

Written evidence submitted by the University of Salford

University of Salford written response to the Education Select Committee inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

About us

The University of Salford welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into COVID-19.

The University of Salford is a higher education institution in Greater Manchester. With over 20,000 students we are fastest growing university in the north west. Established 50 years ago, but with our roots in the 19th century Royal Technical Institute of Salford, we take an industry-led approach to teaching and research. Our goal is to provide our students with real world experiences that set them up for life and to work with partners to tackle real world social and economic challenges through research and enterprise.

Summary of response

This response focusses on the following areas of the inquiry:

- The impact of campus closures on students, the support provided and the transition to online provision;
- The effect of cancelling formal exams and pupils' progression to higher education;
- The effect of campus closures on prospective students
- The impact of COVID-19 on degree apprenticeships and workplace-based education; and
- The financial implications of the crisis.

Response

Campus closures and impact on students

The University of Salford suspended face-to-face teaching for all students with the exception of final year undergraduate and postgraduate students from Monday 16 March. This decision was taken the day after the government announced it was moving into the delay phase of attempting to limit the spread of COVID-19.

There were no cases on campus, but this was felt to be the most appropriate course of action in order to support the government's efforts to limit the spread of the virus and to protect our staff and students. Teaching was suspended for two weeks ahead of the Easter Break in order to allow time for staff to transition to online provision for the final term from 19 April.

Communications were issued to students as soon as the decision was taken. University-wide information around campus closure and the suspension of teaching was disseminated via direct emails to students and supporting communications across social media and 'The Hub', which is the internal student news and information website that all students have access to. There were also specific communications across the different academic schools in order to provide more detailed information on teaching and assessment direct to students across different programmes and cohorts.

An FAQ document was also created and hosted on The Hub where it was accessible to all students. This was a live document that was updated regularly and sought to be as responsive to students' needs as possible, with enquiries through student support services being fed into a student communications command group to then enable the document to be updated with appropriate responses and pre-empt further enquiries.

Where possible we have been supporting students to access technology to enable them to engage with teaching and learning opportunities digitally. This has included increasing the number of laptops available for loan through the University library and sourcing kit ourselves. From September, we are looking at further measures to loan kit, making bursaries more flexible to allow students to buy kit. This includes the Salford Ed Tech Fund, which will see the University make a £1 million investment in buying additional kit to support students and enable them to access additional financial support. We are also working with our IT supplier to create an online shop to allow students to allow students to purchase approved kit at an advantageous price.

Alongside securing high quality online provision of teaching and alternative arrangements for assessments, the wellbeing and welfare has been the University's main priority. Our student body is diverse, with a significant proportion of our students from widening participation backgrounds, including those from low income households. We are aware of the disadvantages that our students can face and, therefore, a number of decisions were taken to ensure the negative impact of coronavirus on the wellbeing of our students is minimised as much as possible.

Financial hardship has been one of our main focusses. We are aware that many of our students would supplement their student maintenance loans with part time work. This would often be in the retail, hospitality and / or leisure sectors, which have been particularly hard hit by COVID-19. Our careers team has been working with students to place them in roles that are recruiting, for instance temporary roles in food retail, but the impact is still substantial.

One of the biggest financial burdens for students is the cost of living, in particular accommodation. The University does not own its own accommodation, but we do have a preferred partner that we work with to provide on campus student accommodation. We took the decision to cover the costs of rent for the final term for those students who returned home from campus and who were living in partner accommodation. This was not an insignificant cost – over £2 million – but we felt that this was the right decision to support our students.

A month into the lockdown there were c.1,000 students still living on or near campus. This had reduced significantly by May following the decision by the University to cover the costs of rent for those living in on-campus accommodation, which enabled many students to return home. Not all students returned home, however, and the reasons for this are varied, including international travel restrictions, financial pressures, health issues and family / relationship matters. As of the start of June, there were around 300 students still living in on-campus accommodation.

