

Covid-19 Briefing Note 4 - Support for students

Friday 5th June 2020

GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education. Our members include universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions from both the traditional and private sectors. Member institutions include some major providers in professional subject areas including art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture and food; education; law; business and finance; health and sports.

Overview

The purpose of this briefing is to bring together guidance, support and questions which institutions should be considering to support students as we approach the next academic year. This briefing should be read in conjunction with others in the series, particularly Briefing Note 2 (teaching from September) and Briefing Note 3 (socially distanced campuses).

Key resources to consider

DfE [Guidance for reopening buildings and campus in higher education](#) (3 June 2020)

DfE Announcement of [support for higher education](#) (4 May 2020)

DfE letter from Universities Minister Michelle Donelan to [providers](#) and to [students](#) (27 March 2020)

OfS [Student guide to coronavirus](#) (ongoing) with FAQs on health wellbeing and support, accommodation and finance, teaching learning and assessment, graduating in 2020 and applying to study in 2020-21.

OfS [Briefing note supporting international students](#) (21 May 2020)

UUK and UCAS [Open Letter to applicants](#) (20 March 2020)

UCAS [Coronavirus student web page](#) (ongoing)

QAA [Covid-19 Support and Guidance](#)

QAA [Preserving quality and standards through a time of rapid change](#) (2 June 2020)

QAA Scotland [Technology Enhanced Learning resources](#)

Advance HE Resources in relation to Covid-19

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/resources-support-you-during-covid-19-pandemic>

Student Minds [coronavirus resource hub](#)

NUS Request for “[No Detriment](#)” (7 April 2020) and the [UUK Response](#) (14 April)

NUS Demands for student renters – [open letter](#) to providers of student accommodation
[Reply](#) from UUK

Protecting learning outcomes and the student experience

The primary consideration during this period has to be the protection of learning outcomes and the student experience. Recognising that building a community is central to higher education, the new term presents opportunities and challenges. There will of course be a host of considerations about how this is undertaken, but to ensure that the student experience is protected it may be useful to set some principles that shape your approach:

- Protecting learning outcomes (and re-profiling activity to a later date if necessary)
- Ensuring that teaching will be available to all students (irrespective of their course/level of study)
- Increasing the commitment to offer additional support to students
- Willing to listen to feedback and respond, should arrangements not meet expectations
- A partnership approach working with and agreeing your plan with the students' union
- Building a community for all students and staff

The briefing notes **teaching from September** (2) and the **socially distanced campus** (3) bring together a whole series of specific pointers and questions which institutions will wish to consider to help preserve learning outcomes and the student experience.

QAA have produced helpful [guidance on maintaining quality and standards at a time of rapid change](#).

Communication with students and partnership with the students' union

Communication with students at any time is important, but particularly when there is greater uncertainty and the majority of students will not be on campus at present. Most institutions are considering what they can do to offer proactive, reactive and personalised communication.

Proactive communication – in addition to announcements to keep students informed, this may be complemented by the preparation of FAQs and other prepared communication which anticipate the likely questions which students will want to know. Institutions are typically using existing communication channels to students (weekly/monthly student emails) alongside other channels (Facebook Live, YouTube videos etc.) to distribute your core messages.

Reactive communication – keeping abreast of feedback which is being received (formally via email, but also through social channels), through contributions from student representatives and preparing messages to respond to this.

Personalised communication – where feasible, giving students named contacts who they can approach/liase with for specific conversations. This may include academic/personal tutors, but it may also include designated points of contact for important student-facing services (e.g. library, careers, registry, student welfare, accommodation etc.)

By working with the students' union throughout the process it should help to identify challenges, arrive at solutions and support your communication.

Student support services

These services are crucial in any academic year, but will be especially so in the next academic year. Many students will find themselves in circumstances they did not anticipate (e.g. remote learning, living in different accommodation, unable to undertake part-time work which heightens financial concerns, dealing with health concerns). **Providers should reasonably expect student support services to be in greater demand than they would ordinarily be**, and institutions should make proactive attempts to resource them appropriately as budgets will be under strain.

Most support services are generally accessed face to face, but steps can be taken to signpost students to online and remote support.

- What steps can you take to resource your student support services adequately (assuming there will be greater demand than previous academic years)?
- What can you do to provide your support services through online/remote means?
- Can FAQs be prepared in advance to help answer the most frequent questions?
- How will you be signposting to students that these services continue to be offered even if students are not coming onto campus?
- What role can the students' union play in helping to support student/signpost them to services?

Student hardship will be a bigger challenge in the next academic year, as part time jobs to earn money this summer and alongside study next academic year may not be possible. This will mean many students will begin the next academic year in more challenging circumstances than they had budgeted or anticipated.

- Providers are making sure that students are aware of their hardship funds
- Some providers have been prioritising fundraising with alumni and other donors to try and increase the hardship funds available for next academic year.

Given that many students will face some additional barriers to access their education in the same way, providers are considering what **reasonable adjustments** may need to be introduced. Can lessons be learnt from the experience this term in order to anticipate challenges for the next academic year?

