

Written evidence submitted by Russell Group

**The Russell Group Submission to the Education Select Committee
Inquiry on the Impacts of Covid-19 on Education**

May 2020

1. Summary

- 1.1 Russell Group universities recognise the scale of the national challenge in fighting COVID-19 and are already playing a key role in supporting ground-breaking vaccine research, facilitating vital large-scale testing capacity, educating frontline doctors and other healthcare workers, and opening up accommodation and facilities for the NHS. In addition to aiding in the national effort, our priority has been responding to student needs during this difficult time and maintaining the highest level of student experience possible.
- 1.2 Our universities understand the enormous uncertainty and strain this situation has placed on students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Russell Group universities have been working hard to identify emerging problems, develop solutions quickly and signpost support and advice to students and staff. Our efforts have included:
 - Increasing support for disadvantaged and vulnerable students through targeted interventions such as laptop loan schemes
 - Offering financial support for students facing hardship, with designated funds having already allocated hundreds of thousands of pounds in support
 - Spearheading online widening participation initiatives for prospective students
- 1.3 However, our universities will face significant financial challenges in the short, medium and long term. These include but are not limited to:
 - Losses in fee income from international students, which significantly cross-subsidises underfunded research council grants and our world-leading research more generally
 - Losses in research funding from charities and businesses as they too face financial difficulty

2. Context

- 2.1 The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining an outstanding teaching and learning experience, world-leading research, and unrivalled links with business and the public sector. Our universities generate £87bn per year for the economy and support over a quarter-million jobs across the UK, in addition to teaching a quarter of all undergraduates and four out of five doctors. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the impacts of COVID-19 on education.
- 2.2 Russell Group universities have played a leading role in the fight against COVID-19, from facilitating ground-breaking research on the virus, to producing new ventilator and testing technology, to providing community support and offering housing and facilities to healthcare workers. Researchers at Oxford, Imperial, Bristol and Southampton, for instance, are already carrying out vaccine trials. Many of our universities have devoted laboratories to COVID-19 research, including Manchester's virology and Leeds's data science labs, Edinburgh's Centre for Virus Research, and Liverpool's Outbreak Lab. Durham University have provided detailed regional modelling for the NHS and care home sector, and support for those experiencing breathlessness. The University of Nottingham has provided the NHS with specialised equipment that can process up to 20,000 COVID-19 tests every day, and the University of Southampton's newly developed personal respirators are already being deployed to hospital

staff, to keep them safe from viral infection. Thousands of our medical students are supporting NHS staff either by volunteering or extending their planned medical and nursing placements, and our universities have brought forward qualifications and trained new staff in their buildings for the NHS frontline. We have also continued to prioritise student welfare and learning by rapidly moving teaching provision and student support services online.

3. The effect on disadvantaged groups: hardship funds and widening participation initiatives

3.1 Our universities realise that this crisis has the potential to affect disproportionately those students who are already disadvantaged. We are mitigating this risk in several ways:

- (a) **Care leavers and estranged students:** Specific support for estranged students and care leavers during this period has included help securing accommodation, regular check ins, and some universities offering vouchers for food and IT equipment. The University of Bristol has, for example, set up the Bristol Voices befriending scheme, which has initially been targeted to support care leavers and estranged students. All care leavers and estranged students at the University of Southampton receive weekly phone check-ins as well as care packs, which include vouchers for food, equipment, and books. The University of Leeds is also offering £500 grants to estranged students and care leavers to help with living costs and other issues.
- (b) **Laptop Grant/Loan scheme:** Universities are supporting students to access technology with laptop loans or grants for a laptop, as well as grants for internet access or dongle loans. University College London, for instance, has increased the existing capacity of its laptop loan scheme by 1700 laptops for current students.
- (c) **Online learning funds:** Many universities have created funds specifically to help with the transition to online learning. The University of Southampton has launched a new Online Learning Grants fund offering up to £300 per student for learning-related equipment, which 900 students have received since April. The University of Sheffield has provided grants to over 200 students to obtain a device or broadband access for online learning.
- (d) **Specialised support:** Our universities are especially aware of challenges that may face particular groups of students. For example, Newcastle University has also proactively engaged with students with autism to provide specific guidance and support. The University of Manchester has reached out to its widening participation students with targeted support to make sure they are aware of the laptops and Wi-Fi dongles available to them.

