



CITY
STUDENTS'
UNION

Student Check-in Calls

A report on the student experience in term two based on the Union's calls to students in February 2021

Student Check-ins Report 2020

Executive Summary

The Student Check-ins project took place for four weeks over February in term two of the 2020-21 academic year. The project was jointly funded by City, University of London Students' Union (the Union) and City, University of London, making use of funding from the Access & Participation Plan budget.

The Union made 8,504 calls to students and had 2,570 meaningful conversations with students, representing just over 13% of City's student population. Students are negotiating the impacts of an academic year like no other. The issues of Covid-19 restrictions are apparent in every aspect of the Student Check-ins from online learning, changes to exams, a lack of community, fears over employability and students excited to get to campus and meet peers and friends.

The Union hopes to repeat the project in August and September 2021 with the aim of checking in on new and returning students. This report highlights the key headlines from the term two Check-ins and recommendations to consider.

Report Headlines

1. The impacts of COVID-19 restrictions are present in all aspects of student life. Students are increasingly learning in isolation, connected to fewer City students, and are required to adapt to a new way of learning and assessment.
2. Online learning has presented challenges and benefits to students. There are many students who have not accessed support and do not have the resources to study remotely. Students want to be consulted through their course and school on the mode of delivery going into term three and the next academic year.
3. Fundamental issues regarding poor assessment feedback are persisting whilst new exam issues such as timing are appearing because of the shift to online assessments.
4. Support is a key issue with students primarily concerned about wait times for access to services and reply times; Black students feel disproportionately less supported by services at City.
5. COVID-19 has exacerbated issues at City around community. Students are reliant on online communities and have had few opportunities to mix with other students beyond their course. Disabled students have been particularly affected by the lack of on campus community.
6. First years have been disproportionately affected by the impacts of the pandemic at City. Unlike other years who may have pre-existing networks, many are suffering from isolation, have not been to campus and have concerns about employment opportunities post-graduation.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been set out by the Union as a result of findings from the Student Check-ins 2020.

1. Online learning

- 1.1 Provide more academic skills sessions and resources as part of every course, specifically designed for students to understand how to get the most through online learning. In addition, increase the promotion of the Academic Skills services.
- 1.2 Prioritising students who are graduating this academic year, review and communicate across Schools the impact of missed practical time and when opportunities will be provided for students to get practical experience, where possible, not resulting in delays to graduation.
- 1.3 Draft and disseminate a prospective plan for the modes of delivery of teaching and on campus activity for next academic year.
- 1.4 Introduce a remote learning resource monitoring system to allow City to understand what resources students have access to and ensure they are equipped for home learning.
- 1.5 Schools to regularly consult students on their online learning experience and what elements can be taken forward, improved, or scrapped.

2. Exams and Assessment

- 2.1 Provide urgent clarity to students on how May 2021 and 2021/22 exams will be taking place.
- 2.2 Review the impact of Covid-19 assessment mitigations and online learning on equality gaps for students underrepresented in Higher Education. In particular, the potential benefits and detriments to BAME, International and Disabled Students.
- 2.3 Introduce 48-hour online exam periods as standard across all schools.
- 2.4 Introduce a feedback monitoring process, to monitor standards of feedback. This should ensure all assessment feedback is tailored, meaningful and comprehensive, with students given the opportunity to ask academic staff questions regarding their assessment.
- 2.5 Make it clear what constitutes feedback across a students' time on a course to ensure they recognise when they are receiving feedback on their work.

3. Return to Campus

- 3.1 Urgently clarify what a return to campus looks like for all Schools in term three.
- 3.2 Communicate the principles being applied for the 2021-22 academic year to students.

4. Support

- 4.1 Research why Black students feel less supported at City and instruct the relevant group to address concerns.
- 4.2 Improve support for students on placement, in particular with centrally tailored communications, increased school communications and increased welfare checks.

4.3 Restructure personal tutoring to include specific sessions for re-informing students of support services available to them and of opportunities to connect with the wider City community.

5. Community

5.1 Create a Community Sub-Group from the Student Experience Task & Finish Group to address and tackle a lack of community at City as we head into 2021-22.

5.2 Create a return to campus guide specifically for current first year students, where possible encouraging them to visit site when guidance allows.

