

# Coronavirus Briefing note

Office for  
Students

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## Graduate students Getting into employment

### Introduction

Many students are uncertain about their employment prospects because of the coronavirus pandemic. The virus is having a profound adverse economic impact, and predictions of a global recession are widespread. The issues are particularly urgent for final year students and recent graduates.

The pandemic presents challenges for graduate employment. Many students' plans are on hold or otherwise disrupted as companies make redundancies, freeze recruitment, and scale back their graduate outreach. Research suggests that only 39 per cent of apprenticeships are continuing as normal, and around a third of employers reported that they were likely to hire fewer apprentices than last year, or none at all.<sup>1</sup> Longer-term economic uncertainties make it difficult to plot a way forward.

Universities and colleges have had to change how they provide careers services, and employers are changing how they are recruiting. Students are also likely to be affected by the decline in the non-graduate jobs market. Non-graduate jobs are often vital for students during holidays, and for part-time students; they can also be a stepping stone for recent graduates, helping them pay off debts, gain experience and develop their skills.

These issues may present particular barriers to students who are vulnerable during the outbreak and may not be able to participate in activities intended to help them into the workplace. This applies, for example, to students who have impairments that have made the switch to online careers activities challenging, and those with

**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. They reflect current information as at date of publication in a rapidly evolving situation.**

additional caring responsibilities resulting from school closures or the need to look after relatives.

One of the OfS's four strategic aims is that 'all students, from all backgrounds, are able to progress into employment, further study, and fulfilling lives'.<sup>2</sup> We therefore have a keen interest in ensuring that universities and colleges can provide good support to graduates entering the labour market.

Although some methods of delivering careers advice and recruitment are not currently possible because of social distancing restrictions, many universities, colleges and employers have been quick to adapt to this new environment. This briefing note looks at some of the ways in which they are working with students to help them on their journey into employment. It does not suggest particular approaches or endorse specific universities or colleges, and it does not constitute or supplement OfS regulatory guidance. The aim is to share ideas and practice about how different organisations are working to ensure students are still able to progress from higher education into jobs that make use of their skills and knowledge, and play a full part in the national recovery.

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.

## Graduate prospects and the economy

### What are the economic projections?

In May the Bank of England projected a 14 per cent fall in Gross Domestic Product for 2020 as a whole, only returning to pre-coronavirus levels in the second half of 2021.<sup>3</sup> There is no consensus about what the rest of 2020 will look like or how the economy might recover, and there may be longer-term repercussions for students looking to start their careers.<sup>4</sup> A Resolution Foundation report predicts that students may be 13 per cent less likely to be in employment three years after leaving education than they might have been without the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> In addition to jobs being fewer, the report predicts that wages could be 7 per cent lower for graduates entering the job market during a recession.

The Confederation of British Industry notes that the sectors most vulnerable to the impacts of social distancing have been the most affected by reduced consumer spending.<sup>6</sup> These include the leisure, transport and retail sectors. The Resolution Foundation report shows that one in five graduates work in these sectors one year after graduating – an important pathway for many students into their careers.<sup>7</sup>

However, graduate-level jobs in other sectors are unlikely to be shielded from the impacts of the virus. A survey by the Institute of Student Employers (ISE) in March found that around a quarter (27 per cent) of employers expected to recruit fewer graduates.<sup>8</sup> A follow-up survey in late April and early May indicated that employers planned to recruit 12 per cent fewer graduates than they had planned to before the outbreak.<sup>9</sup>

### How do students feel about their employment prospects?

Students are concerned about their future in the post-pandemic economy. An April 2020 survey by the National Union of Students found that 95 per cent of nearly 10,000 students expressed fears about the impact of the coronavirus on the economy, with 81 per cent specifically concerned about their job prospects.<sup>10</sup> This highlights the importance of timely and appropriate support for final-year students.

