

Coronavirus Briefing note

Office for
Students

OfS

Note 5 10 June 2020

Information, advice and guidance for prospective students

Introduction

By the middle of January, over 568,000 prospective students had applied to university through UCAS.¹ Only a few months later, the coronavirus pandemic has created a huge amount of uncertainty in the decision-making process for these and many more subsequent applicants.

All potential students deserve to receive good information, advice and guidance (IAG) to enable them to make informed choices. Some elements of IAG are covered by consumer protection law, which continues to apply during the pandemic.² But the current lockdown and social distancing measures mean that the kinds of face-to-face and campus-based activities schools, colleges, universities and other organisations would normally offer to provide this support are off the table for the foreseeable future.

This briefing note looks at how universities, colleges and others are responding to the challenges of delivering high-quality IAG to prospective students through different channels, especially in the context of imminent decision deadlines. It does not stipulate particular approaches or endorse the actions of specific institutions, and it does not constitute regulatory guidance. Its purpose, rather, is to highlight the practical steps universities, colleges and others are taking to ensure that prospective students are as well-equipped as possible in the circumstances to make the best decisions for them.

The note's focus is on prospective students of all ages looking to start an undergraduate course in the 2020-21 academic year. However, it

Working with universities, colleges and other stakeholders, the Office for Students (OfS) is producing a series of briefing notes on the steps universities and colleges are taking to support their students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The notes do not represent regulatory advice or guidance – their focus is on sharing ideas and responses, and signposting to further information. In particular, providers should read the OfS's regulatory guidance on consumer protection published in June 2020.

The briefing notes reflect current information as at date of publication in a rapidly evolving situation.

It is important to note that higher education is not the right route for everybody, and it is equally important that good IAG is available in relation to alternative options, including postgraduate study for those who are already in higher education.

While the OfS's remit extends only to higher education providers in England, the approaches to IAG highlighted in this note will be relevant for students from across the UK and beyond who are considering studying at English universities and colleges.

The importance of good information, advice and guidance

Applying to university or college can be a daunting experience even when the application cycle is operating as normal. There is a wealth of information available about higher education, but research has shown that the landscape can feel cluttered, confusing and even overwhelming to prospective students.³ More information does not necessarily result in better decisions if students

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

don't have the right support to make sense of what they are seeing.

Prospective students need to access information and advice that is impartial, accessible and as complete as possible given the circumstances, so that they can explore their options, refine their thinking and make informed choices based on their own preferences, needs, priorities and aspirations. This has become even more important amid the current uncertainty about how the coronavirus pandemic will affect higher education in the next few months and over the longer term.

Previous polling conducted by YouthSight for the OfS found that prospective students were more likely to consult their parents, teachers and friends or peers than websites, careers advisers or staff at a higher education provider to help them make choices about what and where to study.⁴ Some prospective students and others may be disadvantaged by this reliance on members of their immediate circles.

Better informed choices can result in more students completing their studies and achieving positive employment and study outcomes. And there are broader societal benefits from individuals having a successful higher education experience, with graduates making huge contributions to the economy and public services.

The current challenge

For prospective students

For all students looking to start higher education this year, regardless of what route they are taking to get there, the admissions process and factors affecting their decisions about what, where and how to study now look significantly different from those they would have anticipated just a few months ago. Changes to the assessment of Level 3 qualifications and a lack of certainty about whether, or to what extent, campuses will have reopened by the autumn are clearly significant issues for prospective students. These factors also create challenges for universities and colleges in providing information for prospective students, but it is important to note that their legal obligations to do so remain in place.

At this stage of the academic year, applicants who are still in school or further education could normally expect to be receiving input from their teachers and other advisers on their choices. But in challenging circumstances, prioritising core curriculum delivery can result in this input being overlooked or reduced.

Recent polling by YouthSight for the Higher Education Policy Institute found that although nearly eight in 10 applicants did not plan to change their first-choice institution as a result of the pandemic, around a third of applicants felt less confident that they would get a place at their chosen institution, and only around half felt that the information they were getting from the universities or colleges they had applied to was

good.⁵ Meanwhile, the Sutton Trust found that working-class applicants were more likely to be worried about the impact the pandemic would have on their chances of getting into university than their middle-class peers. Almost a fifth of the applicants surveyed had changed their mind on going to university or were now uncertain about whether to go, and students from working-class backgrounds were more likely to have decided not to go at all or changed their preferred choice of institution.⁶ Regular polling by YouthSight for UCAS has found that, although students are primarily sticking with their choices, almost a third are considering their options, and those who were the first in their family to go to higher education, those at state schools, and those from black, Asian or minority ethnic groups were more likely to have changed their decision about university.⁷

Previous research for the OfS⁸ found that while students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds stood to benefit the most from good information, they were also least well placed to be able to access and understand it. The current situation presents new challenges for the most vulnerable applicants, who are less likely to have access to high-quality information, advice and guidance from parents or other family members with experience and up-to-date knowledge of higher education, and potentially less able to access their teachers remotely. The Sutton Trust found that applicants from working-class backgrounds were twice as likely to have insufficient access to the internet, computing devices or quiet space than those from middle-class homes.