5.3 Ensure that all courses have a group platform for students to connect with their peers.

5.4 Plan and communicate plans for a Welcome 2021 involving new students and returning students to recreate lost student experience.

5.5 Develop a plan for a digital community for students for academic year 2021-22 to engage students who have benefited from a more online student experience.

6. Employability

6.1 Target third year students with communications of the services available to them support their employability.

6.2 Introduce tailored employability events to reassure students of the post-graduation job market and increase skills development opportunities to prepare for it.

6.3 Careers Service and the Union to collaborate on employability events to engage Union volunteers and support them through to progression.

7. The Check-in Project

7.1 Repeat the project pre-registration for first year students in August and September 2021.

7.2 Identify how the Check-in project will be delivered on an on-going basis across the academic year.

Overview

The Union aimed to call students at the beginning of term two to check in on their wellbeing and offer support. The calls were operated by 28 student staff trained and supported by the Union team. The aims of the project were to rerun the Check-in calls and to include contacting 25% of first years who were called in term one, a further 500 new first years and a selection of January starters. No demographic targets were set, instead it was agreed that analysis at specific demographic level (e.g., Ethnicity, disability) would be completed afterwards.

When called by our Student Check-in Callers City students were guided through a range of topics based on the Union's Check-in report from the term one, the January UK Covid-19 restrictions and input from City colleagues. The topics the Union asked students about were:

- Remote learning
- Exams and Assessment
- Communication
- Support
- Community
- Employability
- Open text

The surveys were filled out to different levels of detail and styles by over 32 call handlers, which included student staff and Union staff. Therefore, there was a large fluctuation in the way the free text responses were filled out. As result of this, in places evidence from the call handlers has been used to provide further insights.

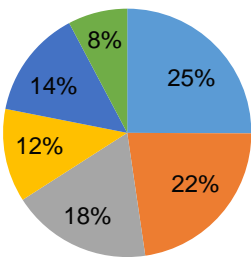
Of the 2,356 calls made, 13 were escalated to be dealt with by the Union Advice team for immediate intervention. There were four new Union Advice case forms received because of the Check-ins.

Sample Demographics

In total 2,570 students responded as part of the term two calls. Students were emailed in advance letting them know to expect a call, giving them the option to opt out and the option to fill out an online alternative, 214 students responded to the online survey. These responses have then been merged with the 2,356 responses submitted by the student staff callers.

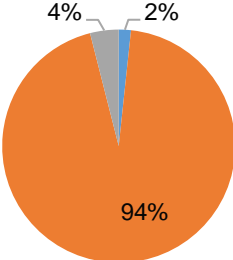
The majority of respondents came from SASS (25%) and SHS (22%) whilst SMCSE (18%), BUS (12%) and CLS (14%) had proportionally less respondents. The remaining 8% was made up of research students and students from LEdA. The sample for EU / International students (6%) is significantly lower than of home students (94%). This is because of the alternative calling method implemented for International students in order to inhibit any excess call charges. It will be important in the future to aim to increase the number of EU / International students who participate in the calls.

