



The Impact of Coronavirus on UK Education: The Government's Proactive Leadership Kept Learning Communities SAF and its Path Back to Global Leadership

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated unprecedented disruption across the United Kingdom's education system, with nationwide school closures, rapid shifts to remote and blended learning, and widespread examination cancellations exacerbating existing inequalities and compromising student well-being. In response, the UK Government's proactive leadership—characterized by the swift deployment of digital infrastructure and device-loan schemes to bridge the “digital divide” [1] the extension of free school meals and targeted welfare support for vulnerable families [2], the introduction of flexible assessment frameworks and algorithm-reversal in summer 2020 [3], and the launch of the £1 billion National Tutoring Programme to address learning loss [4] —successfully maintained continuity of learning and safeguarded educational communities. Comprehensive safe-reopening protocols, including enhanced testing, ventilation guidance, and phased returns, further minimized health risks while restoring in-person instruction. Together, these coordinated interventions not only preserved academic standards and supported mental-health needs but also strengthened system resilience, promoted equity, and embedded hybrid-learning practices. This review synthesizes chronological and thematic evidence to demonstrate how these measures enabled the UK to protect its schools during the crisis and chart a path back to global educational leadership.

Keywords: COVID-19; UK Education System; Remote Learning; Educational Inequality

Introduction

Coronaviruses (family Coronaviridae) are enveloped, positive-sense single-stranded RNA viruses characterized by their crown-like spike (S) glycoproteins, which mediate host-cell entry [5]. Prior to late 2019, six coronaviruses were known to infect humans—four causing mild “common cold” symptoms and two (SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV) associated with severe respiratory disease and high case-fatality rates [6,7]. In December 2019, a cluster of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, was linked to a novel coronavirus, provisionally named 2019-nCoV [8]. On 11 February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially designated the disease COVID-19 and the virus SARS-CoV-2 [9]. The rapid

global spread prompted WHO to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and, subsequently, a pandemic on 11 March 2020 [10,11].

31 January 2020: The UK confirmed its first two COVID-19 cases in York, involving Chinese nationals repatriated from Wuhan. On the same day, British nationals were evacuated from Wuhan to Arrows Park Hospital for quarantine. 6 February: Third case confirmed in the UK. 28 February: First death of a British national from COVID-19 was recorded (a Diamond Princess passenger). 29 February: Total UK cases reached 23; community transmission concerns began.

Timeline of school disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption worldwide, and the education sector in the UK has been profoundly affected. This review article examines the multifaceted impact of the virus and the measures taken to mitigate its effects, considering the short-term crisis management and the long-term implications for the UK education system. On 18 March, Examinations (GCSEs/A-levels) officially cancelled for summer 2020. 20 March: Schools across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland closed to most pupils. 23 March: Prime Minister announced the first nationwide lockdown—people ordered to “stay at home”. On 20 March 2020, the UK government closed all primary and secondary schools in England “to all but vulnerable children and children of key workers” (Department for Education, 2020a). Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland implemented similar measures almost simultaneously [12]. During this first phase, Oak National Academy launched within weeks, delivering over two million lessons in its first week to support home learning [13].

Attendance data indicate that, at the height of the first lockdown, average state-funded school attendance fell below 20%, compared to pre-pandemic levels of 95% [13]. Moreover, Office for National Statistics (2020) survey data suggested that, on average, pupils completed only 11 hours of study per week—well below the 30 hours expected in full-time education [14].

Exam disruptions and assessment challenges

In March 2020, all GCSE and A-level examinations due that summer were cancelled. Ofqual devised an algorithm to standardise teacher-predicted grades, but public outcry over perceived unfairness led to a U-turn: grades were ultimately awarded based solely on teacher assessments (BBC News, 2020, cited in Wikipedia, 2024). Subsequent exam cycles in 2021 saw teacher-assessed grades remain the norm [12].

