

Students Deserve Better

Spending Review 2020

A submission by the National Union of Students

Background

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of almost 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we represent the interests of more than seven million students. NUS represents students and students' unions to ensure that education is transformative, skills and learning are accessible and every student in the UK is empowered to achieve their potential.

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has shone a light on many of the inequalities inherent within our education system. Currently, our education sector is not prepared to respond to the needs of learners, and allow those who have been made unemployed to retrain and upskill for the new economy. It will be crucial to instil this capability as it will be our education sector that is best equipped to reboot our economy and set us up for the future.

On top of highlighting some of the systemic challenges for students, COVID-19 has also created an urgent need for greater support. The spending review must look to the future and secure students' present. The most important measures for this will be ensuring that students have the financial support that they require to cope with the effects of this pandemic.

Students are no different to the wider community, and have been affected in many of the same ways by this pandemic. Many students have lost employment and now find themselves in rent arrears. The government must put this right immediately, by releasing funding to be directed straight to students, whether through university and college hardship funds or through alternative grants.

Those in our education system now will be our key workers of the future, and it will be on their shoulders that we rebuild the economy. We must set them up to succeed.

The proposals contained within this submission would put the UK on the path to having an education system built in the principles of being lifelong, fully-funded, accessible and democratic. We have split the proposals according to these principles.

Lifelong

- *Greater investment into adult education, and all adult education funding invested into the further education sector to be ring-fenced for this purpose*
- *All Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) funding restrictions should be removed through all levels of education*

- *A lifelong learning grant underpinned by a minimum entitlement to fully-funded local level 2 and 3 provision and the equivalent of 6 years' publicly-funded credits at level 4 and above*

Funded

- *Raise the base funding rate for 16- and 17-year-olds in further education to at least £4,760*
- *Future college structure designed to prioritise the needs of learners*
- *Reimburse tuition fees or forgive current debt for all current nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare students*
- *Abolish student-funded tuition fees for all nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare students starting in 2020/21*
- *Funding provided to colleges and universities to be directed towards hardship funds*
- *Greater funding to eradicate digital poverty and ensure that students have the technology they need to learn, including free internet access*
- *A one-off grant, equivalent to a full-year's maintenance loan for students who have had to defer entry to university due to the A-Levels fiasco*
- *Financial support for students during lockdown periods*
- *Provide students with the right to leave accommodation contracts without any financial detriment*
- *Extend the maximum student loan eligibility to enable all students to afford basic living costs without reliance on part-time employment*
- *Funding directed towards students' unions to empower students to shape decisions*

Accessible

- *Reintroduce non-repayable, means-tested maintenance grants, and set eligibility for these at previous levels plus inflationary increases*
- *Introduce universal, living maintenance grants that reflect actual student need for those on nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare courses*
- *Increase the threshold for eligibility for maximum student finance according to historical inflationary increases, and increase it each year in line with inflation*
- *Maintain the current repayment period for student loans to ensure that no graduate has to pay back more than they originally were forecast to*
- *Increase the repayment threshold for student loans, above which students make a repayment, each year in line with inflation*
- *Abolish the in-study interest rate for all student loans*
- *Full-time students should be eligible for Universal Credit if they have lost out on employment or are in significant financial need*
- *Extend the criteria for postgraduate loans to allow those studying for postgraduate certificates, such as National Senco Award, to be eligible for a loan*
- *Introduce a system for Sharia compliant student loans, as was previously promised*
- *Greater investment in NHS children and young people's mental health services*
- *Expand the use of digital platforms to support students with mental health needs, funding more projects and protecting funding for current projects*

Introduction

The following is the National Union of Students' (NUS) formal submission to the 2020 Spending Review. We believe the ultimate aim of these proposals should be to create an education system that is built upon the principles of lifelong, accessible, fully-funded and democratic. The policies proposed in this submission would move the UK closer towards this goal, and help to ensure that every young person has access to an outstanding education.

The first section looks at how to make education lifelong to improve the UK's economic recovery from the impending recession. These proposals would make it easier for those who have been made unemployed, or are in industries that are particularly vulnerable due to the pandemic, to retrain, upskill and prepare for the new economy.

The second section proposes how we can ensure our education sector has the funding it requires to provide every young person with a superb education. The proposals look at funding that is required across higher education and further education, picking out key learners who require urgent support. There are additional measures that are proposed to respond to the immediate risks that COVID-19 presents to students across the UK.

