University Access, Student Success and COVID-19 in a Global Context

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KEY FINDINGS

• In order to look at how the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting higher education, particularly as it relates to issues of fair access and student success, a survey was undertaken from August to October 2020 involving 45 countries around the world, including nations across all continents.

• Of the countries surveyed, in 80% of cases university admissions had been disrupted. Where admission was disrupted in 75% of cases this was via some form of cancellation of examinations.

• Nonetheless, there was no evidence of long term change in admission systems and there has been a policy push to return to testing as soon as is practical. In the UK, while Wales have cancelled A Levels in 2021, the other nations currently remain committed to exams continuing in modified form with some delays.

• For low income/marginalised background students the main issues with disrupted admissions stem from the uncertainty this causes and digital poverty issues, as some examinations and tests are now online. However, in only one country (Australia) was there an example of special provisions in admission decisions due to COVID for low income/marginalised groups.

• In 60% of countries some form of additional financial support in place for low income students, usually as grants or reduced tuition fees, particularly in leading university systems and richer countries such as Australia, United States, Germany, France and Canada.

Other lower income countries have also invested, as have Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

• This is in sharp contrast to the lack of specific support provided in England, and shows this country to be a global outlier amongst richer nations, as one of only two OECD countries in the survey (alongside Japan) to not offer such support

• In 80% of countries courses have been put online as a result of the pandemic, but evidence of specific provision for low income students is low. There are several good examples but overall less specific work being undertaken to support these students in this way.

• Examples exist where individual countries have addressed key issues related to COVID-19 with regard to access/success for low income groups, including a national scheme in Ireland to subsidise laptop and IT provision. However, the overall picture is consistent with what previous research shows: significant variability in commitment to access and equity in higher education across universities and governments globally.

• The pandemic will potentially have long term impacts on higher education, including implications for widening participation and student success at university. As 'blended learning' becomes more bedded in, it will be vital that universal access to digital devices and internet access is seen as of paramount importance by universities. The California 'Higher Education Recovery with Equity' Taskforce stands as an example of using the crisis as a strategic opportunity to place equity at the heart of pandemic recovery.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to higher education across the world. The World Bank estimated that, in April of this year, universities and other tertiary education institutions were closed in 175 countries and communities, and over 220 million post-secondary students had their studies significantly disrupted due to COVID-19.[1] As well as affecting the immediate study experiences of these students, it has impacted negatively on the finances of higher education providers across the world, research initiatives and international student mobility.[2] Importantly, there are indications it may have a particularly pernicious impact on those in or seeking to enter higher education from lower income and other marginalised groups[3] who are at greater risk of dropping out or not achieving their potential as they experience financial hardship, disruption in support networks and issues with academic engagement related to digital poverty.[4] Those hoping to enter this Autumn have to contend again with digital inequality, disruptions to exam preparation/ admission systems, alongside the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on the health and economic welfare of their communities.

The pandemic may only serve to exacerbate existing inequalities in higher education participation and attainment. Evidence shows that such inequalities are universal internationally. Research undertaken in 2016 showed that in all countries where data was available (over 90%), inequalities in participation existed by social background.[5] Further research undertaken in 2018 looking at the policies undertaken by governments in over 70 countries to address inequalities in access and success in higher education also pointed to the relative lack of coherent strategies in place to address this issue.[6]

This brief draws upon a survey of education experts and government representatives which aims to assess in more detail the impact of COVID-19 on access and success in higher education of those from low-income and other marginalised groups and the responses by universities and policymakers.

The survey was undertaken over August to October 2020 and there were respondents from 45 countries covering every continent. The brief contextualises the findings from the survey and highlights key messages for policymakers in England.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS

At the start of the global COVID-19 lockdown in late March 2020, the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) undertook a survey looking at the initial impact of the pandemic on admission arrangements. The survey had respondents from 29 different countries and found that significant disruption in admission arrangements were expected, and in a quarter of countries examinations which were used to facilitate higher education entry had been cancelled.

The admission arrangements for higher education differ across countries. In many countries, particularly European ones, a specific university entry examination is used instead of or alongside upper secondary school examinations to facilitate higher education entry. The examinations used also range from 'content heavy' tests such as the A-level in the UK and baccalaureate in France, to more aptitude related tests as in the US. Hence, how arrangements have changed will also differ.

