

Written evidence submitted by Coventry University Group

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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. This select committee submission is written evidence from the Coventry University Group. We wish to respond to the request for evidence on the provision of remote learning across the sector during the CV19 pandemic. Our longstanding focus on the development of innovative online learning and teaching methods and our commitment to ensuring the highest quality student experience are the central reasons for responding to this request.
- 1.2. We wish to draw the committee's attention to the nuanced responses of the sector to the CV19 crisis in terms of approaches to learning and teaching remotely. Investment in online learning, building social learning environments students benefit from and want to engage with and online infrastructure planning is a key way to prepare for the future of both the global education market and to ensure a resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergencies.
- 1.3. Coventry University Group believes that there is a fundamental difference between teaching remotely (to which many providers had to adapt during the first days of the CV19 crisis) and online learning which at Coventry, is the result of a £23 million investment over the last three years to ensure that our students receive the highest quality experience online.
- 1.4. The costs of online learning as a strategic investment are well known (and run into the millions of pounds) and the Coventry University Group is one of few providers in the UK that offers the complete student journey, for a range of courses, online, with high quality materials hosted on the industry leading UK platform FutureLearn¹. The Coventry University Group was the first university in the UK to partner with FutureLearn to provide fully online degree courses and second in the world. This partnership was launched in June 2017² as a result of wanting to innovate beyond the physical limitations of our campuses and to act as a catalyst to revolutionise teaching and learning across the Group. Our online degrees developed with FutureLearn leveraged the principles of the MOOC, but used the depth and detail of traditional degrees to stack short courses into modules, which then form the full degree, making it a user friendly experience for online learners.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/25/degrees-of-separation-can-universities-adapt-in-the-rush-to-online-learning>

² <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/primary-news/coventry-makes-massive-move-into-online-degree-market-with-futurelearn-50-degrees-to-roll-out-online-over-five-years/>

- 1.5. Coventry University Online shares the same infrastructure as on campus provision and works to the same timeframe as campus provision, although students are free to move through the course content at their own pace. Coventry University Online offers an element of every course free and open as a MOOC. Students are free to register and test out the entire learning platform, including course content ahead of signing up fully and paying tuition. The format is extremely popular and we are moving towards half a million learners over the last 3 years. Coventry University Group was ranked fourth in the world in the first ever global university rankings for MOOC courses in December 2019.
- 1.6. The development of Coventry University Online with FutureLearn has meant that we have been able to support our on-campus students who study equivalent programmes (including Law, MBAs and Global Healthcare Management) access modules fully online so that they were able to begin their May semester remotely, despite the pandemic, providing continuity for students. These contingencies were planned in from the beginning of March. For the September 2020 start the Coventry University Online team are developing a further suite of courses to be available as fully online provision to sit alongside the on-campus provision so that students can adopt both or either mode as well as a blended approach.
- 1.7. We have worked hard to provide all Coventry University Online learners with online personalised learning experience. Each student in Coventry University Online is given their own Student Experience Officer and Progression Coach, to help build their learning skills through 1-2-1 sessions and mentoring, alongside live seminars with associate lecturers to ensure that our online students feel as supported as our students who study on campus. Each module delivered has a media strategy, meaning that the content delivered to students is tailored directly to that subject. Podcasts, video content, quizzes and seminars allow students to engage with the subject as fully as possible.
- 1.8. As part of the digital strand of our corporate strategy, from September, approximately 40,000 students from courses across the Coventry University Group will be moving to the Social Learning Platform, Aula. The Aula platform is focused on lowering barriers to communication between academics and students seeking to deliver a substantial increase in student engagement. Crucially the platform is based on a mobile first philosophy, which allows ease of access for student users already familiar with apps and smartphone technology.
- 1.9. Given the current global public health crisis, the partnership between Aula and the Coventry University Group has been extended and this has resulted in the transformation of 100 modules to be fully online-ready for the start of May 2020 and a further 1200 modules in time for the September 2020 intake. The Aula platform will continue to support and enhance face-to-face

teaching when campus life returns to normal, ensuring that online learning is a fully embedded part of the new on-campus experience.

- 1.10. Recommendation: The Committee should recommend that the Government explain that there is educational equivalence between receiving a British higher education online and on-campus
- 1.11. Recommendation: The Committee should recommend that the Government move to ensure the security of the future pipeline of online international students, as an economic investment for the UK at a crucial time, as the country emerges from both the CV19 crisis and seeks new international partners post Brexit. The best way to achieve this may be to for the Committee to recommend to the Government that they should consider reviewing the International Education Strategy in the light of the CV19 pandemic to allow the strategic investing in the internationalisation of British online education, and help international student's access British Higher Education. The committee should look to the precedent set by HE institutions in the USA whose delivery of online education is recognised as a global leader in the market.
- 1.12. Coventry University Group would welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence to the select committee