The final section addresses how to ensure that our education system is truly accessible for all learners so that they can work towards the qualifications that they require. To move towards this significant changes need to be made to the maintenance support that is on offer for potential learners, and these proposals would allow significantly greater numbers of students to access higher-levels of education. Making education accessible is more than just opening up access to education, we must ensure that students are supported throughout their educational journey so that they can complete their qualifications and be prepared for the world after education. Therefore, we also include proposals on how to improve mental health support that is on offer to students and young people.

While we recognised that education is a devolved issue and many of these proposals will mainly be to the benefit of students in England, there will be numerous funding implications as a result of them which would benefit devolved administrations.

Lifelong

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- *All Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) funding restrictions should be removed through all levels of education*
- *A lifelong learning grant underpinned by a minimum entitlement to fully-funded local level 2 and 3 provision and the equivalent of 6 years' publicly-funded credits at level 4 and above*

Retraining and upskilling

Talent and ability are spread across all corners of the UK, but currently opportunity is not. Many students are held back by the lack of provision of good quality education in their region. Similarly, education is seen as a one-stop shop, something for young people to do before they start their careers, rather than something people can return to as and when they need.

In the wake of COVID-19, as we face rising unemployment rates and slowing economic growth, it will be essential to rethink the way that education is structured. Our education sector can play a critical role in strengthening the UK's economic recovery, but we must see greater investment for this to be the case. Funding needs to be provided to open up opportunities for all people to benefit from education, regardless of the region that they live in or what stage of life they are at.

This starts with greater investment in adult education, and all funding for adult education that is channelled into further education to be ring-fenced for this purpose. Our economic recovery will be built on the back of those who have been made unemployed choosing to retrain and upskill for the future economy. As a society we should reward these efforts and ensure that these workers are set up to succeed. These measures must start with reversing all historical cuts to the Adult Education Budget. In addition, all ELQ funding restrictions should be removed, and this should not just be restricted to Level 6 but extended throughout education.

Furthermore, this Spending Review should be seen as an opportunity to invest in Britain's people by further encouraging the principle of lifelong learning. To encourage all those who have been made unemployed to return to education, the government should introduce a lifelong learning grant underpinned by a minimum entitlement to fully-funded local level 2 and 3 provision and the equivalent of 6 years' publicly-funded credits at level 4 and above, with additional support for priority groups.

By prioritising access to these levels of education it would help people of whatever age and background navigate the new world of work, equipping themselves with the skills they need to drive Britain's productivity forwards. According to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, only 18% of UK adults hold level 3 qualifications as their highest qualification compared to OECD average of 39%¹. If we are to make the UK a scientific superpower it will be essential to upgrade the UK's skills base and ensuring that more adults hold level 3 qualifications should be the first step towards this.

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeconaf/139/139.pdf>

Digital skills

Moreover, many of those looking to retrain and upskill will require more advanced digital skills, both to engage with learning that will be delivered online, and to succeed post-education. Our society and economy are increasingly dependent on the digital world, and digital competency is now essential for those moving into careers in almost every sector. The digital skills gap is growing, as demand for people with high-level digital skills increases rapidly. The World Economic Forum estimates that by 2022 emerging technologies will generate 133 million new jobs in place of the 75 million that will be displaced.² Whilst people are in education, whether that is for the first-time or because they are retraining, it presents a great opportunity to equip people with the digital skills that they need for this new economy.

Funding is required for this to ensure that programmes are in place to train learners in digital skills, alongside their core studies. In a bid to unleash the potential that is within these learners, the spending review should be used to invest and introduce greater opportunities for learners, of whatever age, to access digital skills training.

² <https://www.weforum.org/press/2018/09/machines-will-do-more-tasks-than-humans-by-2025-but-robot-revolution-will-still-create-58-million-net-new-jobs-in-next-five-years/>

Funded

- *Raise the base funding rate for 16- and 17-year-olds in further education to at least £4,760*
- *Future college structure designed to prioritise the needs of learners*
- *Reimburse tuition fees or forgive current debt for all current nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare students*
- *Abolish student-funded tuition fees for all nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare students starting in 2020/21*
- *Funding provided to colleges and universities to be directed towards hardship funds*
- *Greater funding to eradicate digital poverty and ensure that students have the technology they need to learn, including free internet access*
- *A one-off grant, equivalent to a full-year's maintenance loan for students who have had to defer entry to university due to the A-Levels fiasco*
- *Financial support for students during lockdown periods*
- *Provide students with the right to leave accommodation contracts without any financial detriment*
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Further Education

In order to level up economic opportunity across all nations and regions of the country, it will be essential to invest in our education infrastructure and spread opportunity equally. As a starting principle for this all FE colleges should receive necessary funding to be able to cater to local needs, including raising the base rate for 16 and 17 year olds to at least £4,760. While some investment through the last two Budgets has started to correct the underinvestment in the further education sector, it has not solved the issue.

