

Briefing on mental health and wellbeing support provided by Alliance universities

All our member universities take a whole university approach, embedded in strategy, to supporting the mental wellbeing of their students; promoting positive mental health whilst delivering early interventions to prevent crisis. The health and wellbeing of staff and students has been at the forefront of our response to the pandemic and was key to ensuring teaching and learning continued effectively.

At the start of the pandemic, Alliance universities moved quickly to secure the continued access of support services by establishing online provision, along with developing new resources and approaches to support students with specific anxieties and mental health issues related to COVID-19. As students have returned to campus, our members have sought to maintain a blended approach to support services, combining continued online access with designated private spaces on campuses where students can access the services remotely. This service has been especially important for those students who do not have the necessary IT infrastructure or space in their homes suitable for accessing confidential services. Our members are reporting increased demand for their services, which is expected to continue over the coming year.

Alliance universities strive to take a collaborative approach within the university, especially with the Students' Union, and with external partners such as the NHS, local authorities, the voluntary sector, schools, and colleges. Although the crisis has enabled greater joined-up working with many of these partners, there are still concerns that students may fall through the gaps, particularly where NHS services are at capacity, and in accessing long-term therapies.

Alongside the frontline support services offered to students, all Alliance universities have been proactively working to help all students manage their health and wellbeing and maintain social connections between each other, including running online sports clubs and societies and social virtual outreach initiatives.

Examples of supporting student mental health and wellbeing throughout COVID-19, including those self-isolating

1. **Coventry University** has developed the **Connections Matter** initiative, running alongside the already established **Mental Health Zone**, to ensure that staff and students stay connected not only with their immediate teams and peers, but also across the wider

group. It is an online platform which gives access to both staff and students to online resources and activities to stay connected with each other and support them to stay healthy, both physically and mentally. Some examples of what the platform offers include home activity ideas from the Coventry University nursery, tips on working remotely while caring for others and support to explain COVID-19 to young children. Since March Coventry University Group subject experts have curated 367 health and wellbeing resources which have been sent out to students and staff via a weekly email. Between March to September 2020, there have been over 20,000 interactions by staff on the Connections Matter portal and during the same time period over 16,000 interactions by students who either accessed the portal from an email or without prompting.

2. **Coventry University** appointed **fifty student ambassadors** located in several different areas around the campus to help inform, educate and assist those on site to follow the new rules and regulations in place, designed specifically to minimise the transmission of COVID-19 on campus and provide a peer-to-peer support network.
3. The **University of Hertfordshire** has been delivering care packages, food, vouchers, providing access to food banks and their Community Fridge scheme to students on campus and in the local area and by post to students who may commute. Security teams have been helping them to deliver shopping to students who are isolating or in quarantine and all the teams, including their local Police and Environmental Health Officer team, help deliver care packages to students living off campus in the local area. As well as offering self-isolation advice and support for students, the **University of Hertfordshire** runs the [Active Students programme](#), designed to keep students entertained and active during quarantine.
4. **Oxford Brookes University** has set up a **comprehensive support service**, including an online reporting form which allows students to inform the University that they are going into self-isolation. They are then allocated a case worker, who regularly checks in on the household to check on the welfare of the students, arrange any support as needed and help with the delivery of essential supplies such as food and medication.
5. In addition to the continued work of student support services, **Oxford Brookes University** has partnered with FIKA to put in place free resources for Oxford Brookes' students, and have promoted this free use of the **FIKA Mental Fitness App** to students, alongside the free **Headspace App**.
6. **Anglia Ruskin University (ARU)** runs the **Safe Behaviours Ambassadors initiative**. Ambassadors model the safe behaviours from the ARU community pledge and demonstrate how they deliver a safe environment. As of October 2020, there are a total of 17 trained Safe Behaviour Ambassadors working across Cambridge, Chelmsford and

Peterborough all of whom are students, providing a friendly face on campus and a peer-to-peer support network.

7. Most Alliance Universities offer access to the Big White Wall, now known as **Togetherall**, an online service which provides a safe space for students to share their experiences but also gives access to various tools and courses. The **University of Greenwich** was the first university in the UK to extend access to all current and prospective students.
8. The **University of Hertfordshire** works with the **Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust (HPFT)**, which provides mental health and specialist learning disability services across Hertfordshire. As part of this partnership, there is a dedicated mental health nurse on campus in addition to the University wellbeing team of counsellors.
9. **Teesside University's** new Student Life Building integrates the physical and digital to support diverse learner needs and bring all student facing services together under one roof - providing students with access to a single point of contact for advice and guidance and wellbeing support. Going into lockdown, the University moved Student Life provision online, ensuring that this mirrored the physical offering, with the new Enquiry Management System used to respond to queries. The University also offers a Faith and Reflection Service to help identify those in need of support by working closely with religious leaders in the community.
10. **UWE Bristol** has established a series of **online wellbeing initiatives** to encourage social connectivity, including virtual global cafes, creative writing, online music sessions, virtual volunteering opportunities and a big carpet picnic. This is alongside an extensive existing social prescribing programme which has been transitioned online and allows students to engage in art, exercise and walking activities as a treatment.

Support for particular groups of students

Alliance universities continue to work hard to support the diverse needs of their student communities.