The findings from this survey show that in 80% of countries there had been a change in admission arrangements for higher education. In the majority of cases this involved some form of cancellation of examinations. In relation to students from low income and marginalised groups, where respondents commented specifically, the major issues related to uncertainty and digital connectivity. The presence

of uncertainty regarding what arrangements were in place was perceived to have a greater impact on these students. They were less confident regarding their entry into higher education and the changing nature of admission arrangements added to what they already see as a stressful process.

Digital connectivity, as well as affecting learning and the ability of students to prepare for examinations, also compromised their ability to take those examinations, as in several countries examinations had moved online. In Japan, for example, an increasing number of universities have been holding online entrance exams.

The effect of these changes in admissions processes on higher education participation levels is still becoming apparent, but is clearly differing across nations. Respondents from Colombia pointed to the concerns that low income families had regarding taking out loans at this time of uncertainty. In Nigeria the issue was whether the pandemic would impact on participation in higher education by girls. There was concern the pandemic would add to the caring responsibilities that many young female students already undertook and may prevent them returning to their studies. In contrast, in higher income countries such as Denmark, Norway and Finland, participation in higher education looked to be increasing this academic year.

While in some countries there was uncertainty, in the 80% of countries where admissions was disrupted there was view that, if it not happened already, examination based entry systems would be returned to as soon as was able. The desire of policymakers to maintain a commitment to examinations had already caused some tensions in certain countries. For example, India has seen a series of protests from students regarding the government's insistence on delivering physical university admissions tests.[7] It may be the case though that disruption continues into 2021. Wales has already decided to replace examinations with teacher assessments next year.

Special provisions introduced to the admission system to recognise the potential extra challenges faced by learners from different backgrounds were rare. However, in the Australian state of Victoria, the Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) will introduce a new 'Consideration of Educational Disadvantage' process. Schools will be asked to provide additional information regarding their students' expected assessment performance that will complement the usual information schools provide about their students' performance. This information will be taken into account when students are being assessed. However, even given the considerations put in place by Victoria and other states, there were still concerns from respondents from Australia regarding what will happen when examinations are taken. As one stated:

> School students face varying disruptions to schooling - and whilst there remains a commitment to maintain the standardised school leaver results of the "Australian Tertiary Admission Rank" and that each student will have individual extent of disadvantage taken into account - it remains to be seen how this process will proceed.

In addition, in Brazil, where admission to higher education is via a university administered examination, the Universidade Estadual de Campinas has taken a pro-active approach to supporting students to enter from low income backgrounds.

> For our next selection process, to 2021 admission, we extended the time and offer of free application (no cost). Also, the selection process was adapted and, the list of readings was reduced, and the content of the examination was adapted to the circumstances. Also, the logistics of the examination to be taken was carefully revised, reducing time and spreading out the candidates. Also, we launched campaigns to donations from alumni and the community in general to support access to IT equipment.

3. UNIVERSITY SUPPORT FOR LOW INCOME AND MARGINALISED GROUPS

The majority of respondents (80%) reported that existing courses had been put online. This process has been challenging overall and the challenges faced by learners from low income and marginalised backgrounds in this form of learning was uppermost in the minds of the respondents. Some were particularly concerned about the ability of universities to prioritise the needs of learners from such backgrounds in this context. As a respondent from India stated:

> Universities are literally at a loss thinking or rather ignoring low income and marginalised students enrolled with them and have signifi-cantly failed in responding to these students' circumstances during on-line teaching transition. They simply don't have material resources and most importantly the administrative will to engage pre HE students from any group.

The respondents from lower income countries placed great emphasis on issues of the digital divide, pointing to variabilities in internet penetration presenting acute challenges to learners. Nonetheless, digital divisions were highlighted by respondents from higher income countries as well. There were however examples from some respondents of the work that was underway to support low income/marginalised students to achieve their potential:

> Low-income and first-generation college students belong to a supportive community that is critical for their survival as they negotiate the Academy, from which they cannot be expected to social distance. Thus, we prefer not to use the term 'social distancing', but rather 'physical distancing'.

In practice in the US example physical distancing means delivery of learning and teaching in smaller groups etc. but at the same time a concerted effort to maintain social contact through online and physical means as far as possible.

The separation of social and physical distancing is a particularly interesting concept. It illustrates the need to ensure that students, in particular those for who may be in a minority or who are facing greater challenges in achieving their potential, are supported in feeling engaged with their peers and tutors, including a respondent from the University of Cape Town in South Africa:

> Faculty based psychologists offer therapy and counselling as well as group support to those students in need. This is in addition to the overall student wellness service that the university offers. Screening for students at risk and follow up and aftercare support to those vulnerable students. Covid relief fund with a once off reward of R1500 to those students in need… within the Faculty of Humanities.