The needs of their local populations should be at the crux of the design of every college as well as the national college structure. Our colleges are a national asset and set the UK apart as a country that can provide a first-class education, but there are still improvements to be made. In designing the future college structure we must prioritise the needs of learners, and potential learners. Practically this means protecting the status of small and specialist colleges, and discouraging large-scale mergers and the formation of academies of colleges. Colleges should be embedded in their local communities and flexible to adapt to local needs, rather than faceless corporations.

Nursing, midwifery and allied healthcare students

Ultimately these proposals should be seen as first step towards establishing a new education system on the principles that education should be accessible, funded, lifelong and democratic. Education should be free from cradle to grave and accessible across all levels and forms of education. Therefore, this Spending Review should also be used as an opportunity to redress the imbalances of contributions that exist in higher education.

As a first step the government should create a more equal funding package for nursing, midwifery and allied healthcare students. The way in which so many of these students have stepped up to offer their skills and knowledge to assist with the response to the pandemic is a source of great pride, and we should continue to encourage more students

to enter these courses in order to secure the future pipeline for the NHS. To reflect the contribution that these students have made to the COVID-19 response, and to ensure that these courses are accessible for as many students as possible the government should reimburse tuition fees or forgive current debt for all current nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare students, abolish student-funded tuition fees for all nursing, midwifery and allied healthcare students starting in 2020/21 and introduce universal, living maintenance grants that reflect actual student need.

Modelling, undertaken by London Economics on behalf of the Royal College of Nursing, shows that moving to means tested maintenance grants plus non-means tested tuition fee grants provides 850 extra qualified nurses entering the NHS postgraduation each year and brings a net benefit to the exchequer of £132 million by reducing the reliance on bank and agency staff in publicly funded services.³ This would be a first step to resolving some of the staffing issues currently experienced in the NHS and securing future provision of excellent services.

COVID-19

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the finances of students, and many are concerned about how they will be able to continue their education next year. NUS' recent Coronavirus and Students Survey II found that, out of over 4,000 respondents, 3 in 4 students are concerned about their ability to manage financially beyond the pandemic.⁴ In addition 20 percent of students have confirmed they will not be able to pay their rent and essential bills when they return to study, and 3 in 4 students are anxious about paying their rent this term. Along with the measures outlined above, these results show that urgent action must be taken. Extra funding should be provided to university and college hardship funds to support students who are in urgent financial need. Universal Credit eligibility criteria should be expanded to include full-time students who are in significant financial need, so as to avoid future scenarios in which significant number of students have to turn to foodbanks, as occurred during lockdown earlier this year.

We must avoid this situation happening again, and this will involve increasing the maximum loan eligibility for all students. Median expenditure by full-time students, who live away from home and study outside of London, is £11,679, which is significantly higher than maximum loan amount of £8,700. It is therefore not surprising that 52% of students earn some form of income alongside their study to meet the gap between expenses and income from maintenance loans⁵.

Moving forwards we would propose that maintenance loans be tied to the real living wage and operate accordingly. Students should be able to access support that would amount to a living wage for the time that they are studying. This would reflect the system that is current in use in Wales and ensure that students should not have to work alongside their studies to afford basic necessities. For calculations for how much this would be, we would propose to assume that students in full-time education study for the same amount of hours as a full-time job (37.5 hours a week) and for a duration of on average 36 weeks per year. This would mean increasing the maximum loan entitlement to £12,555 for those outside of London and £14,512 for those in London.

³ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-beyond-the-bursary-workforce-supply-uk-pub-009319>

⁴ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-students-survey-report-phase-2-public-version>

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

In addition, funding must be provided to universities and colleges this year to ensure that all students have the technology that they need to engage with learning, and cases of digital poverty stopping students from accessing education are eradicated. The same survey found that a quarter of students who were offered online learning last term were unable to access this teaching.⁶ From those respondents that we heard from many explained the reason why they were unable to access this learning was because they needed specific computer programmes or technology that they did not have. One university student said, *"I needed specific software such as SPSS"* and was therefore unable to continue their learning. As part of the funding for this, all students should be provided with free internet access, as this is now a requirement for education.

