
Background

COVID-19 seems like it will be with us for the foreseeable future: and if or when the threat of the virus is removed, it will probably leave a changed world in its wake. This update explores COVID-19's impact on student admissions and recruitment, particularly access for groups previously underrepresented in higher education (HE).

What is normal now?

COVID-19 has definitively reshaped higher education. Things may not return to how they were for some time, if ever. The pandemic has not proved to be the temporary 'blip' that many of us first imagined. Quick adaptation and flexibility have been crucial for higher education providers during this period. Although there are some hopes that life could be on its way back to normal due to vaccine advancements¹, a new focus on blended learning, increased reliance on digital software, and social distancing are central to student (and staff) experience during this phenomenon.

Does this foreshadow an end of, or at least lasting change to, face-to-face student experiences? Are we on the cusp of 'reimagined' universities? Is digital delivery a temporary substitute and second-best option? Could remote delivery of higher education, phased over one's career rather than an upfront three-year or four-year burst become the norm for many? This may seem unrealistic, but perhaps COVID-19, whether on its own or in tandem with the impact of an altered employment landscape; strained government finances; and post-Augar education policies could signpost that what was 'normal' pre-coronavirus will not necessarily be 'normal' anymore.

Admissions and Entry Grades

A-level exams were cancelled in summer 2020. To enable students to receive qualifications, and to help institutions decide who to accept onto their courses, students were to receive calculated grades instead. Following government confusion over teacher assessed predictions and centre assessed grades, the standardised process resulted in 15,000 students who were originally rejected by their first-choice university then receiving the grades they originally needed². Decisions had to be made quickly. This sudden change placed pressure on institutions following an influx of calls from students. Many institutions expanded their capacity for the 2020/2021 admission intake and guaranteed acceptance of all students who met their offer grades (except in areas with a strict capacity limit, such as medicine) alleviating some recruitment target concerns for 2020-2021. Other institutions offered guaranteed deferred places for the 2021-2022 intake.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51665497>

² <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-receives-upgraded-centre-assessed-grades>

Conversations regarding admissions are currently taking place, with the Education Secretary announcing the UK government is to review the university admissions system³ and Universities UK (UUK) releasing their Fair Admissions Review report⁴ - discussion points include the need for greater transparency within admissions, a new code of practice, potential models of Post Qualification Admissions (PQA) and greater focus on addressing inequalities.

The Academic Year So Far

Many institutions welcomed students back to campus in September. They moved into well-populated student halls, albeit with new social distancing measures, supported by principles and considerations shared by UniversitiesUK⁵, and adhering to Public Health advice. To help protect the population and regain control due to an increase in positive cases, many institutions have now ceased in-person teaching. Access to lectures and seminars is now mostly online, often without the means to record sessions due to engagement and attendance monitoring. Virtual learning, however, is working well for some.

Others, experiencing isolation in student residences, held in legally binding contracts and experiencing unnecessary financial burdens, may differ in opinion. Over 76% of graduates previously agreed that their degree was good value because of the 'student experience'⁶. A lack of socialising, reduced campus engagement, and firmer controls could cause many students to question the value of their student experience; the 'Don't Drop Out Survey' already indicating that we have a current student body which desires a more social learning experience⁷. The deal offered to students in this market encompasses outputs and outcomes; what the experiences will be like, including how they will be taught, and the employment / networking opportunities following graduation. If the first 'COVID cohort' of students believe they experienced a diluted version of this student life, that differed from the proposition offered to them prior to their arrival, then claims for monetary refunds will be a definite risk. Negative reports about first year experiences could potentially foster decreased applications for future admission cycles. The Office for Students (OfS) expects transparency within recruitment and marketing from providers.

Dissatisfied first year students are a perennial risk regardless of the added pressures from the pandemic. The challenge of adaptation to new routines and a change of environment, from home to homesick, is not always highlighted in sector marketing materials⁸. In response, universities need to ensure support systems are advertised effectively and are accessible. How are universities working with their student unions in the midst of a pandemic to help students settle in? How are institutions reassuring families about student welfare?

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-plans-for-post-qualification-university-admissions>

⁴ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/uuk-fair-admissions-review.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/principles-and-considerations-emerging-from-lockdown-june-2020.pdf>

⁶ https://yougov.co.uk/topics/education/articles-reports/2020/06/17/how-useful-undergraduate-degree?utm_medium=Advertising&utm_source=CTA&utm_campaign=UK_2020_08_THEArticle

⁷ <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2020/11/Non-continuation-research-November-2020.pdf>

⁸ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/covid-19-has-amplified-student-loneliness-and-distress/>

Supporting this cohort to cope whilst having a positive HE experience is fundamental. Universities need to plan support for their 2020 entrants to encourage retention and minimise risks to future recruitment. Following the Department for Education's Christmas guidance⁹ which has introduced a 'student travel window', universities need to ensure they have plans in place – that incorporate a travel guidance - to support students to return home safely. What will happen if students are unable to return home during the identified window, or are unwilling to return to their homes, especially as many staff members are now accustomed to working from home? The introduction of the 4-week November lockdown we are currently experiencing only enhances the need to plan and resource effectively¹⁰.