Similar forms of support were described by the respondent from the University of Auckland in New Zealand.

> We have supported students through a buddy peer network, providing laptops, wifi devices where needed, offering spaces to study where able to provide space to students whose home environments are not conducive to study. Also financial hardship grants, offers of stays in University accommodation, and adjustments grades to take into account the disrupted semester.

Finally, the differences in some countries between public and private universities was raised by several respondents. The response to COVID-19 can differ by institutional type, as the respondent from Peru states:

> In Peru there are more students in private universities than in public ones. Most of the private universities, reduced the tuition or gave facilities to pay, or extended the time or reduced the fee. In addition, they offered internet or laptops or tablets for students. The government offered scholarships for extremely poor students (in public universities), but this support was only for 5% of the students in the higher education population.

4. FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS FROM LOW INCOME AND MARGINALISED GROUPS

The major route by which governments had or were supporting students from low income/ marginalised groups was via additional financial support that was aimed either explicitly at such groups or encompassed such groups. Of the 45 countries included in the study, 60% were providing such financial support. This was more common in higher income than lower income countries. Of the 21 countries in the study who are members of the OECD, only 2 were not providing any additional financial support such students could benefit from: England and Japan. Table 1 below describes some of the support being provided by OECD countries featured in the survey.

As Table 1 shows, there are a range of approaches being adopted by richer countries to supporting the access and success of students most at risk from the educational impact of COVID-19.

However, examples also existed of financial support being provided by lower income countries. In the Philippines for example, students have been offered tuition subsidies with the condition that they finish their studies and later serve local government schools; while in Indonesia low-income students in both public and private universities are allowed to defer tuition fee payments or can use subsidies to pay their tuition fees.[8]

Such financial support is obviously widely welcomed, however respondents also highlighted that more may be needed to meet the full needs of students from low income/ marginalised backgrounds. As a respondent from Ireland stated:

> More needs to be done for students and potential students living in direct provision. The government need to recognise the risk these students are at and put supports and alternative suitable accommodation in place for all people living in these dire circumstances. I am concerned that many more students will now be commuting long distances as they will not be on campus full time and cannot afford accommodation on campus or in Dublin city.

Table 1: Financial support offered to support students from low income/marginalised groups

Country	Description	Further Information
Australia	The government is providing $903.5 million over four years from 2020-21 for more university places and support for students. The funding include 12,000 university places for Australian students; and an additional 50,000 short course places. Universities were asked in April 2020 to provide new short courses for those losing their jobs during pandemics.	Link
Canada	Student Grants have been doubled for full-time students to up to $6,000 for this school year for low income students and the cap on Canada Student Loans has been increased to $350 per week of study. These two measures represent an investment of approximately $1.9 billion. As well as these measures, additional funding of $61.7 million was invested in the Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) programme.	Link
France	An additional €200 one-off support was provided for students in precarious situations.	Link
Germany	Students are able to receive interest-free loans of up to €650 a month and those in "particularly acute emergencies" were offered non-repayable grants. In total 100 million Euro set aside to support students.	Link
Netherlands	Tuition fees have been halved for students in their first year of higher education. Students doing teacher training courses get this reduction during their second year too.	Link
United States	The CARES Act provides nearly $14 billion to support postsecondary education students and institutions with $6.28 billion for cash grants to students for expenses related to disruptions to their educations due to the COVID-19 outbreak, including things like course materials and technology as well as food, housing, health care, and childcare.	Link

Aside from financial support for students, the most notable examples of other ways in which governments were intervening to try and prevent the negative outcomes of COVID-19 on access and success were in Ireland and the United States. In Ireland, 15 million Euro has been allocated to university widening access offices nationally to purchase ICT equipment for low-income students. In the case of one of the respondents from the Dublin City University, this will allow them to offer 20% of incoming students a free laptop computer.[9]

In the state of California in the United States a 'Higher Education Recovery with Equity' Taskforce has been established. The work of the taskforce is described in Box 1 below:

5. ADDITIONAL POLICIES REQUIRED TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

There was a clear view from the respondents that while many of their governments had responded to the challenges to access and success there was much more that needed to be done. Looking to the longer term, one of the respondents from South Africa argued that we need to ensure that the needs of students from all groups are central to the development of policy and practice.

