

Written evidence submitted by Nottingham Trent University

Education Select Committee Inquiry: The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services

Submission by Nottingham Trent University

Vice-Chancellor Professor Edward Peck

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Introduction

1. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Nottingham Trent University has ensured that the mental and physical wellbeing of our students, staff and wider community is at the heart of our decision making. As we have adapted our processes and approach, we have acted in the best interests of our students and have aimed to avoid undue stress and anxiety as much as feasibly possible. At each decision point, we encourage clear, transparent and simple communications to reduce confusion, smooth the transition into higher education (HE) and ease stress for all HE students and applicants.
2. Our submission acknowledges the extensive effect Covid-19 has had on the HE sector, and in particular students – from those researching and applying to universities to graduates who are seeking employment – and we recognise the swift action that has been taken by government and the sector to mitigate these effects. We have highlighted areas for improvement and examples of best practice which can be considered for contingency planning in the event of future national emergencies.

About Nottingham Trent University (NTU)

3. NTU is one of the UK's largest and most popular universities. With a community of nearly 33,000 students and more than 4,000 staff located across our four campuses, NTU is a modern, forward-thinking, award-winning organisation with a vision and strategy to create the university of the future. NTU contributes £960m to the UK economy every year and a total of 81% of our graduates go on to graduate entry employment or graduate entry education or training within six months of leaving.
- 3.1 Our student satisfaction scores reflect our success in this: we achieved an 87% overall satisfaction score in the 2020 National Student Survey and 92% of our recent graduates would recommend studying at NTU.
- 3.2 NTU is passionate about creating opportunities for all. We know that we are all held back by stagnant social mobility. We have gained a national reputation for the innovation and quality of our evidence-based programmes that raise attainment, helping students access and succeed at university and beyond. Our dedication was recognised in 2019, when NTU won University of the Year at the UK Social Mobility Awards. Our outreach team, CenSCE, delivers more than 700 activities each year, places 300 NTU undergraduates in local schools, works with over 30,000 pupils and matches more than 1,000 volunteers to a range of community projects.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

4. NTU understands the necessity for the cancellation of formal exams this year and the changes that have been made to awarding qualifications using multiple sources of evidence and input. We believe in creating a process that enables students to be awarded a valid qualification in the best interest of students and university applicants. However, it may be useful to explore the approaches taken on assessments, comparing the cancellation of formal assessments at schools with the move to online assessment within universities, and in the case of NTU for all scheduled assessments. We believe there may be helpful learnings here for the DfE and Examination Boards to explore when undertaking their contingency planning for future similar circumstances.
- 4.1 The deadline for students to reply to their UCAS undergraduate offers changed from 5th May to 19th May initially and subsequently again to 18th June. Providing students with an extended deadline to make their decisions was in their best interests, and an extended timeline was one we supported. It reflects a recent trend of students applying and deciding later in the cycle. It is worth noting that whilst the decisions to shift the deadline were beneficial for applicants, it did impact other parts of the university admissions process, for example on existing accommodation deadlines. At NTU we have acted in the best interests of our students and have moved deadlines accordingly to prevent undue stress on students.
- 4.2 The A Level results day announcement means that confirmation and clearing processes can continue 'as normal' rather than the shifting of deadlines impacting this. The announcement has been a reassuring one for students as we are still able to deliver the right information in a timely manner to all our applicants.
- 4.3 We believe that the Government has been right to focus on students' progression to the next stage of education or employment in relation to support measures that have been announced. This is one of the most common requests NTU receives from our local schools; support with such transitions is the only intervention that has been requested from our outreach team in CenSCE by local schools in and around Nottingham since the lockdown period began.

Changes to the admissions process

- 4.4 At NTU we have updated our practices in line with Universities UK's fair admissions process, alongside the updated Office for Students (OfS) guidance on admissions. We broadly agree with the decisions that have been made.
- 4.5 However, we believe communication on changes to the admissions process could have been clearer in places, including the original moratorium that paused all unconditional offers. We believe that this moratorium meant that, for students with an unconditional offer – those that had met the threshold, for example mature students who already had their grades, or those who had attended an interview – NTU was not able to make an offer as the applicants would have been expecting. We believe that the OfS could have engaged with universities to better understand what changes need to be made to the admissions process to protect students and in order to avoid undue stress and anxiety amongst the student population.