These disruptions had knock-on effects on university admissions and student morale. The Education Endowment Foundation's review found that uncertainty over grade awarding contributed to increased anxiety and disengagement, particularly among disadvantaged pupils [14].

Digital divide and educational inequality

The sudden pivot to online provision exposed and deepened pre-existing inequalities. A June 2020 survey by the Department for Education found that 10% of pupils lacked access to a suitable device or internet connection at home [15]. A study by the Edge Foundation estimated that disadvantaged students were nearly 2.5 times more likely to be entirely unable to engage with remote learning, risking significant learning loss [16].

Schools and local authorities responded with device-lending schemes and mobile data packages, yet the “digital divide” persisted. By late 2020, regional variations in attendance and engagement remained stark, correlating closely with socio-economic deprivation [13].

The shift to remote learning

The transition to online learning required a rapid overhaul of teaching methods and resources. While some institutions were better prepared than others, the digital divide became a significant issue.

- **Digital Divide:** Access to technology and internet connectivity was unevenly distributed across the UK, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lacking the resources needed for effective remote learning [17]. This disparity exacerbated existing inequalities in the education system.
- **Teacher Preparedness:** Educators had to quickly adapt to new technologies and online teaching methods, often with limited training and support.
- **Student Engagement:** Maintaining student engagement and motivation in a remote learning environment was challenging, with concerns about the quality and effectiveness of online instruction.

Impact on students

The pandemic has had a wide-ranging impact on students across all levels of education.

- **Learning Loss:** School closures and disruptions to teaching have led to significant learning loss, with concerns about the long-term consequences for students' academic achievement [18].

- **Exams and Assessments:** The cancellation of GCSE and A-level exams in 2020 and 2021 led to controversies and changes in how grades were awarded, causing stress and uncertainty for students [19].
- **Mental Health and Well-being:** The pandemic has taken a toll on students' mental health, with increased anxiety, isolation, and concerns about the future [20].
- **Vulnerable Students:** The pandemic has disproportionately affected vulnerable students, including those with special educational needs, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those in care.

Assessment and examination reforms

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unprecedented upheaval in the UK's examination system, forcing rapid reform of assessment policies at both GCSE and A-level stages. In March 2020, as the first national lockdown loomed, the government announced cancellation of all summer 2020 external examinations [21]. In their place, Ofqual—the examinations regulator—devised an algorithm to standardise teacher-predicted grades against historical school performance. However, widespread concerns about algorithmic bias and the downgrading of results for disadvantaged pupils led to a public outcry. Within days, the government reversed the algorithmic model, instead awarding grades solely on teacher assessments and rank ordering [3].

This U-turn, while alleviating immediate injustices, introduced new challenges. Universities faced uncertainty over admissions amid disparate grading standards; many institutions delayed offer confirmations and widened clearing processes [12]. To address such volatility, the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofqual issued interim guidance for 2021: examinations remained cancelled, and teacher-assessed grades were retained, supplemented by enhanced appeals mechanisms and a “safety-net” policy allowing students to revert to calculated grades if their later exam performance proved higher [22].

The impact of these reforms extended beyond logistical hurdles. The Education Endowment Foundation (2022) found that the shift to teacher assessments increased stress and anxiety among both students—uncertain of grading criteria—and teachers—tasked with robust internal standardisation under tight deadlines. More-

over, marginalised groups reported greater difficulty accessing mock exams and preparatory materials, exacerbating attainment gaps [4]. In response, the government introduced the Recovery Premium in April 2021, allocating additional per-pupil funding to support small-group tuition and mock examination series, aiming to rebuild examination literacy and confidence ahead of the 2022 return to traditional assessments [13].

When external examinations resumed in summer 2022, they did so under revised content coverage and advanced notice of summer question themes, reflecting lessons learned about flexibility and fairness during crises. Moving forward, stakeholders have advocated embedding greater resilience into assessment frameworks—such as modular testing windows and hybrid assessment models—to mitigate future disruptions [23].

