing and the number of other international postgraduate students increasing¹⁰⁶. Even when multivariate analysis is used to

⁹⁹ Scottish Government (2022), 'Insights into Student Experiences of Financial Support in Summer 2021: Results from an Online Survey', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/insights-student-experiences-financial-support-summer-2021-results-online-survey/>

¹⁰⁰ Scottish Funding Council (2022), 'Funding to Support Digital Poverty 2022-23', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/guidance/2022/SFCGD102022.aspx>

¹⁰¹ The Scottish Parliament Education and Young People Committee (2022), Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people, 2nd Report 2022 (Session 6), *Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body*, <https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/Committees/Report/ECYP/2022/2/11/9c0fcf62-e8ea-43ad-a05e-1d214ce00829-1#Introduction>

¹⁰² Scottish Government (2022), 'Wider Harms of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wider-harms-covid-19-pandemic-learners-students-staff-within-higher-education-further-education-community-learning-development-scotland/>

¹⁰³ Scottish Government (2022), *Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) and Student Housing: Research*, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-purpose-built-student-accommodation-pbsa-student-housing-scotland/>

¹⁰⁴ J. Arday & C. Jones. (2022), Same Storm, Different Boats: The Impact of COVID-19 on Black Students and Academic Staff in UK and US Higher Education', *Higher Education*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-022-00939-0>

¹⁰⁵ E. Del Bono et al. (2022), 'University Access: The Role of Background and COVID-19 Throughout the Application Process', *University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER)*, <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/267160>

¹⁰⁶ L. Van Essen-Fishman (2023), 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 2021/22 Student data', *Higher Education Statistics Agency*, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/19-01-2023/impact-covid-19-2022-student-data>

control for the impact of Brexit, the impact of the pandemic on the number of university applications from high-income countries is statistically significant¹⁰⁷.

Although some UK research has suggested that international students' mental health was not disproportionately affected by the pandemic¹⁰⁸, other research points out the importance of cultural and interpretation differences; international students appear to be less likely to define themselves as having a mental health difficulty, while simultaneously experiencing a higher level of pressure and anxiety allied to concerns about finances, social connectedness and employability¹⁰⁹. Ethnic minority students appear to have been overrepresented in Scottish university counselling services in 2020-21, although this data is not complete and cannot be analysed by sub-group¹¹⁰.

LGBTQI+ Students

An international systematic review found that for sexual and gender minorities, minority- and pandemic-related factors intersected with pandemic challenges such as having to return home to unsupportive or homophobic families. Other research continues to highlight the negative consequences of lockdowns on LGBTQ+ students^{111 112}.

A 2022 survey by LGBT youth reported that the proportion of university students in Scotland who said the experience of LGBTI students was 'good' had decreased since 2018, although for college students the number had increased¹¹³.

Disabled Students

Data published by UCAS in 2022 shows that the deferral rate for disabled university applicants rose during 2020 and again in 2021. The steepest increase in deferral rates was for students with social, behavioural or communication impairments. The same report found that although most students said the pandemic would not stop them starting their course in 2022, 8% had delayed or deferred due to a lack of support, and 7% due to health concerns related to COVID-19¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁷ G. Di Pietro (ahead of print, 2022), 'COVID-19 and Intentions to Study Abroad: Evidence from Overseas University Applications to the UK', *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/HEED-11-2021-0080/full/html>

¹⁰⁸ H. Slack & M. Priestly (2022), 'Online Learning and Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Impact on Undergraduate Student Well-being', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 48/3, 333-349, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2022.2076804>

¹⁰⁹ N. Frampton, J. Smith & D. Smithies (2022), 'Understanding Student Mental Health Inequalities: International Students', *Student Minds*, <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/mh-inequalities-international-students.html#report>

¹¹⁰ F. dos Santos Sousa & A. Feeny (2023), 'University Counselling Services in Scotland: Insights and Perspectives Following the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Think Positive Scotland*, <https://thinkpositive.scot/resources/university-counselling-services-in-scotland/>

¹¹¹ C. Bleckmann et al. (2022), 'Sexual and Gender Minorities Facing the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Systematic Review of the Distinctive Psychosocial and Health-related Impact', *Journal of homosexuality*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00918369.2022.2074335>

¹¹² T. Leven (2022), 'Health Needs Assessment of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Non-binary People', *NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, NHS Lothian and Public Health Scotland*, <https://www.stor.scot.nhs.uk/handle/11289/580332>

¹¹³ LGBT Youth Scotland (2022), 'Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People', *LGBT Youth Scotland*, <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/resources/>

¹¹⁴ UCAS (2022), 'Next Steps: What is the Experience of Disabled Students in Education?', <https://wwwucas.com/next-steps-what-experience-disabled-students-education?hash=Khe12QF8sBath7P7hVMMpU9lSoJrAtS5f9zaLif2-Ml>

Disability studies scholars have pointed out that moves towards, and now away from, online learning have had uneven effects on disabled students and staff, and decisions continue to be based on what suits able-bodied students and staff¹¹⁵.

