

randstad  
student support

virtual roundtable  
roundup.

# what we did.



## adapting our way of working.

At Randstad, we aim to organise multiple roundtable sessions throughout the year, which are open to all HEI colleagues to attend. These sessions are there to discuss topical issues in higher education, whilst also offering a unique opportunity to network with colleagues from different institutions.

We usually run these sessions face-to-face, however, given the current circumstances we moved to online roundtables in August 2020. We are pleased to report that we had over 50 attendees across four sessions, where we discussed universities' responses to lockdown, and mental health provision - something that is even more important than in previous years.

As promised, we are anonymously sharing some of the key points that were raised across all the roundtables, from how HEIs are communicating to their students, to how online learning is going to be set up.



# the detail - session 1

## university response to lockdown.

We have categorised all contributors' responses into 7 different sections:

- Communication to students
- Student numbers
- Welcome weeks
- Learning
- Accommodation
- Exams
- Student support

### Communication to students.

The overarching key point was that communicating with all parties regularly is going to be extremely important during the 20/21 academic year. Some notable points were:

- Having one central team in charge of managing messages out to staff and students. Student wise, it's key to send a different message to prospective students than existing
- In terms of speaking to students around deferring, the focus is on 1st years, as it's unlikely that 2nd or 3rd years would defer
- On campuses, there are social distancing signs, hand sanitiser stations, and increased cleaning
- One way systems will be introduced where possible

### Student numbers.

Many HEIs were concerned around student numbers dropping for not only 20/21, but also 21/22. This covers both national and international students, with international applications already being down. Most HEIs had no plans to reduce tuition fees for 20/21. Some notable points were:

- Universities were concerned about balancing their face to face and online offering, as they did not want students to choose different universities with different offers
- Some have introduced a special scheme of study for international students - whole course online term by term. This has also helped to combat time differences
- UK students have been questioning whether they can defer due to not wanting to pay for accommodation whilst not being based around the university

### Welcome weeks.

For the vast majority, welcome weeks and introductory lectures will be taking place online, with some extending the week to a month to compensate. HEIs said that:

- Students have to complete a video at enrolment with a tour of uni and questions to answer
- Meet the team and meet the lecturers will be held online, with a mix of pre recorded and live streamed content
- They are worried about students arriving and mixing with the locals - Not following rules and risk of increased cases. So, they have worked with local councils to put a plan in place and reassure locals
- International students have the option to come two weeks early / rest of students start after
- They may introduce a traffic light system for inductions, appointments and learnings: red - everything online / amber - blended / green - on site

Tailoring communications to different year groups is key.

Universities need to work on balancing face-to-face and online offerings.

Welcome weeks will be held online for the vast majority.



# the detail - session 1

## university response to lockdown.

Of course, responses to lockdown will vary across universities, depending on location, size, and course offering.

### Learning.

As with the welcome weeks, it is likely that the vast majority of learning will take place online, with some exceptions where courses demand practical elements. Some HEIs have already invested in additional software to enable automatic captioning when teaching online. Plus, staff have already had experience with using online software, and managing team meetings using video calls. Some key discussion points about teaching and learning are as follows:

- HEIs need to be prepared for circumstances changing all the time. The ideal is blended learning with some face to face sessions guaranteed, which will be organised on a school level
- There is no plan to enforce bubbles but social distancing will be recommended
- Some universities are following FE approach of two cohorts - one week in one week out
- Less physical space will be needed on campuses. People who have been awarded degrees are coming back in September to finish so normal term start moved back to October
- Students will be allowed on site in term 1 to use equipment needed for degrees but teaching will be online
- Degrees are very practical - questions around how to support students with medical needs who are already shielding to engage with on-campus activities

- Modules are being rearranged to enable coursework to be done first then practical later in the year
- In some cases, HEIs have introduced an application form students can complete to opt out of any on campus teaching and do everything online if want to
- Risk assessments carried out for all students returning to campus
- Students have said that they prefer virtual sessions, and this has increased attendance
- HEIs need to maintain the university experience within social distancing measures, as coming onto campus is a key part of this for many students
- One university has a live FAQs page - directing all applicants to this as most current source of information
- All staff and students to wear face masks on campus - however, HEIs need to consider deaf students who lip read

### Accommodation.

With students being locked down in university accommodation, or not taking up their accommodation offers due to cost, many HEIs are considering their accommodation offers, for example:

- Having a skeleton team on campus and the lowest amount of students living on campus compared to other years
- Having less accommodation available to enable social distancing
- Concerns over testing - how quickly can we get students showing symptoms tests, to lessen the impact on other students



# the detail - session 1

## university response to lockdown.

### Exams.

Many HEIs already have experience in managing unusual exam circumstances. Some key points are as follows:

