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**Rapid Response Briefing Paper
How have university student services directorates responded
to Covid-19?**

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SUMS is a membership-based higher education consultancy, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation that provides expert consulting to universities across all professional service areas. We have been talking to university leaders about managing the Covid-19 crisis and their visions for the future. With views gathered from a series of one-to-one interviews, SUMS' Community of Practice Groups meeting virtually, along with student surveys, SUMS is able to take a service-by-service review of university operations. It has found a sector eager to change and seeing positives in adversity.

Helen Baird and Jeannette Strachan, Principal Consultants, share insight from their research into the implications of the pandemic on student services.

Student services directorates deliver a complex set of functions and comprise staff from a variety of professional backgrounds and with specialist skills-sets. Functions vary across directorates, but often include essential services such as counselling, mental health and wellbeing, disability support, sexual misconduct and harassment support, student communications, student finance, careers, chaplaincy and residential life.

Many of these service areas have had prominent roles in supporting students through this crisis to date and will continue to do so. Student services teams have responded well. This is unsurprising since they are used to working in uncertain contexts where “they need to be reactive and creative in anxiety-driven situations”. Staff have demonstrated adaptability and resilience in embracing different ways of working, as student support services have moved rapidly and seamlessly from a predominantly face-to-face service to exclusively online delivery.

Immediate response to the Covid-19 outbreak

Identifying and supporting students overseas

When the then emerging Covid-19 crisis began to impact university student support services in mid-late January, the immediate concern was for students overseas in high-risk countries: China and Iran and later Northern Italy. Some institutions realised quickly that they did not have a single, authoritative data source on where students are at any one time. Instead, information was spread across multiple departments and systems or did not exist. Most students overseas were on organised placements or exchanges but not all were where they were expected to be, with some having gone off on fieldwork or travelling. Others had left their university in the UK temporarily, but had not informed anyone of this, such as Chinese students going home for New Year. Consequently, identifying the location of all students was time and resource intensive and relied heavily on self-reporting by students to piece all the information together. Only then could staff provide practical and financial advice where needed to help students return to the UK, including those from affected areas. Some students remained stuck overseas or had to remain in self-isolation on their return in student housing, while others chose to remain in their placement country. As time went on, the situation escalated quickly from university support staff being able to respond to and manage individual students' circumstances as they ran out of capacity to do so.

Managing students on campus

By late February and early March, universities had moved into crisis management mode. Attention had turned to implementing social distancing on campus and large gatherings and one-to-one contact with students by tutors and support staff had stopped. By mid-March, support staff were focussed on persuading and supporting students who could leave campuses to do so in the run up to the lockdown on 23 March.

Although most students had left by the end of last term, an estimated 10-15% of students remain on many university campuses and are unable to leave. These include students with special circumstances, such as care experienced students or those estranged from their families, as well as stranded international students, mature students with families and postgraduate research students who live on campuses year-round. Although the levels are expected to decrease as more international students are repatriated, there are still significant numbers of students living on virtually closed campuses in many cases.

A skeleton staff is in place to support students still on campuses. Staff members are providing security, limited catering mostly as a takeaway service, resident support and in some cases foodbanks. In some institutions, staff are helping to organise virtual social events for students, alongside the efforts of students' unions and peer supporters. Support teams are also monitoring students known to be more vulnerable, such as those who have registered a disability, including long-term mental health conditions or specific learning difficulties. Some universities, including Keele and Staffordshire, are also providing wellbeing support for healthcare students working on placement in the NHS, including nurses and paramedics.



Support for students in financial hardship

Another area where support teams had to move quickly was in responding to students' financial hardship, whether they had gone home or remained on campus. Focus had been on providing equipment to enable students to access online learning and support, either by loaning or setting up hardship funds to provide laptops and Wi-Fi dongles. There has been surprise at the high numbers of students without internet access at home, and those who only have smart phones for accessing their online learning materials.