Mental Health

Quantitative and qualitative studies published since the previous report confirm earlier findings about mental health during the acute phase of the pandemic. Students who had previously experienced mental health difficulties were more likely to experience mental health issues during the pandemic, and women reported higher levels of depression and anxiety than men. Those who reported living with someone in a high-risk group were more likely to experience depression and anxiety^{116, 117}.

Practical Subjects

The ability to deliver practical and work-based learning remained challenging in 2022 in the context of ongoing, although less severe restrictions^{118, 119}. Many students on courses with a mandatory placement had been unable to complete their placements in the acute phase of the pandemic, and changing assessment models could not always equip these students with the skills they would otherwise have gained. It was challenging to fill these skills gaps while simultaneously catering for new students who had also experienced lost learning^{120, 121, 122}.

Students in the Medical Professions

There were some unique challenges for students training in the medical professions. Some clinical or practice-based learning was postponed, replaced with simulations, or moved online. For some students, particularly those in the early years of their courses, progress was affected by the

¹¹⁵ J. Boys (2022), 'Exploring Inequalities in the Social, Spatial and Material Practices of Teaching and Learning in Pandemic Times', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 4, 13–32, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42438-021-00267-z>

¹¹⁶ F. dos Santos Sousa & A. Feeny (2023), 'University Counselling Services in Scotland: Insights and Perspectives Following the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Think Positive Scotland*, <https://thinkpositive.scot/resources/university-counselling-services-in-scotland/>

¹¹⁷ R. Jia et al. (2022), 'The Prevalence, Incidence, Prognosis and Risk Factors for Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety in a UK Cohort during the COVID-19 Pandemic', *BJ Psych Open*, 8/e64, 1–9, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-open/article/prevalence-incidence-prognosis-and-risk-factors-for-symptoms-of-depression-and-anxiety-in-a-uk-cohort-during-the-covid19-pandemic/A995EAFBD3EFB5C5E1A0E4D01C9D49D3>

¹¹⁸ Scottish Funding Council (2023), 'College Statistics 2021-22', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2023/SFCST012023.aspx>

¹¹⁹ C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

¹²⁰ C. Maguire et al. (2022), 'Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges', *Mental Health Foundation*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/thriving-learners>

¹²¹ Scottish Government (2022), 'Wider Harms of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/wider-harms-covid-19-pandemic-learners-students-staff-within-higher-education-further-education-community-learning-development-scotland/>

¹²² F. Green, G. Henseke & I. Schoon (2022), 'Perceived Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Educational Progress and the Learning of Job Skills', *Journal of Education and Work*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2092608>

pandemic due to lack of access to clinical practice^{123, 124, 125, 126}. Others experienced the changes to assessment, increased empathy received, and extra time to complete courses as positive^{127, 128}.

Research published since the previous report highlights the impact of the acute pandemic years on nursing students, many of whom were recruited for clinical practice, consequently experiencing increased stress, anxiety and fear of the risk they posed to others, which in turn increased their isolation as they quarantined from friends and family members^{129, 130, 131}.

Impact on Applications and Attainment Outcomes

The number of 18-19 year olds participating in a full-time college course in Scotland decreased slightly from 2020/21 to 2021/22, in line with trends across the UK. Reasons for this could include declining numbers of young people, more students going to university due to increased attainment since 2019, and more low-skilled jobs being available due to the beginnings of labour market recovery as pandemic restrictions eased^{132, 133}. Enrolments in college increased overall, however, reflecting the fact that students who had deferred their practical courses in the previous year were now able to begin their studies. This increase was driven by courses under 10 hours per week and non-recognised qualifications such as pre-access courses, which reflects Scottish Government's ongoing focus on college as an economy-responsive resource to reskill and upskill¹³⁴. Over 90% students who deferred in 2019/20 have since returned to college¹³⁵.

The number of HE students in Scotland in 2020/21 increased from 2019/20. At Taught Postgraduate level, the student body increased by almost a quarter from 2019/20 to 2020/21,