3.2 The support we offer students has also included financial support across several areas:

- (a) **Hardship funds:** Universities have set up hardship funds to provide financial support for students during this period. For example, the University of Bristol has created a £175k Coronavirus Impact Fund, and the University of York has awarded £240k in hardship funding to date, with two further funding rounds to follow. The University of Oxford has also created an Emergency Assistance Fund to provide grants of between £200 and £1000 to students whose finances have been negatively affected by the Covid-19 outbreak.
- (b) **Accommodation:** All of our universities have released their students from the remainder of their 2019/20 accommodation agreements where this accommodation is not being used. Some of our universities have offered additional support for students by liaising with provider partners, private landlords and city councils as well. Newcastle University has also provided accommodation to students affected by family breakdown, and they

have increased their communication of support available to those experiencing domestic violence or abuse. Durham University have accommodated NHS key workers who are unable to return to their own homes.

3.3 Despite the challenges posed to our usual programmes for widening participation, we remain committed to supporting prospective students from all backgrounds, and have adapted our usual practices in the following ways:

- (a) **Digital Engagement:** Many of our universities are moving, or have already moved, their access programmes online. The University of York has for example accelerated plans to deliver digital widening participation programmes nation-wide, and will reach out to over 5000 pupils from state schools, underrepresented groups and those from less advantaged backgrounds. The Manchester Access Programme (a post-16 access initiative) is running online and has 651 students engaging, their biggest cohort ever. Some of our universities are also offering HE study skills online through digital hubs, webinars and online lectures.
- (b) **Partnerships:** Our universities are regularly in touch with key local, regional and national partners, including schools, to ensure that they stay responsive and alert to the evolving needs of students. King's College London, for instance, ran a rapid listening campaign to understand issues in the local area for disadvantaged populations. Our universities are working closely with social mobility charity partners to move summer schools and other programmes online as well. The University of Cambridge and other universities have worked with the Sutton Trust to develop the Sutton Trust Online. This new programme integrates FutureLearn, Causeway Education's personal statement tool and The Access Platform to ensure it is multi-functional and collaborative.¹
- (c) **Mentoring:** Russell Group universities are offering new mentoring programmes and adapting existing ones online to offer individual support for students. At Queen's University Belfast, student mentors have sent letters to the young people being mentored, and reading and activity packs have been delivered to their homes. The University of Liverpool has moved their attainment-based mentoring programme of over 40 looked-after children in the Merseyside area online, and have updated their safeguarding guidelines to reflect best practice for online outreach. As a result of the change, children benefit from more contact time with mentees as travel time is no longer factored in.
- (d) **Teacher conferences and parental engagement:** Some of our universities are offering virtual teacher conferences, and Advancing Access² is moving its annual conference online this year (with over 500 sign ups). Queen Mary University of London has held a virtual Teachers Coffee Morning to support teachers and their students.
- (e) **Adult learners:** The University of Glasgow is inviting all adult returner Access students on their Short Courses Access programmes and on Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) Access courses to participate in their online summer schools. One third of these students are key workers, and the university is putting additional provision in place to enable their participation. Cardiff University is continuing to run its community-focussed adult education groups online. The University of Southampton's Student Inclusion team

¹ [FutureLearn](#) is a digital education platform jointly owned by the Open University and SEEK Ltd. It offers Massive Open Online Courses from 143 UK-based and international university and other partners. [Causeway Education](#) and [The Access Project](#) are two UK-based charities, which support disadvantaged young people to access higher education.

² [Advancing Access](#) is a collaborative project between the 24 Russell Group universities, providing a variety of resources, events and conferences for teachers on access to Russell Group universities. The programme is specifically targeted at widening participation schools.

are running drop-in sessions for mature students and, in partnership with their Early Years Centre, providing resources for student parents to help with home education, which will allow them additional time to focus on their studies.