School breakdown of students



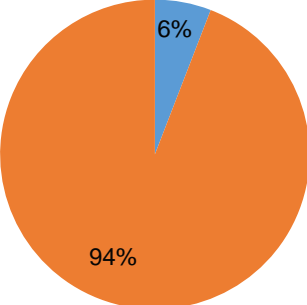
- SASS
- SHS
- SMCSE
- BUS
- CLS

Fee status breakdown of students



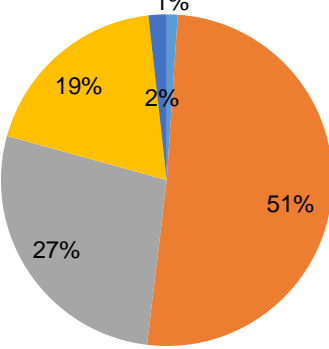
- European
- Home
- Overseas

Disability breakdown of students



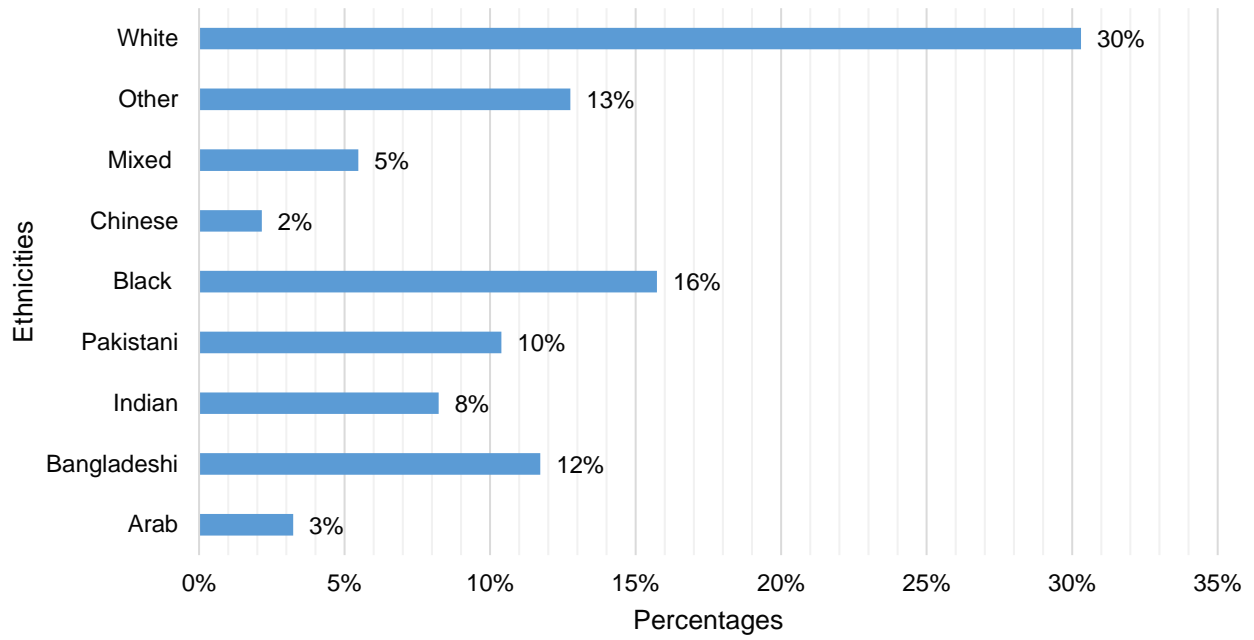
- With disability
- No known disability

Year of study breakdown of students



- Year 0
- Year 1
- Year 2
- Year 3
- Year 4

Ethnicity breakdown of students



Check-in Calls Data Analysis

Online Learning

When surveyed, 8% of students did not have access to the space and resources they felt they needed to succeed in learning at home. For 32% of these students, this was due to a lack of resources such as books, articles, and access to the library. **A lack of consistent Wi-Fi or general access to internet** was stated as the reason for this by 24% of students. Other students stated that they did not have a **quiet place to study or a desk**. *'[I have] No privacy, no space to study, [and] bad internet connection.'*

The 8% of students without the space and resources required to succeed at home were spread across all the schools. The highest number of students without the resources required to learn at home was in SASS, followed by SMCSE. These students had difficulties engaging with learning and reported an impact on their studies.

Students were informed that they could access campus facilities such as the library. Many disclosed this was a difficult choice between their personal and family's safety and their studies. *'[I] can't come into university as people they live with are vulnerable.'* Some students did however praise the benefits of online learning giving them more autonomy over their studies.

Exams and Assessment

There is a mixed picture of student attitudes when it comes to exams, tests and assessments. There is a large section of the students who are not concerned about assessments (37%) and are clear about what is expected of them (32%).

There is also a significant proportion of students who are **stressed** (22%) and **worried** (19.9%) by assessments. Many students were concerned about their **attainment** (18%), this was particularly pertinent at the time as many students were awaiting results. Many of these concerns can be attributed to the impacts of Covid-19 and the adjustments put in place to facilitate assessment this academic year. International students were 5% more likely to be worried or concerned about exams than Home students and twice as likely to be concerned about attainment. Many students (15%) signalled they were concerned about the **impact of Covid-19** on their assessments. Poor motivation was signalled as another consequence of online learning and remote assessments.