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- ¹²³ S. Gowda et al. (2022), 'Tangible Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Fall in Dexterity Amongst Surgical Trainees?', *Scottish Medical Journal*, 67/2, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00369330221088928?journalCode=scma>
- ¹²⁴ R. Walmsley et al. (2023), 'The Challenges of Visualisation During Delivery and Assessment of Clinical Teaching Under COVID-19: A Reflective Account of Problem Solving', In O. Varsou et al. (eds), *Biomedical Visualisation. Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology*, vol 1397, 199–213, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-17135-2_11
- ¹²⁵ M. Welsh et al. (2022), 'One Size Does Not Fit All in Remote Anatomy Teaching', In O. Varsou et al., eds., *Biomedical Visualisation: Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology*, vol 1397, 55–77, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-17135-2_4
- ¹²⁶ A. Rich et al. (2023), 'UK Medical Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Interview Study', *BMJ Open*, 13/e070528, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/13/4/e070528.abstract>
- ¹²⁷ A. Rich et al. (2023), 'UK Medical Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Interview Study', *BMJ Open*, 13/e070528, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/13/4/e070528.abstract>
- ¹²⁸ M. Macluskey et al. (2022), 'The Impact of a 1-Year COVID-19 Extension on Undergraduate Dentistry in Dundee: Final Year Students' Perspectives of Their Training in Oral Surgery', *Dentistry Journal*, 10/12, 230, <https://www.mdpi.com/2304-6767/10/12/230>
- ¹²⁹ D. Barrett (2022), 'Impact of COVID-19 on Nursing Students: What Does the Evidence Tell Us?', *Evidence-based Nursing*, 25/2, <https://ebn.bmj.com/content/25/2/37>
- ¹³⁰ L. Griffin & R. Riley (2022), 'Exploring the Psychological Impact of Working During COVID-19 on Medical and Nursing Students: A Qualitative Study', *BMJ Open*, 12/e055804, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/12/6/e055804.abstract>
- ¹³¹ L. Berragan et al. (2022), 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Learning for Final-year Nursing Students', In M.G. Jamil & D.A. Morley, eds., eds., *Agile Learning Environments amid Disruption*, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-92979-4_19
- ¹³² Scottish Funding Council (2023), 'College Statistics 2021-22', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2023/SFCST012023.aspx>
- ¹³³ 'Education and training statistics for the UK' <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk#dataBlock-36fd6e20-0797-4a13-b28a-85f4fc60e3ea-tables>
- ¹³⁴ Scottish Funding Council (2023), 'College Statistics 2021-22', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2023/SFCST012023.aspx>
- ¹³⁵ Scottish Funding Council (2022), 'College performance indicators 2020-21', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2022/SFCST032022.aspx>

perhaps reflecting the then contracting labour market¹³⁶. HE enrolments in Scotland continued to rise in 2021/22¹³⁷. 2022/23 enrolment data is not yet published but UCAS data shows that HE applications to Scottish institutions continued to rise in 2022, although not as sharply as the previous year. For students domiciled in Scotland, applications rose in 2021 and decreased again in 2022 to pre-pandemic levels¹³⁸.

Overall, the number of people qualifying from HE in Scotland increased from 2019/20 to 2020/21¹³⁹, partly due to those who paused their studies during 2019/20 due to the pandemic and qualified the following year instead. As 2021/22 data on qualifiers in Scotland is not yet available, it is not possible to say whether this increase represents a return to the long-term upwards trend in the number of HE qualifiers. In 2021/22 the number of qualifications in the UK increased for all levels except first degrees, which decreased slightly since 2020/21 but are still higher than pre-pandemic¹⁴⁰.

For UK-domiciled students who started their full-time HE course in 2019/20 or part-time HE course in 2018/19, the rates of non-continuation¹⁴¹ are not significantly different from previous years¹⁴². Withdrawal rates in the college sector in Scotland increased in 2020/21 following a lower than usual withdrawal rate in 2019/20. This 2019/20 decrease had likely been caused by fewer alternative options being available during pandemic restrictions. Most of the 2020/21 withdrawals happened in the second half of the academic year when pandemic restrictions had begun to ease and jobs became available, but while physical attendance at college was still limited, particularly for practical courses such as hairdressing and construction. Reasons for increased withdrawal rates include fatigue with blended learning, uncertainty about assessment methods, lack of in-person practical activities, fewer work placements, childcare and caring commitments and lack of opportunities for in-person interaction with peers and lecturers¹⁴³. Data on college completions and withdrawals in 2021/22 is not yet available.

In 2020-21 the number of HE entrants from the most deprived communities in Scotland was higher than ever before, and exceeded Scottish Government's target. In addition, more disadvantaged students returned for the second year of their university degree in 2020-21 than the year before¹⁴⁴. As the Commissioner for Fair Access points out, however, these figures should be used with caution, as the 2020-21 figures tell us about the first academic year impacted by COVID-19, when many entrants were already on course for higher education. The full impact on fair access is likely

¹³⁶ Scottish Funding Council, 'Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions 2020-21', Scottish Funding Council, 2022. <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2022/SFCST052022.aspx>

¹³⁷ Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) (2023), 'Who's studying in HE?', <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>

¹³⁸ UCAS (2022), 'Undergraduate End of Cycle Data Resources 2022', <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2022>

¹³⁹ Scottish Funding Council (2022), 'Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions 2020-21', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2022/SFCST052022.aspx>

¹⁴⁰ HESA (2023), 'Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22', <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2023/sb265-higher-education-student-statistics>

¹⁴¹ Defined as those who did not leave in the first 50 days but were not there a year later

¹⁴² HESA (2022), 'Non-continuation: UK Performance Indicators', <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation>

¹⁴³ Scottish Funding Council (2022), 'College Performance Indicators 2020-21', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2022/SFCST032022.aspx>

¹⁴⁴ Scottish Funding Council (2022), 'Report on Widening Access 2020-21', <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistical-publications/2022/SFCST062022.aspx>

to be seen in data from subsequent years, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis¹⁴⁵. Widening Access figures for 2021/22 are not yet available, but applications and acceptances from students in the most deprived areas of Scotland increased in 2022 compared with 2019¹⁴⁶.

