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COVID UPDATE

Recently, I’ve seen some interesting media perspectives on COVID-19 as an ‘equaliser’, an indiscriminate disease which can and does strike anywhere. Take this quote from The Economic Times in April: ‘In many ways, COVID-19 has been a great leveller of sorts. Be it the rich, the poor or even the famous, the virus has affected people from all walks of life and spared none.’ And it is true that no one is immune and in that sense we are ‘all in this together’.

But the harsher reality is that while physically we may all be susceptible, we are not all equally susceptible to other serious consequences of COVID-19. Take our IntoUniversity students. They are highly vulnerable to the adverse effects of living in close proximity with multiple family members, in crowded accommodation, typically with no access to outside space – and the negative impact this has on mental health. They are at immediate risk of food poverty because of lost jobs or difficulty in accessing Free School Meal vouchers with schools closed. They have access to far fewer resources to stimulate and engage them – including laptops and other devices. Many parents are struggling to support their children’s home learning due to their own educational poverty.

It is also a sad truth that the longer-term consequences of COVID-19 will fall unduly harshly on our students. Whether it be the consequences of an extended period of lost school learning or the negative impact of their inability to take advantage of new digital provision which their better-off peers are enthusiastically grasping.

This is a depressing picture. But it is not all bad news. IntoUniversity – and we are not of course alone in this – immediately embarked on a response to the lockdown.

As trusted members of the local community, tutoring calls from the team are gratefully answered, precisely because we are recognised as a personal, reliable source of support: when Luke from Hackney South calls, parents and students alike recognise him as a familiar role model, a caring professional and an experienced tutor who can support with learning tasks they may struggle with themselves, and, he can respond practically and sensitively to each child, already knowing their academic needs or the family circumstances.

By the end of week one of the lockdown, our teams had made over 2,500 calls to our students.

You may be thinking, why an old-fashioned telephone call? Why not online lessons and support? Well we are providing these too, and already our corporate mentoring programme is functioning online where it can. Our students often live in households where they have limited access to laptops and where they are available, they are often shared between several family members. With telephone tutoring – using their own phones or parents’ phones – we can support precisely those young people who are most at risk of missing out during lockdown.

Post-lockdown, the adverse impact of COVID-19 will continue disproportionately to affect not just our students but disadvantaged students across the UK. But we will be there for them. And despite the challenging funding environment we are still committed to our growth plan to reach an additional 10,000 young people through ten new centres in high-need communities.

Dr. Rachel Carr
Chief Executive and Co-Founder, IntoUniversity

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Dispatches from the front line

A survey of our centres showed that the majority of our students are using online learning. However, just under half of our centres report that almost none of their students have access to their own personal laptop or PC.

What proportion of students at your centre are using online learning?

What proportion of students at your centre have their own personal laptop/PC?

Giulia, Centre Leader at IntoUniversity Brent, reported some of the difficulties this is causing young people who usually attend Academic Support.

‘During our initial pastoral calls we spoke with a family of six, whose four children attend Academic Support. During the phone call, we discovered that the family were struggling a great deal. The three older students all have to be online during the normal school hours (attending online lessons) and the youngest has been set Primary work online.

He explained that they only have one laptop so the older students had to share, meaning that they were not getting their work done and the family were getting calls from both schools saying that the students hadn’t been logging on for the whole school day.

We assured the family that we will support them, help the students academically and speak to the school to find some solutions. We rang both Primary and Secondary schools and explained the situation. Both schools have now sent the family paper worksheets for the students so they are now able to share the laptop as they do not need to be using the device simultaneously.’

Some of our students have access to a computer but their ability to use it effectively for online learning is limited, as James from IntoUniversity Bristol South explains:

‘Charlie is one of our Year 6 students who was due to sit his SATs exams this year. Keen to continue his learning, Charlie has been working hard on all the work set by his school, but he struggled with some Maths work and his Mum was unable to support him.

We suggested that they email us the work so we could talk Charlie through it, but unfortunately, Charlie’s mum couldn’t work out how to attach the worksheets to an email. Undeterred, we spent an hour talking through each question with Charlie. The work was about scale factors so Charlie had to describe the shapes, how long the sides were, the size of the angles in each corner and then read out the corresponding question. Working like this, Charlie was able to complete his homework, initially with lots of support but by the end he could work them out independently.’

We know that we are needed now more than ever.

Despite this important remote support, after the crisis, our young people will inevitably have missed out on key learning opportunities. It is vital that IntoUniversity centres are still here to support them.
The survey of centres also revealed that many students do not have a proper place to study at home.

What proportion of your students have a proper place to study at home?

- They all have a good place to study: 379%
- Most have a good place to study: 41.4%
- Its half and half: 17.2%
- Some have a place to study, but most are finding it difficult: 3.4%
- Most are struggling to find proper study space: 4.3%

For some families, these challenges are being compounded by parents inability to help their children with school work. In many of the communities where we work, it is common for children to be the best English speaker in their family; 47% of current Academic Support students speak English as an Additional Language.

Laura, Centre Leader at IntoUniversity Leeds East, describes some of the support that her team have been giving to their families who speak English as an Additional Language.

