



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

All-Party Parliamentary University Group Virtual Meeting

Wednesday 2 September 2020

15:30-17:00

Chair: Daniel Zeichner MP

Speakers:

- Professor Steve West, Vice-Chancellor, University of the West of England (UWE)
- Dr Paul Thompson, Vice-Chancellor, Royal College of Art
- Professor Gavin Brown, Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Liverpool
- Professor Cara Aitchison, Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff Metropolitan University

On Wednesday 2 September the All-Party Parliamentary University Group (APPUG) held its first meeting of the 2020/21 year via Zoom.

The meeting was organised at short-notice in response to the developing situation around university admissions caused by the decision to award centre-assessed grades and remove student number controls (SNCs). The other focus of the meeting was preparations being made to ensure the safety of students, staff and communities at the start of the academic year.

The first brief presentation was made by **Professor Steve West** who spoke about the difficulties in balancing the risk appetites of a diverse student population and staff. He stressed that campuses had not shut down during the Covid-19 lockdown period, and therefore institutions were prepared to support students that needed to self-isolate in the new academic year. UWE had hosted a Nightingale hospital and trained several hundred students within the hospital during this period, increasing their resilience.

UWE was working closely with its neighbouring universities in Bristol and Bath, as well as Public Health England (PHE) and local authorities on areas such as public transport and wider information sharing. Alongside the University of Bristol, they had established a student code of conduct to protect students, staff and the local communities from Covid transmission.

Dr Paul Thompson explained how the Royal College of Arts (RCA) differed from many other institutions in terms of its older student population, lack of student accommodation, highly internationalised nature and the fact the majority of staff and students relied on public transport networks.

Delivering specialised art provision was challenging during lockdown as most teaching was previously delivered in a physical and collaborative learning environment, however the university had managed to deliver online teaching to 60 countries and moved its annual art show online.

In preparation for the start of the new term, the RCA had invested in a large number of screens and supply of hand sanitiser as well as additional security. It would also be adopting a blended learning approach like the majority of other institutions.

Professor Gavin Brown stated the University of Liverpool's commitment to provide some in-person teaching to all students, but explained that all courses had been designed to be able to move entirely online should another local or national lockdown be imposed.

They were mindful of the fact new students had missed several months of education and social interaction and so had set up various programmes and activities to assist with developing appropriate study skills for blended learning; the university were encouraging international students to enrol onto a British Council programme.

He explained how new, returning and international students' return to campus would be staggered to minimise risk of a Covid-19 outbreak, and that the focus of 'week one' would be more on health and wellbeing than previous years.

Finally he gave details of the safety measures being imposed on campus (e.g hand sanitiser, social distancing, face masks), the student pledge established by the university (*please email appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk to receive a copy*), and the key role the university had played in the city council's Covid-outbreak plan.

Moving on, **Professor Cara Aitchison** explained that one of the features of Cardiff Metropolitan University was the focus on smaller groups of in-person teaching and therefore this had to be quickly adapted during the lockdown period. She added that online teaching had generally been well-received by students.

In terms of the issues with 2020 admissions caused by the regrading of A Levels, she explained that her institution had converted all conditional offers to unconditional offers on the original results day due to the clear unfairness in the system.

In general she thought government advice had been arriving too late, and institutions that had taken a more proactive approach were then vulnerable to being punished.

Q&A session

A Q&A session followed to allow parliamentary and university attendees to discuss the issues raised by the introductory presentations in more detail. Q&A sessions within APPUG meetings are held under the Chatham House rule. Topics of discussion centred on:

- Safety for students and communities off campus
- Local outbreak planning
- Fairness in admissions for students applying in the 2021/22 academic year
- Uptake of places/deferrals from both domestic and international students
- The quality of blended provision
- The costs associated with the transition to online learning and ensuring campuses are Covid-secure
- The accuracy of predicted A Level grades