Additionally, many universities have waived the final term's rent in university-owned accommodation or provided discounts to students still on campus. However, students in privately owned accommodation are not having the same benefit, with many remaining liable for rent even if they have returned home. Moreover, many students have lost their part-time jobs and main source of income.

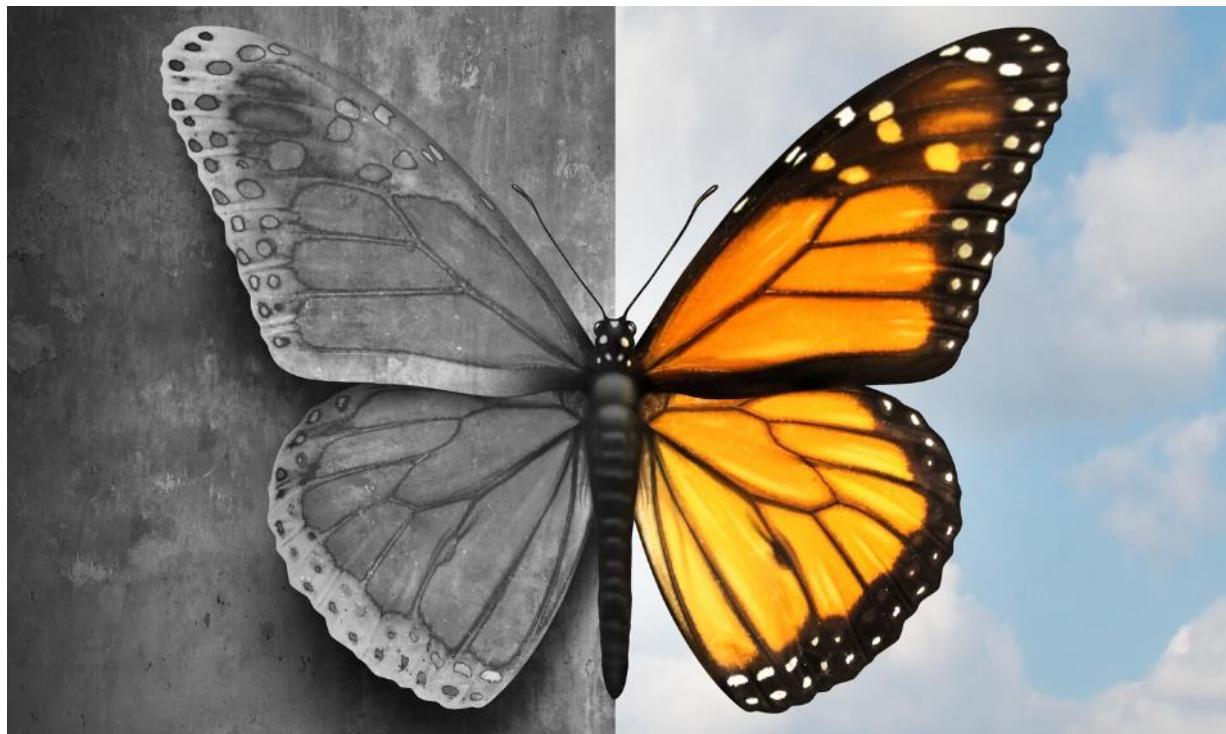
As such, student financial hardship is a live issue and [NUS are now campaigning](#) for a safety net including a £60 million national hardship fund to support students and those graduating this year. The Scottish Government announced a [£5 million package](#) of emergency financial support in early April to help students facing hardship, and a far higher bar was set by the [Canadian government](#) in providing over £5 billion for students and recent graduates, through loans and grants and a universal monthly benefit. The UK [Government support package](#) announced on 4 May included provision for HE providers to use existing funding (of £46 million) to boost hardship funds for students in financial difficulty and for disadvantaged students impacted by Covid-19. However, so far, there has been no direct financial support package for students in hardship from the UK Government.

