

COUNCIL 25 FEBRUARY 2021

AGENDA ITEM 17

MEMBER QUESTIONS - SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT

Six Member Questions are allowed in accordance with Procedure Rule 15. However on this occasion 7 questions have been permitted due to an officer error which meant a Member question that should have been included as one of the six was missed:

Question from Councillor David Turner

On 27th January the Leader forwarded a letter from the University of Wolverhampton setting out its then-current position which endeavoured to address topics such as January student returns, student testing, key worker courses, tuition fees and accommodation charges.

The associated update covered:

- Covid Infection/Transmission
- Blended Learning
- Student Wellbeing
- Student Feedback and Engagement
- Student Finance
- Financial Position
- Cost of Covid and Loss of Income
- Government Support
- Student Recruitment
- Staff Wellbeing, and
- Support to our Communities

Would the Leader facilitate an equally detailed and early update from University Centre Shrewsbury for Members, given that it has a rather more relevance than Wolverhampton to Shropshire promising, as it does, high-quality teaching and research, fostering entrepreneurship, contributing to the community and, ultimately, making a global impact?

Response from Councillor Steve Charmley and University Centre Shrewsbury

1. Covid Infection/Transmission

We have been following the Public Health advice throughout the pandemic and have been in regular contact with public health teams and reinforced the central and local government messages, including through working with the Students' Union. All our facilities are covid-secure. Our students and staff all have access to asymptomatic lateral flow testing at sites in Shrewsbury. Anyone needing to use UCS sites regularly has been informed if they are symptomless they must have two tests each week. There is clear guidance on reporting and self-isolation protocols are in place if someone has symptoms or a positive test result. We are introducing Lateral Flow Testing from 25/2/21 at our Guildhall site for staff and students that need to be on campus. The University has the facility to conduct internal contact tracing for any students or staff who have been on site in the 48 hours before reporting symptoms or a positive test.

2. Blended Learning

We developed our flexible timetable for the 20/21 academic year so that we could move from partly face to face (on average 1/3 of the face to face in previous years) to entirely online with minimum disruption, in response to rapidly changing guidelines. Students on a specific list of programmes with practical elements, for example those relating to key worker disciplines, have been permitted to return to University since January. For courses involving placements, we have worked closely with placement providers, to ensure those are quality assured and risk assessed. The 'roadmap' announced on 22nd February 2021 introduces the possibility of more in-person teaching from March 8 2021 for programmes where specialist equipment or facilities are required. The University is finalising arrangements for this with academic staff and will be communicating to students.

3. Student Wellbeing

We have been extremely proactive in our support for student wellbeing throughout the pandemic. We work extremely closely with Shropshire Council staff in the student accommodation, who have been fantastic in their ongoing support for students who have needed to self-isolate due to Covid, as well as those at risk of isolation during lockdown and struggling with their mental health. We have maintained a fully operational Wellbeing and Mental Health service throughout, for example for those who were unable to return to their permanent address over the Christmas break, including festive food hampers. Feedback suggests that students appreciate the personal, proactive support they receive at UCS.

For the students who are resident in Mardol House and Tannery we have covid secure policies and procedures in place, including procedures for when students need to isolate all of which are working well.

4. Student Feedback and Engagement

We have used a range of formal and informal means of gathering feedback from students, such as Staff-Student Liaison meetings, both for individual courses and at faculty level. Feedback has generally been very positive. Students have shown a high level of understanding and pragmatism in their approach to the situation and engagement with new ways of learning. A dedicated 'covid student' mail account was established at the start of the pandemic, as a focus for any questions or concerns. Students (and prospective students) have also received regular communication: via email; the app; the intranet; the website; and a new weekly e-newsletter, Student Shout Out. The Students' Union has been in ongoing dialogue with the University and has been consulted with on all major developments. They have enabled two-way communication with the student body.

5. Student Finance

The University of Chester took the decision to waive accommodation fees for those renting University-owned accommodation that were unable to return because of UK Government restrictions. Shropshire Council mirrored that arrangement for students in Mardol and the Tannery. Students have access to a series of hardship funds. A newly-created Digital Inclusion Fund is designed for those requiring IT equipment/software or with WiFi connectivity/Broadband issues. The new COVID Support Fund assists students (or their sponsors) if, for example, they have suffered loss of earnings, or have been paying rent on two properties during lockdown. More complex circumstances are tackled via the existing general Financial Assistance Fund.

6. Financial Position

Additional costs were incurred across the institution for providing equipment for staff for working off campus (laptops, office chairs, headsets, etc.).

Income has been reduced through loss of catering and external room hire (see below).

7. Cost of Covid and Loss of Income

The initial costs to the University regarding making Guildhall compliant were as follows:

Screens £4,044

Signage £7,950

Furniture £2,688

There will be extra costs this year in the region of £5,500.

Loss of income from external bookings to use facilities for conferences and events, particularly during the breaks in between term-time.

In terms of student living accommodation we can confirm that about half of the UCS students are currently studying at home as a result of the third lockdown. UCS has decided not to charge students for the rooms they occupy whilst they remain at home. Charges will recommence when they return as lockdown restrictions are lifted.

8. Government Support

There is no money specifically ringfenced for UCS. There was money to support students, and this is open to all students across our campuses, and the distribution will depend on the eligible applications.

9. Student Recruitment

Student recruitment was broadly at or above target across the institution, though there was variable performance across programmes. Applications are looking positive for next year, and we have seen large increases in applications for nursing programmes.

10. Staff Wellbeing

The University provides a confidential Employee Assist Programme which is available to colleagues and their families, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The University operates a 'Our Healthy University' strategy which takes a whole university approach to health, well-being, and sustainability to make working and studying at the University a positive and rewarding experience.

This provides a centralised resource hub available to all staff.

The Council's decision to provide all Shropshire residents with access to the 24/7 online community Together All to promote and support good mental health has been an extremely useful tool to signpost towards.

11. Support to our Communities

Many of our students and staff are active as volunteers and workers in the local community. UCS Business students have worked on projects focused on supporting Shrewsbury's post-Covid economic recovery, and other groups such as the Health and Exercise Science

students have been exploring ways to improve health and wellbeing and promote active lifestyles during and post-pandemic. We have a number of health students who have been on placement throughout the pandemic, working directly in our local community to underpin the covid effort and gaining valuable skills and professional experience.