Differential Circumstances and Marginalised Groups

Access and participation to higher education regardless of a student's background is a central tenet of the Office for Students. Evidence suggests, though, that the coronavirus pandemic has fallen harder on some sections of society. Protected characteristics that overlap with socio-economic disadvantages cause particular concern, with some discussed further below.

Private school students have increased access to academic support, being twice as likely to access daily online classes, and are more likely than state school students¹¹ to have had their grades overestimated. The faulty algorithm implemented over the summer therefore favoured private school students over those from disadvantaged backgrounds¹².

Children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity are most likely to be living in low income households in the UK¹³. The Other (36%), Mixed (33%) and Black (30%) ethnic groups also have a higher percentage of children living in low-income households than the national average¹⁴. Socio-economic status means students from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)¹⁵ category are more likely to be from widening participation backgrounds. In 2017, The Runnymede Trust found that students

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses/student-movement-and-plans-for-the-end-of-autumn-2020-term>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-national-restrictions-from-5-november>

¹¹ <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/13/england-a-level-downgrades-hit-pupils-from-disadvantaged-areas-hardest>

¹³

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>

¹⁵ We are focusing on limiting the use of the term 'BAME' as a homogenous term due to its problematic nature however it is important to highlight the use of this terminology as it is still widely utilised and understood within the sector. To help highlight the evident disparities between those who do fit under this umbrella term we endeavour to provide separation and indicate whenever there is reference to a particular ethnic background within statements or data.

from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have grades under-predicted¹⁶. Ofqual has since released a technical report following this year's process of awarding grades which, based on an 'equalities analysis', showed no evidence of systemic bias due to socio-economic status¹⁷. Conversely, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) highlighted indirect discrimination and unfairness in relation to socio-economic status in their letter to Ofqual¹⁸. If bias still covertly exists, or could be further amplified if A Level exams are affected by COVID-19 again next year, access opportunities for these students may be negatively impacted.

Citing research showing that almost a quarter of high-ability applicants from lower-income backgrounds experienced an under-prediction of grades between 2013 and 2015, a recently released government statement outlines plans to consider proposals on admissions reform – including a possible move to post-qualification admissions – with a view to addressing the limitations of the current predicted grades system and its impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds¹⁹.

Although making up 13% of the UK population, BAME individuals make up 34% of all patients critically ill from COVID-19²⁰. The number of BAME students under the age of 18 seeking help for stress and anxiety from the Kooth²¹ digital support service increased by 11.4% from last year, compared to 3% among white children²². Higher education providers need to be attuned to the risk of self-exclusion by these students, whether this is due to wellbeing or health issues relating to COVID-19. Student wellbeing and mental health has long been key in University's agendas, but appropriate steps are needed to ensure that these students feel comfortable visiting campus wherever possible throughout, and following, the pandemic.

Students who declare a disability upon arrival at an institution make up 14.3% of the student population (2018-19)²³. The Higher Education Commission report highlighted that many disabled students are not given adequate support to fully participate in their education; 26% of the respondents rated the accessibility of their course between 1-2 out of 5²⁴. With ever increasing pressure, disabled student admissions could be severely affected - particularly as one in five

¹⁶ <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/predicted-grades-bme-students-letter-to-ed-sec>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guide-to-as-and-a-level-results-for-england-2020>

¹⁸ <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/gmca-letter-to-ofqual-17-august-2020/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-plans-for-post-qualification-university-admissions>

²⁰ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/covid-19-does-discriminate-so-we-should-tackle-its-impact-on-bame-students/>

²¹ Kooth is an emotional wellbeing and mental health platform for children and young people which provides a free, anonymous and confidential service. Users can seek professional support via the online application on any connected device, and support is available for those aged between 11-24 years of age. It is commissioned by the NHS, Local Authorities, charities and businesses. For more information, please see: <https://www.kooth.com/>

²² https://xenzone.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BAME_infographic_June-2020_WEB-v2.pdf

²³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8f61cef7-4cf7-480a-8f73-3e6c51b05e54/coronavirus-briefing-note-disabled-students.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/arriving-thriving-learning-disabled-students-ensure-access-all>

disabled students have been identified as being at risk of dropping out of this year's cohort²⁵. Section 91(9) of the Equality Act 2010 requires higher and further education providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled students, highlighting the extreme importance of levelling alterations in this changed world. Moves to online outreach can be beneficial for accessibility issues, but consideration for neurodiverse learners, or those with visual or hearing impairments, can falter, thus, an understanding of the diversity of individual needs within disability is crucial.

