# **Covid-19 and education: what are the lessons learnt?**

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## **Introduction:**

The Coronavirus crisis has caused a significant disruption on the normal ways in which we deliver education and learning for students across higher education sector. There is strong evidence emerging of BAME communities affected disproportionately by the Covid-19. Looking it at through the lens of higher education, there is growing concern that BAME students are massively at disadvantage.

## **What are some of the issues that students are experiencing?**

At UPSIGN, we have been talking to university students, lecturers, tutors and teachers. We have discussed what specific issues are in the spotlight and here is what we have learnt:

**Financial hardship**: Many university and college-going students who were doing part time jobs or zero contract hours, particularly in health and retail, are now facing financial hardships. Some might have lost their jobs resulting in loss of earnings to pay for necessities like food, rent, etc. This will affect their capacity to engage and complete their assignments and course work.

**Lack of equipment:** Not all families have access to personal laptops, or high-level internet. They perhaps have just one desktop for the entire household. The lack of equipment and facilities can have a negative impact on students especially if they want to study on Skype or talk to their friends.

**Family commitments:** Even if they have access, many BAME students they live with large families and there are usually several distractions, responsibility to look after younger siblings, do household chores such as cooking, cleaning, etc. It is not easy to be in a mind-set of university life where you have the privacy to do your own work.

**Language barriers:** Since the lockdown began, many students are living with their families. Bilingual students have been speaking their first language for more than 4 weeks now so they worry that they might not be able to retain the academic standards of English language environment, write assignments in English and capture their thoughts well.

**Lack of time to take up hobbies:** Also, other factors such as living with families leaves very little time to do study and course work. Students are just about able to keep up with their assignments, readings and course work. This leaves very little or no time to take up any other hobbies or interests.

**Mental health:** The feeling of isolation is strong as students are away from the university campus and friends. Some of them are not allowed to go outside because they live with grandparents who have existing health conditions. Lack of exercise leads to a negative effect on the mental health. Essentially, their well-being is compromised. In many communities, mental health is a taboo subject and no help is available. It has a knock-on effect on their performance in exams. Timed exams are hard because no focused environment available.

## **How can education system provide better support to students during this time?**

Think outside the box. Do not be too concerned with division of responsibility. Be sensitive towards your students, listen to them, and be available for them. Where we are not available to deal, then send them on to other sources of support. In a way, we are becoming social workers for them. These two issues are still there in Covid-19 but manifest in their own ways during the crisis. Despite our awareness, we are experiencing unconscious bias. As a rule of thumb, all tutors and education teams are encouraged to be open to online learning, empower your students, and engage them in discussions. Anonymise the feedback. Encourage students to be much more open about their thoughts and feelings. Sense of belonging is the way in which students are feeling adrift by not being physically in the university and hence not feeling part of the university culture. We can respond to that by creating inclusive learning environments, online discussion forums, non-threatening icebreakers at the beginning of activities, establishing ground rules, avoiding and confronting micro aggressions.

**What are the existing support services for students?** All universities have moved to online teaching. Messages of support and unity are coming right from the top. They are making information available online and issuing regular updates. Some students might be experiencing harassment and racial discrimination (Chinese students have reported this already). Universities already have hate crime reporting systems in place. They are providing funds and equipment to cater for all students. DON NOT assume about things. Health and wellbeing, actual involvement with students. Contracting the virus. We need to be sensitive about how we speak with students and use confidentiality.

## **What is the way forward?**

This crisis will change the way we work in the future. The virus has brought these issues much more into focus. One of the great things that has come out is people’s ability to pull together and the resilience that they have shown in times of a global pandemic. We shall need to build the confidence of our students upon returning, given the disruption that we are experiencing. We shall need to be emotionally intelligence and practise the values of empathy and tolerance when students return. Education is about humanising people’s lives; we can certainly get better at that.

The university culture is very competitive by its very nature. How can I get ahead, how can I improve my grades, and how can I excel at this course – all these questions are usually motivators for better performance. However, for now, it is important that we can all feel each other’s anxieties and can learn from the crisis that life is about supporting those around us, not about grades. Finally, the culture of supporting students and their families should encouraged. As a society, we need to have empathy and care.

## **Socially distant, but emotionally connected**

There is a distinction between being alone and feeling alone. Social connections are so vital to our own health and happiness. Right now, we are all physically alone, to some degree, but we are all sharing the same experience at the same time. This shared experience means we are all starting to understand what it means to be lonely or disconnected all the time. Therefore, it is vital to focus on the importance of these connections. The quality of our interactions with those we hold dear will get us through the next few weeks - and as we try to find ways to connect with those in our communities that are alone and vulnerable. We may be socially distant but we need to stay emotionally connected.

## **What is UPSIGN doing?**

At UPSIGN, we are engaging with policy makers, key influencers, academic teams, students, their families, teaching staff, administrative staff and other stakeholders to gather a better understanding of their experiences of Covid-19. We are planning to conduct webinars, discussion panels, symposiums and workshops to disseminate our findings, which will then inform teaching practices.

If you would like to get involved, do get in touch with us on m.sajid@ucl.ac.uk