

Written evidence submitted by The Open University

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Executive summary

- The Open University Students Association is an industry leader when it comes to providing services and support to students in distance-learning settings.
- The main impacts of COVID-19 on OU students have been to increase time pressures due to home-schooling, working full- or part-time and caring on top of studying; financial pressures due to lost income and lack of maintenance support (in England), and; mental ill health due to uncertainty, confinement, health anxieties, and worry about at-risk relatives among many other things.
- The Students Association elected leaders have worked tirelessly to create links between the information provided by the Open University and the student body, using a variety of communication platforms to ensure that students feel connected and reassured.
- The Students Association provides services that support students experiencing mental ill health in relation to overcoming the immediate issues they are facing, but does not offer counselling or therapy services.
- Additional affiliations with charities such as Nightline, which provides a listening service (currently email only given the current circumstances) as well as signposting via the OU Students Association website offer students in mental health distress options at times of need.
- The OU Students Association is a hub of social activity for students to engage in, facilitating interaction between fellow students around shared interests, experiences and backgrounds.
- During the COVID-19 crisis, the Students Association has drawn on its long history and extensive experience of providing for students at distance to both innovate and scale-up around social interactions in order to combat the increased risk of social isolation during the lockdown.

1 Introduction to the Open University Students Association

1.1 The Open University Students Association, much like any other Student Union, aims to help students make the most of their time as students of the Open University, using the student voice to enhance the student experience, contributing to better outcomes, and promoting the interests of its students both within the University and in the external environment. It also has an important function of providing support, advice and guidance for students in times of crisis.

1.2 The Open University Students Association is run by students, for students and is supported by a staff team normally based at the Open University campus in Milton Keynes (but currently working remotely). It is a registered charity and is governed by a Board of Trustees. The direction of the Students Association is determined by the Central Executive Committee (CEC), which is made up of elected student representatives, including a President, Deputy President, several Vice Presidents with varying portfolios, area/Nation and faculty representatives, and a student member of the University's governing body, the Council.

1.3 There are over 174,000 students registered with the Open University (2019 figures), making it almost four-times larger than the next largest UK university. The majority of students are studying part-time and at distance across the 4 Nations of the UK and across continental Europe and therefore have a different student experience to those at traditional brick universities. Recent data has shown that the average age of OU students is 27 and that three-quarters of students are in employment. The OU also has the largest single population of disabled students in Europe. There are OU students in 90% of UK postal districts. All OU students are automatically Students Association members.

1.4 This response provides insights into how COVID-19 has impacted Open University students, how the OU Students Association has supported students through this difficult period, and the ongoing services and support offered to students of the Open University.

2 The impact of COVID-19 on Open University students

2.1 OU Students Association President, Cath Brown, reached out via social media to ask students for their feedback regarding what the main issues they have experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown have been. Hundreds of responses were provided by students from England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. However, there were broadly common themes irrespective of place.

2.2 The most common issue was increased pressures on students' time leading to inability to concentrate on studies. Many OU students have young children at home during this period, with all schools closed indefinitely. A large number of students commented that trying to home-school their children of different ages alongside the additional cooking and cleaning that is generated, as well as continuing to work either full- or part-time from home (76% of our students are in employment under normal circumstances) means that very little time is left for study. And even when they do find time, students are often exhausted.

2.3 The current situation has created a financial pressure for many families of OU students. Families where one or more members of the household are furloughed or are self-employed but do not qualify for government support may have experienced significant loss to income and are unsure of when their household income will return to normal. Many English students said that maintenance loans for distance-learners would have provided some stability during this uncertain period (even someone studying 120 credits per year at the OU receives nothing in England!), while OU students in Wales now benefit from maintenance support further to the Diamond Review.

2.4 The mental health of OU students was a prominent theme in responses when asked what the impact of the coronavirus crisis has been on them. The OU has over 27,000 known disabled students (2019 figures), a number of whom highlighted personal anxieties about their own higher-risk status in relation to the virus. Many more students mentioned struggling with their mental health in relation to what will happen with their studies, their qualifications, worry about elderly relatives who are at risk, and more general uncertainty about when the crisis will end.

2.5 A number of other issues were highlighted by students including, but not limited to:

- Increased working hours required due to being a key worker (across the four nations OU student nurses have been retained on placements to provide support to the NHS through the crisis).
- Reduced broadband speed and access due to increased demand on networks (particularly in rural areas).

- Students Award Agency Scotland (SAAS) office are not currently accepting Part-time Fee Grant (PTFG) applications, due to it being a paper-based process.
- Reduced access to vital resources related to studying, such as local libraries.
- Cancellations of face-to-face tutorials meaning that students don't have as much support or feedback on their progress throughout modules.

2.6 Despite many Open University staff, tutors and associate lecturers experiencing many of the same issues as the students, many students commented that a range of OU staff had been very generous in providing help, support and understanding during this difficult period.

3 Responding to the COVID-19 crisis

3.1 Due to sudden changes to requirements in relation to assessments and exams that were caused by the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown, there was a large amount of uncertainty and some distress within the student body. This was most evident on social media, where OU students often support each other through difficult circumstances with advice and reassurance.

3.2 OU Students Association elected representatives reacted incredibly quickly in responding to an identified need to provide a link between the information being released by the University and the student body themselves to ensure that the risk of misinformation spreading was reduced.

3.3 Students Association President, Cath Brown, lobbied successfully to be included in Coronavirus crisis meeting groups in order to both ensure that the student perspective was represented in all conversations, and also to be able to provide a link to the student body for feedback in both directions where appropriate.