Student Recruitment and Outreach Activities

Approved by the OfS, Access and Participation Plans (APPs) define how higher education institutions intend to improve access opportunities for underrepresented groups and include a plan of outreach activities. Widening participation is intertwined with outreach activities, with strategy aims focused on directly targeting schools and colleges with a high percentage of underrepresented groups of students. Delivered in schools and on campus, most outreach activities are delivered face-to-face and require direct interaction. The 'new normal' has resulted in many outreach activities and transition programmes that support APPs being disrupted, having a consequent risk that recruitment targets and KPIs may be missed. More focus has been placed on overall growth rather than equity and equal advantage. Decisions were made quickly and were dependent on capacity, without time to reassess the suitability of current APPs.

Greater reliance on online learning can help universities fulfil their roles as civic institutions in the very broadest sense, by protecting the general public through limited in-person interaction. Many institutions have already made the shift to virtual outreach activities, including online open days and summer schools, engaging with accessible good practice, creating printable activities for those who cannot access virtual learning, and distributing art boxes for creative activities. Others have created virtual resources for those with specific learning difficulties, with students being granted access to level specific modules and interactive courses, whilst others have removed the need for pre-entry specific completion activities (usually completed at a Summer School), or produced numerous webinar series²⁶.

Using knowledge gained thus far, to avoid a potential 'mis-selling' scandal, universities should ensure full transparency of this 'new' student experience during outreach activities. Those who felt ill-informed this year could drive negative feedback about value, which could result in negative press, potentially leading to a decrease in prospective students for 2021-2022 and beyond. To help fulfil APP targets, a drive for more accessible and alternate delivery degree formats within outreach activities may also be beneficial. Instead of focusing on the traditional 3-year degree, using the idea of lifelong learning and virtual learning dependence, information on part time and other non-traditional courses should be considered. However, careful management of this information is crucial when highlighting differing sectoral options to prospective students; absolute assurance that underrepresented and disadvantaged students are not solely funnelled into non-traditional ways of teaching is crucial in ensuring that the OfS mantra - all students should have access to the same education regardless of background - is fulfilled. Lifelong learning may also result in new limitations for those from marginalised backgrounds. Although Indian workers are the most likely to occupy 'professional' jobs within the BAME category, black ethnic groups are statistically more likely to work

²⁵ <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2020/11/Non-continuation-research-November-2020.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/624ae140-b26a-405c-8717-501ffce38d2e/coronavirus-briefing-note-outreach.pdf>

in 'elementary' jobs²⁷. How universities engage with employers to ensure professional development and study leave is engrained into their practice is imperative for equal opportunity.

What can institutions do?

- Adequately plan for further, future lockdowns (including 'breaker lockdowns').
- Review current degree portfolios, enhanced and influenced by subject league tables, ensuring they provide opportunities to drive the widening participation agenda, and that all courses offered are adequately marketed.
- Following support from the OfS for more portable approaches to credits, institutions should reconsider pre/co-requisites, alongside a potential review of the curriculum to allow this, to help minimise negativity from student experiences from particular universities and allow them to leave without penalty. This could be enhanced by the current review and decolonising of the curriculum.
- Engage in remote listening projects and exchanges with students to gain first-hand insights into their experiences throughout COVID-19.
- Continue offering online mixers and events, which predominantly happened throughout freshers; encourage societies and other groups to continue to engage in virtual social activities.
- Potential skill gaps in the understanding of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues, particularly at senior levels, raises the need for a revamp of promotion. The understanding of complex hinderances for particular students should be engrained into promotional requirements and management expectation²⁸.
- Universities should consider the need to adopt clear digital strategies based on the new reliance on online teaching and blended learning²⁹. This should be easily accessible for prospective students.

Admissions

- Consider reducing reliance on results from standardised testing, such as A-Levels and other vocational entry grades. Instead, consider a flexible and increased focus on students 'characters', often highlighted in personal statements and other work / voluntary experiences.

