Dear Zamzam, Claire, Robert and Hilary,

Many thanks for your letter dated 7 April 2020. We understand that this is challenging time for students and appreciate the extensive work that the National Union of Students is doing to support students during this period.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the higher education sector is significant and it has affected all aspects of university activity, as we see elsewhere. The sector has been responding quickly and with an overriding commitment to the education and welfare of our students, moving both academic provision and wider support services online to ensure staff and students can continue to have access to their university where possible. We recognise, however, that the impact will not be the same for everyone and for some individuals – whether because of their course, institution, or personal circumstances – there may be more disruption than for others.

Central to the approaches being taken by universities is a principle of fairness and UUK is encouraging its members to consider any adjustments in this light. This means recognising the exceptional circumstances in which students are being taught and assessed while also ensuring that for those individuals graduating or progressing with their studies this year, the qualifications they are awarded hold their value and meet the requirements of accrediting bodies so as to enable students to progress smoothly into their chosen profession. Universities are working hard to ensure as many students as possible can continue with their studies, access alternative forms of teaching, and are able to demonstrate – and feel confident – that they have met all the required learning outcomes. In some cases, this may mean further examinations are not considered necessary. We are advising our members to be flexible but to take these decisions locally so that they reflect the variation between different degree programmes and curricula. UUK is also working with PSRBs to ensure that this extends to courses with professional accreditation.

The work of universities is also being strongly guided by regulatory notices from the Office for Students and guidance published by the QAA. These stress that while ‘no detriment’ and ‘safety net’ approaches may be appropriate in some instances, the operationalisation of these cannot be at the expense of academic standards which are laid out in the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. This would not be in the interests of students. Nor do the principles of ‘no detriment’ or a ‘safety
Universities will be working within the framework of their regulations to consider what the most appropriate approach is for their provision and their students, one that balances fairness with rigour in academic standards, and communicating this directly to their study body.

Our members are working hard to support student wellbeing across a range of issues from accommodation through to mental health. This includes ensuring that universities are closely following public health advice and supporting students who remain in university accommodation including those who are self-isolating and those health students who have moved onto an emergency register to work in the NHS. We are also taking care to ensure the welfare of international students, many of whom are unable to return to their country of origin, working alongside organisations such as the UK Council for International Student Affairs. As part of our longstanding work on harassment and hate crime, we are aware that the coronavirus outbreak has led to some students experiencing hostility and incidents of harassment. Universities have taken care to reach out to these students and support them wherever necessary. As part of our comprehensive work on student mental health we are assessing the short-term and longer-term implications of this pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of students in the UK.

I hope that this correspondence provides you with reassurance that universities, working with other sector bodies, are doing all that they can to ensure that no students are unfairly impacted by Covid-19 and that student welfare continues to be central to how we are collectively and individually responding to this pandemic.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Julia Buckingham CBE
President
Universities UK