A survey conducted by Prospects found that, of over 1,200 final year students who responded, 26 per cent had lost their work placement or internship, 29 per cent had lost their job and 28 per cent had had a job offer deferred or cancelled.<sup>11</sup>

Other surveys have been a little more optimistic (although it is worth noting that student views may be changing as the pandemic progresses). A Higher Education Policy Institute survey in late March found that 79 per cent of students felt confident about getting a graduate level job.<sup>12</sup> While 28 per cent cited anxiety as their primary feeling, only 29 per cent said that the pandemic

'The coronavirus hasn't affected my feelings of my future, as I know the industry I want to go into will recover in no time, as it had lots of jobs going before the virus and will have lots by the time I graduate.'

*(Second year student, mechanical engineering)*

had changed how they felt, suggesting that the pandemic is not the only source of students' concerns about their future.

### What is the government doing to support jobs?

The government has implemented several programmes to support employees and businesses during the outbreak. The Job Retention Scheme has allowed employers to claim a contribution towards furloughed employees' wages, and employer National Insurance and pension contributions.<sup>13</sup> There are also loans, tax relief and grants available to support businesses.<sup>14</sup> Most recently, the government has encouraged employees in some sectors to begin returning to work, publishing guidance on how this can be done safely.<sup>15</sup>

### What are universities and colleges doing?

#### Careers services and information

Careers services vary across the sector, but most students will be able to access a service to help them consider their options and prepare to go into employment after their studies. Universities and colleges typically offer a wide range of career support services, including:

- careers hubs, often via online platforms, where students can find listings for placements and jobs vacancies and access the university or college's careers services
- CV writing services where students can get help, advice and feedback
- student-led peer mentoring schemes
- interview preparation services
- careers fairs that provide students with an opportunity to meet with employers
- networking events
- events and talks featuring employers and providing advice on getting into the job market.

Many universities and colleges face challenges in delivering their full suite of services in the current environment, as they cannot always be 'ported over' to online platforms without careful consideration of how they must be adapted to meet students' needs.

## Engaging with students

A recent survey of Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services members found that a majority disagreed with the statement 'Students/graduates are engaging with our service's offerings as expected at this time of year'. It also found students who did access services increasingly enquiring about how to deal with change and uncertainty, or needing help with virtual recruitment processes.<sup>16</sup>

Some universities and colleges are making greater use of alternative digital channels to reverse this reduction in engagement, for example by working with employers to move careers fair content to social media.

## Portfolios and virtual showcases

Some activities are more difficult to deliver remotely. Students in the creative and performing arts, for example, depend on events and exhibitions, such as an end of year show, to showcase their achievements to potential employers. Some providers are using technology to connect their students with industry contacts.

## Supporting students most vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic

Different students have different needs. Those who are more vulnerable to the impact of the virus may face additional barriers to engaging with initiatives to encourage progression into employment. Examples of this could include:

- Care leavers and estranged students, who may not have access to support from parents or carers to help them navigate employment advice, prepare for interviews or find resources.<sup>17</sup> Their living arrangements or immediate financial hardship may reduce their capacity to engage with careers activities.
- Some disabled students, who may be classed as particularly at risk from the effects of the virus. Some students with ongoing health conditions may be 'shielding', with additional restrictions. Others, such as students with social or communication impairments or those with mental health conditions, may be finding it particularly difficult to adapt to remote study.
- Students with caring responsibilities, who may need additional flexibility, even for online events and appointments, as they balance looking after children or relatives with studying.

## What are employers doing?

Many employers are keen to maintain the same level of regular contact with universities and colleges. Small and medium-sized enterprises may find this harder as the pandemic forces them to prioritise other core elements of their business,<sup>18</sup> but they are still likely to see universities as a key partner, with graduates likely to play a significant role in any post-coronavirus economic recovery.

## University of Portsmouth: New activities

The University of Portsmouth's Careers and Employability Service has introduced:

- A phone campaign, calling all final year students to offer advice and support into further study and work.
- A twice-monthly 'opportunities bulletin', sent to students, recent graduates and university staff. This highlights job vacancies, gives information about the state of the labour market, and dispels common myths about graduate employment.
- 'Opportunities week' – a programme of activities for the whole student body in June 2020. It will include information on volunteering, part-time and full-time work, and further study.