New experimental statistics from HESA suggest that the HE attainment gap – measured by the number of people awarded a first or upper second degree – between students from the most and least deprived decreased more in Scotland than the UK as a whole between 2017/18 and 2020/21¹⁴⁷.

Impact on Staff

Research continues to highlight the additional workload and strain experienced by HE staff over the pandemic, and now includes some data from the UK and Scotland^{148, 149}. While embedding the positive learning from the pandemic it will be important to avoid further pressurising staff by adequately resourcing this work^{150, 151}.

For female early career academics who were more likely be young mothers during the pandemic while they were on precarious contracts, long-term career trajectories and stress levels may be disproportionately affected^{152, 153, 154, 155}.

¹⁴⁵ Commissioner for Fair Access (2022), 'Maintaining the Momentum Towards Fair Access Annual Report 2022', *Scottish Government*, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/maintaining-momentum-towards-fair-access-annual-report-2022/>

¹⁴⁶ Universities Scotland (2022), 'University Dedication to Widening Access Continues to Reap Results', <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/ucas2022endcycle/>

¹⁴⁷ Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) (2023), 'Degree Attainment by Socioeconomic Background: UK, 2017/18 to 2020/21', https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-04-2023/ah2304-degree-attainment-socioeconomic-background#_ftn5

¹⁴⁸ P. Hanna & M. Erickson (2022), 'UK Higher Education Staff Experiences of Moral Injury During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Higher Education*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-022-00956-z>

¹⁴⁹ N. Connon & E. Pirie (2022), 'Home-Based Learning (HBL) in Higher Education Post-COVID: An Analysis From Staff and Student Perspectives', *Journal of Innovation in Polytechnic Education*, 4/1, 45–50, <https://jipe.ca/index.php/jipe/article/view/107/51>

¹⁵⁰ M. Weller (2022), 'The UK Open University COVID Response: A Sector Case Study', *OTESSA Journal*, 2/1, 1–13, <https://journal.otessa.org/index.php/oj/article/view/35>

¹⁵¹ M. Hutchings et al. (2022), Practice-based Learning and the Impacts of COVID-19: Doing it for Real?', *British Journal of Midwifery*, 30/6, 305–357, <https://www.britishjournalofmidwifery.com/content/professional/practice-based-learning-and-the-impacts-of-covid-19-doing-it-for-real/>

¹⁵² A. Herten-Crabb & C. Wenham (2022), "‘I Was Facilitating Everybody Else’s Life. And Mine Had Just Ground to a Halt’": The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Women in the United Kingdom', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 29/4, 1213–1235, <https://academic.oup.com/sp/article/29/4/1213/6585015?login=false>

¹⁵³ A. Zamberlan et al. (2022), 'Gender Inequality in Domestic Chores over Ten Months of the UK COVID-19 Pandemic: Heterogeneous Adjustments to Partners’ Changes in Working Hours', *Demographic Research*, 46, 565–580, <https://www.ijstor.org/stable/48677034>

¹⁵⁴ J. Zike & S. Illingworth (2023), '‘I Have Struggled’': How Individual Identities Impacted Staff Working Experiences in Higher Education During COVID-19', *Perspectives: Policy & Practice in Higher Education*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2023.2192531>

¹⁵⁵ S-A. Constantinescu & M-H. Pozsar., 'Was This Supposed to Be on the Test? Academic Leadership, Gender and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Denmark, Hungary, Romania, and United Kingdom', *MDPI*, 10/16, <https://www.mdpi.com/2304-6775/10/2/16>

Minority ethnic women were disproportionately affected because of the cumulative impact of the pandemic on those already affected by structural and institutional racism^{156, 157}. Discourses of meritocracy have been unhelpful in acknowledging and responding to intersecting, cumulative structural inequalities in the HE sector¹⁵⁸. In sum, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities.

¹⁵⁶ J. Arday & C. Jones. (2022), Same Storm, Different Boats: The Impact of COVID-19 on Black Students and Academic Staff in UK and US Higher Education', *Higher Education*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-022-00939-0>

¹⁵⁷ A-L. Pennant (2022), "Who's checkin" for Black Girls and Women in the "Pandemic Within a Pandemic"? COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and Educational Implications', *Educational Review*, 74/3, 534–557, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00131911.2021.2023102?needAccess=true&role=button>

¹⁵⁸ M. Blell et al., 'Working in Unprecedented Times: Intersectionality and Women of Color in UK Higher Education in and Beyond the Pandemic', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30/2, 353–372, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12907>

Section 3: Youth Work Sector in Scotland

Summary

- There has been a disproportionate impact on some groups of young people: the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities based on e.g. gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and financial disadvantage.
- Mental health and wellbeing of young people and youth work practitioners is a widespread concern.
- There are significant and particular challenges for the youth work sector's recovery from COVID-19.
- Impacts of COVID-19 on some young people's learning and development appear to be compounded by long term financial austerity and the current cost of living crisis.

