
Background

COVID-19 has changed all of our lives dramatically over the last few months. The challenges faced by universities are complex and interlinked. Like other organisations, there has been a migration to home working for staff and to online delivery and support for students. Related activities such as residences, catering and conferences have effectively ended.

The Office for Students has signalled a change in tone by promising to be more receptive to providers who voice their concerns and ask for help in the current circumstances. It has also published weekly briefing notes, sharing good practice from the sector. That said, the arms-length approach of the OfS hasn't gone away altogether: it continues to emphasise its primary role in defending the student interest and will expect institutions to use the reportable events framework to alert the OfS to any financial concerns. As the effects of COVID-19 look likely to spill over into 2020-21, English universities have been set the impossible challenge of spelling out to potential students what will be on offer. This example aside, the OfS has suggested that it will exercise its role reasonably and will not set unmeetable deadlines. Beyond this, the level of support available to the sector is likely to be limited, the government's advocacy for the sector is poor and popular opinion, as influenced by negative media stories about universities over the last four years, make for an uncertain future.

Student recruitment

Because of travel restrictions, early predictions that international recruitment would be severely affected look likely to be realised. Institutions which recruit the heaviest international cohorts and so depend on overseas fee income may face particular challenges. Some universities are modelling scenarios of up to an 80% drop in student enrolment from outside the EU.

There is also more general uncertainty around the upcoming domestic enrolment cycle. Institutions have modelled some 'worst-case scenarios' of drops in EU and UK student recruitment of up to 20%. At this stage we don't know what the reaction among applicants will be, as while lockdown measures are relaxing there is ongoing uncertainty about what form the educational offer will take in September 2020. Will applicants seek a deferred place, in the hope that a September 2021 start will be more settled and closer to the traditional experience? Will they expect adjustments in fees to reflect the change in student experience? Into this mix, the Chief Executive of the Office for Students, has added the expectation that before prospective students need to make firm choices in June, they should have 'absolute clarity' about what will be on offer. The OfS has not indicated *how* such clarity might be delivered, which for now leaves English universities in an impossible position.

As colleges have shut, and A level exams won't be happening, universities will need to negotiate a new position to allow prospective students entry. How will Access and Participation targets to widen access be affected? Although the OfS has temporarily suspended most ongoing consultations, this may provide the ongoing admissions review with a further insight of what systems might work, and which won't.

Teaching, exams and assessment

Providers are expected to make 'all reasonable efforts to provide alternative teaching and support for students that is broadly equivalent to the provider's usual arrangements'¹. The main change that universities have had to make so far is the transition to online delivery of teaching and learning. All universities have now moved primarily to the online provision of courses, whether this is via remote video capture (e.g. Teams, Skype, Zoom etc), or making all resources accessible on student intranets and learning platforms. Many institutions have confirmed that this will be the case, for the start of the next academic year, if not all of it. This of course has much broader implications than ensuring students can simply finish the learning aspect of their course. For instance, with the change in university learning environments, how should we now be viewing TEF ratings awarded based on the quality of teaching support and classroom learning? Additionally, could the shift to online learning discriminate against students who are less digitally literate, or have access to fewer digital resources, disproportionately affecting for example, mature students, those from widening participation backgrounds, care leavers or disabled students? If this is the case, what support should universities be providing for these students to ensure that all students have fair access to learning resources? The next stage for universities is to decide how to approach the assessment period, with some exams inevitably having to be postponed or cancelled. there are challenges adapting assessment types and for some, where the programme learning outcomes include competences in operating/using equipment or demonstrating laboratory/clinical skills, then assessments may need to be postponed. For first and second year students rescheduling could take place in the next academic year, but for final year students it could impact on their ability to achieve their award this summer. QAA has issued CV-19 thematic guidance on practice and lab-based assessment.² The marking and moderation of student work and assurance of the standards and reliability of awards via external examining and boards of examiners meetings will need to adjust. Getting the balance between 'no detriment/safety net' and maintaining reliable outcomes are spurring important discussions around student progression and awards, (with a continuing eye on grade inflation (though it's likely the OfS may be focused on more immediate priorities)). Maintaining regular dialogue with students to explain how their teaching, learning