Prior to the roll out of the government testing regime, the University proactively engaged with students living on campus thought to have symptoms or having tested positive for COVID-19. Around 100 students were then self-isolating. We supported those living on campus in a number of ways, from working with our onsite caterers to provide food for those students, working with our student support team to help students pick up medication where necessary and ensuring our wellbeing team reached out proactively to support students with mental health issues if appropriate.

While have no control over those private providers with whom we do not have a partnership, we have written jointly with our Students' Union and the other universities and students' unions of those institutions to private landlords across Greater Manchester urging them to offer rent waivers for those students not in accommodation for the final term.

We have also substantially increased our hardship funds – by £750,000 taking the total available to c.£1 million – so that those students facing financial difficulties are able to access the support they

need. The demand for this support has increased substantially – in particular between April and May in part because of the continued economic impact of lockdown and in part because we communicated more with students about the funds available.

Financial hardship is a major concern, but so too is wellbeing. The University of Salford and the University of Salford Students' Union continue to operate the on-campus support services remotely. This includes careers advice, financial support, mental health and wellbeing services. Our wellbeing and counselling, and disability and learner support teams have seen huge increases in demand for their services.

The volume of enquiries has increased as has the complexity of complaints, in particular in relation to student who declare a disability. The University of Salford has an above average proportion of students declaring a disability; over 20%. Students are particularly concerned about returning to study and what reasonable adjustments will be made to enable them to do so safely. Of course, the teams responsible are working as hard as they can to provide those reassurances to students, but it has exponentially increased demand on our services.

Exam cancellation and progression to higher education

The government announced in March that A-level and BTEC, along with other level 3 qualifications, examinations would be cancelled this year, with grades being awarded on the basis of teacher assessments. Universities had already made offers to applicants by this point and with alternative arrangements for the awarding of level 3 qualifications in place, there are no technical barriers to progression from school / college to higher education. However, there are a number of issues that must be considered.

First, prior to the confirmation of how grades would be awarded there was understandable uncertainty and concern amongst applicants as to how university entry requirements would be judged if exam grades were not to be awarded. In response to this a number of higher education institutions took the decision to convert conditional offers into unconditional offers.

No doubt the decision was taken by these institutions in order to provide reassurance to applicants at a very uncertain time and it is clear from the response of prospective students and parents that they were grateful for the clarity at a time of high stress and anxiety. However, while there is merit in providing reassurance through unconditional offers at this unprecedented time, the actions of these universities and the subsequent moratorium on unconditional offers created an unlevel playing field across the sector.

Within our own comparator group of six similar regional institutions, over 9,000 offers were changed from conditional to unconditional in the week after the cancellation of exams alone. The market disadvantage that this has created for some institutions could have severe consequences for financial sustainability in the longer term should this impact on recruitment for 2020/21.

Moreover, that decision by those providers to issue unconditional offers has actually had the perverse consequence of taking the decision out of students' hands at a time when we should be reassuring applicants and providing with them the security they need to make informed choices at this challenging time. No doubt some applicants will have felt pressured into making choices that are not in their long-term interests. While the government has now put in place admissions stabilisation measures, including a student numbers cap and penalties for recruitment practices that undermine student interests, that does not matter for those students who took decisions on offers during the initial uncertainty after the cancellation of exams.

While, while teacher assessments mean that this year's school and college leaver cohort will have grades that will allow university admissions teams to make judgements on their applications, research

suggests that disadvantaged students are more likely to have their grades under-predicted than wealthier peers.¹ This already impacts on these students' choices regarding applications, but may now also be impacted by teachers' assessments of their grades. We know from our own applicants that this uncertainty around grades is causing a significant degree of stress, this is not just about getting the grades to get into university, but also about the removal of the chance to get closure on their school / college days and prove to themselves that they are 'good enough' for university study.