Key Events and Related Changes to Relevant Educational Legislation, Policy and Guidelines

The spring of 2022 heralded a strategic shift in the management of youth work services across the educational landscape in Scotland. From 21st March 2022, the approach of the Scottish Government moved from a focus on legal requirements surrounding COVID-19 towards guidance designed to suppress the virus. This was supported by advice for the effective management and improved resilience across the youth work practice sector. YouthLink Scotland (2022)¹⁵⁹ and Youth Scotland (2022)¹⁶⁰ published guidance to support the continuation of local-level risk assessed decisions and actions regarding the delivery of face-to-face services. This sector-specific guidance was contextualised by wider public health advice. Youth work leaders were encouraged to adopt this advice alongside the Scottish Government's (2022)¹⁶¹ updated Strategic Framework and associated guidance for colleges, universities and community learning and development (CLD)¹⁶².

A review of the emergent literature from this point forward brings attention to the longer-term residual impact of the preceding period of restrictions for youth work organisations, practitioners and young people. The potential legacy of the COVID-19 virus appears to be taking shape in the recent evidence and commentary on, and from, the youth work sector. Several key themes are evident in the literature reviewed. These are:

- Mental Health and wellbeing of young people and youth work practitioners.
- The challenges for the youth work sector's recovery from COVID-19.
- The impact on young people's learning and development.

Overall, research from the past year supports and strengthens findings from the 2022 report. Much of the newly published evidence relates to the acute phase of the pandemic rather than this current recovery phase.

¹⁵⁹ YouthLink Scotland (2022b), 'Guiding Principles to Support the Safe Delivery of Youth Work'.

¹⁶⁰ Youth Scotland (2022a), 'Youth Scotland's Guide to Safer Community-based Youth Work: A Best-Practice Guide on Youth Work Delivery Post-Restrictions', <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/media/2334/youth-scotlands-best-practice-guide-on-youth-work-delivery-post-restrictions.pdf>

¹⁶¹ Scottish Government (2022), 'COVID-19: Scotland's Strategic Framework Update', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-scotlands-strategic-framework-update-february-2022/>

¹⁶² Scottish Government (2022a), 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Universities, Colleges and Community Learning and Development Providers', <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-universities-colleges-and-community-learning-and-development-providers/>

Impact on the Generality of Young People Engaging with Youth Work Services

The *Pandemic Impact Survey* (2022)¹⁶³ published by the Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People engaged with 118 service providers sampled from the Scottish local authorities and third sector respectively. The report highlights the knock-on effects of the restrictions to community-based youth and children's services. From findings of the survey, 86% of the respondents reported a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the children, young people and families using their services. However, the authors warn that whilst this finding is significant, the reality is still emerging. As one respondent states:

The full impacts of the pandemic are still unfolding. Many young people are still set in a 'coping stance': relationship problems suppressed to get by; losses not yet acknowledged; harmful coping mechanisms becoming habitual; learning delays and disruptions undermining new steps... We see increasing numbers of young people talking about suicidal ideation, as well as self-harm, as a coping mechanism that they prefer to hold on to rather than access support. Disconnectedness with support services, exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions/disruptions is also concerning.

A recent study commissioned by the Scottish Government (2023)¹⁶⁴ utilised an online survey with almost 1000 young people aged 12 to 25. From the findings, only 29.9% of the respondents agreed to any extent that they felt good about their mental health and wellbeing. Recent publications focused on youth work have reflected on the impact of COVID-19 and the mental health of young people (Youthlink, 2023¹⁶⁵; Youth Scotland, 2022¹⁶⁶; Children in Scotland, 2022¹⁶⁷). For Reynolds and Charraighe (2022)¹⁶⁸, the restrictions introduced during the COVID-19 period created a 'perfect storm' resulting in young people being harshly affected, both economically, and in mental health terms.

The impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of young people is an international concern for youth organisations. A survey of 100 youth organisations based in 36 OECD countries reported the greatest worries about the impact of COVID-19 were on mental health (83%), followed by education (64%), employment (42%), familial relations and friendships (35%), and limitation of individual freedoms (34%) (OECD, 2022)¹⁶⁹. More locally, a report by NHS Lothian (2022)¹⁷⁰, concluded that the onset of the pandemic exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities, and as a result 'had a significant impact on people's physical and mental health and these impacts

¹⁶³ Cross Party Group on Children and Young People (3 May 2022), 'Pandemic Impact Survey', *Scottish Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/cross-party-groups/children-and-young-people/030522-cpg-children-and-young-people-minutes.pdf>

¹⁶⁴ YouthLink Scotland et al. (2023a), 'Your Mental Health and Wellbeing Insights Report', <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/your-health-and-wellbeing-insights-engagement-report-launch/>

¹⁶⁵ YouthLink Scotland et al. (2023a), 'Your Mental Health and Wellbeing Insights Report', <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/your-health-and-wellbeing-insights-engagement-report-launch/>

