Covid generation: Shaken and still feeling the hurt

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Covid generation students starting university on Monday, from left: Raman Kaur, Georgia-Rae Jones, Nabaa Faisal, Anna Maria Va'a, Kevin Wang and Ellie Harper. Photo / Dean Purcell

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Eleven months after New Zealand went into lockdown, a generation of young New Zealanders is still feeling the hurt.

Until the latest series of snap lockdowns - including the one that started at 6am today in Auckland - most of us have more or less snapped back into normal life. We had returned to work or school. We look around the world and count ourselves lucky to be still alive.

But the 51,000 young Kiwis who were in their final year of school last year can't go back to school. Last year was their last chance to get the qualifications they needed to build their future lives.

Those young people - who will always be our "Covid generation" - are now trying to find jobs or training. They had been due to arrive at universities next week.

We sought out six of them, all 18-year-olds who left decile-5 Rosehill College in Papakura last year. Covid has left a dark hole in their souls and is now beginning to have long-term consequences.

Ellie's story

Before Covid, Ellie Harper was a perfectionist.

In her first two levels of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), she achieved 20 or 30 credits more than she needed.

"I used to be quite an optimist," she says.

As well as her Year 13 studies at Rosehill, she had a part-time job helping her mother run a shop.

Ellie Harper: "I used to be quite an optimist." Photo / Dean Purcell.

She had big plans for life - a degree in Global Studies at Auckland University, leading to a career, hopefully with the United Nations.

Nabaa's story

Rosehill 2020 student leader Nabaa Faisal feels she "did well" in the lockdowns - but her career direction has changed. She is now seeking stability.

Like Ellie, she was "a perfectionist" before Covid. In the brief period between lockdowns she organised the school ball while trying to keep up with her schoolwork and helping to look after her three younger siblings.

She is "pretty independent". "I don't need people as much as some do," she says.

But her routine was disrupted.

"The lockdown was okay once you had a routine. Then you were back to school and you had to change your routine again," she says.

"Then we went back into lockdown. The motivation part kind of went."

Nabaa Faisal is looking for a more secure career after the uncertainty of Covid. Photo / Dean Purcell.

Her teachers were in touch.

"They said, 'Let us know if you need any help.' But I don't think many people asked for help," she says.

"In class, if anyone has questions you'd put up your hand, but on Zoom calls everyone has their cameras off, who knows how many people were actually listening, and you didn't really want to speak on a Zoom call.

"At the end of the day, it was like, I'll do my work tomorrow, no one is really looking."

She got behind with her schoolwork and never fully caught up.

"Assessments were taking so long during the year that we didn't have so much time to prepare for our external exams, so it was really rushed in every single class for the teacher to try and teach you everything you needed to know to pass," she says.

"In chemistry, they recommended that instead of three externals you do two.

"We lost a lot of learning time - and the final year of high-school experiences. You looked forward to that year, you were going to hang out with friends a lot more, you had your study to do and a lot of school events that were planned but couldn't happen any more."

Careerwise, before Covid, Nabaa was thinking about food and nutrition.

"If it wasn't for Covid, I might have been a dietitian," she says.

"Once Covid hit, it was just thinking about, are you going to keep your job if another lockdown happens, are you going to be able to get money in for your family, all that stuff. We'll get through it, but there's a lot of uncertainty around it. So that's what led me to go, okay, I think I want to do police."

She has enrolled in criminology and psychology "because I wanted to study before I join the police - just in case anything happens, I'll have that in my back pocket."

Kevin's story

Kevin Wang's whole life fell apart last year. He was living with his father, but his father "disappeared half-way through the lockdown". He couldn't join his mother in Ōrewa, so he has stayed ever since with a friend's family.

"They already have four kids," he says. "And they're in Karaka, so the internet isn't very reliable, so I really struggled to engage with my online classes."

Before Covid, Kevin used to get regular "merits". Despite rowing 20 hours a week, he kept up with his study and planned to do mechanical engineering at university.

After Covid, he failed to get University Entrance (UE). He failed business studies, he couldn't really do automotive engineering or physical education in the first level 4 lockdown, and - most crucially for his career plans - he failed calculus.

Kevin Wang: "Lots of classes, like calculus, it's really difficult to teach over the internet." Photo / Dean Purcell

"Lots of classes, like calculus, it's really difficult to teach over the internet," he explains.