## University of Winchester: Online careers guidance

In the first week of the March 2020 lockdown, staff at the university's Careers and Opportunities Hub noticed growing concern, particularly among final year students, about how the pandemic was affecting the graduate job market. In response the university has:

- Updated resources on the hub, with 'top tips' covering a range of topics such as finding graduate employment, writing job applications and CVs.
- Launched a programme of week-long themed webinars, starting with 'Applying for opportunities' in May.
- Continued one-to-one support, with over 160 online appointments since March.
- Ensured that from June 2020 a 'graduate careers pack' will be sent to every final year student. Webinars are planned for June and July to complement and reinforce the packs' printed resources.
- Announced that it will give all graduates careers advice and guidance for life.

## Recruitment, placements and internships

Employers are creatively adapting their recruitment practices. Many firms cannot carry out face-to-face interviews, visit careers fairs, or provide mentoring or work experience opportunities, so they are moving events online. According to an ISE survey from March 2020, the majority of recruiters are conducting their assessment centre activity (60 per cent) and face-to-face interviews (71 per cent) online or by phone.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 1: Expected percentage change in numbers recruited by sector**

Sector	Non-graduates	Graduates	Interns and placements
Built environment	-75%	-45%	-65%
Charity and public sector	-72%	-1%	-3%
Finance and professional services	-44%	-12%	-56%
Energy, engineering and industry	-37%	-15%	-50%
Retail and fast-moving consumer goods	-30%	-18%	-32%
Legal	-21%	-4%	-8%
Digital and information technology	-11%	-17%	-41%
Health and pharmaceuticals	10%	-10%	-7%

Source: Institute of Student Employers survey, conducted between 20 April and 4 May 2020. The survey received 179 valid responses after data cleaning.

Research by the ISE suggests that employers intend to recruit fewer interns or placement students, with a substantial reduction in recruitment in some sectors (see Table 1).<sup>20</sup> However, some employers have adapted their work placement and internship activities so they can continue in the current circumstances, recognising the importance of graduates to their organisations' prospects for recovery and growth. Employers are using digital platforms to train, support, and connect their interns or placement students.

### Mountview: Virtual showcases

Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts has set up a programme of online showcases to ensure that final year students do not miss out on opportunities in the creative industries. This is particularly important as, ordinarily, 95 per cent of the academy's students work in their chosen creative field within one year of graduating.

All students graduating this year can participate in online showcases involving self-recorded performances, with staff supporting students where required with direction and accompaniment. The recordings are sent to a database of agents, and to the casting organisations Spotlight and the Casting Directors Guild. Postgraduate students will receive similar support. The trade publication *The Stage* has also reported on the initiative.<sup>21</sup>

### Connecting employers and students

A student survey run by RMP Enterprises highlights the need for employers to keep lines of communication open with students.<sup>22</sup> Of the students surveyed, 50 per cent stressed the importance of communication, even if just to be told there is no new information. A survey by Prospects also noted communications as an important component, highlighting the role of regular communication to counter rumours that employers are no longer recruiting during the crisis.<sup>23</sup> This can help students feel that employers are still active and thinking about the importance of students to their organisations. A recent online discussion published by Gradconsult highlights that an important consideration for employers is to ensure that digital recruitment maintains the 'personal touch' of face-to-face contact.<sup>24</sup>

'I would say that online platforms of teaching and learning are a preference in my opinion. However, other [virtual] opportunities such as insight days or assessment days don't produce the same feel for the company as going to the office. However, if office-less environments become the norm then this wouldn't be a problem.'

*(Final year student, law)*

The Gradconsult discussion provided some insights into how to engage students in digital recruitment, including that:

- recruitment needs to be easy to run and access
- activities should not be too long and should stick to the brief
- students may need training in how to use various platforms
- online events should be social and interactive, not just presentations.

Universities and colleges have a crucial role in brokering strong relationships between students and employers, and this will become more important as they all work together to rebuild local economies.

