

Brighton Students' Union
4th Floor, Room 406
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Gavin Williamson MP and Michelle Donelan MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Gavin Williamson MP and Michelle Donelan MP,

Subject: Supporting Higher Education Students and their Institutions

We write to you on behalf of the 20,000 thousand students we represent, on issues impacting their experience within higher education in light of the ongoing pandemic. These matters are not simply local ones but are impacting millions of students across institutions and this has been exacerbated by a disappointing lack of national coordination in relation to these students and their institutions. It is often said that education is a public good, but it certainly has not been treated as such as of late and universities and their students seem far too often to be an afterthought in national discourse – they have not been made a priority by the Government. Unlike many other sectors, universities are being left without proper central funding, generating an inconsistent response across institutions, which is exacerbating inequalities. Universities simply cannot offer the solutions students deserve without the backing of government and students are in desperate need of this, now more than ever.

Two of the most pressing issues facing our students are in relation to the quality of their academic experience and accommodation rent. On the first matter, we feel the rhetoric about 'the quality being there' ultimately distracts from efforts to have a meaningful conversation on the fee level so as to prevent it from being reviewed, while also incorrectly attributing the responsibility for any refund to universities, whereas this should be centrally funded by government. You have maintained that where the quality is lacking, students should navigate the internal complaints process of their respective institutions and then take their cases to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator if they remain unsatisfied. The former disarms students with bureaucracy and the latter is misguided advice, especially as the OIA has recently indicated that such cases would not even be considered due to them constituting academic judgement. Furthermore, if refunds are left to individual institutions, we are likely to see huge numbers of courses being cancelled, facilities shut, staff redundancies or ultimately universities going bankrupt, all of which would be catastrophic for students.

On the matter of accommodation, it is unjust that students are being made to pay for accommodation that they cannot return to or access due to the Government's own mandate.

The Competition and Markets Authority has maintained that where an individual is receiving regular services for a regular payment as part of a contractual agreement, they will usually be allowed to withhold payment for the services they are not given or unable to access due to lockdown laws, yet there remains a great deal of ambiguity on students' consumer rights and we urge you to instruct CMA to clarify this. We also ask you to legislate on this matter in a manner similar to that enacted by Scotland and to fund institutions to enable them to provide refunds to students residing in university halls.

Funding also needs to be extended to other critical areas, chiefly mental health and wellbeing services. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the government is pushing, rightfully, on mass testing, to protect campuses and the wider community, yet has not suspended the NHS surcharge for international students, which we urge you to do. We also encourage you to consider providing a one-off payment of £1,000 to all students to help address the altered circumstances under which they are completing their degrees. The government must also invest in a long-term solution to digital poverty that is scalable across institutions and the sector. Last, but not least, this funding must urgently address the desperate situation of our doctoral researchers, who have been utterly neglected. Those most in need have been abandoned by UK Research and Innovation and it is important that you provide institutions with funding to be able to offer extensions for postgraduate research students in need of this

In summary, we ask:

On Fees

- Review tuition fees in light of these altered circumstances (a recent petition has gained nearly 500,000 signatures)
- Explore a series of measures, including to provide financial support for universities to enable them to allow those students wishing to repeat the year at no extra cost to be able to do so; a debt write off for home students receiving a fee loan for the affected period; freeze interest rates on tuition loans; a refund to all those who paid upfront, such as international students
- Legislate to enhance student consumer rights and provide clear protections
- One-off payment to students of £1,000 in recognition of the disruption they have suffered, as well as the fact that a debt write-off for home students receiving a loan will not materialize in the form of an actual direct refund paid to them

On Accommodation

- Implement the same resolution as in Scotland which enabled students to give notice to end their contracts (there is a petition for the same to be applied in England and it has 61,000 signatures at the moment) – it is important this is applicable to not only university halls and purpose-built student accommodation, but also private contracts

- Provide universities with compensation to make up for significant financial losses they will experience in issuing rent rebates in order to ensure all students are provided with this

Additional funding

- Provide additional funding to universities to ensure they are able to deliver high quality online learning and teaching experiences for all students; to enable them to expand their hardship funds, and to allow them to sufficiently resource their mental health and wellbeing services

On Digital Poverty.

- Invest in a long-term scalable solution to address digital poverty, ensuring hardware and broadband access for all those in need, as well as increasing investment in hardship funding

On Postgraduate Research Students:

- Address the recent debacle with UKRI and their guidance, and provide universities with funding to enable them to offer registration extensions to those needing them and who are unable to complete their projects on time

On Regulators:

- Instruct England's higher education regulator to temporarily suspend grade inflation monitoring, which poses significant obstacles to any meaningful conversation on no detriment policies, and to specifically monitor the impact of the pandemic on students from underrepresented communities in relation to access and participation targets, noting the positive impact of these policies in ensuring that pre-pandemic effort to close attainment gaps are not derailed
- Instruct the designated quality body to form sector recognized standards underpinning safety net policies that effectively uphold the integrity of degree awards and at the same time, ensure the conditions under which students are submitting academic work is recognized through robust no detriment style policies
- Instruct the Competition and Markets Authority to clarify the position on student consumer rights and issue fresh guidance to higher education institutions, detailing what protections they are entitled to and in what cases refunds will be owed to them, as well as whether their stance on refunds is applicable to tuition fees and accommodation

As expressed above, it is important that government reviews fees and we urge you to raise this matter. Students' fees contribute to not only their course, the delivery of which has been inconsistent despite the hard work of staff, but also facilities and a wider package of service, to which their access has been restricted. The government has mandated this and therefore it is only right that any financial redress is covered by the government or institutions will suffer untold damage and students' futures will in turn be jeopardised.

Beyond the fees debate, universities are in dire need of additional funding to invest in further hardship support, mental health resources and redress for loss of practical elements for those students studying these subjects. On the latter, there is no denying that some of these students will simply not be able to fulfil the necessary practical components and learning outcomes that are critical to their degrees and as such, this will require collaboration between institutions, the government and regulatory bodies and can only be possible through increased funding.

We would also like to emphasize the exacerbated state under which University wellbeing services are operating. These services are ever the more critical as student community is experiencing widespread isolation, yet current resources are insufficient to generate a sufficiently proactive response to the extent this is needed. Therefore, the Government needs to enhance support for these services, which even before the pandemic reflected an ongoing challenge, and to increase the accessibility of these services for those on and off campus.

Higher education is ultimately about the transformative experience that changes an individual's life, and to which students sign up for. No student wants to be in the position they are in. They are grappling with lost learning, impacted research, concerns about educational outcomes and their careers and restricted access to the wider experience that makes their time at university what it is, coupled with rising issues in relation to finance and mental health. They wanted to be receiving the experience they were promised, the one afforded to generations of students before them, and so it is only right that a national coordinate response is initiated to do right by these students.

We look forward to your prompt attention to these urgent matters and hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Brighton Students' Union