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/f351a739-6cd6-4310-8f98-a6aa603f17f4/quality-and-standards-guidance-during-coronavirus.pdf>

² https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/covid-19-thematic-guidance-practice-lab-based-assessment.pdf?sfvrsn=f3cccd81_6



and assessment experiences will change to adapt to the pandemic is crucial. Students following accredited programmes may be anxious about professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements to enable them to practice. Whilst some of these tend to be a competency based outcome (pass/fail) universities should keep students in the loop about rescheduling where necessary.

Student support

It's important to remember in these discussions that education isn't the only reason that students come to university. For many, universities offer social spaces to network, or new environments to allow for personal development. With the partial closure of campuses, and reduced opportunities for social gatherings, how can universities ensure that these 'fringe' functions continue, and that students are provided with the appropriate resources and support? Looking first at student support, universities will need to ensure that there are systems in place that allow students to continue to get the academic and pastoral support they need. This will most likely be provided through video conferencing services (such as those used for lecture capture), but it will be important to make other alternatives available, on a more specific, case by case basis. Similarly, although student unions are encouraging societies to cease actions and gatherings, social media and other online networking tools could prove useful to facilitate social interaction, which is such a vital aspect of so many student lives. Demand for these support services is also likely to rise, particularly for those students that require support for their mental health or as anxiety levels increase among the wider student population over this period. This has been one area of recent focus by the OfS, who have published several examples of good student support practices including those to help overseas students without family support.

Students may be more likely to raise complaints or appeals if they are unhappy with the outcomes of their assessments or because they believe they were not informed of changes to teaching, learning and assessment. Considering how to deal with Covid related complaints and indeed posing frequently asked questions would be useful in recording communications with students.

Workforce and staff resource

Following government direction, universities have now implemented remote working for staff, wherever possible. While institutions have readied themselves for elements of this, the immediate concern for universities here is the welfare and health and safety of its staff. The fact that the virus may lead to a reduced workforce / resource in what is already a testing time, should be a secondary concern to this. Following on from immediate concerns for staff safety, staff resource, and job security, universities should ensure that their staff are well supported and adequately equipped to work remotely – including to ensure the safe transfer and processing of personal data.

This would ideally include clear information on wellbeing and resilience when working from home, describing how to maintain a positive work/life separation, and combat any possible loneliness. These are all things that will remain relevant, once normal working practices start to return.

Some universities are also starting to think about what a return to work might look like for staff. This may include 'bubbles' or groups of staff who work together to limit any possible spread of the virus. However, they will need to be mindful that some staff members may prove unwilling to return to work perhaps because they, or other members of their households, are at



heightened risk from the virus. Reconciling business needs with staff concerns to reach acceptable solutions may present significant challenges.

Social distancing / self-isolation on campus

The latest Government advice now allows house moves to go ahead enabling students who have gone home to collect their belongings from university accommodation and/or to enable students who remained in accommodation to travel home. However, chaos could ensue as parents and students descend to clear rooms. Universities and landlords will need to work with them to plan necessary travel and logistical arrangements and where they live in shared housing, to co-ordinate with fellow tenants to maintain social distancing. And what arrangements are in place should students be unable to collect their belongings – they may need to organise removal companies to remove and store their items, incurring further costs. With plans for the new academic year yet to be confirmed, what advice should parents and students be given about taking on accommodation in September 2020?

As the lockdown eases, universities will be considering how they match up a safe campus experience, with similar measures in their halls of residence. In some shared accommodation, it may not be possible to create two metres of space for each student at all times, and if so, will students still want to enrol this year if the offer is very different from the expected 'University experience'. For those institutions with arrangements with private providers, how will they ensure those arrangements match up to national guidance? Similarly, if student numbers are affected and recruitment falls, will they still be required to meet financial commitments to these third parties?