"The teacher I had for calculus struggled a lot with technology, it was just not really her sort of thing. At one point she did actually leave the [Google Meets] call and took ages trying to find her way back in - that happened quite a few times."

Even submitting calculus work online was difficult because mathematical symbols and multi-levelled equations could not be squashed into a straight line of computer text. And, like Nabaa, Kevin was reticent about asking questions.

In class, he says, "If you don't really understand it you can always put your hand up." The teacher can come over to help you.

"You can't really do that in a Google call because you are sort of taking up everyone else's time."

His calculus teacher was "a great teacher in person" and offered tutoring sessions when students came back to school. But for Kevin it was too late.

"With calculus, I just gave up," he says. "I still sat the external. It just didn't happen."

When he missed out on UE, he found a business studies course he could do online over summer at Hagley College in Christchurch, and flew down there for the assessment this month.

He now has his UE and has applied to do a Bachelor of Engineering Technology at AUT, a "practical design and applied technology" course which has lower entry requirements than other engineering degrees.

He had planned a "gap year" overseas this year, knowing that when he comes out of university he will have "a massive loan to pay off" and will need to go straight into work.

"I wanted to go have fun before all that was going to happen," he says.

"Europe looked kind of cool, America also seems pretty fun. Okay, I'll just look at photos on the internet."

Georgia-Rae's story

Georgia-Rae Jones was one of 10 Year 13 students nationally who won a trip to Silicon Valley through Massey University's Pūhoro STEM Academy for Māori science and technology students.

"As soon as Covid hit America, the trip got cancelled," she says.

She passed NCEA levels 1 and 2 with excellence, but she just "scraped through" level 3 - "and that was using the learning recognition credits".

Like Kevin, Georgia-Rae found learning calculus online was "10 times harder" than it was in class.

"You had to remember that our teachers probably knew less than us about technology, and when Covid hit it took a while, maybe two weeks, for them to connect and find their own ways," she says.

At home Georgia-Rae, her two sisters and her father, a lecturer, were all trying to do Zoom classes at once.

Georgia-Rae Jones: "I strategised it - if I drop these papers it will be less stress for the other papers." Photo / Dean Purcell
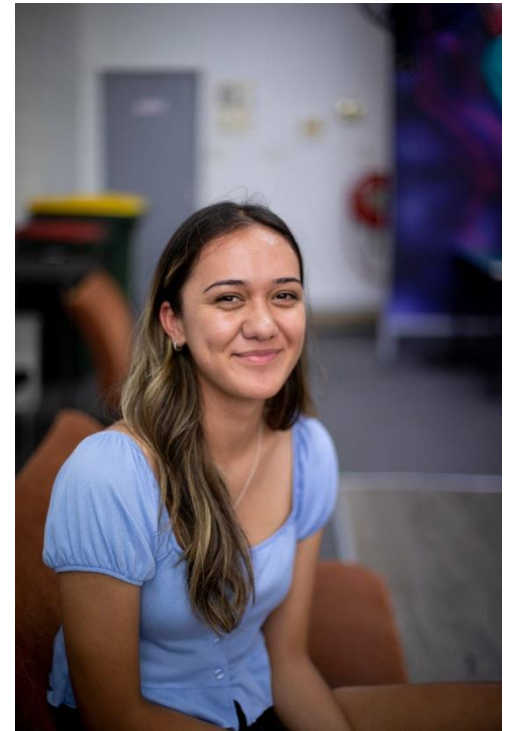
"So it was all over the place. You didn't know whether you were going to make it into a call or not," she says.

"My motivation slipped a lot. I was trying to find a way to just pass instead of trying to get higher grades."

When school reopened, teachers offered tutorials at lunchtime and after school to catch up, but there simply wasn't time to catch up with everything.

"So in a way I strategised it - if I drop these papers it will be less stress for the other papers," she says.

Before Covid, Georgia-Rae had planned to study medicine at Auckland University.

But Covid sparked an interest in microbiology - "things related to pandemics". She has enrolled in a Bachelor of Science specialising in microbiology at AUT.

Anna-Maria's story

Covid turned Nabaa's mind towards a career in the police. In contrast, Anna-Maria Va'a enrolled in police studies last year intending to go into the police, but the pandemic turned her against it because it meant "going out and being surrounded by more people".

Instead, she has enrolled in a conjoint arts and law degree at Auckland University and aims to become a lawyer, with a "back-up" of becoming a music teacher.