Students described **online learning as more challenging** (15%) than face to face learning. Students criticised the difficulty to engage as effectively with course material. There was a correlation between students who found online harder and the 8% of students who wanted a no detriment policy in place. The concerns around online learning raised here reflect the issues highlighted in the term one Check-ins report where students found online learning unengaging, of a poorer quality and not enabling peer to peer interaction. Online learning continues to be a persistent concern for students that has impacted other attitudes towards exams and

assessments. *'It's hard working from home and completing assessments. There are no group discussions as of lockdown'*.

Feedback continues to arise as an issue across all schools. Fewer comments, generalised feedback and long delays for grades were all referenced by students. These attitudes were reflected across multiple areas of the Check-in calls. **Clustered exam deadlines** were another repeated issue that 1.5% of students raised. Whilst this number isn't statistically significant, this was a repeated theme that arose across student feedback which suggests this figure hides a more widespread issue. *'Feedback isn't clear & tailored' 'Feedback is very general and copied and pasted. Not individualized feedback (generic for everyone)' 'Marking has been very poor as some pieces of coursework hasn't even marked.'*

Students also frequently commented that they **did not have enough time** both to complete online exams and upload them afterwards. There were examples where the length of exam had been shortened for this academic year whilst containing the same amount of content. *'[Being] given 2 hours for an exam that normally take 3 hours in person [...] is unfair - uploading process was problematic and everyone uploaded it late'*.

There is clearly a mix of attitudes towards the changes brought in to facilitate exams online, with just under 1% of students finding the changes useful. Future work should look to strike the balance capturing the elements that allow some students to succeed whilst support those for whom online learning and exams causes increased difficulties. *'Easier online than on campus' 'open book is good, would struggle without it considering impact of teaching because of the virus'*.

Communication

Most students (69.3%) felt as though they have received all or most of the information they need from the University, their School and the Union. Students highlighted that communications had improved from term one to term two. Students strongly liked receiving **regular and clear information** on all areas of university life. *'Very consistent emails, he knows who to get in touch if needs anything... Really appreciated the availability from the university through emails.'*

Whilst students overall stated they received the communications they need, these students often described receiving too many emails. 12% of students described the communications they receive as not relevant and at times overwhelming. *'A lot of repetition of same info through, but still informative and detailed.'* *'It is very hard to keep up with communication online, too many emails do more harm than help.'*

30% of students praised their **course information**, 13% of the information provided by their school and 12% from the central University. SASS received the most significant praise for course and school information. Quick replies were cited by some students and this was signalled as a crucial aspect of positive communications. Other students signalled the benefits of the Union weekly newsletter as well as other regular University emails. *'Mainly from lecturers, quick*

replies when she has had questions, placement allocations team has been very helpful.'

Where students did not feel they have received all the communications they need, 57% required more course information whilst 18% required more exam information. Anecdotal evidence from student staff highlights a desire for timelier Covid-19 related communications particularly following changes to government guidance. Many students also used this section to highlight their desires for more information regarding the return to campus or the approaches that will be taken to the return to campus in term three and next academic year.

Community

Just under half of students (47%) do not feel a sense of community at City. This was proportionate across all of the Schools, demonstrating a City-wide issue.

The lack of community was predominantly attributed to the impacts of lockdown and on remote learning. Interestingly, many students criticised online learning for not facilitating a sense of course community. Several students referenced cameras being turned off as in contact time as a cause of this. Others referenced the lack of time to ask questions to academic staff and to their peers. *'Lectures are online, don't have many friends. No one talks in the breakout rooms.'* *'Doesn't know who's on his course - everyone's cameras are always off. No direct interaction with students.'*

The second most prominent reason for a lack of community was **Covid-19 restrictions** (31%). Students were critical of not spending time on campus with several describing not having spent any time on campus or spoken to any other students. Many students describe not feeling as though they have had the opportunity to interact with other students. There is the sense that nearly all the aspects of the student experience have been lost which has led to there being no sense of community. Other students felt that online activity simply could not replicate the social community aspects of in person socialising. *'They haven't been to uni or spoken to anyone. She is in her first year, she doesn't know anyone and she has never been on campus.'*

Disabled students were 11% more likely to not feel a sense of community than students without a disability. The free text comments highlight that this is caused by the limited opportunities to engage with other students on campus and the challenges of online interaction.