¹⁶⁶ Youth Scotland (2022), 'Acting on Poverty: How Youth Scotland's Vital Work Supports the Most Affected Communities', <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-stories/acting-on-poverty/>

¹⁶⁷ I. Barnes et al. (2022), 'Participation through the Pandemic', *Children in Scotland*, <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/participation-through-the-pandemic/>

¹⁶⁸ R. Reynolds & A. Ní Charraighe (summer, 2022), 'Post-Covid Youth Work and Mental Wellbeing of Young People Across Scotland and England. *Concept*, 13/2, <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/7353>

¹⁶⁹ OECD (2022), 'Delivering for Youth: How Governments Can Put Young People at the Centre of the Recovery', <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/delivering-for-youth-how-governments-can-put-young-people-at-the-centre-of-the-recovery-92c9d060/>

¹⁷⁰ NHS Lothian (2022), 'NHS Lothian Director of Public Health Annual Report', <https://services.nhslothian.scot/publichealth/annualreport/>

are likely to be seen for some time' (p.1). Clearly, those young people and families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged have been affected disproportionately and will subsequently bear a higher burden of ill health in the months to come.

Disproportionate Impact on Particular Groups of Young People

The findings of this research and other recent reports point to the intersectional impact on young people's educational experiences and pathways. A recent report from LGBT Youth Scotland (2022)¹⁷¹ presented findings from a survey involving 1279 participants. From the young people who participated, 83% believed that their education had been impacted by COVID-19. The effects of the pandemic have been experienced disproportionately by young people with distinctive characteristics and living in specific circumstances. These include: young women, young people in poverty, young people from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), young migrants, young people with disabilities, young people from BAME groups, LGBTI young people, young people in rural communities (Cebula and Birt, 2023¹⁷²; Hill and Webber, 2022¹⁷³; OECD, 2022¹⁷⁴; Youth Scotland, 2022¹⁷⁵; MacDonald et al., 2023¹⁷⁶).

The intersectional impact of the pandemic is also recognised as a contributing factor in determining health outcomes for families in Scotland. As NHS Lothian (2022)¹⁷⁷ state:

The impacts of chronic stress, precipitated by poor quality employment or poverty for example, create many physical and mental health problems. Being homeless also increases the risk of poorer health...The intersection of different experiences and life circumstances drives inequality and poverty at an individual and population level. This results in differences in individual experiences of, for example, discrimination, prejudice, stigma, low income, and opportunities (p. 2).

The youth work sector in Scotland responds to the changing needs of young people; as such there appears to be a shift from the challenges of COVID-19 to the pressing impact of the cost-of-living crisis. Whilst COVID-19 did not affect young people directly to the same extent as older population groups in terms of illness, there is emerging evidence of longer-term impacts associated with lockdown and mitigation necessitated by the pandemic. A review of recent literature and evidence is reflecting this legacy, but also pointing to the added impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the

¹⁷¹ LGBT Youth Scotland (2022), 'Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People',

<https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/media/2712/life-in-scotland-for-lgbt-young-people-2022-e-use.pdf>

¹⁷² C. Cebula & C. Birt (2023), 'Deepening Poverty in Scotland – No One Left Behind?' Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/deepening-poverty-scotland-no-one-left-behind>

¹⁷³ K. Hill & R. Webber. (2022), 'From Pandemic to Cost of Living Crisis: Low-income Households in Challenging Times,' Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/pandemic-cost-living-crisis-low-income-families-challenging-times>

¹⁷⁴ OECD (2022), 'Delivering for Youth: How Governments Can Put Young People at the Centre of the Recovery', <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/delivering-for-youth-how-governments-can-put-young-people-at-the-centre-of-the-recovery-92c9d060/>

¹⁷⁵ Youth Scotland (2022), 'Acting on Poverty: How Youth Scotland's Vital Work Supports the Most Affected Communities', <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-stories/acting-on-poverty/>

¹⁷⁶ R. MacDonald et al. (2023), 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and Youth in Recent, Historical Perspective: More Pressure, More Precarity', *Journal of Youth Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2163884>

¹⁷⁷ NHS Lothian (2022), 'NHS Lothian Director of Public Health Annual Report', <https://services.nhslothian.scot/publichealth/annualreport/>

resultant deepening of poverty. Early indications are a compounded effect on the educational experiences, attainment and wider achievement of young people.

Impact on Young People's Learning and Development

A long-standing educational focus and planned intervention for youth work services in Scotland has been the key points of transition in the life course between childhood and adulthood. The development of skills, alongside experiential and accredited learning acquired through participation in youth work, supports young people's achievement outside of formal schooling. Following the impact of COVID-19, post-school transitional experiences and expectations have been profoundly affected for many young people. The OECD (2022)¹⁷⁸ has raised concern for the current generation of young people, whom they argue will shoulder the burden of the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the current financial crisis. They conclude that young people will find it 'increasingly difficult to transition to an autonomous life' (p. 5). The evidence cited points to the potential impact on educational attainment, future insecurity and precarity in the labour market, housing instability and increasing incidence of mental ill health. In a UK study conducted by MacDonald and colleagues (2023)¹⁷⁹, they identify the prospect of worsened mental health for young people linked to the pandemic, in particular the disruption to 'regimes of learning and qualifications' (pp. 5-6). They identified:

a widespread sense of uncertainty and, for many, psychological ill-being. Youth workers told us how even those in their early teens were worried about the impact of the pandemic on their long-term education and job prospects.

