

## **House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee**

### **Inquiry on Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics**

#### **Written evidence from Professor Sarah Sharples**

#### **Pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and People, University of Nottingham**

##### **1. Introduction**

1.1 The University of Nottingham is a research-intensive university with a proud heritage, consistently ranked among the world's top 100. Studying at the University of Nottingham is a life-changing experience and we pride ourselves on unlocking the potential of our 44,000 students - Nottingham was named both Sports and International University of the Year in the 2019 Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide, was awarded gold in the Teaching Evaluation Framework 2017 and features in the top 20 of all three major UK rankings. We have a pioneering spirit, expressed in the vision of our founder Sir Jesse Boot, which has seen us lead the way in establishing campuses in China and Malaysia - part of a globally connected network of education, research and industrial engagement. We are ranked eighth for research power in the UK according to REF 2014. We have a strong civic commitment, and in 2020 launched the "Universities for Nottingham" initiative, reflecting our collaborative role and leadership in addressing local, societal and economic issues in partnership with local and regional teams.

##### **2. Summary**

2.1 This submission will focus on the impact of COVID-19 in Higher Education, mainly the short and long-term effects on students and staff. COVID-19 has had a rapid and significant impact on the Higher Education Sector. There have been specific effects on those who hold protected characteristics.

2.2 This submission recommends that these specific effects are recognised, and that policy, funding and communications recognise and address these effects in the short and long term.

2.3 This submission highlights issues that have been raised by staff and students within the University of Nottingham (UoN) community, as well as in the Higher Education sector more widely. The 2019 UoN Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Delivery Plan recognises that alongside the 9 protected characteristics as recognised in the Equality Act, it is also important to recognise factors such as care responsibilities, socio-economic background, and temporary impairment (short term illness that would not meet classification as long-term disability). My role within the University is to lead the strategic implementation of our EDI plans, as well as to sit as a full member of University Executive Board, reporting directly to the Vice-Chancellor.

2.4 The impact of Covid-19 on the Higher Education sector have been well documented in the press. The sector has moved rapidly to an online model, involving staff and students working and studying from home. For a University such as Nottingham, its significant campus presence requires a small number of staff to remain on site to maintain buildings, infrastructure and security, and to provide essential services (cleaning, catering) to the small number of students who are unable to return home. We have a significant cohort of students (from Medicine, Nursing and Allied Medical Professions) who have graduated quickly to enable them to work in the NHS, and continue to support them, along with our clinical academic staff. We have also seen significant numbers of our researchers directly contribute to the [Covid-19 response](#).

2.5 The financial impact of Covid-19 on the Higher Education sector is significant. In the short term, this is reflected in impact on cash flow due to immediate reduction of income from sources such as student

accommodation fees, conferencing and industrial research contracts. In the long term, it is anticipated that the sector will see a significant reduction in international student fees, and uncertainty around home student numbers. As well as having an absolute impact on overall income to the sector, this has a secondary impact as government funded research is currently only paid at 80% Full Economic Cost, therefore the pre-Covid financial model reflects subsidy of research through international student fees.

### 3. How have people been affected by COVID-19 and subsequent measures to it, and are there specific impacts on people due to them having a protected characteristic?

*3.1 Gender and Care responsibilities:* The rapid move to home working, alongside the closure of schools, nursery and respite care, places a particular challenge on staff and students who have care responsibilities. These staff and students are [disproportionately, although not exclusively, women](#). The short term impact of this is stress, anxiety and mental health, as parents must balance delivery of work tasks and care/schooling for children. This is particularly acute for those who are single parents, whose partners are key workers, or who have disabilities.

*3.2* Whilst the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) does allow for those with care responsibilities to request to be furloughed, many staff within the HE sector are paid through public funds, and are therefore ineligible for the CJRS. The long term impact of this situation will be that those with care responsibilities will be less able to produce key outputs that aid career progression in Higher Education, such as [academic publications](#), or proposals to obtain research funding. This will be reflected in slowed progress in closing the gender pay gap within academia. Students with care responsibilities may be less able to focus on their studies, resulting in poorer performance in degree outcomes, and lower success in the job market.

*3.3 Race and Ethnicity:* An extremely helpful briefing paper by Dr. Gurnam Singh, highlighted in [this University of Nottingham EDI blog that I published on April 24<sup>th</sup> 2020](#), has outlined the key issues impacting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff and students. These issues include noting the increased likelihood of BAME students and staff living in crowded homes, making it harder to identify a quiet space to work or study, and that rates of poverty amongst BAME communities are [double that of white people](#). We are already aware that there is a significant [BAME degree awarding gap](#) and there is an increased spotlight on the [ethnicity pay gap](#). Progress in closing both of these gaps may well be slowed as a result of Covid-19. We will also slow progress in [representation of BAME staff in senior roles](#) in Universities – such representation has appropriately been under strong scrutiny and diversity in representation in all roles in Universities is seen as key to encouraging access to Higher Education for students from diverse backgrounds.

*3.4 Religion:* Covid-19 has had a direct effect on those who practice religion, through the closure of places of worship, and causing people to move away from and become isolated from their local religious community. Religion provides a key social and support function for many staff and students, particularly those who are international and away from their friends and families. At UoN our faith space also provides an important place of retreat and reflection for all students and staff, of any faith, and no faith.