We are also aware of issues with prospective students who are entering university through non-traditional routes. A small proportion of applicants will have been planning on taking examinations privately and it is still unclear as to how these grades will be awarded. This is causing considerable uncertainty for those individuals, many of whom will be mature students and therefore further limiting progression to this group of students.

Campus closures and impact on prospective students

Deferrals and the extent to which students' decide not to take up places in higher education this year should also be considered in the context of progression to higher education. A recent survey from YouthSight / UCAS showed that more applicants are considering deferring for a year or changing their preferred institution as a result of coronavirus.

Almost one in five applicants are considering deferring a year and 45% of applicants are thinking about changing their decisions on going to university or which university they would like to attend.² While it is the prerogative of applicants to make the decisions that are best for them, it is clear that COVID-19 and specifically the uncertainty around campus re-openings is having an impact on decision making around progression to higher education.

Universities have rightly been asked to provide as much accurate information as possible to applicants about what they can expect from their university experience. In the absence of government guidelines or sector-wide agreements on provision for September, this means applicants to different institutions are being offered a range of options from full on campus provision to online provision from the first term.

At Salford, our approach has been to be as proactive and as honest as possible about what we can and cannot confirm at various stages in our communications with applicants and prospective students, which has been well received thus far.

We have seen a c.50% increase in the number of applicants enquiring about deferrals. This is due to uncertainty around what to expect from the coming academic year. In a recent survey carried out with offer holders we found that they were most interested in hearing about how teaching was going to be delivered, with a focus on specifics relating to their course for instance in respect of practical elements. Accommodation was the next biggest issue.

Anecdotal evidence from our applicant visit days – which have been held virtually – also tells us that prospective students and parents were concerned about the impact of ongoing social distancing measures on the social side of university life; the teaching and learning side is important, but so too is the feeling of missing out on the key rites of passage into adulthood associated with going to university.

It is also worth noting that in our own surveys of offer holders, there are big differences in the attitudes of BAME applicants and white applicants. BAME applicants are likely to be less comfortable with the

¹ Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged students and the university admissions process, The Sutton Trust, December 2017, <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rules-of-the-Game.pdf>

² Scenarios for starting university in September, UCAS x YouthSight, 12 May, <https://www.youthsight.com/blog/scenarios-for-starting-university>

prospect of being on campus for face-to-face teaching and other on-campus activities. We have also seen more concern around from those students who will be living off campus – a higher proportion of which are BAME – in respect of travelling to campus for teaching when they would have to take public transport.

Around 1 in 10 students say they would not feel comfortable attending lectures and around 1 in 5 who wouldn't feel comfortable visiting or studying in the library. There is an uplift in these figures if respondent's preferred safety measures are put in place, but there still remains a minority of potential students who are very concerned about returning to campus. We know that there is a link between engagement in the student experience – for instance, making use of the library and other on-campus resources – and retention, so as well as concerns around deferrals, we must also be conscious of the impact of an altered university experience on drop out rates.

Degree apprenticeships

At the University of Salford, we offer a wide range of higher and degree apprenticeship programmes. With their work-based focus, clearly there has been an impact on the ability of education providers and employers to continue with apprenticeships as normal as a result of COVID-19. The economic impact of the pandemic means companies are furloughing staff or making employees redundant and the lockdown has affected the off the job learning for apprentices in the same way as other higher education students, with a huge transition to online delivery.

Our main concern has been around the potential for apprentices to have to be placed on breaks in learning as a result of their employment status. A recent research briefing from The Sutton Trust found that up to three-fifths of apprentices have lost out on work or learning as a result of coronavirus and one in 13 have been made redundant.³

We have been able to keep most of our learners on programme despite the current situation due to them being able to continue with the off the job learning while furloughed and the transition to online provision. Around 4% of our apprentices will be going on a break in learning and 1% have been made redundant (prior to COVID-19) and have a 12-week grace period to find an employer who will support them to complete their programme.