Moreover, those students on university and college campuses have faced many challenges during this term of education. Students have been placed into self-isolation at very short notice, and often for extended periods over the entirety of the term. It should be the responsibility of universities and colleges to ensure that students are supported and cared for during all periods of self-isolation, but the providers themselves will need additional support in recognition of the increased costs that this entails. Unfortunately this has not always been the case, and we have seen cases of universities seeking to exploit students during self-isolation periods by charging them excessive costs for food and basic supplies.⁷ The Spending Review is an opportunity to stop this bad practice continuing into next term, by providing funding specifically for care packages with food, household products, wellbeing materials and general necessities, for all students during self-isolation periods. This funding should mirror the £500 payment available to people on low incomes under the Test and Trace Support Payment scheme.

The most recent cohort of students, many of whom will be starting university this year, have experienced some of the most severe impacts of the pandemic. Following the fiasco surrounding the awarding of A-Level exams grades this year, many of these students have been faced with lots of uncertainty as to what course, and where, they would be able to study this coming year. Even worse, some students will have had to defer the take-up of their university place until next year, as courses at their preferred institution were full by the time they received their correct grades to meet their offers.

Whilst we recognise the work that has gone into the package of support for students who have to defer their studies recently announced by the Department for Education, we do have some concerns that this will not be enough for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been made to defer. Taking a year out of education is something that many students cannot afford to do, and many will not be able to support themselves financially during this period. The support package does present some opportunities for paid employment for these students, but we do not think that this will be sufficient or appropriate for all of the students concerned. Similarly, these students will be faced with a much-reduced job market in which key sectors to which they would often turn to find employment will not be recruiting.

In recognition of these unique circumstances, and the fact that students have been put into this situation because of the actions previously taken by the government in the allocation of A-Level grades, greater financial support should be offered to these students. We believe that this should come in the form of a one-off grant, equivalent to a

⁶ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/covid-19-and-students-survey-report-phase-2-public-version>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/06/isolating-students-offered-food-toiletries-but-no-financial-support-by-uk-universities>

full-year's maintenance loan that they would have received if they had been studying. This should be limited only to those students who have had to defer due to their preferred course not having capacity for them, rather than to students who previously elected to defer their studies. The grant should also be equivalent to their personal entitlement for a maintenance loan, taking into account the other changes recommended to the conditions for maintenance loan eligibility outlined above.

COVID-19 has shone a light on some of the inequalities and injustices within the student accommodation sector. A long-standing practice of systemic pressure selling by student accommodation providers and landlords tied students into tenancy agreements for the academic year 2020/21 in the winter of 2019 – before the pandemic had begun. This has meant that as students' circumstances have changed, and they no longer require the accommodation, they have been left still liable to pay rent for it and can find it very difficult to leave these contracts. Now that academic terms have started we have seen cases of students wanting to move to fully online learning, and therefore leave their accommodation to return to non-term time accommodation, or choose to leave courses entirely. In all of these situations it is imperative that student choice is preserved and so if a student does want to leave either their accommodation or course they should be facilitated to do so without incurring any financial detriment.

Legislative change is needed through the promised Renters' Reform Bill to ensure all tenants have the right to give 28 days' notice to leave on all tenancies – as they have in Scotland. The Bill must be brought forward as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we believe that the spending review must be used to introduce a temporary solution for students in this predicament this year. Funding should be provided to ensure that students are able to leave their accommodation contracts, whilst preserving finances for universities and ensuring they do not face any punishment from accommodation providers. Government should also fund the Competition and Markets Authority to fully investigate the pressure-selling practices in the student accommodation sector and explore non-legislative options and funding to support student tenants to exit their tenancies early.

Many students have fallen behind on their rent obligations and are at risk of eviction. Students lack access to the benefits system, which has been the primary vehicle through which tenants have been supported during the pandemic. As has been called for by Generation Rent and others, the government should reinstate the eviction ban for all tenants and provide grants to all tenants to allow them to pay off rent arrears accrued as a result of the pandemic⁸. These grants could be delivered to students through access to the benefits system, boosting of university hardship funds, additional payments through student finance or a separate scheme open to all tenants.

Students' Unions

For our education system to truly be a world-class public service we must empower students to make decisions that will shape their education. Our educational structures should be democratic and prioritise student voice so that learners can be engaged with developments that will impact on their own learning.

It is students who are often best placed to identify the problems within our education and to propose the solutions that will create an education sector that works for all and enables everyone to fulfil their potential. This power is not just bestowed upon students,

⁸ https://www.generationrent.org/the_government_has_protected_jobs_time_to_protect_homes

but requires time and funding to come to fruition. Within the education sector we should be doing all we can to empower students to take ownership of their education and challenge existing structures to create improvements.