For some students, **access to reliable internet and technology** (laptops etc.) will provide a material barrier to their full participation to teaching and wider support services. Some institutions are making arrangements to ensure dongles and laptops are sent out to students, supplemented by open socially distanced computer labs on campus available to students when the new term commences.

Student mental health

In addition to the suggestions relating to student support generally (above), particular emphasis should be placed on support for student mental health specifically.

Student Minds have provided a [coronavirus resource hub](#)

Disabled students

Providers should work through how changes to teaching and the delivery of support services will impact different groups of students, particularly disabled students. It may be helpful to proactively engage with disabled students who have experienced remote teaching this term to identify what has worked well, and where further improvements can be made.

An equality impact assessment of changes for the next academic year should ideally be conducted to consider what the impact of any changes will be, so that additional support can be provided to categories of students who may be unfairly penalised.

Induction

Induction for new students will have particular challenges in the new academic year. Providers are considering how new students can best be introduced to you through a combination of remote, on campus and blended approaches. The **Briefing Note 2 on teaching** had specific sections on **entirely online provision** and **blended learning**, and **Briefing Note 3 on the socially distanced campus** should provide useful pointers to how you may wish to engage new students.

For **school/college leavers** their final few months of provision will have been disrupted and there may be a need to consider whether elements on the A level (or equivalent) curriculum which you would expect new students to have received may need to be built into the first term.

Some students will have been expecting to participate in **summer school or language courses** over the summer, which also may be disrupted and similar consideration should be given as to what may need to replace them to support induction.

Given campuses may have to be locked down again after term starts, providers are preparing to ensure that the most crucial elements of induction are delivered first such that if campus is indeed closed, all students will be able to continue their course remotely. Particular emphasis may need to be placed on **accessing library/journal resources and study skills** right at the beginning of term.

IARLA is running [a free virtual meeting](#) that will explore how **library services** are reinstated in the post- or recurring-COVID-19 environment.

Some of your provision may be distance/remote already, are there any lessons from the induction you provide these students which can be applied for all students in the new academic year?

Some providers are seeking to ensure that every student (new and returning) is given a named contact (which may include a combination of personal/academic tutors, alongside professional service staff), who students can contact electronically and/or in person when term begins.

Welcome/Freshers' Week

Welcome and Freshers' week can be an important part of campus life for lots of students, often delivered in conjunction with your students' union. It is likely that this will need to be adapted for the coming academic year.

In addition to the wider reflections about induction and academic study (set out above and in Briefing Note 2 on teaching), you will also want to consider the extent to which steps can be taken to ensure that an introduction to **extra-curricular life** (clubs, societies, sport, student media) and social events/life can still go ahead. Each activity will likely need to be considered on a case by case basis, but every institution should try and agree a final plan for what welcome week will look like in partnership with the SU.

Working with the students' union to consider whether **traditional freshers' fairs** can still go ahead in a social distanced way, or whether they might need to be replaced with a remote alternative. **Social events** which are an important way for students to meet other students (particularly those not on their course) may need to be re-imagined as remote/online events. Some institutions are planning a programme of online freshers' activity in term one, to be followed by a more traditional event later.

In the same way that providers and SUs will have set themselves a target for the number of students to engage in welcome/freshers' week activity for previous years, the same targets should continue to be set, but the means by which they are reached will be different.

International students

Providers are paying particular attention to additional support which can be provided to international students, especially new starters, for whom their first experience of living away from home (and of your institution) may be 2 weeks in quarantine.

At present, we understand that higher education providers will be responsible for students during the quarantine period from the point they land.

- For students who will be staying in university run accommodation, might that reasonably include arranging transport to your accommodation? What happens if a student misses their flight?
- For providers who do not have accommodation, how will you work with students so they can safely arrive in quarantine?

- How might an institution provide information about the UK health system in the case that a student falls ill?
- What support might be provided for international students in the case of a second wave, including possibly supporting them return home.

In place of face to face support, what can your institution do to support students (e.g. daily Zoom calls for all international students, assigning them a named contact at the university, online buddying with other students?) If international students are using your accommodation for the quarantine period, will the university offer to take responsibility to provide food and other essentials?

Also ensuring that all students, particularly international students are aware of how the wider student support services can be accessed will be important.

Travel to campus

For some students, travel to campus will be harder where public transport is a crucial means to get students on site. Some providers are working with transport providers to try and increase the frequency and capacity of transport to get students on campus, combined with reviewing the frequency with which students need to be on site.

Student complaints

Whilst all providers will be approaching the new term trying to offer the best possible experience for students, it is also important that students are aware of the avenues they can pursue should they be unhappy.

In the first instance this will often be through informal channels including student services and advisers at the students' union. Should they prove unsuccessful, students are entitled to pursue a complaint through your internal processes and ultimately to the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Your internal complaints processes should always be clearly signposted.

Working with the SU to try and identify any common complaints being raised informally or formally will be particularly important, to help address any persistent issues that may arise.