Whilst these percentages are low, this is still over 30 apprentices out of over 600 who have had their training impacted by coronavirus. We have a number of examples of apprentices being made redundant but struggling to find another employer to take them on as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19 on so many businesses. In normal times, the 12 week window is sufficient time to find further employment in most cases, but in these challenging economic times – and conscious that we will be feeling the shocks of this crisis for many months to come – 12 weeks is not enough time to ensure that apprentices are able to find another employer that is willing to take them on. It is also worth noting that a number of those who are taking breaks in learning are apprentices on health care or medical programmes who are being pulled back into critical roles in the NHS. While they are undertaking vital key work on the frontline, they will have to re-join their programmes at a suitable point later in the year or potentially next year.

We are also concerned that our intake in September will be much smaller than previously anticipated as businesses hold off on apprenticeship recruitment due to the economic impact of COVID-19. At a time when apprenticeship starts are already not at the level that government had hoped and with a post-COVID-19 economic recovery dependent on a kick starting of businesses, a further fall in starts would be counter to the ambition for the UK skills landscape. The government has announced an incentive scheme for businesses that take on apprentices, but feedback from our employers is that

³ COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #3: Apprenticeships, The Sutton Trust, May 2020, <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Covid-19-Impacts-Apprenticeships.pdf>

this is not enough. The burden of the salary is still by and large the main blocker for employers looking to take on new apprentices.

Given the exceptional circumstances that have been thrown up by COVID-19, we believe there are a few ways in which the government could support apprentices at this time:

- Extend the 12-week grace period following redundancy (we would suggest doubling to 24 week) or fund apprentices to competition if made redundant if they are more than 50% of the way through their programme;
- Provide clarity around future non-levy funding as SMEs have expressed nervousness about reservations running out;
- Offer further incentives to take on apprentices in September despite difficult economic conditions including consideration of flexing the levy to support up to 50% of salary costs; and
- Pause all current consultations on funding and policy (senior leader standard and funding bands) until the end of the pandemic.

Workplace-based education – health care

The University of Salford is proud to be one of the largest trainers of NHS staff and allied health professionals in the country. This means that our staff and students have been on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis in practice and on placement, which has thrown up a number of issues.

A significant number of students have been on placement in the NHS or been deployed into the NHS as part of the workforce. This is an unprecedented risk for both those students and the University, which is ultimately responsible for their welfare and wellbeing. Given the pressure on NHS trusts during this crisis, students on placement have been considered non-supernumerary (i.e. they have been working as a normal member of staff and not receiving normal levels of supervision and assessment), but – initially - without the same level of protection as other members of staff (e.g. death in service cover).

New guidance from Health Education England (HEE) issued on 7 May clarified that all placements (excluding those for first year students) will, regardless of whether they meet normal regulatory criteria for supervision or not, be remunerated under a paid contract of employment (funded by the NHS). While this guidance has mitigated the initial risk, the stress and concern around employment status and protection could have been avoided.

And most recently we have seen concerns raised around the termination of the contracts of student nurses deployed into the workforce. HEE has now confirmed that paid placement contracts will be honoured, but the uncertainty that was caused has added further stress onto those students that have been at the frontline of the coronavirus crisis.

Our students have been concerned about the impact of entering the workforce – or not – on their current studies, future progression and, most importantly, their health and wellbeing. Given the extent to which these students have been called upon to support the national effort during the coronavirus crisis, it is worth recognising that the deployment of these students into the workforce has not been without its challenges.

In addition, the deployment of student nurses and allied health professionals being deployed into the workforce during the crisis causes a medium-term issue in respect of workforce planning for the NHS. Deployment means that students are unable to continue their studies, potentially meaning they will not complete their programmes in this academic year. They will then be required to continue their studies, which will disrupt the normal pipeline into the workforce. We do not yet know the impact of COVID-19 on recruitment, particularly to health-related programmes, which may further compound the issues.

Financial implications

There is real concern about the impact of coronavirus on the financial sustainability of the higher education sector. The evidence in support of this concern has been provided elsewhere, notably a recent study by London Economics on behalf of the University and College Union⁴ and via Universities UK's own briefings⁵, so this submission does not seek to repeat what the Committee is no doubt already aware of.