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1. This select committee submission is written evidence from Coventry University Group. We are one of the country's leading 'modern universities', with above 40,000 students and a robust academic presence in the West Midlands, London, and Scarborough and across the world. Our focus on the development of innovative online learning and teaching methods and our commitment to ensuring the highest quality student experience are the central reasons for responding to this request. We would also like to reiterate our support an active engagement by the government in support for the HE sector.
- 2.2. All Coventry University Group locations have been affected by the CV19 crisis. The CU Group (the CU Group is the trading name of Coventry University College Ltd, our lower cost flexible HE provider, founded in 2012) delivers a unique and flexible learner experience, to some 5000 students, in many different areas and through a number of modes. These include CU Coventry, CU Scarborough, CU London (Dagenham and Greenwich), the National School for Education and Teaching, Coventry University Apprenticeships and Coventry University Pre-Sessional English. The CU Group will be expanded further this autumn, with the development of the University Group's branch campus in Poland, Coventry University Wrocław, which is due to become operational this September.
- 2.3. This year will be Coventry University London's (trading name of Coventry University London Campus Ltd) tenth anniversary, with our first cohort of students having begun their studies in October 2010. What started as a small operation in Central London with a couple of hundred students has evolved into a two-site campus, of 2200 students, dedicated to those wishing to study flexibly. It is a

community celebrating equality, diversity and inclusion, with a student body and a staffing base that represent more than 100 nationalities. Coventry University London's moved to remote teaching in the second semester in response to the pandemic, and moved to online learning in the third semester (May 2020). Coventry University London's response has also been community focused and are seeking to help adults who wish to move back into HE, with the first fully online Connect Course, delivered through Microsoft Teams, for free.³

2.4. Coventry University Group has deployed contingency planning to ensure that the disruption to students (both current and future) is kept to a minimum. Making effective use of our existing online learning platform has been crucial in providing comprehensive support to groups of students who have been especially disadvantaged by the lockdown. A good example of this forward planning is that Coventry University Group, through CU Group and Coventry University Online, has launched an online Pre-Sessional Education course (on the FutureLearn platform) in order to help international students build the English language and academic skills needed for successful university study in the UK. Initially piloted in autumn 2018, Coventry University's PSE Online Award was the first ever fully online-pre sessional course. The programme began on 18 May 2020 for those starting a degree in September 2020, while the following run will commence on 7 September 2020 for those starting a degree in January 2021.⁴

3. ONLINE LEARNING BEST PRACTICE

3.1. We wish to draw the committee's attention to the nuanced responses of the sector to the CV19 crisis in terms of approaches to learning and teaching remotely Coventry University Group created a 2.5 year head start which has left us uniquely placed to support our students through the pandemic. Building courses online in real time has become a necessity for many providers in response to the pandemic. It is, however, not possible to recreate the quality of a fully online learning experience so quickly, each module in the degree programmes offered by Coventry University Online (equivalent to 10 weeks study time) takes 16 weeks of preparation by technical and academic staff. Each semester of study, on each programme, is made up of four modules.

3.2. The costs of online learning as a strategic investment are well known (and run into the millions of pounds) and Coventry is one of only a handful of providers in the UK that offers the complete student journey online⁵.

³ <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/cul/cu-london-news/cu-london-offers-free-online-connect-course-to-help-adults-get-into-higher-education/>

⁴ <https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/46443-coventry-university-launches-pre-sessional-course-on-futurelearn-for-international-students-affected-by-covid-19>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/25/degrees-of-separation-can-universities-adapt-in-the-rush-to-online-learning>

- 3.3. Coventry University Online has become incredibly popular, and now employs 94 staff to support Coventry University Group students who are wholly based online. Setting up this infrastructure of pastoral and technical support has been key to the success of Coventry University Online. Coventry University Online offers 20 degree programmes online, including Masters programmes and two Undergraduate programmes. Coventry University Group was ranked fourth in the world in the first ever global university rankings for MOOC courses in December 2019.⁶
- 3.4. The development of the Coventry University Online platform with FutureLearn has meant that we have been able to support our on-campus students who study equivalent programmes (including MBAs and Global Healthcare Management) access to modules online through this platform so that they can begin their May semester as usual, providing continuity for students. These contingencies were planned in from the beginning of March. For the September start the Coventry University Online team have cross matched courses to ensure that those courses with the highest recruitment (and would require the largest lecture theatres) can be delivered online to ensure the safety of the students and staff on campus and to suit students who wish to continue to engage online.
- 3.5. As part of the digital strand of our corporate strategy, from September, approximately 40,000 students from courses across the Coventry University Group will be moving to the Learning Experience Platform, Aula. The Aula platform is focused on lowering barriers to communication between academics and students seeking to deliver a substantial increase in student engagement. Crucially the platform is based on mobile phones, which allows ease of access for student users.
- 3.6. Given the current global public health crisis, the partnership between Aula and the Coventry University Group has been expedited for the benefit of students and has achieved the transformation of 1300 modules being online for the start of May and September 2020. The Aula platform will continue to support and enhance face-to-face teaching when campus life returns to a new normal⁷.
- 3.7. Coventry University Online has partnered with the West Midlands Combined Authority throughout the CV19 pandemic to deliver open courses designed to improve mental health of those working at home. The Thrive at Home programme⁸ is part of the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot, funded by the Government and the Midlands Engine, which is running for the next three years.
- 3.8. It is up to us as a sector to ensure that when these students and staff return to their studies and research, that effective resilience planning is underway to prevent academic disruption in the case of

⁶ <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/news/coventry-university-ranks-fourth-in-first-ever-mooc-world-university-rankings/>

⁷ <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/news/2020/coventry-university-and-edtech-company-aula-launch-a-pioneering-model-for-digital-student-learning/>

⁸ <https://mhpp.me/thrive-at-home/>

another national emergency, and online teaching and investment in digital infrastructure should be at the forefront of this.⁹

July 2020

⁹ <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/news/2020/coventry-university-answers-call-to-help-the-nhs/>