Effects on student well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound impacts on the mental health and overall well-being of pupils across the UK. Ofsted (2020) reported heightened levels of anxiety, loneliness and reduced motivation among children during prolonged periods of school closure and social isolation. In its summer 2020 briefings, inspectors noted that pupils were less engaged with learning and exhibited signs of low mood and stress when schools reopened [21].

Education Support (2021) surveyed over 4,000 school staff and found that 75% observed worsening mental health among students, with particular concern for vulnerable groups such as those with special educational needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Teachers also reported increased behavioural issues linked to pandemic-related stressors, including family financial pressures and health anxieties [24].

Furthermore, data from NHS Digital (2020) indicated a 50% rise in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) during the 2020–21 academic year. The same report highlighted that digital inequalities compounded these challenges: students lacking reliable internet or private space struggled to engage with online pastoral support, exacerbating feelings of isolation (NHS Digital, 2020). Academic disruption, concerns about exams, and financial worries have contributed to increased stress levels in students [17]. Social isolation and the lack of face-to-face interac-

tion with peers and teachers have led to feelings of loneliness, particularly among university students [23]. The uncertainty, fear of infection, and social isolation caused by the pandemic have led to higher rates of anxiety and depression among students [20].

In response, many schools implemented wellbeing programmes—such as “check-in” calls, virtual counselling sessions and mindfulness activities—to mitigate these effects. However, studies suggest that without sustained investment in mental-health services and training for staff, the long-term scars of the pandemic on student well-being may persist well into the coming years [25].

Teacher and staff experiences

The pandemic has also had a significant impact on educators.

- **Workload and Stress:** Teachers and university staff faced increased workloads, as they had to adapt to online teaching, provide additional support to students, and deal with the challenges of the pandemic.
- **Well-being:** Many educators experienced increased stress and anxiety due to the disruption to their work, concerns about their students, and the uncertainty of the situation [22].

Catch-up and recovery strategies

As per the Department for Education - Consolidated annual report (2020-21), the new School Rebuilding Programme announced by the Prime Minister, and on track, with the first 50 schools – supported by £1 billion in funding – confirmed in February and another 50 schools given the go-ahead to rebuild in July. The Government is committed to championing the family hub model – as set out in our manifesto.

Policy responses and guidance

OECD analysis puts UK public spending on education at 3.9% of GDP in 2018. This was 19th highest out of the 37 OECD members with data on this measure and below the OECD average of 4.1%. If private expenditure on education is included then the UK's total spending on education in 2018 was 6.1% of GDP. Only Norway, Chile (both 6.6%), New Zealand and Israel (both 6.2%) and had higher figures.

Long-term implications and future directions

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare and, in many cases, deepened pre-existing inequalities within the UK education system. Disadvantaged pupils were disproportionately affected by school closures and remote learning, with early studies predicting that without sustained support, attainment gaps could persist for years [18,25-30]. The National Tutoring Programme and “recovery premium” funding represent important short-term measures, but multiple reviews have highlighted that only a multi-year commitment to small-group support and curriculum prioritisation will fully mitigate learning loss [4]. Key areas of focus include:

- **Addressing Learning Loss:** The pandemic has resulted in significant learning loss, particularly among disadvantaged students. Future efforts need to focus on effective strategies to address these gaps, such as targeted interventions, tutoring programs, and extended school days [13].
- **Digital Divide:** The rapid shift to online learning highlighted the digital divide, with many students lacking access to adequate technology and internet connectivity. Long-term strategies must ensure equitable access to digital resources and develop teachers' digital skills to support blended learning approaches [17].
- **Mental Health Support:** The pandemic has underscored the importance of mental health support in schools and universities. Increased investment in mental health services, training for staff, and early intervention programs are crucial to address the long-term mental health needs of students [20].
- **Curriculum Reform:** The pandemic has prompted discussions about the relevance and adaptability of the curriculum. There is a growing call for a more flexible and skills-based curriculum that prepares students for the challenges of the 21st century, including increased emphasis on digital literacy, critical thinking, and resilience [22].
- **Teacher Development:** The pandemic has placed unprecedented demands on teachers, requiring them to adapt to new technologies and teaching methods. Ongoing professional development and support are essential to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to navigate future disruptions and effectively support student learning.

