

College, University and Partners response to COVID-19

Introduction

1. This paper outlines some of the support which our institutions and partners are doing to support care-experienced students during the COVID-19 outbreak. This is a high level analysis based on the rich detail provided by partners and is intended to give an overview of the common themes. Full information provided by institutions can be found in Annex A.
2. The Become Charity alongside four other organisations (Stand Alone, NNECL, Unite Foundation and Spectra) carried out a UK-wide survey of HE students (251 students) who were either care-experienced or estranged from their families. The survey called [Supporting care-experienced and estranged students in higher education](#) aimed to understand the challenges which vulnerable students had during this time. They came to the conclusion that four areas required particular support.
3. The Hub for Success, Action for Children and SFC asked a selection of colleges, universities and partners what they were doing around these four areas. This was their response:

Reducing Financial Hardship

4. All colleges and universities are using a combination of existing and new hardship and discretionary funds to support care-experienced students. Most are reporting an increase in the use of these funds, as would be expected, and list areas such as rent, food, IT equipment, utility bills, personal necessities, childcare, overdraft charges and travel as the main areas that students are seeking support with.
5. Some institutions have set up COVID-19 specific funds and others have allocated additional funding, some through additional fundraising activity or donor or alumni contributions, into existing structures.
6. Institutions are also actively seeking out and publicising information on either specific local or national grants, funds and trusts which can provide financial support at this time. Some institutions are reporting that their processing systems have been streamlined and the need for the more 'traditional' evidence of hardship has either been reduced or removed completely. One institution has made automatic hardship payments to any student in a 'vulnerable' group; care-experienced students were included in this.

7. Previously, it was common for students to receive vouchers when hardship payments were approved, and whilst some funds are still supplying supermarket vouchers, the majority are making payments in cash, usually through BACS transfer.
8. All institutions are using digital platforms and new and existing communication networks to publicise and share information about both local and national financial support available but a number of institutions are reaching out to care-experienced students on a one-to-one basis through phone calls or video calls to discuss this area.
9. Most institutions have their own financial support team who are providing advice and guidance in these areas to students but others have used existing or built new links with local authority, third and voluntary sector services in this area to provide additional support.

Boosting wellbeing and support

10. All colleges and universities are using digital platforms to provide support to students. The majority are very active on social media and institutional networks in providing information to students. All institutions have reached out individually to care-experienced students at least once to share information on support available. Some institutions are in regular one to one or small group contact with students whereas this is less common in some other institutions.
11. Most activities that were regularly taking place before the COVID-19 outbreak have been adapted to be delivered online but in addition to this, the majority of institutions have created and developed new services and activities in light of the current situation.
12. All institutions detail some form of access to counselling or wellbeing support; there is some variance around whether this is provided internally, by an external company or service or a combination of both. There is also detail around both formal and informal wellbeing supports from more fun activities such as cook a longs and book clubs to more formal one to one counselling sessions and in some places, development opportunities around webinars and modules.
13. Some institutions have opened online spaces around wellbeing to both staff and students at the same time, recognising that this situation is affecting all people and it may be helpful for staff and student groups to come together to share and discuss common themes.
14. One institution has created a process which involved the named care-experienced contact and the student association officer having weekly contact to identify common themes and develop support strategies and mechanisms.

15. Many institutions are also proactively contacting prospective students to begin to build links and relationships.
16. Mentoring features prominently as an effective wellbeing support and some institutions, whilst not offering formal mentoring, have allocated named contacts for care-experienced students who are in touch weekly to offer support, advice and company.
17. These supports are all predicated on students having ongoing and reliable access to both hardware and a broadband and data connection which may still be an issue for some.

Preventing homelessness

18. The majority of information received is based on supporting students in university halls of residence however one institution specifically referenced the additional risks present for students in privately rented accommodation, namely the risk of rent arrears and exploitation by landlords.
19. Most institutions are providing financial support to students in halls by waiving fees and providing practical support to apply for the SAAS accommodation grant. In addition, many have either already provided or have set up processes to provide emergency accommodation to care-experienced students who might be in need of this.
20. Some institutions are liaising with local authorities or other corporate parents to put measures in place to reduce the risk of homelessness and have recognised the intersectionality between homelessness, wellbeing and financial hardship.
21. Student accommodation examples of good practice include:
 - Introduction of social distancing measures within student accommodation.
 - Additional cleaning resources and food packs for students in self-isolation.
 - Delivery of meals to students who are isolating.
 - Allocating vacated rooms as additional study rooms for students remaining in accommodation.
 - Recognition of duty of care to all students across all accommodation types – institution-managed, privately managed and private rentals.
 - Dedicated wardens and security staff on campuses.

Ensuring Academic Continuity

22. The importance of access to digital communication for this area has been highlighted in all returns and the majority of institutions have provided laptops, payment for WiFi and/or mobile data to students, or helped them to access additional funding to do so. Many have also referenced the practical support put in place to enable students to

download or access computer programmes that are needed for completing coursework.

23. The majority of students are having contact with lecturers or other teaching staff on a weekly basis and in some places, there is additional weekly contact with personal tutors or support assistants. Some of the complexities around providing robust Additional Support for Learning have been recognised and some institutions have created personalised arrangements for this based on the needs of students.
24. All institutions are making information available through online platforms and social media around tips for studying at home and more personalised institution specific support.
25. There is a significant amount of work underway in most places to support prospective or continuing students and some of the new ways of providing this support include online transition modules and online summer schools. Staff in some institutions are also making personal contact with prospective students to begin to build relationships. Some are also offering practical support to complete applications and financial support paperwork.
26. In regards to coursework and exams, one institution has implemented a 'no detriment' policy to ensure that any coursework or exams undertaken during the lockdown period cannot reduce a students' GPA.

Further information

26. Thanks to Linda O'Neill, CELCIS who helped with the analysis for this paper. Further information: Nick Stansfeld, nstansfeld@sfc.ac.uk