### Apprenticeships

Some apprentices may be concerned about what the pandemic means for their end point assessments and job prospects. Employers surveyed by the Sutton Trust in early April reported that on average just 39 per cent of apprenticeships were continuing as normal, 36 per cent had been furloughed and 8 per cent made redundant. 17 per cent of apprentices had had their off-the-job learning suspended.<sup>25</sup>

The government has provided guidance for students, employers and training providers,<sup>26</sup> which outlines temporary measures to support students to complete, pause or continue their apprenticeships, alongside actions to support training providers. The guidance allows for greater flexibility in end point assessments, enables breaks in learning for those affected by coronavirus and provides support for apprentices who are made redundant.

In parallel, and as we have seen with classroom-based teaching, universities and colleges are moving to virtual learning and assessment environments and modifying courses so they can be delivered online.

### IBM: Placement students

Students currently on placement at IBM have seamlessly switched to remote working. The company remains committed to its placement programme, with the incoming cohort joining the organisation as planned this summer.

Placements will start virtually, with a full induction delivered through a mix of live and pre-recorded online content, making the most of interactive tools like Trello boards and Kahoot quizzes. A Slack messaging channel will build a community of placement students, connecting people from different teams and locations across the UK.

### Aon: Virtual internships

Professional services firm Aon's chief executive has committed to continue with the company's internship programme despite the coronavirus crisis. Interns will join an eight-week programme mixing project work with learning opportunities.

Technology has been pivotal to delivering the programme. The company has a comprehensive learning management system, a Webex conferencing platform and a new reflective video tool. Interns will receive a full three-day induction, work on live projects and join weekly core and optional learning sessions. Aon has identified managers who are used to working remotely to support the interns. All interns will be paid, and all assessed during the internship for secure permanent roles with the company when they graduate.

### Conclusion

Many of the initial challenges faced by universities and colleges during the pandemic have been technical ones, requiring swift adaptations in how services are provided. The next challenge is likely to be strategic – the need to adapt medium- to long-term provision amid uncertainties about funding and students' abilities to secure jobs after their studies.

This briefing has described some of the challenges in supporting students into employment, and how some universities and colleges have already taken action to adapt to these. Students understandably remain concerned about the impact the pandemic could have on their future prospects,

### Manchester Metropolitan University: Learning pathways

Manchester Metropolitan University has reworked its third-term enhancement programme. The 'Learning Pathways' initiative gives students the chance to participate in activities aligned specifically with employment sectors in the city region, such as wellbeing, education, creative, digital, coding and design. Each pathway has been co-created with industry and practitioners, and culminates with students creating a project response to video briefs set by advocates from the city region. Students' responses will be showcased online, and some participants will also write reflective accounts of their learning to gain additional credits towards their degree.

Students have been keen to engage with this kind of learning, with over 1,500 students enrolling in the programme within a week of launch.

so it remains vital that they continue to receive high-quality support, information and advice about how best to make the right choices after their studies. Graduates entering the workforce, bringing with them vital knowledge and skills, will be crucial to restarting and rebuilding our economy and society after this unprecedented crisis.

The issues and activities outlined in this briefing are not exhaustive. Ultimately, what matters is that all students are able to progress into fulfilling employment or further study. The OfS is working with a range of organisations to further the sector's understanding of the impact of the pandemic, and to share examples of how providers can respond in the best interests of students.

## University of Liverpool: Support for healthcare apprentices

The University of Liverpool has worked closely with local NHS partner trusts during the pandemic to ensure the needs of individual apprentices and NHS trusts are met. Where trusts have decided that a break in learning is the best option in the circumstances, the university is working closely with the NHS to mitigate the impact on the affected apprentices.

The university has introduced a range of measures to ensure that students and apprentices will not be penalised as a consequence of the pandemic. These measures are particularly relevant to apprentices working on the front line in the NHS. Online learning and conferencing tools have enabled teaching to continue and supported regular meetings between programme staff and apprentices. The university has also introduced alternative modes of assessment where necessary. Recorded lectures, discussion boards and directed online learning have allowed for a more flexible approach to learning, which has helped to support apprentices.

## Getting into employment: Information and resources

**The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services:** a membership organisation for career development and graduate employment professionals that provides research, training and networks – <https://www.agcas.org.uk/>.