A key challenge for universities will be to help mitigate the effects of inequality among students, which are being exacerbated as the lockdown continues. Students need money for essentials like food and rent as well as access to laptops and connectivity to enable their learning. Additionally, they need access to adequate personal space and conducive environments to be able to study and learn, which are highly variable.

Moving staff and services online

Among the universities in our sample, once the decision was made to send students home where possible, student services teams moved rapidly to set up remote working for staff and put infrastructure in place to move support services online. The move from predominantly face-to-face student support services to exclusively online delivery took between just three days and two weeks across the universities we spoke with: "*on the whole, students support services have moved to new ways of working fairly seamlessly.*"

Organisations such as BACP and the University Mental Health Advisors Network were quick to encourage staff to move to online and telephone counselling. This accelerated the process by helping to alleviate concerns staff had such as over lack of training in online counselling and confidentiality issues. The biggest initial challenge was organising hardware and software for staff to use at home.



Student demand for counselling and wellbeing services

A key function within student services is counselling, wellbeing and mental health support. Students already receiving counselling are continuing to do so via video sessions. Mentoring and emotional support is also being offered through different types of delivery, such as 20-minute check-in telephone sessions and signposting students to self-help tools and resources. While all these virtual services are essential at present, the longer-term outcomes of online delivery are of course not yet known.

From when universities closed until just the beginning of the final term, all the universities in this sample had seen a decline in student demand for mental health support services, though only at the lower end of the risk spectrum. The successful move to online services in some cases could only have been achieved alongside this drop in demand. For some, this decline could be explained by reduced levels of students' exam and assessment anxiety and '*a drop-off in more trivial issues*', with students less focussed on day-to-day worries and pressures of university life. Others may also now be receiving support from their families, networks, and support services in their home area (although accessing NHS care for their conditions will be more challenging).

However, universities are still supporting the smaller proportion of higher risk students, including both those who remain on campus and others who have gone home but are known to have more severe illnesses and or difficult circumstances.

Most of the student service directors we spoke with expect this pattern of low demand to be temporary. They expect that demand will rise in coming weeks and months as students are affected increasingly by feelings of loneliness, isolation and disconnection. Some students will also experience bereavement or illness themselves through this period. There is also a real concern that students beginning to experience difficulties may not be seeking out help at an early enough stage, leading to more significant problems in time.

As one director put it "*I have been struck by differences in demand for counselling and disability advice, but as time rolls on I expect mental health issues among students to increase substantially*". Another director disagrees however and believes the narrative that large numbers of students should expect to feel unwell because of the pandemic is being overplayed, and indeed that this message may be unhelpful for students.

Student demand for disability advisory services

The situation has been different with demand for disability advisory services within universities. To begin with, there was a lot of anxiety among disabled students about exams and assessments being reformulated online, leading in some cases to disability services being overloaded with enquiries: "*demand skyrocketed leading up to the end of year exam period*". Now that students are better informed about how this will work, levels of anxiety are settling down and disabled students are benefiting from online study skills via online platforms such as MS Teams which have record and transcription functions.

Moreover, most of the directors highlighted the benefit for disabled students of moving exams and assessment online, and thereby making them more accessible for all students. Some universities already had widespread inclusive teaching practices and the move to online assessment enables inclusive and accessible assessment as well. As one director pointed out "*this situation has added impetus to a level of change that was going on anyway*". On a more cautionary note, another director is concerned that not all reasonable adjustments needed are in place for disabled students, and that some will be disadvantaged through this crisis.

Careers and employability services

Many of the services provided by Careers staff were already offered online as well as face-to-face, in particular careers guidance, start up support, reviewing CVs and application forms and providing mock interviews. However, the uptake of the online services has risen considerably in the light of recent events. One of the issues that Careers Services are experiencing, and indeed experienced prior to the current situation, is that online support can take longer than a face-to-face conversation e.g. responding to an application check by email rather than in person. Internships which involve students working on an employer's premises are not possible at present and virtual internships are being explored with employers.

