

How universities can manage student anxiety about coronavirus on campus

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Students have returned to UK universities, and the timing couldn't be

worse. Some in the medical community have [argued](#) that the key to safe reopening is to do so at a time when community transmission is [minimal](#). With coronavirus infections currently [doubling every week](#) and the government introducing new measures to bring those rates down, having up to one million students back on campus is enormously worrying and will inevitably contribute to the continued spread of the virus.

Despite this, according to a [Universities UK survey](#), 97% of UK universities are proceeding with a "blended learning" approach combining remote and in-person teaching during this academic year.

It's hard to blame individual universities—without the brand value of Oxford or Cambridge, and lacking serious [financial support from the government](#), they have felt compelled to offer blended learning to remain competitive for applicants. Still, it is worth pointing out that [many students](#) have said they are very supportive of a delayed or remote start if it means more face-to-face teaching down the line.

In taking a blended approach, universities now face an ethical dilemma: to justify having students back on campus, they need to provide enough in-person teaching to make it worth their while, yet to reduce coronavirus risk, they also need to limit face-to-face contact as much as possible.

The better option for [public health](#) would have been a commitment, by government and the higher education sector as a whole, to providing online-only education for the first semester of this academic year at least. But it's too late for that now. With students back on campuses, some of which are already experiencing [suspected outbreaks](#), the question is instead how universities can balance their duties to educate students with their civic responsibilities to society at large. Here are some suggestions.

Managing uncertainty

One of the biggest adverse impacts on people's mental health during the pandemic has been the [uncertainty surrounding policy](#). With the government introducing new regulations that will last six months, and the threat of local lockdowns continuing to loom, students now need to receive clear information, as early as possible, as to what the contingency plans are for their curricular and extra-curricular activities in the event of greater restrictions.

This will help them prepare, logistically and emotionally. For example, knowing now how in-person teaching will be replaced, or how course or assessment content will change in light of local or national lockdowns, will help reduce anxiety.

Blended learning

In normal times, a blended learning approach has [many advantages](#). However, these are far from normal times—and a few caveats are worth pointing out.

According to a recent survey by the [National Union of Students](#), 70% of students are at least somewhat concerned about the risk of contracting COVID-19 on campus, with one in ten being "extremely concerned". [Research](#) suggests that, particularly for those prone to anxiety or other mental health conditions, sensitivity to a perceived threat can negatively impact attention and hence the ability to learn.

As such, worrying about catching COVID-19 and whether distancing and hygiene is being upheld appropriately (even where it is), might either deter anxious students from attending class or affect their ability to concentrate while there.

That's why universities need to prioritize [student](#) wellbeing during these times. [Research](#) suggests that effective blended learning requires a positive environment—that is, one where learners feel safe and motivated and their emotions are constructively appraised and supported. The pastoral responsibilities of academic staff—the primary points of contact for students—will thus be greater than ever to identify those who are struggling academically or emotionally. Additional training in how to provide this support and how and when to refer students for additional professional support will be necessary.

Looking out for the most vulnerable

Students in lower socioeconomic groups, disabled students and international students have been [particularly affected by the pandemic so far](#).

Universities, supported by government, need to pay particular attention to these most vulnerable groups; for example, to either make their return home as smooth as possible if they need to go, or to support those who need to stay on campus but who might lose income from part-time jobs due to the pandemic.

Preparing for the future

We should not lose sight of the fact that, although coronavirus may not be going away, we can be hopeful that it could soon be under control if a vaccine is rolled out by the next academic year, if not sooner. Ahead of a widely available vaccination program, universities can reconfigure their delivery of courses to bring forward material that is more suitable to [online learning](#) and leave material that benefits from, or requires, face-to-face teaching (for example lab or practical work) until later in the course.

The debate around returning to university during a pandemic serves as a reminder to all of us in higher education about the importance of face-to-face learning. Despite the growth of online courses, recorded lectures and reports of poor in-person attendance on campus, the threat of having it taken away reminds us that the centuries-old tradition of gathering in lecture halls and seminar rooms is, after the pandemic ends, something worth saving.

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