

Coronavirus Briefing note

Office for Students

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Disabled students

Introduction

Many disabled students already face challenges during their time at university or college that students without a known disability do not. The coronavirus pandemic may be intensifying many of these issues and raising new ones. Study support – for example, the assistance some students receive from note-takers and sign-language interpreters – may be less readily available.¹ Hearing or visually impaired students may struggle to access lectures and webinars as teaching and learning move online. Some students may be self-isolating because of underlying health conditions and be unsure how to access the support they need. Students with mental health conditions may find their impairments exacerbated by the lockdown.² These issues could be further compounded if disabled students belong to another group vulnerable to the pandemic such as black, Asian or minority ethnic students, or do not have family support.³

Some disabled students are worried that their attainment will be affected by modified assessment processes that may not take full account of their needs. They may be unsure about the financial support available to them during this period. They may be worried about how their needs will be met if higher education providers are unable to deliver face-to-face provision during the next academic year. Prospective students may be confused about the procedure to apply for Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) while physical distancing measures are still in place.⁴

This briefing note looks at the practical steps universities and colleges are taking to help disabled students during the pandemic and beyond. It explores concerns raised by disabled students themselves, and signposts to sources of advice

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, stipulate particular approaches, or endorse the actions of specific institutions. 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.

and information. Many universities and colleges are reporting an increase in the numbers of disabled students accessing their support services.⁵

The term 'disabled students' encompasses students with a vast array of different impairments and needs. In this note, we use it to refer to those who have declared a disability.