Impact on Organisational Capacity and Staff

As we emerge from the pandemic, some of the challenges faced by youth work practitioners in effectively meeting the educational needs of young people in community settings look set to continue. A review of the literature from March 2022 onwards highlights a range of discrete issues for the sector. There is emergent evidence of the impact on organisational capacity, with some service providers experiencing staff shortage. The Pandemic Impact Survey (2022)¹⁸⁰ reported 72% of organisations experiencing negative impact on staff morale and wider staff wellbeing. The survey confirmed a contributing factor to low morale came from 'a feeling of a lack of recognition about the value of their work during the pandemic and also a lack of funding' (p.10). YouthLink Scotland (2023)¹⁸¹, the national agency for youth work, has also identified emergent pressures on the workforce. Levels of staffing are depleted due in part to workers leaving or retiring during the pandemic. Staff succession is also identified as a source of concern with recruitment of youth workers with appropriate experience and qualifications proving difficult. The combined challenge of staff recruitment and retention, alongside uncertainty of funding, has resulted in services being suspended and some young people being left without the valuable support they get from youth

¹⁷⁸ OECD (2022), 'Delivering for Youth: How Governments Can Put Young People at the Centre of the Recovery', <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/delivering-for-youth-how-governments-can-put-young-people-at-the-centre-of-the-recovery-92c9d060/>

¹⁷⁹ R. MacDonald et al. (2023), 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and Youth in Recent, Historical Perspective: More Pressure, More Precarity', *Journal of Youth Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2163884>

¹⁸⁰ Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People (3 May 2022), 'Pandemic Impact Survey', *Scottish Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/cross-party-groups/children-and-young-people/030522-cpg-children-and-young-people-minutes.pdf>

¹⁸¹ YouthLink Scotland (2023), *Youth Work's Role During and in Recovery from COVID-19*, <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/youth-works-role-during-and-in-recovery-from-covid-19/>

work (Pandemic Impact Survey, 2022)¹⁸². Access to facilities has been key to the re-establishment of youth work over the past year. Up-to-date statistics on this are limited. It is evident that those organisations that have access to their own facilities ‘have fared best’; those which do not, mainly in the third sector, continue to find access particularly challenging (Pandemic Impact Survey, 2022, p. 12)¹⁸³.

In contrast to these challenges, there is reported evidence of some positive outcomes and lessons learned from the COVID-19 period. Despite the restrictions imposed, youth work practitioners continued to engage with young people, often in new, creative and innovative ways. In tandem with well-established methods and approaches, the workforce appears to have embraced the use of digital platforms, utilised the outdoors, adopted new practice approaches and developed new /deepened existing partnerships (Children in Scotland, 2022¹⁸⁴; YouthLink Scotland, 2023¹⁸⁵). Youth work practitioners have upskilled and engaged in opportunities for training and professional development. Youth Scotland is the largest national youth work organisation in Scotland supporting 1739 youth groups and almost 10,000 practitioners. During the pandemic the organisation responded quickly to adapt their programme of training, to allow online participation with sessions offered focussed on topics pertinent to the context for practice. The demand for their training increased by almost 50% with up to 5295 practitioners participating (Youth Scotland, 2022)¹⁸⁶. Some partnerships appear to have been improved and as a result the demand for youth work increased with an enhanced sense of value and understanding of purpose (Pandemic Impact Survey, 2022)¹⁸⁷. As YouthLink Scotland (2023)¹⁸⁸ report:

Local authority and third sector youth workers worked closely with social work, education, and other agencies and this has led to an increased understanding of the value of youth work. Youth work is now recognised as a critical strategic partner within local authorities. Partners recognise that youth work is not an activity but a process using a suite of resources and approaches that impacts young people’s confidence skills and engagement. This has led to increased requests for youth work to participate in various groups within local authorities (p.18).