In the case of our own institution, the University of Salford has built up a strong financial position over recent years thanks to prudent financial management, growing students numbers based on a strong offer to applicants looking for an industry-focussed higher education experience and a growth in commercial income.

We have, of course, seen an immediate loss of revenue as a result of coronavirus, including from our accommodation, campus and conference activity, and enterprise and commercial consultancy. We have also had to make significant expenditure, notably covering accommodation costs where possible for those not returning to campus as a result of the pandemic and increasing the hardship funds available to students. As noted above these two measures alone cost well over £2 million, but they were the right thing to do to support our students.

We are able to take advantage of the government's business support scheme - the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. There are a number of roles at the University, all of which are extremely valuable, but which are difficult or impossible to carry out from home as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, activity on campus has been scaled back significantly as a result of the social distancing and lockdown measures, which has also affected a variety of roles at the institution. We have therefore taken the decision to furlough a not insignificant proportion of our workforce in order to protect jobs further down the line. It is worth noting that we have continued to pay all furloughed employees their full salary as normal, with tax and national insurance contributions, pension contributions and other contractual arrangements continuing as normal also.

The government has also confirmed a range of measures designed to help support the higher education sector during the crisis. This includes measures announced in May to stabilise admissions, support cashflow in the first half of the academic year 2020/21 and bring forward quality-related research funding. And then a further announcement in June around the loans that will be made available to cover any loss in income from international students that would have funded research and research-related jobs. While these measures are welcome, they do not go far enough to provide reassurance to the sector as a whole and to individual institutions.

The issue for higher education is that the real financial impact of COVID-19 will not be known until September 2020 and beyond; when we know how many students – both domestic and international – will be taking up places. As noted above, a significant proportion of applicants to higher education are thinking about deferring. The financial impact of a decrease in international students will be devastating for the sector as a whole, but even for those universities that do not rely heavily on international students – such as Salford – the concern lies in the market impact of universities with large international student revenue looking to make up for lost income by recruiting more home students.

In 2018/19, over three quarters of our income was from tuition fees and education grants. If students did defer at the rate suggested in the YouthSight / UCAS survey, the University of Salford would see

⁴ Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university finances, London Economics, April 2020, <http://londoneconomics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LE-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-university-finances-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ Achieving stability in the higher education sector following COVID-19, Universities UK, April 2020, https://universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Documents/uuk_achieving-stability-higher-education-april-2020.pdf

its income drop substantially. Combine this with ongoing lost revenue from commercial activities which will be impacted by social distancing measures which are expected to be in place until the end of the year and the impact will be substantial. The combined impact of COVID-19 and continuing financial strain on the sector means that at present, we assess that for 2020/21 we need to find efficiencies of c.£20 million, which is around 10% of our income.

This is not just about institutions, but about the communities those institutions serve. Loss of income for universities will impact on institutions' ability to invest in its students, whether through new facilities, widening participation activity or providing wrap around support and pastoral care. Universities are anchor institutions that provide significant social and economic benefit to their local communities. The University of Salford supports one in every 32 jobs in the city of Salford and our GVA into the city is £188 million. But it is more than just the financial benefit in terms of jobs and procurement; universities play a vital role in the cultural life of their towns and cities. The University of Salford is a key partner in a number of initiatives across our city, including a cultural partnership and a digital skills partnership, and we are planning to develop a civic university agreement with Salford City Council and other partners to further enhance our contribution to our city.

Clearly, there remains a high degree of uncertainty around the full financial impact of COVID-19 on higher education in the medium to long term and this uncertainty makes planning for the future intensely difficult. However, it is clear that any contraction in the higher education sector as a result of this crisis will impact students, future students, staff and our local communities. Further government reassurance around supporting universities financially through the crisis and beyond would be helpful at this time.

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