Group work and teaching is proving the most challenging. This is for a combination of pedagogical, technical and staff confidence reasons. However, up until now there has not been a compelling reason to deliver online and so staff are having to adapt very quickly to a new situation. There is a recognition that there needs to be sufficient staff training in place to support online delivery (including use of technology, how to present, how to make sessions interactive, how to react to an audience that might be muted, etc.).

One of the biggest concerns is for large scale events such as careers fairs. The experience of virtual fairs is that in the past students have not engaged with them to the same degree as physical fairs. Some Careers Services, in place of fairs and employer presentations, are offering employer webinars. The current crisis has encouraged Careers Services to extend their reach and offer opportunities which did not exist before. This is including in their programme a greater diversity of recruiters from the UK and

from around the world, including alumni. In addition, the move to student consultancy projects which can be delivered remotely, means that there is far more scope for international opportunities. So for example a student who wants to work in China could undertake a project with a company there and a student who wants to work in the United States could participate in a webinar from a company recruiting for positions in that country. There is also the opportunity to hold virtual events and include students from other universities, in other countries.

Careers Services are working to increase their visibility with students via social media and student e-mails supported by programmes of blogs, vlogs and webinars. They are also working with other teams in Student Services to co-ordinate a wider message to students and graduates about the support that is available over the months ahead.

Directors of Careers Services reported that ACGAS have provided valuable resources during this crisis to support careers staff including webinars and information on the current situation.

The near future

The initial period in the run up to and immediately post the lockdown was fast paced and a huge amount of effort went into moving universities' student support services online. Most universities seemed to take the Easter break as a natural breakpoint, with some closing for up to one week or providing staff with additional leave to recharge. There is a desire now to return to business as usual and ensure that current services can be sustained over the next period until the summer break.

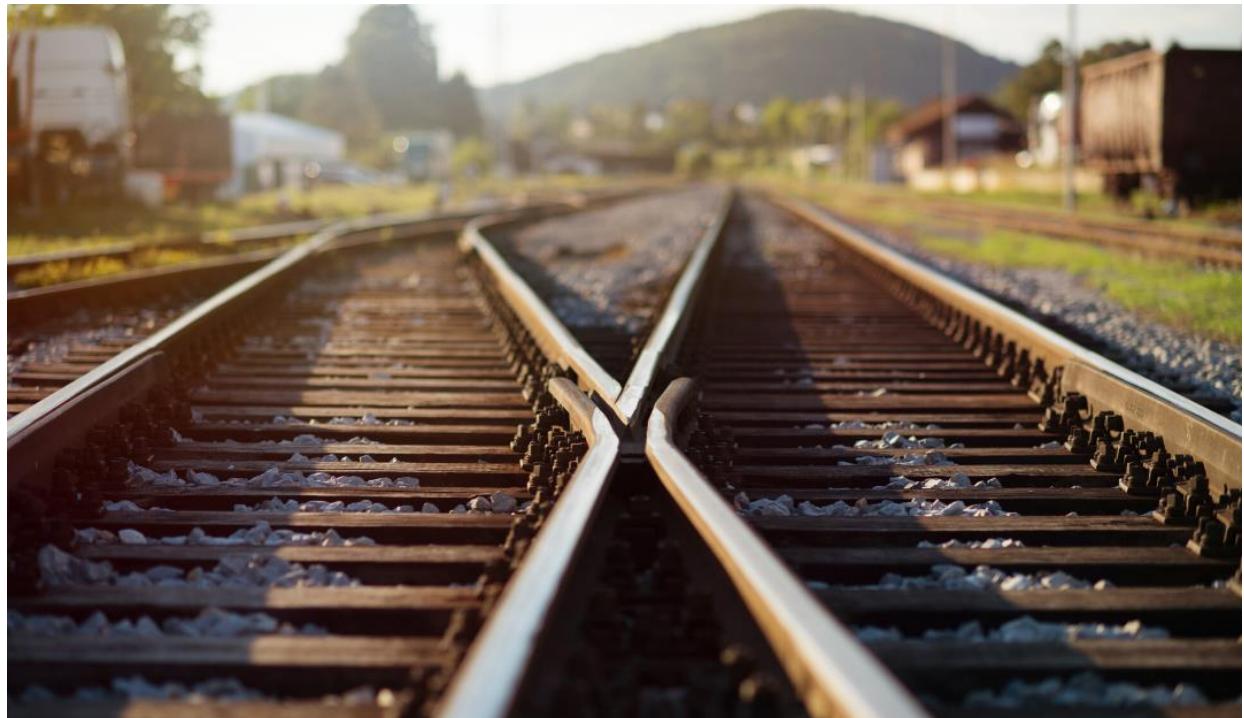
Some of the areas which student services teams are now focussed on during this final term include the following:

- Renewing university **policies and protocols** such as on control of infectious diseases, dealing with student and staff deaths and assessing mitigating circumstances.
- Finding ways of providing **additional wellbeing support remotely** to students to help alleviate feelings of disconnection and isolation. This includes providing small group sessions and drop-in activity by counselling teams, and in several cases rolling out online resources like [Big White Wall](#).
- Considering how to deliver aspects of the **student experience and university life** through extra-curricular activities for students. Others are looking at how best to support students in practical and community ways, to maintain their sense of belonging to the university and allow for moments of celebration. Graduating students had to pack and leave very quickly and it will be important to enable a ceremonial finish for them.
- Providing support to **students graduating this year** as they enter what will be a difficult job market, by working creatively in engaging with employers to understand the implications for recruitment of this year's graduates and arranging virtual internships and placements. Recent research by Prospects shows a worrying picture for final-year students. Nearly two-thirds feel negative about their career prospects and many have already lost part-time jobs, internships and graduate job offers.
- Planning for the next academic year is in progress, with student support teams thinking about how to best support **student transitions**. For instance, school leavers will be far less prepared for university this year. How can universities support young people moving away

from home and ensure a positive transition for them? Since it is difficult to imagine Freshers' Weeks happening in the same way, regardless of whether intakes are purely online or staggered, ideas are being developed for **online induction** activities. Some thinking is also going into how this experience may change people, where they may find it difficult to re-integrate after social distancing and how best to support this. Consideration is also needed as to how to identify students who are not engaging to provide them with additional support.

Areas of effective practice

All the directors we spoke with felt their universities have responded well to the Covid-19 crisis overall. Some key areas of effective practice highlighted during the interviews are shared below.



Governance and decision making

Leadership teams are seen to have taken an agile and risk-focussed approach, setting up major incident response teams and infrastructure quickly enabling student service teams to be fleet of foot in response: "*the pace and rate of decision-making has shifted at all levels during this period*". This is considered a real positive. Some directors emphasised the importance of more centralised decision-making for clarity and consistency. However, this has been well balanced in some cases with a willingness by executive teams to listen to expert managers and empower them by delegating authority as far as possible within their respective remits.

There has been no time for the luxury of allowing all stakeholders to have their say on a change in the usual way. Consequently, decision-making has been faster and more top-down than in normal times. Decisions which would usually be consulted on extensively through a process of iteration and sign-off in the committee system, have been made quickly and effectively '*sometimes in an afternoon*', using chairs' action where sign-off is required. Normal structures are expected to be re-introduced over the summer term although key decisions are likely to continue to be made by small senior teams.

Communications

The need for clear and coordinated communications across all levels of the university are essential. A single authoritative source of clear information to students is required so that key messages do not get lost in translation: "*you do need to have centralised communications in a crisis*". Another learning point is that communications need not be overly finessed, instead the sooner key messages are relayed the better. Moreover, it is essential to inform the right people across the university prior to major communications being relayed to students, so that support teams can be prepared to scale up for the resulting increase in enquiries likely to follow. In one university all telephone enquiries to faculty or school information hubs have been re-directed to the central university hub team who then field them as needed. This has worked well in helping ensure consistency and clarity and reducing duplication of effort. Clearly, it is also important for communication to be a two-way exchange and for universities to listen to their students as well.

