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How are universities supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has had an enormous impact on students. COVID-19 has meant students have been forced to isolate themselves and do their learning online, usually while paying extremely high university and accommodation fees.

Going to university should be an exciting time. Not only is it a chance to study something you're interested in and a first step towards a career, it's also when many people leave home to live independently for the first time.

The last year has been very different, however. Of a survey of more than 4,000 students by the NUS in 2020, over half said their [mental health](#) has deteriorated or been affected negatively by COVID-19.

Many students have found themselves locked down in their halls of residence alone, with their lectures and lessons all online. Others have been forced to continue paying for expensive housing, despite not being able to live there. Those [self-isolating](#) in halls have had to rely on universities delivering food to them, a system which has proved unreliable for many students.

Lonely and isolated

"There are a number of ways in which the pandemic is affecting students, including the move towards online teaching for the majority of courses," says Laura Brown, editor at [Save The Student](#). "Not only does this limit the social interaction of students, leading to an increased risk of [loneliness](#) and [isolation](#), but we've heard from numerous students who find online learning significantly more difficult.

"As well as this, a lot of students have the added stress of paying for accommodation that they are unable to access due to lockdown restrictions. In fact, based on the results from our recent [National Student Accommodation Survey](#), we estimate that nearly £1 billion has been wasted by students on unusable accommodation so far this academic year."

Only 45% of students agreed to some extent that they are sleeping well, with feelings of love and belonging falling since the summer, the NUS found. Fewer than two thirds said they have sufficient contact with other people, leaving them feeling [lonely](#).

A separate survey of 2,000 students, by the [Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS), found that 57% of those who participated reported a worsening in their mental health and well-being during the autumn term. A further 63% felt COVID-19 posed either a big or significant risk to their mental or physical health.

Impact on international students

While all students have been negatively affected by COVID-19, international students have been hit especially hard. Students from abroad face higher fees, are further from friends and family at home, and may be less likely to engage with university well-being services.

"A student's basic needs, such as suitable housing, food, and enough money to cover the cost of living, are crucial prerequisites for them to be able to achieve academically and to support their [mental health](#)," says Rosie Tressler, CEO of the charity [Student Minds](#).

"Even before the pandemic, international students faced additional challenges meeting these needs, such as culture shock and [isolation](#) from loved ones, xenophobia, visa-based employment restrictions, higher fees, and more."

So what support and resources are available for students during the pandemic?

Support for students

Mental health support

Universities have their own mental health services which often provide [counselling or talking therapies](#). Students can access these via their university's website. Therapy sessions provide a safe space for people to talk through their worries, emotions or feelings without judgement with a trained professional. At the moment, most therapy sessions will be carried out via a video call or over the phone.

Student Unions will be able to provide guidance regarding accessing support, as will lecturers or professors too.

"I would encourage any student who is struggling with their mental health to approach their university's mental health services. These services should currently be available online so students can access the support, regardless of where they're staying," says Brown.

Students struggling with their mental health can also get in touch with their GP or refer themselves for [NHS talking therapy](#). There are also a number of [mental health helplines](#) that students can contact, such as the [Samaritans](#) (116 123). Charities including [Student Minds](#) and [Mind](#) also provide support and advice.

People can also access online support and information via [Elefriends](#) – run by the charity Mind – and [Big White Wall](#), a safe and anonymous peer support community. [Moodgym](#) is an interactive online self-help book that students can access at any time, and [Every Mind Matters](#) is a useful online tool to help you manage and maintain your mental health.

It's also important to speak to family, friends and other students about how you feel. "Talking about how they're feeling will be the first step to getting help, and things always feel easier to deal with when there's someone else there who knows and understands what you're going through," Brown says.

Financial support

Accessing hardship funding can be daunting, but it's important to remember that the pandemic has affected millions of people financially. So if you are struggling with money, you're not alone.

In the short term, students struggling with money can contact the financial support services at university. "They should have hardship funds set aside for students who are struggling with money to help them get by," Brown says.

"On top of applying for the government's Student Loans if they're eligible, I would recommend that students look into the [scholarships, grants and bursaries](#) which could be available to them. There is a lot of money that might be accessible, but not all students realise they could be eligible for these funds."

Organisations including [The Scholarship Hub](#) and [Turn2Us](#) offer support and advice about accessing grants. Student bank accounts often offer no-fee and interest-free overdrafts which can be helpful for students in a tight spot. Students can reach out to the charity [Unipol](#) for information and support around student housing.

At the start of February, the [Government announced £50m](#) of hardship funds for university students. "A means-tested fund of £50m is a start, but not nearly enough to make a noticeable difference for the majority of students," says Tressler.

"If the demand for this hardship funding is as high as we would expect, processing funding applications could place a significant administrative burden on university and students' union staff. This could delay the distribution of funds.

Safety on-campus

Although students want to return to normality, the thought of heading back to campuses and in-person lectures post-COVID can be [stressful](#). However, universities and educational institutions are working hard to ensure students stay safe after they return.

Universities are offering free testing, engaging in contact tracing, enforcing social distancing and limiting the number of people in confined areas. Some institutions are also offering socially distanced activities like online quizzes so students can stay in touch with each other safely.

"We have seen universities closely following announcements from the government to ensure any in-person teaching, as and when it returns, is done as safely and responsibly as possible," says Brown.

"Last summer, we heard from universities who were increasing cleaning, and introducing additional measures such as one-way systems and safety protocols for visitors. We would expect to see the same level of effort to keep students safe when they return."

Stephen Buckley, head of information at [Mind](#), says every university has a responsibility for the welfare and well-being of their students.

"Encouragingly, universities are increasingly investing in new measures to support students and staff experiencing poor [mental health](#), for example, by strengthening and raising the profile of counselling services, offering drop-in-therapy sessions, and signposting to appropriate sources of help," he says.

"Peer support networks for students can be useful too. Through [Mind's Mentally Healthy Universities Programme](#) we are publishing a series of short animations to support students with their mental health."

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