

# Research Matters / 32

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## Foreword

By necessity, in response to Covid-19, nations around the world have had to undertake one of the biggest natural experiments in education which we ever have seen. And now we have a huge challenge in trying to understand what actually happened, what impact there has been for young people, schools and society, and what continuing consequences will flow through schooling, society and the economy. But the very nature of the pandemic has meant that undertaking research is extremely difficult, not just because of the fast-paced nature of events and the responses but also because of disruption to researchers' own professional and personal lives. However, we really do need to know how different people were affected, how different approaches to remote learning functioned, and how and over what timeframe the inequalities and differences will play out—important not least for determining appropriate support and action as schooling begins to gear up and remote learning starts to reduce in intensity. Understanding what worked and what didn't (both in terms of attainment and equity) is important for focusing ongoing support to individuals, schools, and to regions, as well as for developing curriculum policy on the use of remote learning—and developing the continuing response to a pandemic which very much is still with us. Our work with Cambridge CEM synthesising research on responses to interrupted learning and probing learning during the pandemic is designed to be both penetrating and timely. There is a very real risk that research lags behind the need to act. Such lags carry a strong risk of policy error—something we anticipated in the 2017 Cambridge Approach to Improving Education. But quite rightly, policy makers cannot wait in current times; swift action is needed and the research community has to step up with rapid research synthesis and empirical enquiry. At the same time, we are sceptical of "Year Zero" thinking—Tom Benton's piece reminds us that we should not forget what we were thinking about and probing prior to 2020. Any "new normal" should be constructed on the very best of what we know about assessment, curriculum, and educational improvement.

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