- (f) **Evaluation and impact:** Universities are amending the evaluation and impact monitoring of their widening participation programmes to reflect the current situation. Where provision has been moved online, universities are adjusting their frameworks and theories of change to reflect that. They are also able to engage with A/B testing when analysing some of the newer communication formats (e.g. text messages, phone calls, web engagement) so that they can be sure students are receiving the best possible support.³

4. Financial implications for higher education providers

- 4.1 Universities in the UK, including those at the Russell Group, are already feeling the financial impacts of COVID-19 across a variety of areas, and these impacts will grow in the coming months and years. Universities UK (UUK) put forward a package of proposals to the Government on behalf of the sector recently in order to seek to meet these challenges. Recognising the need to respond to current financial challenges, our universities have already made difficult decisions and taken steps, for example, to pause capital spending, reduce senior pay, and freeze recruitment. However, even with these measures, these challenges put at risk the UK's excellent research base which will be crucial to economic regeneration post-COVID-19.⁴

Reduction in international student fees

- 4.2 Overseas student numbers are already falling and there is likely to be a significant reduction in first years from abroad for the coming academic year. International student fees represent a vital income stream which helps cover the significant shortfall in research and development funding as well as supporting high-cost subject teaching for home students in critical STEM areas. Postgraduate taught courses may be particularly affected. By way of illustration, based on current modelling, a 75% loss in postgraduate taught students and a 30% loss in undergraduate and postgraduate research students would lead to a £1.81bn loss in 2020-21.⁵ This loss in income would be compounded by smaller cohorts progressing into the following years as well.
- 4.3 The effect on research is being compounded by disruption to ongoing projects which are not directly linked to COVID-19 efforts. Whilst funders for the most part have provided extensions to projects which have been paused, in most cases no additional money has been made available to cover researchers' salaries over the longer period it will take to complete projects – meaning universities may be expected to cover the shortfall. We are currently working through the Research Taskforce with the Government to address this and other issues around future financial sustainability.

Reduction in public, business and charity funding

- 4.4 Whilst universities are currently exploring options for using the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) in some circumstances, there is already a deficit on research activity across the sector of £4.24bn, given that the full costs of research are not covered by Research Council grants, nor other sources of public and charity funding.⁶ Research funding from

³ A/B testing involves comparing two versions of a webpage/app/communication method against each other to determine which one performs better.

⁴ Our universities produce 68% of the UK's world leading research, worth £34bn a year to the economy. See the 2017 London Economics report, [The economic impact of Russell Group universities](#).

⁵ Based on an analysis of 2018-19 HESA data.

charity and business is also forecasted to drop significantly, and some funders have already announced significant cuts.⁷ With reduced income from overseas students in the coming years as well, this shortfall will prove difficult to meet.

Other issues

- 4.5 It is also possible we may see a drop in home student numbers for the coming academic year as the economic crisis eats into individual and family budgets. If a significant number of home students decide to defer entry to university this autumn, the viability of provision in key areas of teaching could be threatened, especially when compounded by a loss of international students. In particular, this is the case for many postgraduate taught courses. Maintaining a broad spectrum of provision will be important in helping the UK achieve its ambitions for a robust HE and FE sector and to deliver the skills the economy will need to rebuild following the current crisis.
- 4.6 In addition, our universities are broadly covering the cost of releasing students from accommodation contracts for this term – as this is the right thing to do. There is also the potential for some tuition fee refund claims for 2019/20, even though universities have invested heavily in transforming teaching, learning and assessment to cope with the social distancing requirements the Government has rightly put in place. (The sector will also be publishing its own guidance on ensuring the health, safety and well-being of staff and students on campus in line with Government guidance.)
- 4.7 Our universities are committed to supporting their staff as far as possible during this very difficult time. Whilst the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme may provide some short-term assistance to universities over the next few months, we will need to work with the Government to find longer term solutions to secure the more than a quarter of a million jobs we support across the UK and ensure we can help lead the economic recovery.⁸

~~June May~~ 2020

⁶ See Annual TRAC 2017-18 [Sector summary and analysis by TRAC peer group](#).

⁷ For instance, Cancer Research UK (CRUK) has announced a 5-10% reduction on existing CRUK awards, along with a statement that they will not fund new research for at least the next 6 months and expect their income to drop by 20-25%. See CRUK's [COVID-19: Open letter to cancer researchers](#).

⁸ See the 2017 London Economics report, [The economic impact of Russell Group universities](#).