3.4 The President, along with other elected student leaders, has worked tirelessly to respond to questions and queries across social media platforms, creating a 'frequently asked questions' page for students to refer to, which is updated as and when new issues arise. The team of student leaders have provided advice and signposting to services within and outside of the University where necessary and have also hosted drop-in sessions on Adobe Connect where students can come and ask for advice.

3.5 Furthermore, the President has sought to provide both internal and external stakeholders with better understanding of the experiences of OU students throughout this crisis period by collecting the data describe in points 2.2-2.6, and has written to members of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Students to relay this message and ensure that the experiences of distance-learners during this time are not forgotten.

4 Supporting our students with their mental health

4.1 The Students Association doesn't provide formal mental health treatment or support, as that would require either our volunteers or ourselves to be professionally trained. That said, mental health and wellbeing of students and staff is high on the Students Association agenda, with a number of staff members trained in Mental Health First Aid. Furthermore, the Students Association elected student reps and staff team worked with the OU to develop the University's new mental health strategy, which was recently approved.

4.2 Peer Support service: Our Peer Support service doesn't directly support students through their mental health issue or provide therapy. But a Supporter will listen to how particular issues being experienced by a student affect their study, and work on that to help them get through their immediate concerns while signposting to more formal mental health support or making a safeguarding report if appropriate.

4.3 Nightline: The OU Students Association is affiliated with the London branch of Nightline, a charity that exists to support students through their university experience. This is also a peer-support system.

4.4 Community Drop-ins: Our elected student leadership team hold regular 'Community Drop-ins' via Adobe Connect (an online teaching/meeting package which is also one of the tools used by the OU for online tutorials, meaning that many of our students are familiar with it), where students are invited to come, ask any questions they have and be involved in a social environment online. Occasionally, staff from the OU have been invited to speak and provide advice, including a Mental Health Advisor (Emma Greenstein).

4.5 Signposting: The Students Association also keeps its website up to date with signposting information for a variety of services that students experiencing mental ill health may find useful. This can be found at <https://www.oustudents.com/mental-health-support>.

5 Building social networks between students to help avoid social isolation

5.1 The Open University Students Association is a social hub for our members where we bring our members together around their shared interests, experiences and backgrounds to create a unique student experience for distance-learners. Our experience of delivering services for our members this way over many years means that we are well equipped to support students through the current crisis.

5.2 Clubs and societies: Clubs and societies provide a great opportunity for students to keep in contact with fellow students. Many of our clubs and societies have social media pages and online forums, which enables students to keep talking despite not being able to meet face-to-face. Some of our societies are running online study and revision sessions to help students with their studying.

5.3 Community Drop-ins: In light of the current Covid-19 situation, elected student representatives have increased hosting Adobe Connect sessions to three times a week, so that students can take a break and chat to other students. We hope this will be beneficial for students who may be feeling isolated or just want a friendly chat more regularly. Having this available more often also enables the Students Association to engage with students on different time schedules.

5.4 Volunteering roles: The Students Association has a large team of student volunteers who support students to feel engaged, access an online community and share the student voice within the organisation. Our team of volunteers are supported by a dedicated volunteer team as well as other staff and students who lead and support volunteers with their roles, providing training and community spaces for volunteers to offer peer support and engage with each other.

Numbers of volunteers fluctuate seasonally across the year between 250-500, with roles including peer support, study support to students in secure environments, student representation, hosting meet ups (online and in person), raising money for our Students Educational Trust and providing

services and opportunities for students to engage with their Association throughout the year. At the last count in April 2020, there were 415 active student volunteers.

5.5 Online Student Meet-ups: As our famous face-to-face student meet-ups have been cancelled due to the Coronavirus, we have introduced online meet-ups held on Adobe Connect. A number of our existing face-to-face meet-up hosts have signed up to host online meet-ups for fellow students in their area, as well as new hosts signing up also.

5.6 Protected-characteristic groups: The OU Students Association administers a LGBTQ+ students group (PLEXUS), a Disabled Students Group (DSG) and a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students group where students who identify in one of these groups can come together in a safe space as a community to discuss issues, attend events, and lobby and campaign for changes.

5.7 Other activities to bring students together: This week we have also launched a writing competition, where we are encouraging students to submit a short story, poem, or essay of up to 1000 words relating to the student experience of the COVID-19 lockdown. The aim of this competition is to encourage students to share their experience, be it about the uncertainty of the current situation, how they're getting creative with their spare time, or the inspiration given by others like the NHS and other frontline workers.

5.8 Social media groups: The OU Students Association has a number of Facebook groups, administered and moderated by our elected student leaders, where thousands of our members share their student experiences and provide support and motivation for each other through difficult times. This is also a platform where our student leaders can engage with other students to obtain feedback and gather perspectives to use in conversations with the University and in broader policy debates.

6 Conclusion and final thoughts

6.1 The Open University Students Association has extensive experience of providing support for students in a distance-learning setting going back almost 50 years. It provides a range of support, signposting and entertainment that ensures the needs of students who need help or feel socially isolated are met. This offer has been expanded in response to the COVID-19 crisis to cater for the impact it has had on OU students.

6.2 The main impacts of COVID-19 on OU students have been to increase time pressures due to home-schooling, working full- or part-time and caring on top of studying; financial pressures due to lost income and lack of maintenance support (in England), and; mental ill health due to uncertainty, confinement, health anxieties, and worry about at-risk relatives among many other things.

6.3 The OU Students Association's hard-working President and elected student representatives have provided a constant source of reassurance and information for students during a time where there is so much uncertainty.

6.4 The Open University Students Association is happy to answer further questions or provide clarification on any points discussed in this response. Please get in touch using the contact details provided below.

May 2020