**Background**

In March 2020, University campuses closed in response to the COVID pandemic, disrupting the normal educational situation, particularly for on-campus students and impacting social connectedness. With previous studies showing postgraduate student support needs are not well addressed\(^1\), the current study focussed on the experiences of postgraduate taught (PGT) students during this challenging period.

**Aim**

To assess the views of postgraduate taught students within the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition (SMMSN) on the support provided during the initial COVID-19 response, focussing on students’ feelings around social isolation, institutional assistance, and any gaps in this provision.

**Methods**

- Online SNAP survey conducted from June to September 2020 among students across all 23 PGT programmes and On-Demand courses delivered by SMMSN.
- Survey included questions specifically developed for the study or adapted from previous validated instruments\(^2\).
- Following approval from School ethics board, all eligible students (n=498) invited via email to participate.
- Quantitative data analysed in SPSS using chi-square or Fischer’s exact test.
- Thematic analysis conducted on responses to open ended questions.

**Results**

100 PGT students (20%) completed the survey from across SMMSN (64% female; 53% full-time students; 44% on-campus programmes).

**Support from University**

79% reported receiving support from the University, with 59% receiving 2 or more sources of support, from the majority from programme and course coordinators and other students (Fig. 1).

- 75% felt they received adequate support from the University (Fig. 2)
- 84% felt the University communications were sufficient (Fig. 3).
- 84% felt they had adequate access to digital capacity and technology facilities / support to continue studies (Fig. 4).
- 50% contacted support services for help, most commonly IT and general admin (Fig. 5). 17% sought help from 2 or more sources. 89% found the help adequate.

**Impact on learning**

- 70% felt COVID had impacted their learning.
- A significantly higher proportion of on-campus and blended learning students felt this way than online (84% vs 49%).
- Those who felt they had adequate support were significantly less likely to feel that COVID had impacted their learning (64% vs 88%).
- Themes of areas of impact: change of learning environment; reduced interactions; impact on wellbeing; potential impact on grade.

**Themes of suggested improvements to communications / support:**

Although a high percentage of students were satisfied with the support, suggestions were made on areas for improvement, helping inform future support provision.

**Communications**

- tailored / targeted
- frequent
- rapid response
- consistent
- clear communication about no detriment policy

**Support**

- financial concerns
- international student support services / early advice for foreign students
- keeping vital student services open
- increased online opportunities to interact with lecturers and other students

**References**