

Written evidence submitted by University Alliance

University Alliance submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services

Introduction

1. University Alliance (UA) is the voice of professional and technical universities. We represent 12 large to mid-sized universities working at the heart of their communities. Alliance universities work with industry and the professions to deliver the workforce of today and tomorrow through practical, skills-based learning and applied research.
2. This submission should be taken as supplementary to the oral evidence given to the committee's inquiry by UA Chair Professor Debra Humphris on 18 May 2020, and as such it will not address the full terms of reference of the inquiry but will highlight additional evidence and emerging data. The examples used within the submission are illustrative and not exhaustive of the activities taking place across the Alliance.

Summary

3. Alliance universities have moved swiftly to respond to the challenges posed by Covid-19, and to support their university communities through the crisis. Universities have worked hard to move teaching and student support services online; maintaining an excellent student experience and prioritising student welfare. This work has focused on supporting disadvantaged students for whom this crisis is likely to disproportionately impact. Initiatives include targeted financial grants and loans, digital equipment provision, targeted support for particular groups such as care leavers, and outreach initiatives.
4. Alliance university leaders, students and staff are currently making a significant contribution to the national effort to tackle the frontline Covid-19 pandemic. This includes – but is not limited to – the substantial role Alliance universities play in skilling the nursing and allied healthcare professions. Alliance universities train nearly 25% of undergraduate nursing students in England, in addition to other allied health professionals, Nursing Associate apprentices and policing apprentices. They are now working with multiple NHS Trusts, Health Education England and others to support many of those students move into frontline roles.
5. In addition to the secondment of staff to the NHS from nursing and allied health academic areas and delivering Return to Practice training programmes, Alliance members are making available a wide range of equipment and facilities to support the needs of the NHS - including ventilators, 3D printers and other IT equipment, and PPE. They are also providing the manufacture of hand gels, PEE, training videos and simulation units for healthcare professionals. Recent developments include a Nightingale Field Hospital being housed in UWE Bristol's Exhibition and Conference Centre and a rapid test for detecting Covid-19 developed by scientists at the University of South

Wales.

6. Our members have a long and proud tradition of practical and work-based learning and their expertise and deep-rooted connections to their communities will play a pivotal role in re-skilling and re-training efforts at a local, regional and national level. Our member's work supporting the delivery of degree apprenticeships and higher technical education progression routes will all be vital to ensuring students do not lose out on opportunities due to Covid-19. Such provision must be protected and enhanced through this crisis.
7. Our member universities do face significant challenges in the coming months and years, which if not mitigated will impact their ability to support the recovery efforts. The Covid-19 crisis will have an immediate impact on the total comprehensive income for UA members in 2019/20. However, the key and growing concern for UA members is the 2020/21 and subsequent financial years. Based on a scenario of 50% reduction of international students (EU and non-EU) and 15% deferrals of home undergraduate students, collectively UA universities would potentially lose an estimated £315.5 million in tuition fee income for 2020/21.

Support given for disadvantaged students by Alliance universities during the Covid-19 crisis

8. University Alliance has a diverse student demographic, with most members above the sector benchmark on both access and retention. We recognise that this crisis has disproportionately affected disadvantaged students, and our universities are working hard to identify problems and offer solutions to support these groups.

Digital support:

9. Some students may not have the digital infrastructure or appropriate technology to engage effectively when learning from home. All Alliance universities have been supporting students experiencing digital disadvantages by arranging doorstep deliveries on a wide range of digital equipment including laptops and internet dongles, and providing specific grants and loans for digital equipment and access.
10. For example, the University of South Wales loaned out over 200 items of IT equipment, and UWE Bristol introduced a flat rate scheme offering £300 for IT equipment and a top up for mobile broadband, available to all final year students and all levels of nursing, midwifery, paramedic and the allied health professions courses. 460 students have taken up their scheme. Alliance universities are also extending this support to incoming students, for example the University of Hertfordshire are providing IT equipment to facilitate the transition of incoming Herts Success students who do not have a laptop.

Support for particular groups including care leavers:

11. Recognising the particular challenges facing care-experienced, estranged and young adult carers, a number of universities have introduced free accommodation and targeted financial and pastoral support. Care-leavers have often gone straight from care provision to university and may not have a home to return to in the holidays along with limited financial support.

12. Kingston University created a specific support package including proactive regular contact to check on their wellbeing, emergency grants to help with financial hardship and accommodation costs and also graduation bursaries for Kingston University Cares students exiting the University this year into challenging circumstances. Coventry University are introducing a new scheme providing up to 10 student care leavers free accommodation in University-owned student halls for the duration of their course, starting with new students joining in September.

