
Background

COVID-19 has dominated the headlines and university action in the last few weeks. In an uncertain time, we thought it would be helpful to explore some of the key short-term changes caused by the pandemic, practical responses that managers can take or consider, and how these issues might develop into more fundamental structural changes for universities, further down the line. However, while there is no clarity on how long the short-term effects will last, we can assume that some, if not most of the measures taken will span into the next academic year.

While the student body typically consists of younger, healthier people, who were not initially thought to be at risk of contracting the virus, the social distancing advice issued by the government is aimed at reducing its spread and protecting the more vulnerable people, in both the student body, and the wider population. By enforcing this through measures such as closures and greater reliance on online learning, universities are fulfilling their roles as civic institutions in the very broadest sense, by protecting the general public. But is there more that they could do and support? Researchers at Imperial College London and the London College of Tropical Hygiene and Medicine have already contributed to data modelling to inform the Government's strategy and advice. But could research efforts be streamlined to work towards a vaccine and explore treatments, and could university resources also be used to provide relief or support for other key services if the societal impact of the pandemic intensifies?

The OfS has for now announced that it will suspend its current regulatory requirements, and act to support the government in their advice, and HEIs in their approach to dealing with the virus. In this briefing, we aim to discuss what some of these immediate actions are and acknowledge the knock-on effects they may have.

Student Recruitment

Because of travel restrictions, international recruitment seems set to be severely affected. Institutions which recruit the heaviest international cohorts and which have become dependent on this overseas fee income may face particular challenges. There is also more general uncertainty around the upcoming domestic enrolment cycle. 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. This may provide the ongoing admissions review with a further insight of what systems might work, and which won't. We'd anticipate that the most likely outcome here is a delay to the start of the 2020/21 academic year.

Teaching, Exams and Assessment

The main change that universities have had to make so far is the transition to online learning. Most universities have now moved to online provision of courses, whether this is via remote video capture, or making all resources accessible on student intranets. 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 who have access to fewer digital resources, potentially including mature students, and those from widening participation backgrounds? 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. This will leave some important discussions to be had around student progression and awards, with an ongoing backdrop of scrutiny around grade inflation (though it's likely that the OfS may be focused on more immediate priorities).

Student Support

It's important to remember in these discussions that education isn't the only function of the University. For a lot of students, universities offer social spaces to network, or new environments to allow for personal development. With the partial closure of campuses, and reduction on 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 need will to ensure that there are systems in place that still allow students to get the necessary levels of academic and pastoral support. 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 raise among the wider student population over the period.

Workforce and staff resource

Following government direction, most 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. As acknowledged above, there should be arguably more financial security for jobs than in other sectors, at least for the short term. Following on from immediate concerns for staff safety, staff resource, and job security (in that order), 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.



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ISO 9001, ISO 14001, OHSAS 18001, ISO 27001

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.

Social distancing / self-isolation on campus

Overall, while switching to online learning, and making staff work remotely are positive actions that will help to slow the spread of the virus, there are other parts of university operations which are significantly harder to manage. For instance, looking at halls of residence, how can students effectively self-isolate in flats with shared bathrooms and living spaces. Similarly, should these students be told to return home to maintain appropriate social distancing, possibly risking spreading the disease further, and to possibly more at-risk communities? Colleges at Cambridge have recently received some criticism for directing students to leave campus, effectively forcing them out of tenancy. Although university accommodation often has clauses in the terms and conditions to allow contracts be terminated, to do so now might be highly inappropriate from the moral standpoint of looking after student welfare, and from the civic standpoint, in protecting the wider population.

Governance and decision-making

While many parts of the institution will adapt quickly to remote working, it will be important to preserve decision making capacity and to maintain appropriate levels of governor engagement and oversight. This is particularly important where key or important decisions are required (e.g. decisions around the deferral or postponement of borrowing or financing, the development of the estates, 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 engagement with the Board 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.

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.



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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 the ways in which that universities are thought about, no longer belonging to a specific place, but rather using that location as a base for operations and operating on a less geo-specific scale. Once we work through immediate responses, this might be seen as an opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about university provision, and new methods of working.

How can we help?

Using our sector knowledge and network, 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.