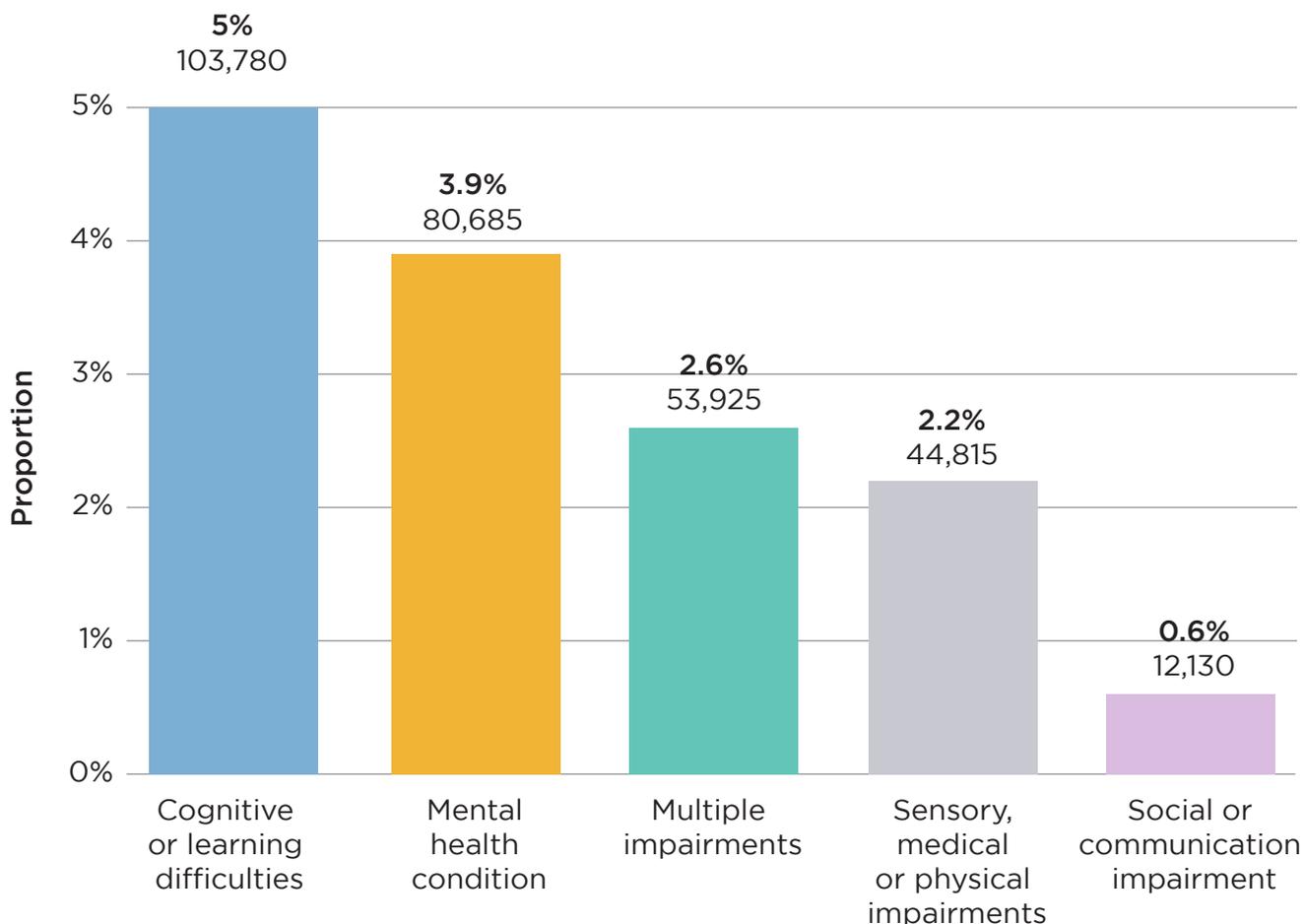
Disabled students in higher education

Disabled students now make up a sizeable minority of the student population: in 2018-19, 14.3 per cent (more than one in every eight) students studying in England declared at least one disability.⁶ These students have a wide range of impairments (see Figure 1). University and college support services have, therefore, to create bespoke solutions for individual students alongside more generalised inclusive support. As not all disabled students declare their disabilities, the official figures are likely to be an underestimate.

Students who meet the eligibility requirements can claim DSA to cover some of the extra learning-related costs they may face because of a

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.

Figure 1: Proportion of students studying in England who declared a disability by impairment, 2018-19



Source: OfS equality and diversity data.
 Note: 85.7 per cent of students do not declare a disability.

mental health condition, long-term illness or other disability.⁷ This could include a laptop with the necessary assistive software and training to use it or hiring a sign language interpreter for lectures and seminars.

Section 91(9) of the Equality Act 2010 requires higher and further education providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled applicants and students. This requirement applies across a range of matters, which among other matters include student admissions, educational provision, and access to services and facilities. In essence, it means that higher and further education providers must take reasonable steps to ensure that disabled people are not put at a substantial disadvantage (in comparison with people who are not disabled) by provisions, criteria or practices; physical features; or the lack of an auxiliary aid. For example, they must make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students can access buildings on campus, and provide information in an accessible form.⁸ Providers are now considering what new adjustments are needed during the pandemic in order to meet these requirements.

Before the pandemic, there were already clear attainment and outcome gaps between disabled and non-disabled students; students reporting a disability have lower degree results overall and lower rates of employment after graduation than non-disabled students.⁹ In the 2019 National Student Survey, disabled students also reported lower satisfaction with the management and organisation of their courses than non-disabled students.¹⁰ To tackle these issues, the OfS has encouraged universities and colleges to make all their services as inclusive as possible for all students.¹¹

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) is advising, informing and challenging the higher education sector to develop more effective models of support for disabled students. During the pandemic, commissioners are engaging with students, staff and representative bodies to identify the most significant challenges in the current environment and how they can be addressed. The DSC will report on the outcomes from this work later in the summer.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled students

Information, advice and guidance for prospective students

It is particularly important during the pandemic that disabled prospective students can access advice and guidance to help them to make informed decisions about their higher education options. Discover Uni and UCAS are publishing regular advice and updates for applicants, including guidance for disabled students.¹² The Student Loans Company (SLC) has information for students and higher education providers about applying for DSA, the additional support that may be available and how needs assessments are being undertaken during the pandemic.¹³ Outreach and widening participation events have moved online.

Prospective students expecting to enter higher education in 2020 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. Students may also be unable to visit campuses to assess the physical accessibility of accommodation and teaching facilities. Many universities and colleges are publishing information specifically for disabled students about these and other issues on their websites. Others are running online events and presentations so that disabled applicants will be better prepared to begin their courses in 2020. Many are shifting to online open days.

The OfS is working with Uni Connect partnerships across England to help support those university and college applicants most affected by the pandemic, including disabled applicants.¹⁴

Supporting higher education applicants during the pandemic

LincHigher Uni Connect partnership

LincHigher has moved much of its outreach activity to an online training and outreach hub. The hub has been designed to cater to all students, particularly those with additional needs. It is special educational needs friendly, dyslexia-friendly and accessible for students with colour sensitivities.

Birmingham City University

Birmingham City University has replaced face-to-face events with a series of online events for disabled applicants, including a series of short online presentations and Q&A sessions taking place over the course of a week.

Leeds Beckett University

Leeds Beckett University is developing an applicant microsite with information specifically for disabled students.