The primary reason for students feeling a sense of community at City was through their **course**, with 37% of students attributing it to this. This was split evenly across all the respondents from each School. There is an 8% overlap between the sense of community felt through a course and the 19% of students who felt **online group chats** (WhatsApp) created their sense of community. This recognises the influence of, often organic, course group chats as well as the wider contribution of technology in keeping students connected during lockdown. For those students who felt a sense of course community, there was often a lack of large City community, which was considered as important to their university experience. *'Networks and students*

are very supportive and make you feel a part of a community.' Tutor groups are very community based, making WhatsApp groups and chats. A lot of time spent together in collaborative learning.'

Students who felt a sense of course community praised the **interactive** elements of online learning for creating community. Quizzes, time allocated for questions, personal tutoring, tutor groups and group work all featured as positive aspects of course community. *'WhatsApp group, lecturers are all very approachable, and put you in breakout rooms to help you network and interact.'*

Most students who had a pre-existing sense of community were not in their first year of study. Whilst a lack of a sense of community is split across all years, there are added struggles for first year students forming community at City as a result of Covid-19 restrictions.

Societies and Sport are clearly still a significant part of the student experience despite limited time spent on campus, with 14% of students attributing that to their sense of community. There is clearly a desire for students to be able to engage more with these activities as 3% of the students who did not feel a sense of community blamed this on not being involved in societies. *'Have not had any chance to join any community activities.'*

Support

Overall, students felt reasonably supported at City with 67.5% of students feeling supported or very supported. Whilst students felt supported overall, there is a significant proportion of students (10%) who do not feel supported and 22% who were neutral. **Black students were nearly 10% more likely to not feel supported at City in comparison to other students.**

The free text comments and anecdotal evidence from the call handlers highlight that **wait times** for support services such as the Disability Services and Counselling Services was the key issue, especially the wait time for initial responses and then wait times for follow ups. Lack of course support was the next most common item raised in students' comments featuring most in students from SMCSE (10%) followed by SASS, SHS and CLS (8%) and then BUS (4%).

There was also a feeling of a **lack of University support** found amongst students. Overall, this was not attributed towards one service but instead a wider student sense of a lack of support linked to spending little time on campus. The notion that online support didn't have the same benefits as face-to-face support was very clear in conversations with students. Many students felt that they did not feel as though they were being reached out to and instead had to actively ask for help. *'University hasn't reached out and isn't very supportive.'*

Of the International students we spoke to, many highlighted the need for more support with their visa in terms of information for post-graduation work visas and the impacts of changes to Government guidelines on Tier 4 visas.

When students praised the support, it was most attributed to positive University support (14%), peers providing support (11%) and course support (6%). Students praised the amount of information from different sources such as the Student Hub, Union website and their course. Several students praised the Check-in calls and the Union for conducting them as providing support at different points throughout the calls. *'There are a lot of support of available as there is access, SU website and student hub contain all information of service.'* *'Feels quite supported, especially with this check in.'* *'Feels more supported after this call, this is the first time anyone's reaching out.'*

When listed with wider City support services available, 88% of students were **aware of the support services**. Across the Schools, students in SMCSE (84%) and BUS (86%) had marginally lower awareness of support services.

Employability

57% of final year students when specifically asked were **confident about their next steps post-graduation**. There is a significant number of students (43%) who are not confident or neutral. Students in SASS and SMCSE were least likely to be confident about their next steps, whilst in SHS they were the most likely.

All students were then asked about their use of the City Careers Services. Only 31.5% of students had **used the City Careers Services**. As would likely be expected, the percentage of students that accessed the careers service increased through the years of study. Final years had used the Careers Service more than the average, with 40% having accessed the service, whereas 73% of first years had not accessed the service. Students in BUS were most likely to have used the service whilst students in SHS were substantially least likely.

The most common reason for not using the Careers Service was that it is too early in their university career. This is representative of the large number of first year students in the sample. More concerning perhaps, are the 28% of students who did not know what the Careers Service offers. Some students linked this with their difficulties using the service. The other most common reason was the 26% of students who were too busy, which was most apparent in both SHS and SASS. The next most common reason from 18% of students was they do not need to use it; this substantially came from students in SHS. *'Felt like it was a bit complicated to use, book appointments, get in contact etc.'*

Worries

Students were also asked specifically about their worries (Appendix A, Q14). Student worries present a complex and mixed picture: 33% of students had no worries, the remaining 67% disclosed worries of some kind. The primary concern amongst students were **assessments and exams** with 31% of students being worried in some way. In total, 46% of worries raised were related to the academic experience with the rest concerning wider student life.