This clearer engagement process would have helped us, and other institutions, manage expectations better during this difficult and unprecedented period for applicants.

Communications from the Government to students via UCAS

4.6 The Department for Education sent out communications to both applicants and current students through UCAS channels. We are of the opinion that it would have been beneficial for universities to have had sight of these before they were sent out. A joined-up approach would have not only been more impactful but would have allowed universities to align their messaging with the Government's both to reduce confusion and stress for applicants and existing students.

4.7 This is especially true for those students with whom NTU is already in regular communication through emails and updates to our website. We have frequently updated our students with the latest university and public health guidance. We updated our FAQs to ensure that our students had all the information they needed to stay safe and continue their studies. We also utilised our extensive student support services, where necessary, to provide tailored support to students, including for those students who were unable to return to their home address.

Support for students and families during closures

Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

5. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, NTU has put the mental and physical wellbeing of our students at the heart of our decision making. We have developed a comprehensive suite of support options for students, applicants and apprentices during the Covid-19 pandemic that puts their interests first.

5.1 Our Student Support Services web pages provides a range of online resources to help students with their mental health and wellbeing. These include fact sheets to support students' understanding of stress, anxiety and depression, and our new online tool SilverCloud, which provides interactive and motivational content. For students who require more support, they are able to complete our wellbeing online form so we are better able to support them.

5.2 We are fully supportive of calls for further mental and emotional support to students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as we progress into the next phase of the pandemic. The office of the Children's Commissioner has been pressing the Government to focus on helping children who will be struggling with anxiety or depression, calling for appropriate arrangements for children during and beyond the pandemic. This includes a focus on those children who are already struggling with mental health issues, and those who will be feeling very anxious and worried about the current situation. A Young Minds survey of children with a history of mental health problems showed that 83% said the pandemic has made their mental health a bit or much worse.¹

The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

- 5.3 We welcomed the Education and Skills Funding Agency's policy change allowing for apprentices on furlough to continue in learning. As of July 2020, a total of 5% of all our learners studying for an apprenticeship are currently on furlough; the highest numbers include those in Chartered Surveyor, Chartered Manager and food apprenticeships. The food sector is particularly interesting as this is one area where there are examples of markets disappearing (such as pre-packed sandwiches and sushi) and other markets, which are booming. Overall, only 1.5% of our apprentices are on a break in learning and less than 1% have been made redundant or withdrawn from the course.
- 5.4 Recruitment is currently very slow with businesses unable to commit to employing apprentices or giving up the time for existing employees. We believe the recently announced new additional cash incentives for new hires will help stimulate apprentice recruitment; however, we believe this should go further and that incentives should be made available for all new apprentice starts. This will aid the reskilling and upskilling of employees which is needed in the post-Covid economy. Additionally, further support could include the relaxation of the 20% Off The Job training (OTJ) requirement.

The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

6. NTU welcomes the range of sector stabilisation measures introduced by the Government in May and more recently in July. We appreciate the recognition of universities' role in education and as civic institutions in communities across the country.
- 6.1 Of course, NTU has never entirely closed. However, face to face teaching ceased in March and many students went home. NTU cancelled the rents of those students in NTU accommodation at a cost in excess of £8m to the University. Commercial income from catering and conferences was foregone and a smaller number of students than predicted, withdrew from their studies. Overall, NTU lost £15m in income in the academic year 2019/20. This was mitigated by a number of actions, including furloughing 500 members of staff.
- 6.2 Those students not in NTU accommodation – the large majority – had very mixed experiences in terms of refunds. The Government may want to consider clearer advice to students and accommodation providers in the event of another national lockdown.
- 6.3 Of course, the major financial implications for the entire HE sector may come in the autumn depending on how many students enrol.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

7. There is a risk that the more disadvantaged students may defer their place at university in order to seek employment to support their family during the economically uncertain time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Should their employment progress well, or be made permanent, these university applicants may not return to their education ambitions at all. This could mean that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds miss out on their university experience altogether; worryingly, this will hinder all of our efforts to improve social mobility. To date, there is no sign of mass deferrals.