In particular, we have asked them to focus on the information, advice and guidance needs of students applying to enter higher education in the current admissions cycle. This will help to ensure that any disadvantages these students have experienced elsewhere in their lives are not compounded by the choices they need to make during the pandemic about the next stage of their education. Many Uni Connect partnerships have moved their activity online and are incorporating physically distanced engagement as part of their approach.

Disabled students currently in higher education

Finances and DSA

Like other students, disabled students face greater risk of financial hardship at this time. They may also be facing hardships particular to their needs. Having to work from home might mean that some students need adapted furniture. Others may need additional technology to continue their learning remotely.

The OfS has made clear that higher education providers should honour the commitments in their approved access and participation plans to provide direct financial support to current and future students. We are allowing universities and colleges some flexibility in using funds they had committed to activity affected by the closure of schools, including using these funds to address the hardship and mental health needs of disabled students. We have advised that providers can use the student and disabled student premiums to boost their mental health support and hardship funds. This aid could be an important source of support for students during this uncertain period.¹⁵

Relatedly, some students' original DSA needs assessment may no longer be adequate.¹⁶ As their needs have changed as a result of the pandemic, these students may be unsure about for what new adjustments they can or should ask for.¹⁷ If a student believes that their requirements for DSA have changed, they should contact the SLC's disabled students' team to request a reassessment.

Learning and teaching

While some providers have a long track record of delivering remotely accessible learning it has not until now been the standard mode of teaching. Increased online learning could benefit students who experience barriers to accessing traditional face-to-face modes of delivery. Those who sometimes find it difficult to attend lectures in person have benefited from being able to watch them at home.¹⁸ For disabled students to benefit in the longer term from these changes, attention must be paid to digital accessibility to ensure that resources can be used by all students.

But for many disabled students, difficulties remain. These concerns include not having the right hardware to access lectures, webinars and tutorials. Some students do not have access to the software they may need to complete their coursework, and

buying licences could be prohibitively expensive. Universities and colleges could consider offering access through their own software licences. Some may struggle with having to look at screens for extended periods. Some students have left their term-time accommodation and had to leave their assistive equipment behind. More generally, increased demand has led to reported shortages of assistive technology hardware.¹⁹

The move to online teaching may raise difficulties for students with particular needs.²⁰ For example, neurodiverse students have reported concerns with online conferencing due to the need for multi-tasking and the array of features on offer. This is further complicated when disabled students are asked to use different platforms by different members of the academic and support staff. The National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP), the professional association for disability and inclusivity practitioners in the higher education sector, has published advice for ensuring webinars are inclusive, including for neurodiverse students.²¹

The lockdown has affected some students' access to the non-technical support they need to access lectures and seminars. Many have not had contact with their note-takers since the lockdown. Others who rely on sign language interpreters may also be struggling. Some universities and colleges are attempting to meet these needs by ensuring video lectures are transcribed or subtitled, or the content shared in note form.

Universities and colleges are required by law to make reasonable adjustments to ensure their students can study and be assessed. If universities and colleges do not do this, students can make a complaint to their provider, contact their students' union and – if they have exhausted other avenues – complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.²²

University of Wolverhampton: British Sign Language interpreters

The University of Wolverhampton's Student Support and Wellbeing team responsible for British Sign Language (BSL) interpreting has been proactive in adapting support. Each Deaf student has a named contact BSL interpreter, and students can video call using sign language.

The team is providing regular interpreting support for Deaf students via the university's online learning platform. Remote interpreting in lectures, group meetings and tutorials with staff allows Deaf students to continue to access their learning. Academic support workers take notes during lectures and work with the BSL team to provide transcripts of pre-recorded lectures. This allows Deaf students to access course material in the event of delay in subtitling recordings.

Student views

A recent survey of UK higher education students in receipt of DSA by the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers highlighted the benefits of mentoring:²³

'Mentoring sessions have been very helpful for me throughout the academic year as well as during the pandemic crisis. I don't think I would have been able to keep up with the workload during lockdown without the mentor help. The support has helped to minimise the negative impact of COVID-19 on my mental health. Even though there were some days when my mental health was at its worst, the mentoring sessions have helped me to get back on track.'

'The study support I have been getting through video calls has been really helpful. I feel that my learning and understanding has improved much more. I'm very grateful for my support right now. We are putting a plan together for support over the summer to help me get ready for next year. My confidence has grown.'

'This support is essential for people who are entitled to it, especially at a time like this, without the support I would not have made it through the three years of my university degree.'

