

Overview of student support for mental health, financial hardship, and widening participation in response to COVID-19

May 2020

1. Summary

- 1.1 This briefing outlines the broad approach and examples of actions that Russell Group Universities are taking to help support student mental health, wellbeing, and widening participation during the Coronavirus pandemic.
- 1.2 We recognise the enormous uncertainty and strain this situation has placed on students, and our universities have been working hard to identify emerging problems, develop solutions quickly and signpost support and advice to students and staff. Our efforts have included:
 - Moving mental health support online, including online resources and appointments via phone, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Skype
 - Increasing support for disadvantaged and vulnerable students through targeted interventions such as laptop loan schemes
 - Offering financial support for students facing hardship, with designated funds having already allocated hundreds of thousands of pounds in support
 - Spearheading online widening participation initiatives for prospective students
- 1.3 We will continue to remain responsive to the needs of students and staff as the situation develops, and support both their well-being and learning experience to the highest degree possible during this difficult time.

2. Mental health support measures

- 2.1 Our universities recognise that the strain placed on students' mental health during this period has been enormous, as anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation have become the hallmarks of everyday life. In response to these challenges, our universities have taken several steps to ensure support provision continues:
 - **Adapting support staff expertise:** Our universities are delivering counselling appointments via Skype and phone, accessible to students wherever they are in the world. The University of Edinburgh's counsellors have, for instance, been re-trained to be qualified in providing telephone counselling, and their accommodation/residence life teams have moved to virtual check-ins and virtual activities to support students still in residences. In another example, Cardiff University has developed a Student Check-In scheme to stay in touch with students during social distancing to prevent feelings of loneliness and detachment. As part of this scheme, students use online forms to explain their circumstances, and staff use Skype, phones and Microsoft Teams to engage students from home. The scheme has reached over 8,000 students.
 - **Moving support online:** Many of our universities have subscribed on behalf of their students to Big White Wall, a digital support service to help students deal with everything from everyday stresses to major life events. The University of Birmingham's Mental Health & Wellbeing Team have also developed a new online course to support students through the current difficult circumstances. Queen's University Belfast's Student Disability and Wellbeing services have proactively organised a daily social media campaign which has

included evening seminars on topics such as sleep management and top tips for keeping healthy in lock down. These sessions have attracted up to 2,000 views at a time.

3. Support for disadvantaged students

3.1 Our universities realise that this crisis has the potential to affect disproportionately those students who are already disadvantaged. We are mitigating this risk in several ways:

- **Care leavers and estranged students:** There has been an increase in the number of estranged students during this period. Specific support for those students has included securing accommodation, check in with care leavers with individual concerns, and some universities offering food vouchers. The University of Bristol has, for example, set up the Bristol Voices befriending scheme which has initially been targeted to support care leavers and estranged students. All care leavers and estranged students at the University of Southampton receive weekly phone check-ins as well as care packs, which include food vouchers and vouchers for equipment and books. The University of Leeds is also offering £500 grants to estranged students and care leavers to help with living costs and other issues.
- **Laptop Grant/Loan scheme:** Universities are supporting students to access technology with laptop loans or grants for a laptop, as well as grants for internet access or dongle loans. University College London, for instance, has increased the existing capacity of its laptop loan scheme by 1700 laptops for current students.
- **Online learning funds:** Many universities have created funds specifically to help with the transition to online learning. The University of Southampton has launched a new Online Learning Grants fund offering up to £300 per student for learning-related equipment, which 900 students have received since April. The University of Sheffield has provided grants to over 200 students to obtain a device or broadband access for online learning.
- **Specialised support:** Our universities are especially aware of challenges that may face particular groups of students. For example, Newcastle University has also proactively engaged with students with autism to provide specific guidance and support. The University of Manchester has reached out to its widening participation students with targeted support to make sure they are aware of the laptops and Wi-Fi dongles available to them.

4. Financial support

4.1 The support we offer students has also included financial support across several areas:

- **Hardship funds:** Universities have set up hardship funds to provide financial support for students during this period. For example, the University of Bristol has created a £175k Coronavirus Impact Fund, and the University of York has awarded £240k in hardship funding to date, with two further funding rounds to follow. The University of Oxford has also created an Emergency Assistance Fund to provide grants of between £200 and £1000 to students whose finances have been negatively affected by the Covid-19 outbreak.
- **Accommodation:** All of our universities have released their students from the remainder of their 2019/20 accommodation agreements where this accommodation is not being used. Some of our universities have offered additional support for students by liaising with provider partners, private landlords and city councils as well. Newcastle University has also provided accommodation to students affected by family breakdown, and they have increased their communication of support available to those experiencing domestic violence or abuse.

