

Covid-19 risks: prepare, communicate and review

As students and staff become embedded into the 'new normal' of campus life we take a look at some of the practical issues affecting the Higher Education sector during the pandemic.

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Please note: the information contained in this legal update is correct as of the original date of publication.

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Wellbeing of young people

It will come as no surprise that young people are worried about the effects of COVID-19, with the top concerns being the effects on schools and universities, wellbeing, work and household finances. It will be important for universities to communicate regularly and often with their students, not only in relation to reminders about the symptoms of COVID-19 and when to self-isolate and get tested, but also in relation to the steps that universities are taking to safeguard student welfare. From organising food parcels to providing welfare support, the provision of information is key to working in partnership with students to ensure that they continue to be able to access their education safely. A successful partnership with students is also likely to result in them 'buying in' to the management of COVID-19, for example, by informing the university as soon as they experience any symptoms, are self-isolating or have a test result. This will enable universities to act quickly and potentially avoid large scale outbreaks.

In a recent blog post by the Chair of the Office for Student's student panel, 3 priority areas were outlined for Universities to consider. These are communication with students, access to food, medicine and other resources and addressing loneliness. Universities UK has also issued a new checklist (6 October 2020) as a guide to Universities who are supporting students who are required to self-isolate. The advice includes to stay in regular contact through the self-isolation period, ensure that students with declared disabilities have their specific needs supported, ensuring accommodation staff teams are trained in mental health awareness and working in close partnership with local health protection teams.

Outbreak management plans

By now, all universities will have in place their outbreak management plans and will be familiar with the national guidance. To ensure effective planning and management, a number of universities have been developing close relationships with their local authorities, public health protection teams and other universities in the region. By working in partnership in this way, universities can share ideas and good practice. In some instances, the mere fact of having these relationships in place can result in the timely sharing of information about local outbreaks, with agreed actions being put in place in the very early stages of an outbreak.

Decision making

Most universities have a gold command or other structure in place to deal with serious incidents and report to the Executive Board, so that decisions can be made with confidence. Regular meeting and reporting are essential to ensure that the Board has the information it needs to make proactive decisions and/or adjust the protocols it has in place, as the situation with COVID-19 evolves in different regions.

Risk assessment is a crucial tool in the decision-making process. As well as identifying risks and control measures, it also allows universities to give clear guidance to students and staff, both in relation to general day to day activities and more specific issues. For

example, in circumstances where students have gathered on university sites in breach of government guidelines on socialising, staff and students should be aware of how this will be dealt with by the university and what actions will be taken. Staff will need to understand when and in what circumstances they can safely intervene to ask students to disperse, when to leave the situation to protect their own health and safety, and when to escalate and to whom to escalate. Equally, students should be aware of how the university will deal with breaches of the guidelines, including the potential action the university can take and the consequences for them personally.

Blended Education – Christmas is not cancelled

At the end of September, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson told MPs that face-to-face teaching could be cancelled at the end of term and replaced with online learning, so that students can carry out a two-week quarantine before heading home. Updated guidance on how the Department for Education will be working with universities to ensure this can happen is awaited at the time of going to press. In the meantime, universities should have online platforms and online resources to enable students to continue their education if they are self-isolating. Universities should ensure that students can access and use teaching and resources online.

There will, of course, be a group of students who do stay in halls of residence or other university accommodation over the Christmas period, and universities should ensure that there are systems in place to make sure that they are safe and well.

Communication, communication, communication

The theme that runs through the pressures now being faced by universities, staff and students is the need to communicate effectively, regularly and quickly. Communication between staff, students, local health protection teams, Public Health, Executive Boards, senior leadership, other universities and local authorities is going to be an invaluable way of identifying outbreaks early, putting into place actions to manage the outbreak and, hopefully, breaking the chain of the virus.

This article was co-written by [Stephanie McGarry](#) and [Rachel Lyne](#). If you wish to discuss any of the themes raised in this article please contact either of the Partners using their contact details in the above links.

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