'My mentor and study skills helper have constantly been in touch and have continued to provide support for me which is greatly appreciated and has helped to relive some stress and anxiety surrounding my studies, so I would like to thank them for that continual support.'

Assessments, mitigations and adjustments

Disabled students may be concerned about how assessment mitigations (such as extra time during exams and using scribes) will be managed during the pandemic. Some universities and colleges have moved to assessing performing arts and similar courses through self-recorded audio and video where it is clearly essential that students have the technology or means to do this.

Many universities and colleges have taken steps to ensure exams and assessments are inclusive for all students. This has included helping them with assistive technology, specifying a time limit of days rather than hours for open book examinations, giving clear instructions about word limits, and providing opportunities for students to test assessment platforms in advance. They are putting clear mitigation procedures in place for students who are unable to complete assessments.

Some universities have contacted students requiring specific exam adjustments to offer support and reassurance and emphasised to

academic staff the importance of accessible assessments. Some providers have cancelled exams for first and second year students, removing the need for adjustments.

Research students are also concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their degrees, with some disabled PhD students requesting extensions to accommodate disruption to their work.²⁴ The OfS has published a briefing note on research students which has more general information for students.²⁵

Self-isolation

Some disabled students will have to self-isolate during the pandemic. They could still be in their term-time accommodation and may be worried about their ability to achieve this if they have to share a kitchen or bathroom with other students. Some universities have moved students who are shielding into self-contained flats to avoid this problem. Some providers and students' unions have been dropping off food and other essential supplies to students in self-isolation. The OfS has published a briefing note on student accommodation, which has more general information for students.²⁶

Progression into employment

The economic impact of lockdown has triggered widespread speculation about the likelihood of a global recession, and the consequent difficulties that final year students and recent graduates looking for employment are likely to face.²⁷ Disabled students may have additional concerns about how employers will make reasonable adjustments during the pandemic, and whether changes to working practices in its aftermath may adversely affect their working lives.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, a significant proportion of the careers education, information, advice and guidance offered to students and recent graduates was delivered face-to-face. Now, most careers services have moved their entire programme of activities and events online.

The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services has highlighted how the need to respond rapidly to the challenges thrown up by the pandemic has led to greater use of vlogs, podcasts, online chats and live streams to deliver support to students and graduates.²⁸ Some university and college career services offer webinars tailored to the needs of disabled students – for example, on how to ask for reasonable adjustments, and job-hunting advice for students with specific impairments.

University and college employment support staff are increasingly linking up with academic staff and employers to provide a more holistic service for students. To help disabled students with their move into the workplace, some university and college employment services are giving advice about what support they are entitled to expect from an

University of Bath: Assessment methods

The University of Bath's Disability Service has worked with faculties and academic departments to reinforce the importance of inclusive assessment methods, and contributed to university-wide communications on revised assessment arrangements to highlight the university's commitment to meeting the needs of its disabled students. This means that students who have chosen not to disclose a disability received messages about seeking support as well as students already in contact with the service.

Students with existing significant exam adjustments have been contacted to discuss whether alternative assessments will be required. Working with the university's Assistive Technology team, the service has supplied equipment and software to students whose assessment arrangements cannot easily be replicated at home, including those with readers and scribes. Support with installation, one-to-one training and practice sessions is provided for students needing help.

The Open University: Expanding existing services

As a distance learning provider, the Open University's careers service is designed to be delivered online, including individual guidance, regular webinars and web forums, careers fairs, virtual internships and insight days.

For one-on-one appointments, disabled students can request flexible timings and ask for adjustments in advance. The university offers web forums with a specific focus on disability, and webinars on themes relating to disability, such as asking for reasonable adjustments and job-seeking for students with autism.

Staff receive training on supporting disabled students. A project to improve support for neurodiverse students is underway, including the development of resources to help staff and neurodiverse students prepare for appointments.

employer, encouraging employers and recruiters to offer guaranteed interviews to disabled students, and offering support to employers to design appropriate reasonable adjustments for students who may be vulnerable during lockdown.

University of Sheffield: Support for disabled graduates

The University of Sheffield is encouraging employers and recruiters to offer a guaranteed interview to any disabled student who meets the essential criteria for a role. The university is also offering support to employers of University of Sheffield students to design appropriate reasonable adjustments for students who might be vulnerable during lockdown, so they can safely work from home.