- **Students abroad:** Our universities are helping to repatriate all students who were abroad – including providing financial support if required.

5. Widening participation initiatives for prospective students

5.1 Despite the challenges posed to our usual programmes for widening participation, we remain committed to supporting prospective students from all backgrounds, and have adapted our usual practices in the following ways:

- **Digital Engagement:** Many of our universities are moving, or have already moved, their access programmes online. In some cases, so as not to disadvantage students without laptops, they have adapted programme content, including for programmes such as Pathways to Law/Medicine/etc. The University of York has for example accelerated plans to deliver digital widening participation programmes nation-wide, and will reach out to over 5000 pupils from state schools, underrepresented groups and those from less advantaged backgrounds. The Manchester Access Programme (a post-16 access initiative) is running online and has 651 students engaging, their biggest cohort ever. Some of our universities are also offering HE study skills online through digital hubs, webinars and online lectures.
- **Partnerships:** Our universities are regularly in touch with key local, regional and national partners, including schools, to ensure that they stay responsive and alert to the evolving needs of students. King's College London, for instance, ran a rapid listening campaign to understand issues in the local area for disadvantaged populations. Our universities are working closely with social mobility charity partners to move summer schools and other programmes online as well. The University of Cambridge and other universities have worked with the Sutton Trust to develop the Sutton Trust Online. This new programme integrates FutureLearn, Causeway Education's personal statement tool and The Access Platform to ensure it is multi-functional and collaborative.¹
- **Mentoring:** Russell Group universities are offering new mentoring programmes and adapting existing ones online to offer individual support for students. At Queen's University Belfast, student mentors have sent letters to the young people being mentored, and reading and activity packs have been delivered to their homes. The University of Liverpool has moved their attainment-based mentoring programme of over 40 looked-after children in the Merseyside area online, and have updated their safeguarding guidelines to reflect best practice for online outreach. As a result of the change, children benefit from more contact time with mentees as travel time is no longer factored in.
- **Teacher conferences:** Some of our universities are offering virtual teacher conferences, and Advancing Access² is moving its annual conference online this year (with over 500 sign ups). Queen Mary University of London has held a virtual Teachers Coffee Morning to support teachers and their students.
- **Open/taster days:** Our universities are developing virtual open days for students, parents and guardians. They have also made preparations to postpone some of these sessions to later in the year.
- **Parental engagement:** King's College London has moved its parental engagement programmes (Parent Power, *Empederando Padres*, and specific work with white working

¹ [FutureLearn](#) is a digital education platform jointly owned by the Open University and SEEK Ltd. It offers Massive Open Online Courses from 143 UK-based and international university and other partners. [Causeway Education](#) and [The Access Project](#) are two UK-based charities, which support disadvantaged young people to access higher education.

² [Advancing Access](#) is a collaborative project between the 24 Russell Group universities, providing a variety of resources, events and conferences for teachers on access to Russell Group universities. The programme is specifically targeted at widening participation schools.

class families in Hastings and Oldham) online.

- **Adult learners:** The University of Glasgow is inviting all adult returner Access students on their Short Courses Access programmes and on Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) Access courses to participate in their online summer schools. One third of these students are key workers, and the university is putting additional provision in place to enable their participation. Cardiff University is continuing to run its community-focussed adult education groups online. The University of Southampton's Student Inclusion team is running drop-in sessions for mature students. In partnership with their Early Years Centre, it is also providing resources for student parents to help with home education, which will allow them additional time to focus on their studies.
- **Evaluation and impact:** Universities are amending the evaluation and impact monitoring of their widening participation programmes to reflect the current situation. Where provision has been moved online, universities are adjusting their frameworks and theories of change to reflect that. They are also able to engage with A/B testing³ when analysing some of the newer communication formats (e.g. text messages, phone calls, web engagement) so that they can be sure students are receiving the best possible support.

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³ A/B testing involves comparing two versions of a webpage/app/communication method against each other to determine which one performs better.