Collaborating with students and students' unions

Student services leads emphasise the need to work collaboratively with the student body and students' unions to ensure the university is highly responsive to students during this time. Where a positive relationship already existed between the students' union and the institutions this has proven to be particularly effective during the pandemic. Many of the universities are involving student presidents or students' union chief executives in senior daily meetings, which is beneficial not least because they receive a lot of enquiries directly from students. The University of Leeds has gone further, and the students' union has been the vehicle for pushing out many key communications to students on the University's behalf.

Recognition of the importance for students of keeping themselves up to date and remaining connected is vital. Working with and enabling students' unions, sabbatical officers and peer support networks to provide this information and support is essential.

Improved working across functions and teams

Many student services teams are finding they have started operating more effectively across professional service boundaries. For instance, there are examples of disability services teams working more closely with centres for academic development or support than in the past, especially to support the move to online learning and assessments. Additionally, one director highlighted the need to work closely with other parts of the student support network across the university, such as the chaplaincy and students' union: "*all these support teams now know how each other operate and have the ability to communicate quickly, the time pressure we are working under has broken down the territories*".

At Staffordshire, this has extended to improved working between academic and professional services units, with some of the school deans inviting members of the student services team to participate in debriefing sessions for academic staff. Such initiatives have progressed a more functional approach to student support across central services and academic units.

Supporting staff wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing of academic and professional services staff has been rising up universities' agendas in recent times anyway, amid concerns about increasing workplace stress. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic may well exacerbate existing pressures, not least amid concern and uncertainty over the renewal of temporary contracts and potential future redundancies.

Many staff are still as busy with workloads but are also now managing childcare and coping with the effects of lockdown on themselves and their families. Additionally, where teams already had capacity issues these have been exacerbated as recruitment is not possible at present.

During this period, it is important for universities to continue to support and connect with staff now working from home, and those still working on campus providing support services to remaining students. There is a need for a greater level of communication and connection, and this is being achieved through more frequent online meetings and check-ins. Workloads and the impact of delivering services online need to be monitored, and staff need to be well supported and encouraged to switch off from work at regular times.

Opportunities for long-lasting changes

The experience of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic has made student service directors think differently about service delivery once universities re-open and in the longer term. Some of the potential long-lasting changes suggested are set out below.

Online and flexible working practices

There is a clear opportunity to be more flexible in future with how people both work and study. We have seen "*overnight changes to ways of working, culture and practice*" across universities. The notion of many administrative functions in future operating a Monday to Friday nine-to-five service will come increasingly under the microscope. This experience may result in some student services providing more flexible late evening and weekend services benefiting students, even where this is just operating an online chat facility to support students out of traditional office hours.

Service teams will be much more inclined for certain activities to be done at home now that this is clearly a viable option and they are used to engaging virtually. Now that the infrastructure is in place and former barriers to change overcome, staff may be more likely to work from home at least partially, thereby reducing the time, costs and environmental impact of commuting for them. In time, there is the potential to free up office space, create capacity for increased service levels and reduce costs for universities.



Blended service delivery

It would be difficult to overstate the scale of the overnight change in student services delivery in the past few weeks. *"This experience has been transformative"* as one director described it, another says *"this has shown that nothing is impossible, no-one would have believed a few months ago that all student services could move online."* For another director there are *'massive silver linings and no going back for student support services. There will be blended delivery of face-to-face and online services in future'*. While universities are likely to remain face-to-face organisations, there are also opportunities to help build communities and support students effectively online.

Consequently, high demand services including **disability advice teams** and **student counselling and mental health support** could see real change in the future, potentially moving to blended delivery. There are opportunities to increase online and self-help support and engagement with students, including rolling out peer support programmes with online elements. Additionally, many university counselling teams have been at capacity for some time and have already or were in the process of looking at different ways of meeting the year on year growth in student demand. The traditional approach of offering a set number of counselling sessions has been difficult to sustain in many institutions due to sustained growth in demand and space constraints for one to one sessions on crowded campuses.