The Disability and Dyslexia Support Service and the Careers Service work together to offer careers information, advice and guidance on a range of issues, including recruitment disclosure issues for disabled students during the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

Universities and colleges are having to adapt to assist disabled students during the pandemic. Transition support for prospective students has moved online, and information and guidance updated. Support is being given for online learning, accessing DSA, and self-isolating safely. For students about to graduate, tailored employment advice and information are being offered.

As the pandemic continues, other challenges and issues will emerge. The OfS is working with the DSC, other sector bodies and disability charities to identify emerging practice, and universities, colleges and students' unions are also sharing practice, resources and evaluation within their own networks.

This will help to develop a better understanding of the impact of interventions and actions during this period. It may also point a way forward. The development of more inclusive assessment processes and the expansion of remote learning because of the pandemic are proving beneficial for some disabled students. There is potential for these and other changes to benefit disabled students if incorporated into longer-term teaching and learning approaches. For this benefit to be realised, though, steps need to be taken to ensure digital accessibility for all.

Resources and information

General information on DSA can be found on the government website: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas>.

The SLC has issued **guidance for prospective students** related to the coronavirus pandemic which includes the latest information on DSA applications: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-prospective-students>.

Information on the Disabled Students' Commission is published on the Office for Students website. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/disabled-students-commission/>.

NADP has a **dedicated coronavirus resource hub** for information impacting staff and disabled students: <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

NADP has published a **report on student concerns and institutional challenges** relating to coronavirus: <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

NADP has published a **guide to ensuring webinars are accessible**: <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

The National Deaf Children's Society has published **guidance on ensuring online learning and assessment is accessible to deaf students**: <https://www.ndcs.org.uk/blog/remote-learning-in-higher-education-for-deaf-students/>.

Disability Rights UK's **factsheet on adjustments for disabled students**: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/adjustments-disabled-students>.

The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services publishes an annual report on the destinations of disabled graduates: <https://www.agcas.org.uk/Latest/launch-of-what-happens-next-2019>.

The government runs an **Access to Work scheme** to help disabled people in employment: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>.

We thank those universities, colleges and partnerships that provided case studies and interventions described in this briefing note. We would also like to thank the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers, whose survey results we have drawn on in this note. We are grateful to the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, NADP and the National Union of Students for their insights and ideas and for sharing case studies.

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 to their own contexts.

Notes

1 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>, 'Your DSA and Covid-19: Student provider survey', available at <https://nmhproviders.co.uk/>.

2 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-supporting-student-mental-health/.

3 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/supporting-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-students-event-video-published/ and www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-students-without-family-support/.

4 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

5 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

6 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity-data/.

7 See <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas>.

8 For more information, see section 20 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/20>).

9 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/.

10 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/the-national-student-survey-consistency-controversy-and-change/.

11 The OfS encourages providers to follow the social model of disability. The social model developed out of an understanding that disability is not something medical to be treated, but rather a failing on the part of society. Understood this way, a response to disability is not about 'fixing' the individual, but rather about restructuring the environments and attitudes around them. By building inclusive practices into an institution's structure and operations, fewer reasonable adjustments will be needed over time. Where such adjustments are needed, the institution can be much more responsive to individual needs.

12 See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/corona-covid-19-information/>, <https://www.ucas.com/coronavirus-updates-hub>.

13 See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-prospective-students>.

14 Uni Connect partnerships provide targeted higher education outreach to young people in areas where participation in higher education is lower than expected. We have asked partnerships to look at supporting broader groups of underrepresented students (including disabled students) during the pandemic, not just those currently in their target schools and wards. See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-programme-an-update-from-the-office-for-students/>.

15 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/provider-guide-to-coronavirus/questions-and-answers/.

16 Your DSA and Covid-19: Student provider survey', available at <https://nmhproviders.co.uk/>.

17 Your DSA and Covid-19: Student provider survey', available at <https://nmhproviders.co.uk/>.

18 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

19 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

20 Neurodivergence includes dyslexia, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, dyspraxia and other neurological conditions.

21 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

22 See <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/>.

23 See <https://nadp-uk.org/covid-19-resources-for-members-and-colleagues/>.

24 See <https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2020/05/18/open-letter-on-behalf-of-u-k-disabled-chronically-ill-and-neurodivergent-phd-students-due-to-covid-19/>.

25 See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-postgraduate-research-students/>.

26 See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-student-accommodation/.

27 The OfS has recently published a briefing note on graduate employment during the pandemic: see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-graduate-students/.

28 See <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/blog/Pages/how-university-careers-services-supporting-graduates-covid19-june-2020.aspx>.