

Inclusive Admissions in Lockdown?

The Department for Lifelong Learning at the University of Sheffield provides foundation years designed specifically for mature students re-entering education after a significant break.

We pride ourselves in having a friendly and inclusive admissions process designed to help mature learners perform to their full potential. Applicants are offered support with travel costs, and a night in a hotel prior to their interview. They're greeted with a smile, hot drinks and biscuits, and are encouraged to get to know each other in a 'non competitive' environment. Whilst they wait for their interview, there's a friendly student ambassador in the room, who can answer questions, and assuage fears. We also have fidget spinners and mindfulness colouring books, to try and lessen nervous energy.

We consistently get excellent feedback for this process, and a conversion rate of over 90%. In the past students who have met at interview day have forged friendships which have sustained them through their degrees and beyond. We want applicants to do their best, and realise that they need to be comfortable in their surroundings to do so. We aim to consider every possible barrier to engagement, and how this can be overcome.

Since the Covid pandemic we have moved our entire process online. We've used Blackboard Open to administer tests, we have a 'virtual interview bag', and interviews are carried out via google hangouts. This means that applicants are already experienced in the technology that will be used for teaching next year. Applicants have the chance to have an interview with an academic and a member of their support and welfare team. We use the same 'appreciative' approach to interviewing where applicants are encouraged to talk about their best times, and how they can apply skills developed to University study.

So far engagement is good, applications are up, and interviews are proceeding successfully. So far so good, but I'm still worried.

I'm worried that applicants have not had the chance to make friends, meet staff and get a 'feel' for the place. They've had fewer chances for informal interactions with staff and ambassadors.

I'm worried that the make-up of the cohort will exclude those without access to digital technologies at the time of application.

I'm worried that the process is currently impossible for some sectors of the population, particularly those who are currently overwhelmed by the unexpected responsibility of becoming full time carers. Much has been written about the impact of the lockdown on female academics and the reduction in productivity related to covid (which accounts for the brevity of this blog!) (e.g. Gabster et al 2020, Viglione 2020), but there has been little work undertaken on the impact on student parents.

It is too early to say what impact Covid will have had on our new cohort, in terms of size, composition and preparedness. I believe that the steps we took have made admissions as

inclusive as possible at this time, and there may be some elements of 'lockdown admissions' that we will keep going forward. It would be good to hear how others have continued their admissions process through this period, and the effects they feel it has had on their 2020/21 cohorts

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References

Gabster, van Daalen, Dhatt, Barry 2020 Challenges for the female academic during the Covid-19 pandemic *The Lancet* 395 (June 2020)

Viglioni G, 2020 Are women publishing less during the pandemic? Here's what the data say *Nature* 581 (May 2020)