Financial support:

13. All Alliance universities have enhanced existing hardship funds and introduced targeted support through grants and loans for students experiencing financial difficulties during this period. For example, the University of Hertfordshire have introduced a COVID-19 Fund which has helped 530 students who were struggling with loss of employment, rents, overseas payments and caring responsibilities. Birmingham City University have introduced a specific £500k funding package to support students financially hit by the outbreak, with grants of £200 available for up to 2,500 students who get into financial difficulty.
14. Some Alliance universities have also introduced specific funds to support health professional, teaching and social care students who are working on the front line to support our communities during the pandemic. The University of Brighton for example is providing grants of up to £200 to fund practical solutions to any barriers preventing study or engagement in the frontline response, such as travel and other critical costs.

Enhanced widening participation practices:

15. Alliance universities have also moved widening access and targeted enrichment schemes online, to reach learners from groups that are currently under-represented in Higher Education, and provide them with a range of engaging activities designed to support their progression and attainment. For example, Oxford Brookes University's 'Outreach hub' runs online activities for school and college learners, including virtual events, webinars and academic experience programmes, and mentoring schemes with current students. The University of South Wales have established a dedicated blog for parents of prospective students to help parents support their children through the admissions process during these unusual circumstances.
16. Universities are also developing transition programmes to support incoming learners who have had extended periods away from support. For example, the University of Greenwich are running a 'Level up' scheme online to support students in the weeks before term starts, and Teesside University is offering free maths tuition for applicants to help prepare them for study.

The impact of Covid-19 on Alliance universities

17. The pandemic and resulting disruption has caused challenges to Universities across the sector, financial and otherwise. If unmitigated these challenges will have an impact on Alliance universities ability to support an economic, social and cultural recovery from this crisis. Of particular concern for our members is the ongoing financial impact and the disruption caused to vital higher technical provision, including degree apprenticeships.

Financial impact:

18. Covid-19 has had, and will continue to have, a significant financial impact on Universities across the sector, including Alliance universities. The key and growing concern for our members is the 2020/21 financial year and subsequent others, with the potential for significant impacts on student numbers. Due in part to successive fee freezes, the loss of income in 2019/20 will be carried over and continue to impact budgets over a period of at least the next three years, but the length and depth of this impact depends on the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 crisis and potential future lockdown periods.
19. Based on a scenario of 50% reduction of international students (EU and non-EU) and 15% deferrals of home undergraduate students, collectively UA universities would potentially lose an estimated £315.5 million in tuition fee income for 2020/21. The potential loss of £315.5m represents 17% of the combined total HE course income of UA members in 2018/19. This figure is based on data from 11 UA members and was compiled and shared with DfE in April before our newest member, Anglia Ruskin University, joined UA.

Impact on degree apprenticeships:

20. Alliance universities are leaders in delivering higher technical education, including higher and degree apprenticeships; progression routes from T Levels and Applied General Qualifications; collaborative work and support already underway for the new T Level providers; Institutes of Technology; Level 4 and 5 courses; and have long-standing consortiums of partner further education colleges. Access to higher-level technical education and skills will be vital to supporting a sustainable economic recovery and particularly those industries affected by coronavirus. We are committed to ensuring access to work based learning and technical progression routes continue to be available, especially at levels 4-6.
21. Throughout the crisis members have been continually assessing the ongoing impacts on businesses and the public and third sectors through their knowledge exchange activity, as well as intelligence through their degree apprenticeship programmes on apprentices being made redundant, furloughed or experiencing breaks in learning and employers already delaying or cancelling apprenticeship and graduate starts for September 2020. There have been instances of manufacturing firms cancelling apprenticeships and graduate roles, in one case for the first time in 15 years.
22. There are concerns that given SMEs have a significant impact on supply chain performance, the knock-on effects to different industries may take longer to emerge, including on manufacturing which is a key focus and area of expertise for many UA members. Just one example would be challenges in the aerospace industry that could have a significant impact on manufacturing suppliers, producers and distributors. Given the vital role that higher technical education will play in the nation's recovery, we are concerned that government interventions to incentivise apprenticeships must not forget degree-level provision.
23. Many members have told us that recruitment to current programmes is holding up better than expected. However, many will still be down on the position they had expected due to decisions taken to cancel planned validation events and delay new programme launches, due to challenges engaging fully with employers and PSRBs during the crisis.

Most members have only seen redundancies of degree apprentices in the single figures and many apprentices that were on Breaks in Learning are now returning (particularly in health and social care). However, we still remain concerned about the future stability of degree apprenticeships given that threats to recruitment and future growth could still be ahead if businesses set budgets early next year in the midst of a recession.

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