



Protecting the Mental Health of Your Students During the Current Global Crisis

Description

In these challenging times, it is vital that your institution continues to take the necessary steps to safeguard the well-being of its students.

The coronavirus outbreak has impacted many areas of our lives, and as a result, it may heighten levels of stress and anxiety.

With [millions of people currently infected](#) with the virus, it is understandable to be concerned that you or your loved ones might also come down with the illness.

In addition to health concerns, [one third of the world's population](#) is currently, or has been, in some degree of lockdown in order to control the spread of the virus.

For those living alone, this means long stretches of solitude without friends or family.

For those living with others, this can still present several challenges, particularly if they live in a hostile household.

Additionally, the uncertainty surrounding the outbreak can be unsettling.

University students are not exempt from many of these concerns and additionally face a set of unique challenges.

Many are worried about how they can continue their education remotely and whether their coursework or exam results will suffer as a consequence.

Mobility has also become an issue. When lockdowns were initially announced, university students across the world found themselves among a large group of people attempting to get home safely.

With one million Indian university students studying across the world, India's quick decision to ban all commercial flights to the country on 23 March came as a huge shock.

[According to the Financial Times](#), this resulted in "thousands of Indians stranded around the world from London to Kuala Lumpur."

Students have been forced to pay higher fees to travel home, many have lost part-time jobs, and graduates face significant uncertainty entering the current job market.

[According to Zanon Chiu](#), a registered clinical psychologist working with children and adolescents in Hong Kong, "college students [are] more vulnerable than we think, especially with the current academic and financial burden."

[In fact, a recent poll](#) has found that 80% of young people with a history of mental illness have "found their conditions have worsened since the coronavirus crisis began in the UK."

While the current mobility restrictions can make it difficult to reach your students, there are still many ways your institution can provide mental health support during this difficult time.

Online student services

Much of the conversation among the higher education sector during the current global emergency has been about the methods employed by universities to continue educating their students.

Our previous blog, [How University Staff are Effectively Working from Home](#), covers this topic in detail.

Implementing online learning is a critical step in reassuring students that your institution is working hard to protect their education; something that is likely to be a large concern of theirs.

While this reassurance is sure to help ease anxiety, work must also be done on transferring all other student services online.

For many, university acts as a safe space, with access to a supportive community and mental health facilities.

Cut off from university campuses, students can be left in a particularly vulnerable state as they attempt to process issues they would usually receive help for.

Transferring support services online is a key step in protecting the mental health of your students.

[The University of Maryland](#) in the USA recently hosted its first virtual mental health workshop using the video platform Zoom.

University counselor Jessica David led the participants in breathing exercises and talked about the importance of developing physical, emotional, and mental self-care strategies.

Explore how your institution could implement similar support services or workshops, and what resources you have internally to create these opportunities.

Additionally, make sure you alert students to the services that are available to them, whether university-led or external.

International students in different time zones must also be considered, so that no one is cut off from the support they need.

Communication

During this period of uncertainty, regular communication with your students can play a large role in helping to manage their anxiety levels.

It can be easy for misinformation to spread in times of crisis, and students will be looking to their institution to dispel rumors and communicate accurate information.

Students are likely to have many questions about the practical impact of the coronavirus on their studies, so it's important that resources are provided, and simple contact procedures are put in place between university administrators and students.

[According to University Business](#), AI-powered emergency technologies, such as chatbots, are helping university staff deal with the influx of questions from students during the coronavirus outbreak.

Jesse Boeding, a University of Pennsylvania doctoral candidate who is studying AI-powered emergency technologies, explains that the use of chatbots allows specialized staff to spend more time with students who need help, rather than fielding these calls.

In other words, chatbots can help automatically answer common questions regarding the coronavirus and direct students to pre-existing resources.

This leaves time for university staff to process more complex issues related to the crisis.

Encourage connection

With many countries enforcing social isolation to some degree, people are spending significant periods of time at home.

For university students, this can make studying feel like a much more solitary and lonely activity.

As discussed in our previous blog, [How Universities can Encourage Healthy Study Habits When Learning Remotely](#), there are many ways your students can alleviate the stress surrounding remote learning.

These include encouraging students to take regular breaks from work, utilizing video conferencing platforms to connect with fellow course members, and staying active as much as possible.

In an effort to keep spirits high during isolation, [Business Breakthrough University in Tokyo](#) hosted a virtual graduation using remote-controlled robots.

Business Insider reports that on 28 March, graduates had the experience of walking across the stage and [accepting their diplomas](#) at the Hotel Grand Palace in Tokyo, virtually.

Students at the University of Pennsylvania set up a [Minecraft server](#) and worked together to recreate their university campus.

There are now plans to connect via Minecraft with other universities to complete challenges.

Encouraging your students to find inventive methods of connecting with one another is a great way of spreading positivity and reducing overall stress levels.

Be flexible

During a crisis, your institution may be unable to function in the same way it did before.

With the coronavirus placing various barriers in the path of students, such as restrictions to mobility and disruptions to education, it may be unfair to strictly adhere to requirements implemented before the crisis.

The University of Birkbeck is one of many universities who have implemented a [no detriment policy](#) as a result of the coronavirus.

Students can choose whether to either not attempt a final assessment and instead be offered the average module mark, or complete the assessment and be assured that they will not receive a mark lower than their average assessment grade.

This reassures students that their overall result will not be negatively impacted by the disruptions brought about due to the coronavirus.

It is important that any application deadlines at your institution are also reviewed, as many students may struggle to complete the tasks required of them for submission.

This is the case for [MBA submissions](#) as many countries have closed standardized testing centers where MBA applicants would otherwise be taking GMAT and GRE exams.

[Harvard Business School](#) has extended its application deadline for its 2+2 program by two months and will keep a larger waiting list than usual.

Being sensitive to a student's situation and adapting your processes accordingly is crucial to protecting their overall well-being and mental health status.

If you'd like to learn more about how prospective international students and institutions are responding to the coronavirus, please download a free copy of our QS report: [*The Impact of the Coronavirus on Global Higher Education*](#).