Care experienced students

Recognising the particular challenges facing **care-experienced, estranged and young adult carers**, a number of Alliance universities have introduced free accommodation and targeted financial and pastoral support. Care-leavers have often gone straight from care provision to university and may not have a home to return to in the holidays along with limited financial support. **Kingston University** has created a specific support package including proactive regular contact to check on their wellbeing, emergency grants to help with financial hardship and accommodation costs and also graduation bursaries for Kingston University Cares students

exiting the University this year into challenging circumstances. **Coventry University** is introducing a new scheme providing up to 10 student care leavers free accommodation in University-owned student halls for the duration of their course, starting with new students joining in September. During lockdown, **UWE Bristol's** Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity team made over 100 calls and sent over 300 emails to UWE Cares students to ensure they had contact with someone and were supported with the transition to online learning.

Postgraduate research students

Postgraduate research students face unique challenges and anxieties due to uncertainty about future funding, extensions, and concerns about the impact of the pandemic on research opportunities. They are also likely to experience increased isolation during this period given the absence of structured learning/engagement opportunities. Through University Alliance's flagship **Doctoral Training Alliance**, University Alliance is supporting PGR students by organising an enhanced support system through virtual networking and engagement opportunities, and producing a handbook signposting available support across our member institutions. The DTA is also utilising student surveys and a newly formed student representative network to monitor, track and respond to student wellbeing and experience.

Allied healthcare professionals

As a vital provider of training for the next generation of healthcare workers, some Alliance universities are offering specific support for **Allied Health Professionals** who are working in practice, in response to the unprecedented difficulties that NHS frontline staff are facing during this COVID-19 outbreak, including extreme work pressures and psychological distress. **Teesside University** offered counselling and remote support for students to discuss any anxieties which are related to their clinical practice.

At **Coventry University**, compassion and Mindfulness sessions were provided for paramedics and nurses who were undertaking the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care course, a top-up degree course designed for qualified clinicians. The sessions focused on showing participants how to calm the nervous system through meditation and breathing exercises. The sessions were offered to all 213 students on the course.

Commuting students

Alliance universities have a diverse student body, and many have a majority of their students commuting from the local community. These students have faced particular challenges during the pandemic, and Alliance universities have taken steps to ensure they have the right support available. Many commuting students will struggle with digital and spatial disadvantage,

meaning they do not have the necessary IT infrastructure or space in their homes suitable for accessing confidential services. Along with donating and loaning IT equipment, Alliance universities have ensured private spaces on campus remain open where students can access support services remotely.

International students

For many universities, their international students have been amongst the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis, many being isolated from friends and family hundreds if not thousands of miles from home and struggling financially due to either loss of part time work or problems with the banks in their home countries. Alliance universities have targeted support in place for international students and have dedicated communications to ensure support is received.

Teesside University have an FAQ section on their website which covers COVID-19 related issues specifically for international students, as do the **University of Brighton and Leeds Beckett University**. **Birmingham City University** made a Pledge in September to all international students stating that their safety and security will be a priority this academic year. **Coventry University's** Connections Matter initiative is an online platform which gives access to both staff and students to online resources from the university as well as external sources and has a dedicated section on international Student Support.

Students in need of financial assistance and digital infrastructure

All Alliance universities have enhanced existing hardship funds and introduced targeted support through grants and loans for students experiencing heightened financial difficulties during this period. Collectively, Alliance universities have spent £6,905,382 for 2019/20 and £3,464,200 for 2020/21 on hardship funds.

The **University of Hertfordshire** has introduced a COVID-19 Fund which has helped 530 students who were struggling with loss of employment, rents, overseas payments and caring responsibilities. **Birmingham City University** has introduced a specific £500k funding package to support students financially hit by the outbreak, with grants of £200 available for up to 2,500 students who get into financial difficulty. Some Alliance universities have also introduced specific funds to support health professional, teaching and social care students who are working on the front line to support our communities during the pandemic. The **University of Brighton** for example is providing grants of up to £200 to fund practical solutions to any barriers preventing study or engagement in the frontline response, such as travel and other critical costs.

Alliance universities are also acutely aware of the challenge students face in terms of digital poverty, with many students struggling to get access to both the hardware and software needed for their studies during lockdown, with many previously relying on coming onto campus to access the technology they needed. All Alliance universities have been supporting students experiencing digital disadvantages by arranging doorstep deliveries on a wide range of digital equipment including laptops and internet dongles, and providing specific grants and loans for digital equipment and access

The **Coventry University Welfare Fund** released more than £100,000 into the Student Emergency Fund to ensure it could support as many students as possible. Some of the money was spent on laptops to be loaned to students who did not have access to such hardware when the physical campus was closed. The **University of South Wales** loaned out over 200 items of IT equipment, and **UWE Bristol** introduced a flat rate scheme offering £300 for IT equipment and a top up for mobile broadband, available to all final year students and all levels of nursing, midwifery, paramedic and the allied health professions courses. 460 students have taken up their scheme. Alliance universities are also extending this support to incoming students, for example the **University of Hertfordshire** are providing IT equipment to facilitate the transition of incoming Herts Success students who do not have a laptop.