

Coronavirus: what questions should students' unions be asking?

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Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic is causing major disruption to societies across the globe. For apprentices, further, and higher education students, we are already beginning to see the effects, ranging from the closures of campuses in the UK to international students unable to travel to or from their home countries. The situation is fast-moving and both government and sector guidance is evolving on a daily basis, with the UK Government and devolved administrations working together but taking different decisions in some respects.

NUS is not a public health body and does not intend to offer guidance to students' unions on how and when to change or cancel activities, and we continue to advise that SUs follow the advice of the relevant public health authority in your part of the UK. However, we know SUs will also wish to do all they can to protect the interests of their members and communicate as much information as they can. This document outlines a number of questions we believe it may be useful to ask of your parent institution or other bodies, including for example local student housing providers. Clearly not all questions will be relevant to all SUs but there will be at least some which are relevant to you. For the avoidance of doubt this briefing is intended to cover all students' unions, associations and guilds across the UK.

We intend to keep this document updated as the situation develops – please check the version control at the top of the page. If you have any suggestions for additions or feedback on our answers, please get in touch by emailing policy@nus.org.uk.

Coronavirus and education

With some institutions already moving on to online study only for the remainder of the academic year, and others considering their options, how students are able to continue with their education will be an increasing concern.

- What study spaces and resources will be available for students if teaching ceases?
- Will teaching be available online? Will tutors post assignments on Virtual Learning Environments? And if so, what support will be available for students who don't have access to computers at home?
- What will happen to exams and alternative assessments - given the stress this is no doubt causing many students, will there be mitigating circumstances available for everyone? If they are postponed, but students have made other commitments, what should they do?
- What will happen with graduations - will students graduate as planned if they miss teaching time, or will it need to be made up?

- Given the Government has now recommended no overseas trips for education, what will happen to those students on years abroad, especially those in highly affected areas? How will those planning to go overseas be informed and advised?
- If you have healthcare professional students, how are you liaising with placement providers to ensure safety and the dissemination of relevant information on what precautions or actions these students should be taking? If any funding or bursary payments are linked to attendance, how will this be handled?
- There have been reports that some final year healthcare students will be able to register as qualified immediately to provide new staff in the NHS. We understand conversations about this are ongoing but no final announcement has been made. For the moment there may not be questions to ask except to request your provider keeps you informed of developments.
- Do you have any students whose start date would be in spring 2020, many of whom will be in healthcare disciplines? What will happen with their courses?

There are some specific considerations for further education students which may also need addressed in colleges and other FE providers.

- If students feel it is unsafe to attend, how will this affect their college attendance records? How will it affect their entitlement to any bursaries or free meals which are based on attendance?
- How will exam grades be affected if teaching doesn't take place? Will predicted grades and mock results be used, and if so, is there an opportunity for students to discuss these with their tutors? How will students be supported with progression to apprenticeships, HE and jobs?

Coronavirus and disabled students

Disabled students, and students who have dependents who are disabled or otherwise vulnerable to this virus, may have specific concerns. This may include students who have health impairments which do not affect their day to day ability to engage in education, but who are at particular risk during this period.

- Have institutions attempted to identify students whose own health, or the health of their dependents, may require special consideration when assessing risk and adapting procedures? As noted above, these students may not have declared an existing health condition.
- Are health-related mitigating circumstances procedures and policies capable of taking into account students' mitigating against heightened risk of attending their courses?
- Are pastoral and academic advice services available to students, ideally remotely, in order to inform them of how to manage risk within the procedures?
- Has the institution taken into account students who are vulnerable acting in advance of formal advice to safeguard theirs' and others' health, in order to avoid penalising those students?
- Has the institution undertaken any work to consider how to effectively communicate with those students whose health, or the health of others around them, will require specific information?

Coronavirus and international students

International students may encounter specific additional concerns as well as the others listed in this document. These primarily relate to attendance and travel, additional provision for students who are unexpectedly in the UK at points they thought they would not be, and may also relate specifically to Tier 4 visa compliance concerns. Travel is a particular concern for all students studying in the UK who have predominantly international backgrounds and support networks, regardless of their status or engagement in study.

- Is there enhanced pastoral support for students whose ability to engage with their support networks is adversely affected, or whose support networks may be impacted by illness?
- Is there enhanced pastoral support focused on students who may experience isolation as a consequence of measures by government, for example cancelling trips home?
- Is there enhanced pastoral support focused on students who may experience particular challenges around areas such as housing or finance, as detailed elsewhere in this document?
- Are attendance-related provisions in study taking into account circumstances which may adversely affect students' ability to attend university?
- What additional support packages are in place for international students reliant on financial support from other countries which may be affected by economic downturn or shutdown?
- Relating to delay or interruption, what approach will institutions take to allowing students to resume study?

International students studying under Tier 4 visas may encounter specific challenges relating to monitoring, compliance, and implications for deferred or delayed study. In particular, attendance monitoring approaches within institutions for students on Tier 4 visas provide specific challenges to students, even as the Home Office has relaxed their requirements to institutions.

- What additional provision for Tier 4 visa advice is available, and is this provision being made available remotely? Have any mitigating actions such as working with other institutions been put in place if Tier 4 visa advice provision becomes limited, for example due to staff sickness?
- How will institutions' approach to attendance monitoring and reporting to the Home Office during this period function in light of government instructions to self-isolate, understanding self-isolating students will not have the ability to gain medical evidence?
- How will institutions approach attendance monitoring and reporting to the Home Office if students are unable to return to study, for example due to being under a travel ban in a non-UK area?
- If students under Tier 4 visa restrictions are unable to complete their course or part of their course this academic year, for example due to sickness or travel bans, what enhanced support is available for students seeking to extend their Tier 4 visa?

