

Universities Minister announces mental health support for students

Good morning everyone. I am so pleased to be able to join you today and I'd like to thank HEPI for going ahead with this conference, in spite of Covid's many challenges. If the pandemic has shown us anything it is that it is so important to keep our communications going, and to keep talking to one another because the world hasn't suddenly ground to a halt and young people's hopes and aspirations haven't stopped. The same dreams are still being dreamt and their plans are still being made. I'd like to say at this point that I am so proud and grateful for the leadership our higher education providers have shown throughout the crisis, which has meant that students plans haven't had to be put on hold.

Universities didn't close and students will graduate as planned and new students will start university this year.

However, it is really important to note that this is also massively down to the resilience and resourcefulness of our students.

This is a really unsettling time for students, and we are working very hard with the sector to support them as we all try to adjust to this new way of living.

But I want to take this opportunity to basically say – hats off to our students – university is challenging enough time as it is – but this cohort have also faced an entire new set of challenges.

And in years to come I genuinely believe employers will seek out the students of today who will be synonymous with resilience, flexibility and determination.

So, as you know, last month my Department announced a package of measures to stabilise university admissions, relieve cash flow pressures on the sector and generally enhance the information available to students as well as support mechanisms.

Let me be clear, we want every student who wishes to go to university and who meets the entry requirements to do so, coronavirus or no coronavirus, but we had been seeing activities that were putting students under undue pressure like the 30,000 unconditional offers made in one week alone.

The controls we have asked for will help reduce pressure on students by allowing them the flexibility to work out what is right for them and what is in their interest.

Our package makes provision for higher education providers to recruit students up to a temporary set level. This has been based on forecasts from the sector themselves, which allows additional growth of up to 5% in the next academic year.

The Education Secretary may also allocate an additional 10,000 places on top of this, of which 5,000 will be allocated to students studying nursing or allied health courses.

I began by stressing the importance of talking to one another and we will continue to work closely with the sector in putting the policy into practice.

The impacts of this crisis are stark and they are varied, and I know that unfortunately this means some students will be far worse affected than others. I want to reassure you that we are very aware of this and I continue to work with the sector to ensure hardship funding is available. That is why we have worked closely with the OfS to enable universities to draw upon grant funding aimed at access and provision, worth up to £23 million per month from April to July, to use towards those funds.

When lockdown began, as we all know, universities needed to make sure that students would continue to get high quality teaching and assessment.

Provision did move online quickly, and in many cases within just 24 hours. Now we're in a position where the vast majority of HE providers plan to move to blended or dual provision for the next academic year.

So while courses and timetables are being redesigned to be suitable for these new styles of delivery and the next academic year already looks very different to what students may have expected; the depth and breadth of the curriculum, the quality of the teaching, and the value of the degree achieved, must stay the same.

Covid-19 could be with us for a very long time and as universities prepare for the next academic year, they may well be operating in a very different learning environment. Regardless of this, they must still make sure that all students, no matter what background, can expect to get the same kind of high quality academic experience that they would have done before the pandemic broke out.

The Office for Students, has published information and guidance for providers and The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has developed a series of guides to secure academic standards and to support student achievement.

I must say I really was pleased to read HEPI's own survey that many providers have been pretty successful in meeting their students' academic needs. Students felt that overall, academic experience was better than expected, and that contact hours had actually increased. They were also doing more assignments, getting more feedback and were feeling more supported in their independent study.

This is quite frankly tremendous feedback and was partly achieved by making the most of educational technology. I do think this sets us up well for the future and I would encourage all providers to build on this as they plan ahead over the next few months and after Covid.

However, the HEPI survey also revealed that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the experience of some students, both academically and in terms of

their wellbeing, and no one can be surprised by this.

The survey found that students are reporting far lower levels of wellbeing compared with the general population which I find, and I'm sure you will find, deeply concerning.

I know that many universities have already put support services in place and I would like to use this opportunity to thank them for being so quick on the ball in responding to their students' needs.

When the pandemic struck my first letter to each institution specifically reminded them of their responsibility of care to students and especially in relation to student mental health. I made it clear that I expected support to be transitioned online, prioritised and bolstered where possible.

I know that some universities have for example been offering additional student check-in services, where staff have volunteered to provide direct support services, and others have enhanced their feedback and online wellbeing services.

In addition to this I also welcome providers reaching out directly to vulnerable groups of students, checking they are well and supported during this time.

Please don't let up on these efforts. Vulnerable students are going to need all the help they can get, especially those who are estranged or who are care leavers.

And to any student who is listening and who may be feeling anxious or need help, I would urge you to get in touch with your university's student support and welfare teams. They really will be able to offer you valuable help and support.

The Office for Students have published guidance on vulnerable students on a range of topics, to help universities give the best support that they can.

And I can confirm that student premium funding which I referenced before can be used during this time to support student mental health.

In addition to this, the £1m of funding that I announced in March for the OfS Challenge Competition to develop innovative approaches to addressing mental health challenges for at risk groups will also move this agenda forward.

Mental health and the wellbeing of all students, whether they come from here or further afield, must be a top priority and it certainly is one of mine. I don't want any student to feel that they cannot get help if they need it.

University is hard at the best of times, we all know that, but the challenges and upheaval that young people face can be compounded and create mental health problems. It's an area I feel we must continue to shine a spotlight on – now more than ever because I can only imagine the turmoil that adding Covid-19 into the mix must produce.

So that's why I have worked with the OFS and today I am delighted to announce Student Space, a new online resource that will be funded up to £3 million by the Office for Students, and led by student minds.

It will really enable all students at English and Welsh universities to have access to a variety of mental health and welfare support services.

They'll be able to draw on this whatever course they're doing or whatever university they're studying at and it will operate daily for a period of six months.

Student Space has been developed to close those gaps in student support services which have become apparent during the pandemic and is designed to work alongside the existing services.

It will offer a whole range of help including preventative support and immediate interventions for those in distress, from therapeutic interventions, to stress relievers, suggestions for strengthening mental health, and quality-assured online resources such as peer support platforms and volunteering opportunities.

I do believe that Student Space will make a true difference to so many students across England and Wales.

To conclude I want to reiterate my thanks to both staff and students, but let's be under no illusion – there is still significant work and challenges to face ahead as we ease out of lock down.

However, by working together we can continue to deliver for students and with the best Higher education offer in the world. And at the heart of this process we must keep the welfare and health of our students – who, after all, are actually the heart of all our Universities.