Disabled prospective students may need access to specific advice and information around such issues as accessibility, teaching and inclusive practices, financial support and disability services. Prospective students expecting to start a higher education course this year might be concerned about how their university or college will make adjustments for them in the event that some or all learning and teaching needs to be delivered remotely.

For those who have accepted offers, the Student Room and TSR Insight's Navigating Changing Options Survey suggests that a priority is receiving practical information from their university or college about starting their course. This includes term dates, reading lists, and accommodation, as well as how learning will be delivered in the autumn, including the extent to which teaching is likely to be online.

TSR also points out that many prospective students who had not made their final decision before travel restrictions were put in place would have been planning to visit universities and colleges again for offer-holder days, interviews or auditions. Information about locations and the first-hand experience of visiting a university or college are high priorities for applicants in making their decisions but difficult to substitute through online or remote channels.

Izzy, who is hoping to study politics and international relations, said:

'It feels really difficult to even think about making decisions as so much is uncertain regarding social distancing measures and deferring. While I was previously planning to go to university this September (and still very much want to), the information I have got that all the lectures will be online until February and the possible lack of social life due to restrictions has me reconsidering. The university has been reasonably helpful with information, but it is hard to know what the situation will be come September. More information coming from universities about living in halls would be useful.'

Dan, who is hoping to study mechatronics and robotics engineering, said:

'Universities have been helpful, but no one knows how the pandemic will change over time and what this means for us, for example, rumours about having to do the first semester from home. Apart from coronavirus, my decisions about what and where to study have felt clear. I am considering deferring due to the virus, and feel that universities' ability to cope with students in pandemic conditions is now an important factor in my decision. I'm getting information from UCAS, school emails and university emails. I would like clearer information about how universities could deal with a possible second wave of COVID-19, and how they will deal with at-risk students (who may feel they have to defer this year for safety).'

Tanaya, who is hoping to study geography, said:

'As I will be the first person in my family to go to university and wanted to go university from a young age, waiting all this time to come to a point where universities are likely to be closed this academic year has made me [rethink] whether I want to go to university this year. I was really looking forward to the one-to-one interactions with my tutors and lecturers as well as joining societies but now it's all at stake due to this virus. I would like more information on how universities will take on students who probably have not fulfilled their entry requirements due to the new grading system for this academic year and how they will be supporting students when returning to normal university settings.'

Daniel, who is hoping to study history and politics, said:

'It is challenging due to the fact there is no consistency in experience across universities and no clarity as to what the university experience will be like. It's even harder for Year 12s though as they can't even go on open days. I see no point in deferring a year unless my grades don't come out as I hope (meaning I'd be forced into clearing), whereas when we were actually sitting exams I never considered any sort of deferring.'

George, who is hoping to study music, said:

'I made the same decision I would have but there's doubt about whether it's the right decision in the given climate. The university have been great with information about what each new change means for my education, but the uncertainty about results isn't great.'

For universities and colleges

Universities and colleges play a significant role in providing information, advice and guidance to prospective students and supporting their decision-making, for example through:

- providing prospectuses and detailed information on life at the institution
- open days, offer-holder days and campus tours
- talks in schools on topics including student finance, university life and personal statements
- attendance at careers and higher education fairs
- pre-entry careers advice

- online and telephone information and advice
- bespoke support to particular groups.

Some of these elements of IAG are covered by consumer protection law, which continues to apply during the pandemic. However, the ongoing lockdown and social distancing measures mean that such activities cannot currently be carried out face-to-face or on-campus. But simply moving this provision online is often easier said than done. For example, running online open days can be very resource-intensive, and typically relies on institutions having had video material (like virtual campus tours) available before the lockdown started. It can also be difficult to achieve a sense of community through video conferencing, especially when some participants may be unable to use the video function.