UK government's role in strengthening the education system

The UK government played a critical role in attempting to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on the education system and in initiating measures aimed at strengthening it for the future. The UK government implemented a suite of measures to ensure continuity of learning, safeguard student welfare, and build long-term resilience in the face of unprecedented disruption.

- **Rapid Remote-Learning Infrastructure** - In March 2020, the Department for Education issued comprehensive guidance and funded the rollout of secure online platforms, ensuring that all state schools could deliver live lessons and digital resources within weeks [25]. Over 1.3 million devices and mobile data packages were distributed to disadvantaged pupils to bridge the digital divide [15].
- **Free School Meals and Welfare Support** - To protect the most vulnerable children, the government extended free school meal vouchers throughout lockdowns and school holidays, and introduced the 'grab-and-go' meal scheme—an intervention credited with preventing food insecurity for over 1 million families [2].
- **Well-Being and Safeguarding Guidance** - Early Ofsted briefings highlighted spikes in anxiety and social isolation among pupils. In response, the Department for Education issued mental-health toolkits and funded remote counselling services, enabling schools to maintain weekly welfare check-ins and virtual pastoral care [21].
- **Assessment Flexibility and Catch-Up Investment** -While reforms to grading ensured fairness during exam cancellations, the government also launched the £1 billion National Tutoring Programme and a Recovery Premium, directing additional funding to small-group tuition and summer schools to mitigate learning loss [13,25,26].
- **Safe Reopening and Long-Term Resilience**: Detailed operational guidance—covering testing regimes, enhanced ventilation, and phased return protocols—allowed all schools to reopen safely by September 2020. Subsequent investment in blended-learning training for teachers and upgraded IT infrastructure has left the system better prepared for future disruptions [27-30].

While the challenges were immense and not all responses were without criticism, several key interventions and policy directions demonstrate the government's efforts:

- **Financial Support**: The government allocated significant funding to support schools and students. This included funding for catch-up programs, tutoring initiatives, and providing digital devices to disadvantaged students [13].
- **Digital Provision**: Recognizing the shift to remote learning, the government invested in providing laptops and internet access to students who lacked them, addressing the digital divide and enabling more equitable access to online education.
- **Oak National Academy**: The government supported the rapid launch of Oak National Academy, an online learning platform that provided free lessons and resources for teachers and students, ensuring continuity of education during school closures [21].
- **National Tutoring Programme**: To address learning loss, the government launched the National Tutoring Programme, providing funding for tutoring services to support disadvantaged students in catching up on their education [18,29-33].
- **Policy Adaptations**: The government adapted policies related to exams and assessments, acknowledging the disruption students faced. This included the use of teacher-assessed grades and other measures to ensure students were not unfairly disadvantaged [34-36].

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an existential challenge to the UK education system, disrupting traditional schooling, exposing deep-seated inequities, and placing immense strain on student well-being (Ofsted, 2020; Education Support, 2021). Yet, through decisive and proactive leadership, the UK Government successfully mitigated these impacts by rapidly scaling digital infrastructure and device-loan schemes [1] safeguarding vulnerable families with extended free school meals [2], and introducing flexible assessment and catch-up measures, notably the £1 billion National Tutoring Programme [4]. The implementation of robust safe-reopening protocols further ensured that in-person learning could resume without compromising health and safety. Collectively, these coordinated interventions not only preserved academic standards and supported mental-health needs but also fostered greater resilience and equity within the system. As the UK charts its path back to global educational leadership, sustaining investment in blended-learning readiness, targeted support for disadvantaged learners, and workforce well-being will be critical to cementing the gains made and preparing for future disruptions [16,23].

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