- No detriment policy in terms of examinations and grading
- New policy for mitigating circumstances - no need to go to panel or submit medical evidence
- Reasonable adjustments needed for students with sensory impairments

### Student support.

As with support last term and over the summer, the majority of non-medical helper and counselling support will be conducted remotely across all HEIs, with face-to-face being offered on a case by case basis. Some HEIs said:

- Happy to have DSA support remotely for the duration of term one due to lack of space and to comms this out more of an assumptive approach rather than offer face to face. Only offer face to face for those who NEED it and not offer as first port
- Demand for services has increased across the board - looking at group support around bereavement and anxiety
- Most ASD students are finding remote delivery more preferable, but this raises a concern around whether they are getting enough social contact
- Difficult to judge how orientation support will take place for MH and ASD students
- Struggles around diagnostic assessments - pushed around students who haven't been able to go through the DSA process - uni funded support needed in the interim



# the detail - session 2

## university mental health provision.

We have categorised all contributors' responses into 4 different sections:

- Counselling services
- International students
- Demand levels
- Accessibility

### Counselling services.

Most HEIs reported that they had seen an increase in demand for counselling and mental health support over the recent months - in keeping with our findings that 69% of students felt that the pandemic had negatively affected their mental health. Some key points raised are as follows:

- More enquiries about mental health to student services now - mainly around relatives with covid, and how this has negatively impacted students' mental health
- Many HEIs have in house counsellors working remotely, but they are very stretched: massive waiting lists, struggling with managing and triaging remotely
- Plans for mental health advisers to do drop ins for academic staff to discuss problem students / embedding team in to schools
- Where possible, HEIs have increased the size of their existing counselling and mental health teams, for example by appointing additional mental health leaders

### International students.

As discussed in session one, there was lots of concern around international students' mental wellbeing:

- International students are more anxious and wary of coming back.
- Some couldn't go home in the first place as no flights to their country, so are isolated and alone in their accommodation

### Demand levels.

As mentioned above, demand on services has increased across the board:

- Some vulnerable students actually in a better position since being around parents and studying remotely, but some who were not vulnerable previously are now struggling
- HEIs are struggling with loss of revenue so will be hard to get budget for more services
- Services are receiving long emails asking for help but it's really hard to judge from that what the problem is (can't see body language, some students don't go on camera)
- Impetus of arranging support getting lost with online working from staff as everything is taking longer - fear that students will drop of the radar

69% of students felt the pandemic had negatively affected their mental health.

Enquiries about mental health support to student services have increased.

Some students who previously were not struggling with mental health, now are.



# the detail - session 2

## university mental health provision.

With the majority of learning staying online for the foreseeable future, accessibility for all students needs to be considered.



### Accessibility.

With the vast majority of teaching and support expected to be remote, this understandably raises questions of accessibility for all student groups. Some HEIs have already implemented steps to help disabled students, such as running early starter programmes, adding live chat to their website, and offering voice calls instead of video calls. Additionally, most student hubs are planning to open, but with only skeleton staff in, with break out rooms where immediate online support can take place.

Some HEIs also felt that there is a real opportunity ahead to actually make services more accessible: flexibility of assessments, lectures now being recorded. Some points discussed are as follows:

- University staff used to walk students down to student services rather than deal with student situations themselves. Now as they'll be less staff in student services available, university lecturers will be trained to deal with these themselves which they are feeling anxious about
- During welcome week, they'll also have a virtual 'anxiety induction' and social mentoring on offer for those students who have ASD / tour of campus to put at ease
- Many have introduced lifetools workshops - similar content to counseling, techniques for anxiety, sleeplessness etc. These sessions have been carefully worded to eliminate stigma - eg student resilience not student mental health
- Increased use of apps to help students set goals and manage finances etc. Also, topics that students were interested in finding out about (such as campus tours) are being recorded and put online as videos or podcasts
- HEIs will need to focus more on returning students - the new way of working won't be a change for the new students, it's more of a challenge for the returning students due to disruption to university experience
- Interim mentoring recommended from the wellbeing team whilst the student applies for DSA - This is to increase



# reach out.

Whilst we foresee that the vast majority of additional support such as mentoring, study skills support and counselling will take place remotely this academic year, we are aware that some students will require face to face support. We have developed a blended support offering for our students and partner institutions for the 2020/21 academic year.

We will be ensuring both the non-medical helper and Randstad office teams are undertaking covid awareness training and that our processes are in line with Government and and specific university guidance, so that we are ready to go with both remote and face-to-face delivery. This way, we can ensure that those students who are unable to access or uncomfortable with virtual sessions are not left behind.

If you would like to discuss how we can support your students, please get in touch via [this contact form](#), or by using the below details:

[student.support@randstad.co.uk](mailto:student.support@randstad.co.uk)

0161 247 8800

[randstad.co.uk](https://randstad.co.uk)



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