Approaches during the pandemic

The role of the OfS

The OfS is working to support students' decision making through a regularly updated coronavirus hub on the Discover Uni website, which we manage in partnership with the other UK funders and regulators.⁹ The new coronavirus hub includes information on key topics like school exams, the admissions process, student finance and additional information for particularly vulnerable groups. The hub also signposts students to other official and trustworthy sources of information. The OfS's FAQ for students also includes a section specifically for those applying to study in 2020-21.¹⁰

Uni Connect, funded by the OfS, brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners that offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college. The programme aims to increase the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education by focusing on local areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. Uni Connect partnerships have rapidly refocused some of their activity from long-term sustained outreach onto targeted IAG for Year 13 students who were due to start university or college in autumn 2020.

Online resources

Most universities and colleges have made static resources available on their websites for prospective students. These are resources that prospective students can access any time at their own pace, such as FAQs, virtual tours, videos of information talks and downloadable booklets or factsheets. Many universities have proactively contacted their applicants and offer holders by email or phone to direct them to these resources and let them know when any updates are

Leeds College of Music: Online open day and campus tour portal

Attending open days can be a significant part of students' decision about where to study, so Leeds College of Music has developed an online open day portal. This portal includes films of welcome talks, course talks and student panels at previous open days. It also allows prospective students to take a virtual tour around key areas of the campus, and houses all the information students need on applying, accommodation, funding and student support in one place. Students can access these resources at any time, and the conservatoire also hosts scheduled live video chat sessions with course leaders and student services teams.

published, especially to statements about starting term in September.

Collating this kind of information into one central hub may help prospective students navigate it more easily and find the information they need. Some universities and colleges have chunked content up by different student groups – like international or disabled students. This may help those students who are more likely to have extra questions about their own particular circumstances to access more easily the information that is most important to them. However, in collating information for applicants in this way, universities and colleges need to ensure that wider information is also drawn to students' attention, particularly where this is necessary to ensure they have an accurate picture of the commitments a provider is, or isn't, making.

UCAS has also created a dedicated site to provide students with information about coronavirus, including general support for students, mental health, qualification status and support around the application process.

Direct contact

Most universities and colleges have a team who can assist with specific questions from individual students, and have made contact details for these teams available prominently alongside other coronavirus content. This kind of support can be provided through online chat functions, email and telephone. Some have added specific coronavirus accounts to their Unibuddy profiles to encourage prospective students with concerns about the coming academic year to approach them directly. Through association with Unibuddy, UCAS is putting prospective students in touch with university ambassadors to find out more about what higher education is like, particularly if studying online.

Live events

Although some events have been unavoidably cancelled or postponed, most universities and colleges have been able to make some available in an online format. Virtual open, applicant and offer-holder days have very quickly become a hugely

Higher Horizons+: Online chats with staff

The Higher Horizons+ Uni Connect partnership, led by the University of Keele, has over the past few weeks been developing 45 online sessions which cover essential areas of support for young learners including IAG, revision skills, Ramadan wellbeing tips, wellbeing, learning from home and wider curriculum support. The partnership has added a safeguarded chat function to its website which enables staff members to respond directly to questions from learners, schools, colleges, parents and carers.

popular offering, and despite the challenges in running such events, there are potentially a number of advantages to this format:

- a. Live content can often be recorded and shared online so that students who are unable to attend at the set time can watch back at a time that suits them.
- b. Students who might normally be unable to attend open days far away from home because of the travel expenses may be more easily able to access virtual open days.
- c. Parents and carers who may not have been able to get time off work to attend open days in person might now be able to play a more active role in this part of their child's decision-making process.

UCAS keeps a regularly updated list of virtual open days on its website.¹¹

Some universities and colleges have made higher education and careers fairs available online. These events are usually hosted by one institution but run in collaboration with others, and focus on advice about the whole higher education experience rather than on particular institutions. For example, Petroc College (a member of the Next Steps South West Uni Connect partnership) ran a virtual higher education fair in May which included a workshop about its own higher education provision, as well as talks on choosing subjects, student finance and student life from universities and colleges across south west England and south Wales.¹²

Some universities and colleges have identified potential safeguarding and data protection concerns around running video conferencing events where attendees have to sign in with personal accounts, especially where they are under 18. Similar safeguarding considerations affect any one-to-one activities.