- Are institutions highlighting any particular concerns relating to international students, including around visas and compliance, to their representative bodies who work with the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration bodies?

Coronavirus and housing and health services

Students who are self-isolating (or whose family are) may be unable to return home at the end date of their tenancy. This is also an issue that could affect international students who are prevented from returning home due to travel restrictions. There are a number of questions you can ask to ensure these students are supported.

- What plans does the university have in place to ensure students in the above situation(s) can maintain a roof over their head?
- Can the university extend students' contracts in their student accommodation if needed and how will the financial implications of this for the student be mitigated?
- Is the university liaising with private sector student accommodation providers to ensure such provisions are also put in place for students who need to remain past their original contract?
- For students in the traditional private rented sector it may be that they need to extend their tenancies as well. In the first instance, a student should liaise with their landlord. You should ensure students have access to a trained housing adviser and clear information from the SU, university or a housing charity such as Shelter or Citizens Advice.
- If a student is unable to remain in their current property but also cannot return 'home' it may be that the university needs to find or provide accommodation for them. Can your institution offer rooms in their own student accommodation, or can it liaise with landlords in the private rented sector to secure rooms?
- It may be that students who are self-isolating and thus unable to attend their employment, or have their hours reduced by their employer, or who are forced to stay in their rented home longer than they thought, will experience difficulties paying their rent. What are the university plans to do to support those students financially? If a student falls into rent arrears will they have access to a trained housing adviser?
- If a student accommodation block had to close what provisions are there to find students alternative accommodation and ensure the cost and stresses of a move are mitigated?
- It is essential that student accommodation providers, students, students' unions and universities follow the latest guidance from government bodies and ensure regular liaison with each other. For example, the UNIPOL Code of Standards for private sector student accommodation (which NUS helps operate) has given out advice regarding what student accommodation providers (and students) can do if there is a case of coronavirus in student accommodation [here](#). Is the institution aware of this guidance? What other guidance is it using? Have all students received information from the university regarding self-isolation and hygiene measures in shared accommodation?

Finally, in this area there are some aspects in relation to access to healthcare services, which interrelate to housing.

- Is the provider able to work with local primary healthcare services to support students to register with a GP if they have not already done so?
- If students are self-isolating in halls of residence, is there any opportunity for the provider to coordinate or otherwise ensure deliveries of food and medicine, perhaps with student volunteers?

Coronavirus and student finance and funding

While HE student support can continue to be paid for an absence of up to 60 days for illness, regardless of which nation in the UK you receive funding from, it is still possible that for many students essential funding is disrupted. This could be from lost earnings from employment, either because the student is not entitled to sick pay or their hours are cut back because business scale back their operations. It may be where funding for international students is disrupted because travel plans have to change, or their stay in the UK has to be extended. Or it may be where parents or partners have their earnings reduced and can no longer support the student – if indeed the student has this safety net in the first place. Again, a range of questions can be asked of parent institutions.

- Is the university or college hardship fund adequate to support students whose funding is disrupted or whose costs rise unexpectedly because of the pandemic? What is being done to advertise the availability of funds? Is it possible to apply online, and how will the provider ensure applications are processed?
- Can the provider consider specific financial support for any students who lack a family safety net, such as care leavers, estranged students or international students where their home country is experiencing significant restrictions?
- If the university or college employs students in any role, including postgraduate teaching staff as well as in areas such as catering and cleaning, will they commit to paying sick pay even if the student's earnings are not above the Statutory Sick Pay threshold?
- Can the careers and/or employment services in the provider work with any local student employers to ensure they also provide sick pay?
- As outlined in the questions for FE SUs above, is the provider ensuring contingencies for any students where bursary funds or other support is paid based on attendance?
- What support and advice is available beyond hardship funds for any students struggling with their finances, and is this available online if necessary?

Coronavirus and students' unions

Some aspects of the decisions around Coronavirus made by HE or FE providers will impact on students' unions as organisations. These can include access to facilities or unintended knock-on effects of closures or other restrictions.

- What access will the union have to its building/space if teaching ceases and/or the end of the academic year is brought forward?
- What university/college space and resource will be available for unions to continue planned or as yet unplanned activities?
- If the students' union has unexpected high costs relating to sick pay for student staff, will the provider help to offset these costs?
- If the students' union is hit by cancellation fees, due to decisions made by the provider out of its control, will the provider help to offset these costs?
- How will changes in assessment and graduation dates affect the eligibility of candidates in SU elections? Will mitigating circumstances be put into place?
- If the institution's insurance policies cover SU activities, are there any actions beyond business as usual needed to ensure cover is valid?

NUS will soon be providing further support for SUs and their own activities and operations.

Coronavirus and the UK/Irish border

These questions are relevant to NUS-USI member unions in Northern Ireland.

- ROI has taken stronger action on limiting social spheres than the UK. Currently public transport in ROI is running normally but if this were to change would students living in ROI and crossing the border for study be penalised for non-attendance?
- Universities and colleges in ROI have been closed. Should students from ROI who are studying in NI be preparing to return home?