Student services directors believe that this experience has shown it is achievable to deliver effective telephone and online advice, guidance and counselling to students. An important caveat of course is that the outcomes of telephone and online counselling support for students will have to be monitored and evaluated to see what works before changes are embedded. The effects of delivering these kind of services online on staff also need to be considered.

Further to this, there is an opportunity to **move some current paper-based processes online**, such as students reporting of adverse circumstances and student disciplinary procedures. The latter can be very lengthy processes, sometimes taking place after students have left the university. Some Student Conduct Offices are now looking at how to run a disciplinary procedure online. If universities can get this right, it will help avoid what are common and often stressful delays for students as their cases work through the system.

Inclusive practices in teaching and assessment

The necessity of moving to online provision of teaching, learning and assessment during the pandemic has been positive for many disabled students. Many universities have already or were in the process of mainstreaming common learning adjustments and building more inclusive practices into teaching and learning across the whole institution. Moving to more general provision means a reduction in the need for individual adjustments to be implemented once a disabled student identifies themselves to the institution and their needs assessed.

However, within some universities there has been strong resistance to adopting online teaching and assessment practices and in others the rollout has been very slow. The need to respond quickly to the pandemic has meant that "*inclusive teaching has been delivered in one fell swoop*" and the view that "*three-hour exams are essential has been blown out the water*". Universities will now be looking at other opportunities for using digital technology to support teaching and learning, and how best to translate these back into the classroom in the future.

Co-creation of services with students

There is also an opportunity for universities to actively listen to their students to fully understand what has or has not worked well for them through this crisis and co-create future services with them. More research and engagement are needed with current and future students to find out what they want the landscape to look like going forward as we begin to look beyond the pandemic.

Most student service directors do not expect universities or individuals to remain unchanged by the experience. We will "*now have a Covid-19 generation*" predominantly among Generation Z students, who are already quite different to previous generations. Therefore "*a whole new way of thinking is likely to be needed post-hoc*". More research will be required on how to support students of different types and with a variety of needs, and how this support can be delivered consistently.

Conclusions

We can assume from the discussions with this sample of university student service directors that most student service teams, at least in the traditional university part of the sector, will be sufficiently resourced and mandated to be providing virtual support to their students well in these challenging circumstances. Indeed, the Office for Students' briefing note [Supporting student mental health](#) concluded that "*staff in many universities and colleges have responded quickly to the need to deliver mental health support in different ways, and students and students' unions are showing resourcefulness and resilience in helping their peers.*" However, there is at least a risk that some smaller institutions and alternative and FE providers of HE may be faring less well and are insufficiently resourced to be able to provide the same levels of support to their students.

Throughout the crisis, university student services teams have relied heavily on informal networks and professional membership bodies such as AMOSSHE, ARC and AGCAS to share information and good practice. Some participants felt that there may be opportunity to coordinate and facilitate these conversations in a more systematic way. As well as the decisions by the UK Government on the big questions of financial support to the sector and for students in hardship, it will also be important to achieve a level of consistency across the sector, not least on when the next academic year will start. Likewise, up to date guidance is needed on a whole variety of more practical issues, such as the use of sector datasets from this year, how Tier 4 visas will apply in the current circumstances and ensuring that online assessments for disability support allowance will be accepted.

The longer the lockdown period and social distancing go on, and especially if next academic year is at least partially disrupted as well, the more likely we are to see longer term changes within student services in universities. Every institution will be affected financially and there are already concerns about the impact on budgets for student support in future across the sector. Although budgets will already be set in most institution for next academic year, there is a big caveat to this. A clear positive and unintended benefit of the pandemic has been increased recognition of the importance of student, and to a lesser extent staff, wellbeing at all levels within universities.

SUMS' consultants are gathering in-depth views from university leaders across the full breadth of university operations. We'll be publishing their service-by-service findings later this month. [Register here to receive your copy of our full sector report.](#)

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