

How Russell Group universities are supporting students' mental health and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic

Overview

Russell Group universities recognise the additional uncertainty, strain and mental distress for many students in higher education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. To mitigate against this, our universities have developed a range of programmes and initiatives to respond to student needs, including:

- Tailored support for students who are in self-isolation
- Delivering mental health and wellbeing provision online and through telephone counselling, as well as bolstering face to face support and peer to peer programmes
- Offering academic support for students through digital study sessions, at-home provision and additional staff
- Increasing hardship funds and investing in high quality online learning.

Members have used social media, webpages, newsletters, and other services to signpost to support. They have also developed resources for parents and guardians. As the year progresses, Russell Group universities will continue to remain responsive to the needs of students and support both their wellbeing and learning experience to the highest degree possible during this difficult year.

Support for students in self-isolation

Russell Group universities acknowledge that self-isolation can be distressing for students and they have put schemes in place to ensure they feel supported during this time, such as:

- Phone calls to all students to check on welfare and offer practical and emotional support. Some universities have developed referral systems so students can get further support from counselling teams if needed.
- Food, toiletry and laundry packages supplied by universities, as well as vouchers for essential supplies. Some offer delivery of hot meals for students in halls of residence, and wider support to access medication and grocery shopping.
- 'Digital hampers' of vouchers for online entertainment services e.g. Sky Store, Playstation, Xbox.

Mental health and wellbeing support

Russell Group universities offer comprehensive and free face to face support including counselling, mental health and disability services, chaplaincies, advice centres, accommodation officers, and personal tutors. These are all designed to give pastoral care to students at any point during their studies.

Since the pandemic, Russell Group universities have worked to shift some mental health, disability and academic support online to ensure students are able to access these services during periods of isolation and social distancing. Support measures include:

- **University of Leeds** are offering 30-minute same day appointments to explore immediate mental health needs and/or signposting to specialist services, available digitally or by telephone. The

appointment offers a private room on-site for students unable to access remote appointments from their place of residence due to privacy, safety or confidentiality reasons. The university has noticed an increased use of the service since diversifying their modes of delivery. They have also offered additional mental health support for NHS students, and run webinars for staff on how to support students with caring responsibilities.

- **University of Newcastle** has designed the INclude app which encourages students to put healthy wellbeing habits in place, and directs students to on-campus opportunities and services. They are also running a number of wellbeing workshops on mindfulness, sleep and meditation.
- **University of Exeter** student wellbeing services have been working with the university's clinical psychology research department to develop a range of evidence-informed CBT self-help prevention materials (e.g. on Managing Your Worries During Covid-19; Getting Structure In To Your Life; Overcome Your Fears; Get Back To A New Life Routine). If needed, students can request evidence-based 'on-demand' e-mail support by wellbeing services staff that have received CPD credited competency-based training.

Many Russell Group universities have subscribed to or partnered with digital platforms to provide support, including SHOUT, Talk Campus, Big White Wall, and Student Space.

Members are also training current students and alumni to offer peer to peer support through 'buddy' services. **Cardiff University**, for example, has trained over 800 students to fulfil this requirement. Where needed, Russell Group universities are working in close partnership with the NHS to coordinate care of students at high risk of self-injury or suicide.

Academic support

Russell Group universities are delivering academic support digitally to students, such as personal tutoring, mentoring, and study sessions. Members have also invested in additional staff and academic programmes to reduce gaps in attainment and to ensure new students are engaging with their studies. Some examples include:

- **Queen's University Belfast** has established Academic Mental Health Tutors to ensure students receive support on studying at home while looking after their mental health.
- **University College London** has created 33 new student success adviser posts to support new undergraduate students to ensure they feel connected to UCL, their studies and are making the most of the opportunities available at UCL (even with the restrictions in place).

Financial support

To manage the financial impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russell Group universities have increased their bursary provision and hardship funding. They have also reached out to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure they are aware of what is on offer (including laptop loans, additional funding etc.). Many universities have created funds to help with the transition to online learning. For example:

- **University of Oxford's** 2020/21 COVID-19 Hardship Fund is intended to provide grants of up to £5,000 to students whose finances have been negatively affected by COVID-19.
- **University of Southampton** launched a new Online Learning Grants fund in April, which was opened again this October for 2020/21 students, offering up to £300 per student for learning-related equipment.

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