The importance of youth work as an educational partner is echoed by HMI Scotland (2022)¹⁸⁹, who recognise the limitation of whole school approaches in meeting the wellbeing needs of all their

¹⁸² Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People (3 May 2022), ‘Pandemic Impact Survey’, *Scottish Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/cross-party-groups/children-and-young-people/030522-cpg-children-and-young-people-minutes.pdf>

¹⁸³ Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People (3 May 2022), ‘Pandemic Impact Survey’, *Scottish Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/cross-party-groups/children-and-young-people/030522-cpg-children-and-young-people-minutes.pdf>

¹⁸⁴ I. Barnes et al. (2022), ‘Participation through the Pandemic’, *Children in Scotland*, <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/participation-through-the-pandemic/>

¹⁸⁵ YouthLink Scotland (2023), *Youth Work’s Role During and in Recovery from COVID-19*, <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/youth-works-role-during-and-in-recovery-from-covid-19/>

¹⁸⁶ Youth Scotland (2022), ‘Acting on Poverty: How Youth Scotland’s Vital Work Supports the Most Affected Communities’, <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-stories/acting-on-poverty/>

¹⁸⁷ Cross Party Group on Children and Young People (3 May 2022), ‘Pandemic Impact Survey’, *Scottish Parliament*, <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/cross-party-groups/children-and-young-people/030522-cpg-children-and-young-people-minutes.pdf>

¹⁸⁸ YouthLink Scotland (2023), *Youth Work’s Role During and in Recovery from COVID-19*, <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/youth-works-role-during-and-in-recovery-from-covid-19/>

¹⁸⁹ HM Inspectors (May 2022), ‘Local Approaches to Recovery: A Thematic Review’, *Education Scotland*, <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/what-we-do/inspection-and-review/chief-inspector-report/national-thematic-inspections/local-approaches-to-recovery-a-thematic-review/>

learners. They cited examples of schools appointing additional staff, including youth workers, to help provide support to meet the specific needs of children and young people in the ongoing recovery from the pandemic.

These positive outcomes do not however detract from the need to recognise that re-establishing youth work services has still required practitioners to rebuild relationships and trust with some young people who had disengaged during the lockdown periods. This was particularly evident for those with complex needs or who had been less likely to engage with alternative online provision (YouthLink Scotland, 2023)¹⁹⁰.

The Youth Work Sector's Recovery from COVID-19

As an educational practice, youth work has extended its reach in responding to the impact of the pandemic, and as a result enhanced the reputation of the service with partner organisations. Evidence showcases examples of practitioners pushing the boundaries that would normally characterise the role and purpose of the sector (Children in Scotland, 2022)¹⁹¹. However, this was necessitated by the often-complex impact of COVID-19 on the lives and lifestyles of young people, their families and wider community. The cumulative effects of the pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis has required youth work practitioners to engage in issues such as tackling food and fuel poverty, providing more targeted and intensive services to young people experiencing difficulties with their mental health and wellbeing, and engaging more directly with families (YouthLink Scotland, 2023)¹⁹².

¹⁹⁰ YouthLink Scotland (2023), *Youth Work's Role During and in Recovery from COVID-19*, <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/youth-works-role-during-and-in-recovery-from-covid-19/>

¹⁹¹ I. Barnes et al. (2022), 'Participation through the Pandemic', *Children in Scotland*, <https://childreninScotland.org.uk/participation-through-the-pandemic/>

¹⁹² YouthLink Scotland (2023), *Youth Work's Role During and in Recovery from COVID-19*, <https://www.youthlink.scot/news/youth-works-role-during-and-in-recovery-from-covid-19/>

Conclusion

The research reviewed in this study demonstrates that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent institutional restrictions continue to represent a setback for children and young people in Scotland. All children bear this burden but the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people continue to bear the heaviest burdens. There are increasing indications that some impacts on education and certification may be far-reaching and long term. However, as stated in our report to the Inquiry in 2022, we also know that education, as a universal service, remains the most effective means available to improve life chances for children and young people, as we emerge from the pandemic.

This new oversight study has offered a summary of key themes: inequalities, health and wellbeing, digital access and infrastructure, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, support for the wider education workforce and systems of support and accountability at all levels of the sector. It is concerning that the pace of research into impacts of COVID-19 on education has slowed. This may in part be related to a wider societal desire to 'get back to normal' but may also be an effect of the cost of living crisis, recent industrial action across the education sector, etc. The findings in this report point strongly to the need for reinvigorated commitment to robust qualitative and quantitative research, including longitudinal research – vital if Scotland is to understand and address the medium- and long-term impacts of the pandemic. Finally, it also draws attention to the lack of progress in many areas which were particularly indicated for further investigation of lessons learned, identified in the 2022 report to the Inquiry, namely:

- The impact of anxiety and uncertainty surrounding exam cancellations and impact of high stakes assessment on mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.
- Patterns and trends in school attendance and engagement.
- The impact of the pandemic on children and young people who require additional support to flourish.
- The direct participation of children and young people in decision-making processes during the pandemic and as Scotland emerges from it.
- Medium- and longer-term impacts on the engagement and learning of the generality of children and young people across all stages of education.
- Access to, experiences in, and outcomes from education across all stages for children and young people from minority and disadvantaged groups and communities with pre-existing and intersecting vulnerabilities.
- The extent to which COVID-19 may have created 'new disadvantage' in addition to the known exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities and disadvantage.
- Staff wellbeing overall, and differential impacts on some groups of staff working across education, including women.
- The role for the youth work sector as an educational partner in meeting the learning and development needs of young people in a post-COVID Scotland.
- Routes to ensure Government and stakeholders can fully involve young people in mapping future plans for recovery of the youth work sector.

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Note on References

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