- 7.1 We are concerned that Year 12 students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are being overlooked, given the understandable current focus on students who are taking public exams this year. In a recent blog for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), NTU's Director of Student and Community Engagement David Woolley explained that Year 12 students could possibly suffer the most from the impact of Covid-19, with disruptions to Year 12, Year 13 and then university life.
- 7.2 However, we believe the current situation could provide us with an opportunity to reflect on, and continue, the strides we are making to widen participation and improve social mobility. Efforts to widen participation must be evidence based, and in order to drive development of the evidence base, NTU helped to establish the independent Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO), which is funded by the OfS. TASO, which is co-led by NTU, will use evidence and evaluation to understand and show how HE contributes to social justice and mobility. As a first step, in his HEPI blog, Mr Woolley said that there is good evidence of the effectiveness of tailored one-to-one support in the form of tutoring and mentoring. NTU backs existing calls for a National Tutoring Service.² We believe that every Year 12 and Year 13 student from a disadvantaged background should be guaranteed access to a tutor and mentor and there is no more pressing time to implement this than now.
- 7.3 There has been some discussion in the media about inflated predicted grades for students from middle class backgrounds and deflated predicted grades for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We believe these concerns may have attracted undue attention. NTU supports the standardisation measures that have been introduced through Ofqual. We do not believe there is any existing evidence to say that the measures introduced are not going to work to tackle any possibility of inflated predicted grades for students from middle class backgrounds, or indeed, deflated predicted grades for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We welcome the fact that Ofqual will apply a standardisation measure to results received across the cohort, and comparable outcomes mean that disadvantage should not be increased as a result of Covid-19 and predicted grades methodology.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?

8. NTU appreciates that we are in unprecedented times and we support the measures that the Government has taken to support the HE sector and the student population. There are areas of learning that can, however, be taken away for future contingency planning. One area of learning would be to better align Government, UCAS and HE sector communications, and work more closely together, in conveying changes to the wider sector, the student population and parents. Such further alignment would help universities support the ambitions of the Department for Education and provide the best possible support and experiences for both applicants and students.
- 8.1 As mentioned above, it may be useful to compare the approaches taken on assessments, comparing the cancellation of formal assessments at schools with the move to online assessment within universities, when DfE and Exam boards are undertaking their contingency planning for future similar circumstances.
- 8.2 There are also examples of best practice that have emerged from this crisis period. In June, Universities Minister Michelle Donelan launched NEON's new uni4me online hub, a new

sector-led initiative of which NTU is a founding member.³ Uni4me is a portal where students, parents and teachers can access 250 free activities to help them progress to HE, offering free virtual courses led by university academics, online tuition, live events and information sessions. This is an example of the sector coming together in an emergency to find new ways of delivering education and widening participation. It is vital that these types of work are progressed to increase social mobility

- 8.3 In line with the recommendations of the Augar Review, NTU believes that there is an opportunity in future to adapt the funding for part-time undergraduate degrees and distance and online learning. Currently, student finance for these courses is often difficult to access, while some students in these positions will need to work alongside their studies in order to pay for them. Improving access to finance for this type of learning – similar pro rata to a full time in-person undergraduate course – could help with contingency planning for such a scenario as well as assist with access to HE for other groups such as mature learners. This will also help to mitigate the risk of students from disadvantaged backgrounds staying in employment and not attending university (covered in section 10) by providing flexible opportunities for study alongside work.

Conclusions

1. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Nottingham Trent University has acted in the best interests of students, staff and wider community. We recognise and support the swift action that has been taken by government and the sector to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on the sector.
2. We support the measures that were taken on the cancellation of formal exams this year as the best course of action for students and university applicants. We believe concerns about inflated predicted grades for students from middle class backgrounds and deflated predicted grades for students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been overstated.
3. We believe further engagement and communication between DfE, OfS and HE institutions would have been beneficial, particularly on the changes to the admissions process and DfE communication through UCAS. This would have allowed universities to align their messaging with the Government's, and to reduce confusion and stress for applicants and existing students.
4. There is the potential danger of losing recent gains in access and widening participation due to the impact of the pandemic. We believe this is a vital opportunity to implement evidence-based interventions to support disadvantaged students in years 12 and 13 to access higher education.
5. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written feedback; NTU will continue to seek opportunities to work with Government and Parliament to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 across the education sector.

¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/03/angry-fed-up-isolated-coronavirus-and-childrens-mental-health/>

² <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/06/08/a-call-to-action-for-widening-participation-in-the-era-of-covid-19/>

³ <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/programmes/neon-outreach-online/>