²⁷ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment-by-occupation/latest>

²⁸ https://wonkhe.com/blogs/this-is-what-leadership-looks-like-on-race-and-racism-in-universities/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%2012%20October&utm_content=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%2012%20October+CID_eea0e40374dd81fc979be3374427d5f3&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=Three%20months%20on%20from%20the%20Black%20Lives%20Matter%20protests

²⁹ https://wonkhe.com/blogs/universities-should-shake-off-our-wariness-about-investment-in-digital/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%2009%20November&utm_content=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%2009%20November+CID_2f765c1bd4871b35278cbe05d7c06ac7&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=UK%20universities%20need%20to%20adopt%20a%20clear%20digital%20strategy%20for%20the%20future%20or%20risk%20being%20left%20behind

- Admissions teams should consider contextual admission grades for those who do not originally meet standard entry grades whilst considering the need for Equality Impact Assessments.
- To help discourage self-exclusion for students more likely to experience health risks with COVID-19, institutions should engage in culturally competent risk assessments, and publish any extra measures taken.
- For students who had to defer their enrolment to 2021 due to capacity issues, institutions should consider increasing transitional support between now and enrolment in addition to the agreements made with UniversitiesUK³⁰. This could include providing access to online content prior to arrival, such as short courses and virtual mentoring, and expanding this transitional support to wider groups, such as those who chose to defer.
- Institutions should ensure they capture and monitor admission data to help inform them of any biases resulting from coronavirus and its impact on student grades for the 2020-2021 admission cycle.
- To help with the admissions process, providers should ensure that there is relevant investment into required technology and software, and to avoid using outdated software used pre-pandemic.
- Admission teams need to be aware of a potential increase in postgraduate admissions, particularly in the short-term due to uncertainty in the COVID-19 labour market.

Recruitment

- Instead of solely relying on overall growth targets, more recruitment focus needs to be shifted onto encouraging (and supporting) marginalised students in applying to their institutions. As a result, APP targets will also be more likely to be met whilst helping to encourage diversity. We recommend institutions revisit their APP targets and consider the need to update them for the COVID-19 world.
- Institutions need to reconsider how recruitment activities can be implemented, such as the need to re-think campus/school visits and amend them to accessible virtual events. Many institutions have already made this shift, including recruitment activities which do not require direct access to the internet (printable activities); however, institutions need to guarantee that they ensure every type of learner can engage.
- Recruitment activities also need to include information on how COVID-19 will impact the student experience; staff working on recruitment events/workshops need to be knowledgeable about the potential implications students may now face due to the 'new normal', and be able to convey this through key messages and discussions. This includes information on how teaching will be orchestrated during their time studying to help inform students on their choices of accommodation. The introduction of 'community champions' may help with access and participation work³¹.

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/package-of-support-for-students-who-have-to-defer-their-studies/package-of-support-for-students-who-have-to-defer-their-studies#:~:text=Universities%20UK%20and%20all%20higher,studie%20in%202021%20to%202022.>

³¹ https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-are-you-doing-today-wonkhe-readers-hopes-for-wellbeing-in-post-covid-universities/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20%209%20November&utm_content=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20%209%20November+CID_2f765c1bd4871b35278cbe05d7c06ac7&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=Wonkhes%20editor%20Debbie%20McVitty%20channels%20their%20hopes%20and%20concerns

- How students consume the media has altered, therefore institutions should also review how they market and communicate the courses they offer.
- Universities should ensure they advertise that they are acting on Public Health England advice, if they are involved in any regional debates regarding the pandemic, and / or are engaging with their local authority (working/discussion groups).
- Data gathering and analysis for recruitment activities needs to be improved to ensure institutions can monitor participation rates of virtual events.
- Data Privacy statements need to be easily accessed and displayed for students prior to their attendance to virtual events, and consent needs to be gained for students under 18 years of age.
- To help combat some safeguarding issues, institutions needs to ensure social workers and foster carers are informed of virtual recruitment events.

Conclusions

With a growing realisation of the success of virtual learning, greater understanding of non-linear educational pathways, and an ever-growing strain on government finances, 'traditional' HE sector procedures may not be so sustainable anymore. Consideration of new models of delivery, new ways of funding, and transparency of the student experience could be the way to reboot the sector. Portable learning models, favoured by the OfS, although previously avoided, could be welcomed. Yet, it is extremely important that universities do not disregard their APPs (and other EDI based targets and KPIs) to ensure they can continue to provide, and improve on, access (success and progress) opportunities for all underrepresented and marginalised groups. If students in the new normal are pioneering explorers of enhanced and altered education, not the recipients of a second-best substitute experience, then this needs to be advertised and marketed accordingly.

Student admissions and recruitment is crucial to the financial sustainability of institutions. Ensuring that there is a flow of eager and diverse prospective students is imperative to future institutional success. The ongoing pandemic presents the opportunity to explore radical reform.

We can help

For further information on how we can help, such as offering access and participation related audits, or any other aspect of Uniac's internal audit and assurance service, please get in touch.



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