She feels that she coped okay in the lockdowns.

"I was someone that didn't listen in class that much, so working online helped me learn by myself," she says.

Anna-Maria Va'a: "Working online helped me learn by myself." Photo / Dean Purcell

But she also admits: "I didn't really wake up to calls in the morning. I wasn't used to waking up early. It was hard."

She relaxed when the Government announced after the first lockdown that students would only need 12 level-3 credits instead of the usual 14 in each of three approved subjects to get UE in 2020.

"I thought it was going to be easier - but it wasn't," she says.

"When lockdown finished I just wanted to hang out with my friends. I didn't think of catching up."

She missed out on UE at the end of the year, and only achieved it last month after the college accepted a music assessment after the due date and her volleyball coach came back to let her do a physical education assessment.

"I think Covid has had a positive effect on me this year - me thinking seriously about my time-management," she says. "I feel better prepared for university."

Raman's story

Of the six young people we met, perhaps Raman Kaur came through Covid with the fewest scars.

She has always been interested in a health career - perhaps medicine, perhaps pharmacy.

When the lockdown hit, her parents both continued to go out to work, leaving her alone at home.

Raman Kaur: "Covid has made me much more grateful and appreciative of the things that are happening in my life."
Photo / Dean Purcell

"It was really strange," she says. "I became unmotivated to do anything and left everything till the last minute."

Yet she feels better off than others.

"I was lucky enough to be home alone the majority of the time, to have this time to focus rather than having any distractions. I was able to focus during the Zoom classes and even after the Zoom classes, just studying and doing my work."

Her biggest problem was geography, a subject she had not taken before.

"I would always ask for help because I didn't understand the terms and definitions," she says.

"Then lockdown happened and it was a bit harder for me to interact with my teacher. All the teachers had their own lives going on at home so they couldn't reply to the emails as much as they wanted to."

But she still achieved UE and has enrolled in health sciences at AUT. She has learnt from the Covid experience.

"Covid has made me much more grateful and appreciative of the things that are happening in my life - whatever is happening at the moment, I feel so grateful for it," she says.

"Covid changed a lot for me. It's just not the little things that matter, it's putting those things behind you. You kind of just have to work around whatever is happening and find another path that can work."

Learning from Covid

Education professors Stephen Dobson and Donna Prendergast warned last week that leaving teenagers in a state of uncertainty at a stage when their brains are being rewired for adulthood risks "lifelong reduced outcomes such as poorer health, lowered educational achievement and the loss of optimism and hope".

"The spectre looms of brains shaped by unmet expectations, disrupted routines, missing significant events, ongoing anxiety, fear and stress," they wrote.

They suggest creating opportunities for young people to share their stories with one another so that they can learn from them.

Professor Stephen Dobson: "We go to school to learn how to be a human being, a citizen, a part of society." Photo / Supplied

"Why do we go to school?" asks Dobson, a former refugee worker and poet who is now dean of education at Wellington's Victoria University.

"It's not just to learn stuff. We go to school to learn how to be a human being, a citizen, a part of society.

"We can always give people a new opportunity to learn subject knowledge. It's much harder to give them a new opportunity to be a citizen or to learn social skills."

Human beings have lived through other pandemics, wars, natural disasters and other traumatic events.

"We have gone through generations of these horrible experiences," says Dobson.

"It's being able to communicate about them. The danger is that people will keep these experiences inside of them and internalise them, and that's not good."

Dr Elahe Khaleghian: "It's changing the psychology from feeling helpless to feeling hopeful." Photo / Simon Collins

Dr Elahe Khaleghian, who leads Rosehill College's counselling team, says the first key to getting through a traumatic event is to accept what you cannot control while focusing on what you can control, knowing that the trauma will eventually pass.

"It's changing the psychology from feeling helpless to feeling hopeful," she says.

Ironically, she says, young people who have grown up in hardship have often learnt this better than those from more comfortable families who have had everything done for them.

"Covid has taught us we have to be prepared, and prepare our young people for the unexpected," she says.

And the second key to getting through trauma is support from others, because we believe in ourselves when others believe in us.

"It doesn't matter what experience you have in life - if that experience robs you of your confidence, robs you of understanding the meaning of life, robs you of certainty about your hopes and aspirations, then we need someone to stand by our side," she says.

"People have the capacity to overcome anything as long as there is someone accompanying them through the darkest moments, because it's really hard for you to do that for yourself."