Students' unions perform a critical role in this space, by providing students with a platform to launch these campaigns to improve their education and the knowledge and skills to do so. Throughout universities and colleges, it is students' unions who enable students to take up places on academic committees and the like, and push for positive change to ensure that education is accessible for all students.

The role that they perform needs to be recognised, as well as the funding that is required to ensure that students' voices can be heard by institutional powers. NUS would like to see funding directed towards students' unions, particularly now as many face real financial difficulty due to COVID-19, so that they can continue these essential activities. This funding should reflect that which has recently been delivered to students' unions in Wales and should not come with conditions attached or restrictions on what the funding could be used for.

Accessible

- *Reintroduce non-repayable, means-tested maintenance grants, and set eligibility for these at previous levels plus inflationary increases*
- *Introduce universal, living maintenance grants that reflect actual student need for those on nursing, midwifery, and allied healthcare courses*
- *Increase the threshold for eligibility for maximum student finance according to historical inflationary increases, and increase it each year in line with inflation*
- *Maintain the current repayment period for student loans to ensure that no graduate has to pay back more than they originally were forecast to*
- *Increase the repayment threshold for student loans, above which students make a repayment, each year in line with inflation*
- *Abolish the in-study interest rate for all student loans*
- *Full-time students should be eligible for Universal Credit if they have lost out on employment or are in significant financial need*
- *Extend the criteria for postgraduate loans to allow those studying for postgraduate certificates, such as National Senco Award, to be eligible for a loan*
- *Introduce a system for Sharia compliant student loans, as was previously promised*
- *Greater investment in NHS children and young people's mental health services*
- *Expand the use of digital platforms to support students with mental health needs, funding more projects and protecting funding for current projects*

Maintenance support

Every young person across the UK deserves to receive a superb education, and to access education to whatever level they desire. Yet the current structures for student finance present multiple barriers to students from already disadvantaged backgrounds.

Most obviously, the decision to scrap maintenance grants in 2015 has had catastrophic effects on social mobility, as it has created a system in which students from the poorest backgrounds graduate with the highest levels of debt. Many of those who graduate will never pay back the full amount that they borrow. The reintroduction of non-repayable, means-tested maintenance grants must be a priority. These grants should be set at least

as high as they previously were and eligibility for these should be set at previous levels plus inflationary increases.

A 2014 study by the Institute of Education showed that a £1,000 increase in grants created a 3.95% increase in participation.⁹ Moreover, this is a policy that has support across the education sector, with those representing students, colleges and universities agreeing that the reintroduction of maintenance grants would be a measure that could easily increase accessibility.¹⁰ The Education Committee also called for the reintroduction of maintenance grants in a report looking into Value for Money in Higher Education in 2018.¹¹

For those on nursing, midwifery and allied healthcare courses universal, living maintenance grants that reflect actual student need must be introduced, in recognition of the increased costs these learners face throughout their course. These students are also in the position of usually being unable to take up further work to supplement their income because of the placement hours that they must complete.

Another barrier presented to learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is the threshold for eligibility for maximum student finance, which has been frozen since 2008/9. If this was to have increased in line with inflation the household income threshold, below which students are entitled to the maximum student loan, would be roughly £33,600 rather than the £25,000 it is now. This must be urgently corrected to allow students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to be able to access the maximum maintenance loan available to them.

Furthermore, some stakeholders, including the Post-18 Education and Funding Review panel have argued that the student finance system should make explicit the expected parental contributions for students to be able to afford their living costs while at university. While making this expected contribution explicit would be a positive step it would not provide a solution nor make higher education more accessible to students, which is essential if we are to enable all people to be able to reach their potential.

Instead the Spending Review should be used as an opportunity to extend the maximum student loan eligibility for all students so that they are able to afford basic living costs, without having to rely on contributions either from their parents or from employment alongside their studies.

Student loan terms

Similar technical changes should be made to the repayment terms for student loans in order to open up opportunities for all people to prosper from our world-class education system. Many proposals have been made to alter the repayment terms, but we believe that it is vital that any changes do not place an undue burden on the poorest graduates, and do not continue to hold back those who endeavour to achieve. The current repayment period should be maintained, and the repayment threshold should be increased in line with inflation each year to encourage more young people to enter education.