‘One single parent reported that she lacks the skills and confidence to support her Year 5 child with his Maths and English work, therefore has previously taken school letters and homework tasks to the local library, where she can rely on staff to translate the content to her. Without a computer or a desk, Crystal must sit on her bed and use her phone to do all of her GCSE work. It’s students like Crystal that make me appreciate the impact that Academic Support can have. It’s not just about having someone to help with homework, it’s about having somewhere to do it.’

Imy, Centre Leader at IntoUniversity Bristol South, told of how this is affecting some of the young people who attend the centre.

‘Crystal, a Year 11 student who we have worked with since our centre opened, is a thoughtful and diligent student and despite her exams being cancelled, she is still keen to continue her studies, to prepare herself for starting sixth form. However, lockdown has meant that Crystal has to share the family computer to do work, and she describes the atmosphere as noisy and chaotic and so has taken to doing her homework in her room. Without a computer or a desk, Crystal must sit on her bed and use her phone to do all of her GCSE work. It’s students like Crystal that make me appreciate the impact that Academic Support can have. It’s not just about having someone to help with homework, it’s about having somewhere to do it.’

Safeguarding under lockdown

It is IntoUniversity’s mission to continue to safeguard all of our young people and their families during this difficult period. Our safeguarding procedures remain robust and under constant review during centre closure.

It is particularly difficult to provide pastoral support when you cannot see a student in person and gain a true sense of how they are. Students may not have a personal mobile so we may have to contact them via parents and carers which can be difficult to navigate if they are exacerbating any issues in the home. We understand that many of our students’ circumstances may have worsened regarding finances, food, overcrowding and poor mental health, although that being said many of our families are being incredibly resilient, keeping to a routine and challenging themselves academically in these times.

IntoUniversity has quickly adapted to delivering programmes remotely and through this contact, we can continue to provide educational and pastoral support.

As a priority, we want to continue to be a consistent, educational and supportive presence in their lives.

**Actions that IntoUniversity has taken to remotely safeguard our young people:**
- Continued contact with social care and schools to ensure multi-agency working.
- All new remote processes have been assessed and tested to ensure quality and safety.
- We have developed safeguarding guidance and risk assessments for remote working.
- Within the first few days of lockdown, we had written and delivered training and guidance to all staff and volunteers on how to continue to safeguard our young people remotely.
- We have created national and local directories of signposting support and further resources to support our young people and families, including COVID-19 specific support plans.
Evaluating our impact in a crisis

As we rapidly adapt our programmes to support students remotely, the questions we’re asking don’t seem so different from those we address day to day. Who needs our support most? What do they need? Who are we struggling to reach? Is what we’re doing effective? How can we improve? The context, of course, is completely different – we’re facing an unprecedented national lockdown, have limited data, and need answers immediately to make big decisions.

To address these questions, we need to be able to monitor who we are supporting and how. We are in the fortunate position of having a well-established Salesforce database and the in-house skills to quickly develop new tracking systems within it. What’s more, we have a staff team that are fully bought into using the database and work hard to maintain data completeness and accuracy. In the current situation, the benefit of all this is particularly clear.

We’re using qualitative data collected as part of conversations with students and families to inform ongoing adaptation of our programmes. Some of the measures we normally use to track success are no longer relevant. For example, at this stage in the year we would usually be helping students prepare for exams. With these cancelled, we are instead supporting those students to remain motivated and to deal with the stress and uncertainty that has resulted. We’re giving careful thought to how we measure the impact of our support during this period.

By adapting our evaluation to help make the best of the current situation, we’re working to put our students in a strong position to succeed once things eventually return to normal.

Staying focused on our fundraising

Whilst the world around our students has changed, nothing has changed in our resolve to seek out and secure new strategic, multi-year partnerships – we’re facing an unprecedented national lockdown, have limited data, and need answers immediately to make big decisions.

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We are aware though that there is a significant fundraising challenge on the horizon for IntoUniversity due to the economic impact of the crisis.

Through the database, staff have been able to identify and prioritise those likely to be most in need of support, systematically contact these students, and manage the follow-up actions arising from these conversations.

In addition, we’re using qualitative data collected as part of conversations with students and families to inform ongoing adaptation of our programmes. To give one example, we’ve been hearing that students are struggling with lack of routine, so we’re contacting them each week on the same day they would normally be coming into our centres for support.

Whilst our centre teams are working hard to continue to support thousands of our students across the country to stay focused on their education and remain on track, the IntoUniversity Fundraising Team will work harder than ever to ensure that we continue to build a sustainable income for the charity and achieve our fundraising targets.

Our students and their families are going to be hit hardest by this crisis; their education is already suffering and will continue to stall in the years ahead. Whilst the world around our students has changed, nothing has changed in our resolve to seek out and secure new strategic, multi-year partnerships with universities, corporate partners and philanthropists to ensure that our vital network of centres is sustained for many years to come.

We are grateful that we are not in an immediate cash flow crisis, and we are equally grateful to all of our brilliant supporters and partners for ensuring that is the case. We are aware though that there is a significant fundraising challenge on the horizon for IntoUniversity due to the economic impact of the crisis, and our focus now is to work closely with our fantastic funding partners and build new funding partnerships over the coming months to mitigate this risk and ensure our students remain focused on their education and their futures.

We would love to hear your feedback about aspire. To get in touch or to find out more about IntoUniversity please visit our website www.intouniversity.org, drop Vicky an email at aspire@intouniversity.org or call us on 020 7243 0242.

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