The second most common concern was regarding **employment** with 12% of students stating this was a worry. Many expressed concerns regarding the job

market post-graduation and finding a job. Of these students, 56% had not yet accessed the City careers services. Interestingly 42% of all students concerned about employment were first years, this signals that it is a concern that can be eased throughout their progression at City.

7% of students were concerned about **loneliness**, this was starkly apparent among first year students. Academic concerns regarding **remote learning** (7%) and **workload** (5%) were the next most common issue amongst students. Worries around remote learning were least apparent in BUS whilst being evenly prominent across the other schools.

The **next academic year** was apparent as a worry for 4% of students. These concerns predominantly surround the mode of delivery for the next academic year. Students were particularly concerned whether remote learning would continue in its current form into 2021-22. As may be expected, most of these concerns came from first year students. *'What will happen next year when/if go back to face to face teaching.'* *'Worried about formatting of end of year exams, would like more info on time, time frames, remote or not.'*

Other worries raised by students included placement (3%), Covid-19 safety (3%), attainment (2%), graduation (2%), finances (2%), mental health (2%), keeping healthy (1%), motivation (1%) and travel (1%).

Positives

As may be expected, a large proportion of students (45%) were looking forward to the **end of the UK lockdown**.

37% of students were **looking forward to graduating**, some noted a graduation ceremony as a particular aspect of this. This is an increase on the term one Check-ins, as may be expected as the year progresses. Of those looking forward to graduating, 35% comes from third year students and 35% from first year students. *'Getting a good job and having a career set up.'*

There is clearly an excitement amongst students to get **back to campus** (17%), **see friends** (15%) and socialise through **meeting people** (13%). Of those looking forward to **returning to campus**, 63% were first years. This is reflective of the fact this cohort of students have had the smallest amount of their student experience spent on site. *'Getting back on campus, join societies and make most of it, going to CityBar.'*

Employability is a key driver in excitement, with 10% of students looking forward to starting work or finding employment. This was interestingly most prominent across second years followed by third- and fourth-year students. **Placement**, predominantly for students in SHS (4%), continues to be a theme throughout the Check-in calls, with 3% of students overall expressing their excitement for placement to begin. *'Looking forward to the future and his career to start, and where his degree will lead him.'* *'Placement and put into practice what you're learning.'*

In comparison to the term one Check-ins, the themes dominating this section are representative of the ways that restrictions have dominated student life. However, themes such as meeting people and hoping to spend time on campus remain persistent issues that have continued across the year.

Feedback on Check-in Calls from Students

All students who participated were sent a follow up survey and the option to fill out a feedback survey. There were 109 feedback responses, representing just over 4% of total Check-ins participants. In total 82% of respondents found the calls useful, with 72% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the call had a positive impact on their wellbeing. In a testament to the student staff operating the calls, over 98% of respondents found their caller friendly and just over 92% of students felt listened to. *'It was good to know that the student union cares about the students.'* *'The woman on the phone call was insightful and very much supportive with whatever issue I'd raised or anything I said.'*

In the free text comments students praised the *'thoughtful approach to contacting students'* and described it as a *'lovely service for students'*. Students who responded signalled that they appreciated receiving the call from another student specifically. Several students requested in the comments that calls such as these continue for students. *'It was lovely getting a chance to speak with someone from City and these phone calls should happen more often.'*

Appendix A: Questions from Script

Questions

1. What best describes your living situation?
2. How are you feeling about recent assessments?
3. So, have you received the information you need from the University, your school and the Students' Union?
4. What other information would you like to receive/need to receive? Where do you need to receive more communications from? (University, School, SU)
5. What in particular has been good about the communication you have received? Was it communications from your course, your school, the SU or others?
6. how supported would you say you feel at City, University of London?
7. Are you aware of the support services available?
8. Would you say you feel part of a community at City this year?
9. And why is that?
10. Are you graduating this year?
11. On a scale of 1-5, how confident do you feel about the steps you need to take to find a job / further study post-graduation? (Final years only)
12. On a scale of 1-5, how confident do you feel about the steps you need to take to find a job / further study post-graduation?
13. Why haven't you used the City Careers service?
14. What are you worried about at the moment?
15. What are you excited about?