> It needs to be 'normal' that all students have access to devices and data, as well as basic training in computer literacy and learning online. It is probable that 'blended learning' is going to become dominant, so it is critical that marginalised students' skills in developing their own learning programmes and their competence to cope with online learning is developed.

In the United States the dangers of students who have initially decided to progress to higher education then deciding not to do so was highlighted.

> We are very concerned about what is traditionally called "Summer Melt", which is when students who have committed to attending a college, including placing a deposit, don't show up in the Fall. Students who were not likely to be at risk in the past are now more likely given illness and financial disruption. We're now calling it "COVID-19 Melt" and we think it will last through the Fall of 2021.

Since the survey was completed, data does appear to show that fewer students have enrolled in higher education in the United States for

Box 1: California Higher Education Recovery with Equity Taskforce[10]

The Recovery with Equity Taskforce was established by Governor Gavin Newsom's Senior Policy Advisor for Higher Education, Dr. Lande Ajose, in consultation with the Governor's Council on Post-Secondary Education. The Recovery with Equity Taskforce is made up of state and national experts in higher education equity and innovation and is chaired by Dr. Ajose. It was established in August 2020.

The Taskforce was created to work collaboratively to produce a roadmap for the state's education leaders, government, and philanthropic institutions to ensure that California's public post-secondary institutions recover from the impacts of COVID-19 more integrated, equitable, and resilient than before — and more aligned with the economic needs of the state. The Taskforce's recommendations will be delivered by the end of 2020 to the Council and the Governor, and will outline specific actions that can be taken in the mid- and long-term.

the 2020-21 academic year.[11] In order to address the summer melt, and broader issues related to the access/success of different groups of students as a result of COVID-19, a respondent from the United States suggested a further package of measures including:

> • More emergency support (for food, housing, day care, transport, laptops, Internet access, minor other emergencies)
> • Better training for faculty while using distance education tools
> • Options to omit standardised tests Investigations/recalibration of standardised tests (have always favoured the wealthy, but even more so now)
> • Free COVID-19 tests
> • Free COVID-19 health care

In terms of lower income countries then, unsurprisingly, the need to support greater internet access was of paramount concern.

> The government needs to get private telecom agencies to provide free access to internet data to students enrolled in government universities until such time that COVID continues.

> The main limitation due to the conditions of the country, is access to internet. Universities will have only virtual courses until 2021. It would be convenient to establish a policy that guarantees access to internet for educational purposes, and financial and equipment aid for lower-income students.

> The focus should be on addressing technological gaps, guaranteeing access to the internet and computer equipment to very low cost (preferably free for Students at the expense of the State), for vulnerable populations, marginalised groups, rural areas, etc. We need to declare Internet access as a Fundamental Right of People.

6. KEY MESSAGES FOR ENGLAND

It is clear that other countries in the OECD have made financial support available to their students, with in many cases this support being targeted at students from low income/marginalised backgrounds. This is in sharp contrast to the lack of specific support provided in England and shows us to be a global outlier amongst richer nations, and even within the United Kingdom, with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all providing support.[12] Evidence has shown the financial impact of COVID-19 on students in this country, with lower income families suffering disproportionately. Furthermore, the ability of students to supplement their maintenance with part-time work has been damaged, with significant consequences for students with less of a safety net who rely on such income.[13]

The study also showed though that several nations who have significantly lower levels of GDP than the UK or England were able to find some resources to support low income students. While the UK has experienced one of the biggest economic impacts of any country in the world as a result of the pandemic,[14] it also invests a

relatively small amount of resources in higher education compared to other OECD countries.[15] However, the research undertaken in 2018 looking at higher education equity policies in 70 countries showed that England is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of policy engagement where access and success in higher education is concerned.

As the impact of COVID-19 continues then this study does suggest that if the government wants the England to remain one of these leading countries then it should consider again offering additional financial support from students from low income backgrounds and/or experiencing other forms of disadvantage. The case for support may be especially strong given that since 2016 maintenance grants for students from low income backgrounds have not been in place.

In order to remain a leading country in the area of access and success in higher education a commitment beyond just financial support for students is required. The examples from Australia in terms of the 'Consideration of Educational Disadvantage' in the university admissions process; Ireland and the release of significant funds to provide IT equipment for disadvantaged students; and in particular the California Equity Taskforce are all policy interventions that should be looked at carefully and consideration given for emulating them in the English context. If there are changes underfoot at present that may change the nature of higher education into the long term it is essential that considerations regarding access and success for are built into them. The pandemic provides an opportunity to build a better, fairer and more inclusive system. We should take this opportunity with both hands.

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