The Sutton Trust has published top tips for online delivery, curated by its Pathways team who have recently moved all of their programming online.¹³ These include:

- making sure that timetabling is diverse and flexible to reflect the different user experience of attending online compared to face-to-face events
- completing risk assessments and developing safeguarding policies in tandem with making decisions about which technology platforms to use
- providing attendees with guides to sessions and the opportunity to pre-submit any questions for presenters ahead of time

FutureMe: One-to-one support

The North East Collaborative Outreach Programme, led by Newcastle University, has reviewed and repurposed its student-facing FutureMe activity in schools and colleges. FutureMe's 15 partner colleges are continuing to provide one-to-one support for students through virtual learning environments, telephone and online meetings. These activities are providing support for students transitioning to an online learning environment and needing to make progression decisions, particularly for those hoping to enter higher education in 2020. A variety of interventions such as virtual careers appointments, online study skills and platforms to enable students to create professional profiles that highlight their key and transferable skills are now underway. The partnership is also developing a study buddy app which will support students' academic learning, help foster strategies to build resilience and ease transition to higher education.

University of Exeter: Discover University digital programme

Discover University is a new collection of web-based activities and resources to help pupils make informed choices about their future and their potential progression to university, created by the widening participation and UK student recruitment team at the University of Exeter.¹³ The digital programme – which has received positive feedback from schools – includes a Facebook Live lecture series, livestreamed advice and guidance workshops, a range of video resources on a dedicated YouTube Channel, a teacher-focused Twitter feed, online subject conferences, and promotion of existing research and interactive tools to help develop knowledge and skills. The lecture series, led by academics from a range of different disciplines, covers subjects such as climate change, mental health and Brexit. Meanwhile, live advice and guidance sessions cover topics such as degree apprenticeships, choosing a course, student life and making the most of online open days.

- practising presentations, testing cameras and microphones, and deciding on any 'housekeeping' rules before sessions start.

Social media

Most universities and colleges are using their social media channels to engage with students who have accepted offers to study with them in

2020-21 and those who are holding offers but still making decisions. For example, the University of Sussex collected prospective students' questions through an Instagram Live event, and subsequently published a video from a member of its recruitment team answering the top five.¹⁴

While social media can be an effective tool for direct conversations with prospective students, it is important to note that some international students who are still in their home countries may be barred from some channels or find it easier because of time differences to watch a recording later.

The role of UCAS

UCAS has direct links to 700,000 applicants and 10,000 advisers each cycle, and has been regularly communicating with this audience to ensure a high level of awareness of the current situation.

UCAS has enhanced its information, advice and guidance provision in response to school closures and changes to the process for awarding grades this year, to ensure that students understand how these factors may impact on their progression to higher education. UCAS has worked extensively with government departments and regulators across the UK to ensure that messages are relevant and personalised for students' individual and diverse circumstances, and also works with key agencies, such as the Student Loans Company and access charities, to provide students with third party content. Last year, UCAS launched the UCAS Hub, a personalised, digital space that delivers this information and advice to students based on their preferences and context.

The navigation of the UCAS website has been revised to support the upsurge in virtual open days and events and to highlight UK-wide student finance content from the Student Loans Company and other relevant agencies. It has also held a series of Facebook Live events which have attracted an audience of around 100,000, involving key decision-makers like the Universities Minister Michelle Donelan MP as panellists.

UCAS: Partnership with BBC Bitesize

Through a new partnership with the BBC, UCAS is addressing student and applicant concerns around topics such as mental health, changes to the summer results process and common myths about higher education. Going forward, UCAS plans to work with social mobility charities to develop content that will support underrepresented students in getting the most out of online resources.

Edge Hill University: University at home

Edge Hill University has launched University at Home, a weekly timetable of live, virtual events providing prospective students with up-to-date and impartial information, advice and guidance.

The university's education liaison team delivers five sessions a day through the Blackboard Collaborate platform, which can be accessed on laptops, computers, phones and tablets. There are sessions for students from Year 7 up to Year 13 (and Year 14 in Northern Ireland) and Access to Higher Education students, covering topics including study skills, introduction to higher education, student finance and personal statements. There is also a range of subject-specific sessions for students who are interested in particular disciplines or careers, including medicine and teaching, as well as sessions in the evenings for parents and carers.

Sessions can be booked up to three weeks in advance, and students can receive recordings to watch back afterwards. Teachers and advisers can also book in bespoke sessions to be delivered to a group of their students learning from home on dates and times of their choice to fit in with virtual teaching timetables.

The deadline for applicants to make decisions on any offers they are holding through UCAS has already been extended to allow them to take the time to properly assess their options and make the decision that is right for them.¹⁶ Clearing will go live on 6 July, and ordinarily there are over 35,000 courses available for students to review if they wish. UCAS has enhanced the Clearing system this year with the introduction of Clearing Plus, a service that matches unplaced students with relevant opportunities when they become unplaced. UCAS will offer a range of individual support, through email and social media and over the phone.