*3.5* Staff and students from religious backgrounds have been unable to engage in key annual festivals, such as Passover, Easter and the Iftar meal that is a key element of support and identity through Ramadan. Whilst many religious groups are showing great innovation through delivery of online worship and faith, it is clear that the absence of physical gatherings and community associated with faith organisations will bring a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

*3.6 LGBTQ+:* One of the key factors in supporting LGBTQ+ staff and students is to enable them to be able to bring their 'whole self' to work and study – to feel comfortable being open about their identity and relationships, and be able to play a full part in University life. LGBTQ+ staff and student colleagues may now

find themselves working in environments where they are not able to be honest about their sexual orientation and identity. They may also be more likely to experience isolation, and [challenges with their mental health](#). This may particularly be the case for staff and students who are from cultures or background which are less accepting of LGBTQ+ people, where individuals may feel that they need to conceal their sexual orientation. The impact of this will be likely to be reflected in performance in work and study, as well as personal impact on health and wellbeing.

*3.7 Disability and Temporary impairment:* Whilst for some with disabilities, the move to home working has actually alleviated some of the challenges that are normally associated with full engagement in University work and life, for others, specific challenges are faced. This may include lack of access to specialist equipment or teams who normally support their work or study, along with an increased feeling of isolation, particularly if their disability affects their ability to engage with online communications. In addition, disabled individuals may be more likely to be required to shield, and thus may be unable to fully participate in University life for a longer period than those who do not hold disabilities. They may also be finding it harder than usual to access support from health and social care, which could have a short and long term impact on their health and wellbeing.

*3.8 Socio-economic background:* Those from a less affluent socio-economic background will find it harder to find a quiet space to work or study at home, and will have less effective access to digital technologies and broadband, which may make them less able to engage fully in work. The Office for National Statistics, in a report [Exploring the UK's digital divide](#) published in March 2019 found that disparities across regions, household income and ethnicity remain. This will be reflected in slower academic progression for those from disadvantaged households and low participation neighbourhoods, and may also present challenges for access to University from these groups, as students with less ability to study remotely may feel anxious about progressing to Higher Education in the new academic year in September 2020.

## 4. Recommendations and Conclusions

4.1 Many of the above issues can be, and are, being addressed locally within Higher Education Institutions. Universities are also collaborating and sharing best practice, through groups such as [Network for Diversity and Inclusion Academic Leads \(NEDIAL\)](#). Further considerations for government and policy makers include:

*4.2 Policy consideration.* Monitoring: maintain focus on gender and ethnicity pay gap, continue expectation of reporting on actions to reduce these gaps, but recognise that progress may be slower than hoped. Access and Participation Plan – continue to monitor data and maintain expectations of investment, but recognise that challenges around access will be encountered in next two academic years.

*4.3 Funding: Short term.* The current furloughing scheme does not allow for partial working, and excludes roles which are already funded through public funds from eligibility, even when they have significant care responsibilities that make them unable to work for many (or any) hours during the week. If furloughing continues, these elements of the scheme should be examined. It is also recommended that the provision of additional grants, with less demanding or off-putting payback terms, for students who are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to encourage them to feel confident about progressing into Higher Education in September 2020.

*4.4 Funding: long term.* Consider provision of funding routes via UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to particularly support those whose careers have been adversely impacted. Ensure that Universities are supported effectively to maintain provision of mental health services, particularly in the light of financial constraints. Recognise that the long-term subsidy of research (funded at 80% full economic cost) through international student fees needs to be addressed. If there is a long-term reduction in research funding this may impact on recruitment from diverse groups at the early career stage, thus having a longer term impact on diversity and representation at a senior level in Universities.

4.5 *Communication and engagement*: Continue to highlight issues affecting groups with protected characteristics, share best practice, and encourage all to excel in diversity and inclusion. This requires avoidance of a 'league table' mentality, which will encourage competition between institutions, rather than collaboration.

4.6 A focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion leads to a higher standard of decision making, education and will secure the long term health of the knowledge economy within the UK. EDI should be by all, of benefit to all, sharing and raise expectation of all, and enabling the HE Sector to recover rapidly, and contribute effectively to the economic and societal recovery of the UK in the light of Covid-19.

## 5. Materials referred to in this submission

University of Nottingham Covid-19 research response <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/covid-19/index.aspx>

Minello, A. (2020) The Pandemic and the Female Academic. *Nature* 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020.  
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01135-9>

Women submitting fewer articles to journals <https://www.thelily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/>

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion blog – Race Equality. Sarah Sharples  
<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/edi/edi-blog/blog-020.aspx>

Poverty and Ethnicity in the Labour Market. Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-ethnicity-labour-market>

Degree attainment gaps <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/student-recruitment-retention-and-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps>

Ethnicity pay gap reporting <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/ethnicity-pay-reporting>

Advance HE data on staff representation <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2019>

LGBT Foundation <http://lgbt.foundation/coronavirus/impact>

Exploring the UK's digital divide  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04>

Network of EDI Academic Leads <http://nedial.ac.uk/>