⁹ Money for nothing: Estimating the impact of student aid on participation in higher education, 2014 available from: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272775714000910>

¹⁰ <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/uk-education-bodies-call-for-return-and-extension-of-student-maintenance-grant-?load=5&top=200>

¹¹ https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/343/34308.htm#_idTextAnchor049

Moreover, the in-study interest rates on student loans should be abolished, so as not to punish those who have sought out education to realise their potential and train for the future economy. The criteria for postgraduate loans should be extended to allow those studying for postgraduate certificates, such as National Senco Award, to be eligible for a loan. This would be a simple measure to implement that would strengthen the UK's economic recovery from COVID-19 by prioritising jobs and skills and help to make the UK a scientific superpower. The Spending Review should also be used to introduce a system of Sharia compliant student loans, as was previously promised.

Mental health support

To truly unleash the potential of Britain's people we must not only support them into education but ensure that they are supported once there. There is currently a mental health crisis throughout all levels of education that is severely impacting students. Half of all mental health problems are established by the age of 14, with three quarters established by 24 years of age.¹² This demonstrates that there must be a focus on early treatment and prevention to ensure that these problems do not develop and worsen in later life.

Whilst there is no short-term fix for this, and as recognised by the Equality Act 2010 any long-term mental health condition must be seen as a disability for which students are given the necessary support, some immediate measures could be taken to begin to tackle this issue.

So far many of the attempts to tackle student mental health problems have focused on this as a wellbeing issue for which students need to be supported, but few have looked at this as a health issue. To start to address this mental health crisis we must first address the adequacy of provision of mental health services through the NHS. Students should not be treated in a silo, they are members of their communities who need access to the same treatments as others. Moreover, it is no use having excellent mental health services within colleges and universities, if these are not matched by equally excellent services provided by the NHS, so that once learners leave education they lose access to the services they need.

The NHS Long Term plan made a commitment that funding for children and young people's mental health services will grow faster than both overall NHS funding and total mental health spending. It also established a target that by 2023/24, at least an additional 345,000 children and young people aged 0-25 will be able to access support via NHS funded mental health services and school or college-based Mental Health Support Teams. We would like to see the Spending Review used to reaffirm these commitments, and provide additional funds for the NHS to enable the improvement of mental health services for young people. It will also be essential to streamline access to these services and ensure that students are informed of how they should go about doing this.

As stated above, these approaches can only be successful if they are embedded with excellent processes within universities and colleges for the treatment of mental health conditions, and a joined-up approach between local NHS trusts and colleges and universities to achieve this goal is crucial.

¹² Kessler, R., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K., & Walters, E. (2005) Lifetime prevalence and age of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*. 62 (6), 593-602. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593>

In particular, COVID-19 has presented numerous challenges to students already suffering from mental health problems, as well as those who did not have previously diagnosed conditions. An NUS survey from July showed that Coronavirus has had a huge impact on the wellbeing of students, with 60 percent of students reporting low levels of self-esteem. Students are also more likely to have experienced feelings of isolation during this period with 73 percent of students interacting less with students from their institution, 72 percent less with their course mates and 59 percent less with their friends.

Moreover, we see that there are disproportionate impacts on certain groups of students, who are already disadvantaged and more likely to face mental health issues. From the same survey, LGBT+ students and disabled students were more likely to experience low self-esteem during the pandemic. The NHS long term plan gave a commitment that Mental Health Support Teams working in schools and colleges will receive information and training to help them support young people more likely to face mental health issues – such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT+) individuals or children in care. This should be extended to all those who are delivering mental health support, whether through the NHS or in universities and colleges. It also underlines the importance of putting in place culturally competent services for students.

COVID-19 will have made it more difficult for many students to access the mental health support that they require, as campuses closed, and many services stopped all but 'essential' provision. Lockdown highlighted the need to develop digital platforms that can offer targeted support to students who may not be able to access them in person. Student Minds' Student Space is an example of the innovative provision that could plug this gap, and we would like to see greater funding directed both to this project and to other projects. The Spending Review should also be used to confirm that funding for these projects will last beyond the end of the pandemic.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has put us in the unique position of facing a once-in-a-generation recession for the second time in just over a decade. We are already seeing rising unemployment rates and businesses collapsing. Our education sector is well placed to reboot the economy, by allowing people to retrain for future jobs, and bring much needed economic investment. But it needs the tools to be able to do so, and just as importantly people need to have the support to be able to enter or re-enter education. The proposals contained within this submission would put England on the path to having an education system that was lifelong, fully-funded, accessible and democratic. Now is the time to act to educate for the future.