Conclusion

Prospective students are making extremely significant decisions about their future at a time of huge uncertainty. It has never been more important to ensure that they can access good information, advice and guidance. This briefing note has highlighted some of the ways that universities, colleges and third sector organisations are working in partnership to meet this need.

Resources and information

The OfS – We support prospective students directly through the Discover Uni website, the official, impartial source of data, advice and guidance on higher education in the UK. We manage this site in partnership with the other UK higher education funding bodies and regulators, the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Scottish Funding Council.¹⁷ We also convene an IAG advisory group made up of representatives from many of the organisations listed below. This group works collaboratively to consider what constitutes high-quality IAG, to identify and fill gaps in provision, and to join up work more effectively so that all different student groups are provided for and the full range of options is promoted.

UCAS – UCAS provides information, advice and admissions services to guide applicants through the admissions process for higher education courses including undergraduate, conservatoires, teacher training and some postgraduate.¹⁸

Student Loans Company – The Student Loans Company administers loans and grants to students in universities and colleges in the UK. The company has issued guidance for prospective and current students on student finance during the pandemic. Online services and information on financial support for prospective students are available through the four devolved administration student finance websites.¹⁹

The Student Room and TSR Insight – The Student Room is an online community which links students up with their peers so they can hear from and ask questions of those who are on or have already been through the same decision-making journey as them.²⁰ It is the largest online engagement platform for students in the UK, with over 10 million monthly users. TSR Insight is the research arm of The Student Room, providing market research and insight, products and services, specialising in education and the youth market.²¹

League tables – League tables compile different pieces of information and data and weight them to produce university rankings. Prospective students can use these rankings as part of their wider research to inform their decision about where is the ‘best’ place to study the subject they are interested in, assuming their priorities match those of the league table.²¹

Universities and colleges – Individual universities and colleges provide information about their courses, pastoral services and study experience, and put prospective students in touch with staff and current students. Many are also involved in the OfS’s Uni Connect hubs across England, working in partnership with other universities and colleges to provide impartial IAG to young people and their parents.²² Universities and colleges are also subject to the requirement of consumer protection law and this places obligations on them in relation to the information they provide to prospective students.

Third sector organisations – A wide range of organisations work with schools, colleges and individual students – particularly the most vulnerable – to provide IAG, and to raise aspirations and attainment so that they are better prepared for higher education.

We thank those universities, colleges and other organisations that provided the case studies in this briefing note. We are grateful to the Sutton Trust, the Student Room and UCAS for sharing their insight. These case studies and interventions have been developed at pace and have not yet been evaluated for effectiveness. They are offered in the spirit of sharing practice that others may find useful and applicable in their own contexts.

Notes

¹ See <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2020/2020-cycle-applicant-figures-15-january-deadline>

² The OfS has published regulatory guidance on student and consumer protection that sets out the way in which consumer protection law applies and how the OfS will approach regulation in this area during the pandemic. See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-for-providers-about-student-and-consumer-protection-during-the-pandemic/>

³ See, for example, <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/research/publications/moments-choice>

⁴ See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/the-knowledge-bank-of-mum-and-dad-new-research-shows-how-students-turn-to-parents-in-making-university-choices/>

⁵ See <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/07/new-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-applicants-feel-less-confident-they-will-get-into-their-chosen-university-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

⁶ See <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-university-access/>. The Sutton Trust defines 'working-class' students as those from NRS social grade group C2DE, and 'middle-class' students as those from group ABC1. See <http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/> for more information.

⁷ See <https://www.ucasmedia.com/content/were-here-support-you>

⁸ See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/providing-information-advice-and-guidance-for-students/our-research/> for the report by CFE Research and the OfS's response

⁹ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/corona-covid-19-information/>

¹⁰ See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-guide-to-coronavirus/student-faq/>

¹¹ See <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/events/find>

¹² See <https://nextstepssw.ac.uk/events-and-activities/virtual-he-fair/>

¹³ See <https://www.suttontrust.com/top-takeaways-for-online-delivery/>

¹⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/DiscoverUniExe>

¹⁵ See <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/coronavirus-advice-for-applicants>

¹⁶ See <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/after-you-apply/coronavirus-covid-19/what-does-mean-your-application>

¹⁷ See <https://www.discoveruni.gov.uk>

¹⁸ See <https://www.ucas.com/>

¹⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/student-loans-company>

²⁰ See <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/> and <https://tsrmatters.com/>

²¹ See <https://tsrinsight.com/>

²² See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2019/jun/07/university-league-tables-2020> and <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings>

²³ See <https://www.ofsuniconnect.org/>