Colleagues will be wrestling with these issues and thinking about their options. In the absence of a vaccine or a better understanding of transmission rates in a diverse student body, they will be looking to deliver a rich educational experience, with high levels of student support and interaction (principally online), while maintaining social distancing and limiting the reproductive capacity of the virus. On campus, this may range from, for example, one way systems through buildings or campuses, through to the segregation of students by course in their accommodation, in order to limit the risk of viral transmission and to allow for the isolation of smaller groups should outbreaks arise.

Governance, risk management and decision-making

Universities have largely adapted quickly to remote working. In this context, continued decision making capacity and governing body engagement and oversight have remained vital. This is particularly the case where key or important decisions are required (e.g. decisions around the deferral or postponement of borrowing or financing, the development of the estate, or the implementation of new systems or collaborative partnerships).

Some universities will already be familiar with document management systems that support board governance, e.g. Diligent, Convene, or their own SharePoint solutions. They may also wish to extend their adoption or extension across other internal decision-making bodies to enable easier remote working.

Universities may also wish, via their governing body, to explore whether delegations of authority are set correctly for the current situation and there may be occasions where in the absence of formal meetings there is additional reliance on chair's action or emergency, time-limited delegations of authority. Whatever local arrangements are in place, greater



governing body engagement will be required to ensure they are aware of institutional priorities and to keep them apprised of the implications in terms of financial sustainability, employment, and in terms of the delivery of education and outputs.

All institutions will be working on their risk registers and their business continuity arrangements have now been stress-tested in a way that no scenario planning exercise could emulate. While Covid will be identified as a specific risk on the institutional risk register, its criticality is such that it will have affected the likelihood and impact of a significant number of the other risks, as well as derailing or disrupting strategic delivery.

Audit committees and governing bodies are likely to seek additional assurances on the efficacy of the risk management framework. Internal audit programmes for the next academic year will also need to adapt for Covid, as informed by those revised registers. For External Audit, the going concern assessment they undertake is likely to be more involved and subject to greater testing than in previous years.

Civic contribution

While the student body typically consists of younger, healthier people, who appear to be less vulnerable to the virus, the social distancing advice issued by the government is aimed at reducing its spread and protecting the more vulnerable, with underlying medical conditions amongst students, staff and the wider population.

Through measures such as campus closures and the rapid development of online learning, universities are fulfilling their roles as civic institutions in the very broadest sense, by protecting the general public. Researchers have contributed to data modelling to inform the Government's strategy and advice and research efforts are underway in several universities to work towards a vaccine and explore possible treatments. As the most severe lockdown restrictions are eased, will the pandemic prompt a rethink in respect of the sector's civic role to provide for more effective co-ordination of activity whether in terms of research, service support, or volunteering?

Future and long-term impacts

While these short-term effects are still emerging, and reactions to them are changing almost daily, it should be acknowledged that some of these changes will be here to stay. Online learning may become more prevalent in content delivery across the sector, with institutions that fail to adopt this, possibly falling behind the curve.

Similarly, remote and flexible working may well become a new norm, with technology allowing for easier and greater collaboration, wherever staff may be. From a business continuity viewpoint, institutions will become more equipped to deal with any issues that may temporarily shut a campus down or affect business continuity, learning from this experience.

Institutional leader boards, frameworks and metrics, such as the TEF and LEO, may effectively become redundant (at least for this year), as they cannot account for individual institutional responses. This may lead to an altogether different view of the values provided by, and hierarchy of HEIs. On a broader, more philosophical level, this may change perceptions of universities as belonging to a specific place, but rather using that location as a base for operations and operating on a less geo-specific scale. After the immediate responses,



opportunities to explore new ways of thinking about university provision, and new methods of working may well come to the fore.

How can we help?

Using our sector knowledge and networks, we can identify any emerging good practice in dealing with the virus, and we can assess institutional responses to a rapidly changing landscape. We could also review any new processes/systems that may be implemented as a temporary measure, and whether there would be value in incorporating these as standard practice for the future.

For further information on how we can help or any other aspect of Uniac's internal audit and assurance service please do get in touch.

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