**Institute of Student Employers:** a non-profit membership organisation that works with employers, the education sector and supplier partners – <https://ise.org.uk/>. ISE provides support for student recruitment and development, including research, networks and events. ISE is currently offering weekly bulletins highlighting key student labour market issues during the pandemic, as well as running webinars focusing on the coronavirus- <https://ise.org.uk/page/webinarsondemand>.

**University Vocational Awards Council:** a non-profit membership organisation that advocates for members on matters relating to technical and professional learning, including higher and degree apprenticeships – <https://uvac.ac.uk/>. Currently hosting weekly webinars related to coronavirus.

**Government guidance** setting out a variety of temporary flexibility measures introduced to the programme to support students and providers during the pandemic – <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-apprentices-employers-training-providers-end-point-assessment-organisations-and-external-quality-assurance-pro>.

## Resources for students

**Prospects:** This page provides advice for students preparing for and applying for jobs during the pandemic. It includes tips on increasing your online presence and preparing for phone interviews – <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/getting-a-job/your-career-and-covid-19>.

**Nextstep Support:** A collaboration between several organisations that provide support and services to students – <https://nextstepsupport.org/>. They have a page specifically addressing some of the issue resulting from the pandemic, and provide articles and resources for students including advice on looking for jobs and wellbeing.

**National Careers Service Skills Toolkit:** The government has produced a Skills Toolkit that provides resources, tools and free online courses – <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/find-a-course/the-skills-toolkit>. Its list of courses includes introductory, intermediate and advanced courses to help improve digital and numeracy skills.

**National Careers Service:** This provides information and links to other organisations, including those offering free online learning – <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/find-a-course/where-to-find-free-online-learning/>.

**Internship Experience UK:** Organised by Bright Network, this is a programme of virtual internships for students and graduates, across a range of careers – <https://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/internship-experience-uk/>.

We thank those universities and other organisations that provided the case studies in this briefing note. The case studies and interventions described in this note 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.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-apprenticeships/>.
- 2 See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/office-for-students-strategy-2018-to-2021/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/office-for-students-strategy-2018-to-2021/).
- 3 See <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/monetary-policy-report/2020/may/monetary-policy-report-may-2020>.
- 4 See <https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/economic-update-coronavirus-2/>.
- 5 See <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/class-of-2020/>.
- 6 See <https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/economic-update-coronavirus-2/>.
- 7 See <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/class-of-2020/>.
- 8 See <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/how-are-graduate-employers-adapting-to-the-challenge-of-covid-19>.
- 9 See 'Covid-19: The impact of the crisis on student recruitment and development', <https://ise.org.uk/page/ISEPublications>.
- 10 See <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-students-survey-report>.
- 11 See <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/graduating-into-a-pandemic-the-impact-on-university-finalists>.
- 12 See <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/28/students-more-anxious-than-excited-about-starting-their-careers-despite-confidence-they-will-find-work/>.
- 13 See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-if-you-could-be-covered-by-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>.
- 14 See <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/business-support>.
- 15 See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>.
- 16 See <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Latest/ise-and-agcas-report-what-is-the-impact-of-the-crisis-on-student-recruitment-and-development>.
- 17 See <https://www.standalone.org.uk/>.
- 18 See 'Covid-19: The impact of the crisis on student recruitment and development' <https://ise.org.uk/page/ISEPublications>.
- 19 See <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/how-are-graduate-employers-adapting-to-the-challenge-of-covid-19>.
- 20 See 'Covid-19: The impact of the crisis on student recruitment and development', <https://ise.org.uk/page/ISEPublications>.
- 21 See <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/coronavirus-mountview-launches-digital-showcase-for-graduates-during-lockdown>.
- 22 See <https://www.rmpenterprise.co.uk/blog/survey-student-perceptions-covid19>.
- 23 See <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/graduating-into-a-pandemic-the-impact-on-university-finalists>.
- 24 See 'Connecting students and employers in a virtual world', <https://gradconsult.co.uk/extremely-useful-resources/>.
- 25 See <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-impacts-apprenticeships/>.
- 26 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response>.