

Universities UK- written evidence to the APPG for Students' inquiry into 'the impact of the pandemic on students' tuition and accommodation'

About Universities UK

Universities UK is the representative organisation for the UK's universities. Founded in 1918, our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally. With 140 members and offices in London, Cardiff (Universities Wales) and Edinburgh (Universities Scotland), we promote the strength and success of UK universities nationally and internationally.

This submission is largely focused on the actions we believe should be taken to address students' needs and concerns, as well as presenting evidence we have gathered from our members on the impact of the pandemic on students and the measures they have already put in place to support them.

Evidence contained in this submission was correct as of 18 January 2021.

Accommodation

Universities recognise the financial pressures the pandemic has placed on students and are providing increased financial and other support as a result. Decisions on accommodation support will be a local decision for individual universities, taking into account the circumstances at their institutions and of their students.

Institutions are increasingly offering wide-scale refunds and rebates for students in university-own accommodation in response to concerns from the broader student base around being locked into accommodation contracts which they no longer can or wish to honour.

During the first week of January Universities UK (UUK) gathered evidence from members on accommodation related issues. The evidence was gathered for the purposes of internal policy formation and to get a more accurate picture of the actions being taken by universities in this area; the findings are not in the public domain. Headlines below:

- 80% of universities that responded had either decided to offer a refund or rebate for accommodation over the lockdown period, were releasing students from rent obligations if they were not studying in university accommodation or were actively considering rent refunds or rebates
- Almost a third of responding institutions said they were in arrangements with private providers of accommodation and if refunds were offered to these students, the liability of payments up to guaranteed occupancy levels would be borne by the university.
- Many institutions have proactively contacted private landlords to encourage them to offer equivalent treatment to students in line with that offered to those in university owned and managed accommodation, but with limited success so far
- Several institutions stated it had been too late to include clauses relating to lockdown restrictions in accommodation contracts

Across the sector we estimate around 20% of students in are university-owned accommodation, 25% are in private purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA), 25% are commuter students and the rest (around 30%) are in private houses of multiple occupation (HMOs). There is a strong desire from institutions to offer fair and equitable support for all students, including those in private accommodation whose landlords are unable to provide rent rebates. However, universities do not have the financial capacity to provide this level of support at that scale with income lost from usual commercial sources due to the pandemic alongside considerable additional expenditure associated with Covid-19. This is the case even as universities continue to identify any further cost-saving measures and opportunities for borrowing that have not already been used to their full capacity.

- **The government should therefore consider measures to improve the parity of treatment to students in privately-owned accommodation**
- **The government should prioritise increasing hardship funding (see section below) to address the financial needs of students in rent arrears**
- **Security from eviction should be extended to the end of the academic year for students in private tenancies**

Hardship funding

As stated earlier, universities have bolstered their hardship funding throughout the pandemic but are facing unprecedented demand from students, in part due to the lack of availability of part-time work in the hospitality and retail sectors. Prior to lockdown, many institutions were already seeing a 50% or more increase in applications for hardship funding, with some seeing a doubling, and the increase will be even more pronounced now.

The £256 million of pupil premium funding repurposed for student hardship is not enough to keep up with student demand, even with individual institutions significantly increasing the funds available through their own resources. On mental health support alone, we estimate that across the sector universities will spend at least an additional £118million in 2020/21. This estimate was calculated before the second national lockdown was announced and is therefore likely to be an underestimate given the increased anxiety, isolation and loneliness lockdown restrictions can cause.

Evidence gathered from our members about student hardship over summer 2020 (and therefore relating to the first national lockdown) found that the groups of students of particular concern were international students (EU and non-EU) and post-graduate research (PGR) and post-graduate taught (PGT). The inability to undertake part-time work to meet living costs was of particular concern to many of these students. This demonstrates that the students are not a homogenous group and have different needs based on their individual circumstances.

We believe universities, working with their student unions, are best placed to distribute any additional funding to their student bodies based on need. Each student body has a unique profile, with varying numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, care leavers or commuter students. If funds were distributed to universities based on head count alone, it could fail to adequately address the needs of the students requiring the most support.

Additional hardship funding would address the concerns of students struggling to pay for their accommodation, or already in rent arrears. Universities will improve disbursement of funding and destigmatise applying to a 'hardship' fund.

- **The government should prioritise increasing hardship funding so support can be targeted to where it is needed the most**

Additional student support

Although UUK welcomes the additional government support announced to date to alleviate hardship, we do not believe it goes far enough. For many providers, the demands on hardship funding have doubled and are putting significant strain on resources leading to concerns about their ability to meet support needs. We are aware that student hardship has been exacerbated by students being unable to work part-time work in service jobs, from students' families suffering job losses and financial difficulties reducing parental / family support, and from an inability to be released from accommodation that is privately-owned. Survey results released by the

[NUS](#) on 13 January found 22% of students have been unable to pay rent and 27% unable to pay bills during the pandemic.

University leaders are prioritising work on addressing student hardship. There are clear links between financial hardship and mental distress, poor retention levels and student outcomes.

- **Additional government support for student hardship is now needed to avoid widening the gap between students from more and less advantaged backgrounds**

The impact of being cut off from access to facilities and learning resources on campus, seeing and making friends, uncertainty over how quickly government rules may change and what this means for assessments and progression, and anxiety in deciding whether to return to campus when the rules allow are adversely affecting the mental health of students. This in turn could lead to increased numbers of students dropping out or questioning of the value and richness of their university experience.

- **Government should prioritise increased support for student mental health**

Digital poverty

Reflecting the situation in the school sector, universities are particularly concerned about digital poverty in the student population. We estimate around 1.8 million students are currently having to study online, yet they do not have equal access to data and devices. Survey data by the [OfS](#) published in September 2020 showed 18% of students had a lack of access to a computer, laptop or tablet. Similarly, the recent [Learning and Teaching Reimagined](#) research project conducted by Jisc with sector partners, found that digital and data poverty is the main issue that prevents delivering online learning effectively.

Universities have been providing laptops, SIM cards, dongles and wireless hotspots to support students struggling with connectivity throughout the pandemic. There are also universities that have developed and are implementing digital inclusion strategies. However, hardship resources are increasingly stretched and therefore there is a limit to the extent to which they can address digital poverty across their entire student population.

It is disappointing that the government's recent announcement to make free data available to learners does not include higher education students, who face the same barriers of cost and connectivity as school and FE learners. Families of students that were previously not categorised as being from a disadvantaged background (e.g. through eligibility for free school meals or a POLAR4 quintile 1 area) may struggle to pay for adequate broadband or devices due to increased financial difficulties brought on by the pandemic.

On 15 January 2020 UUK wrote a joint letter with Jisc, ucisa and GuildHE to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson to warn that the digital divide in the student population would widen without further government support. Within the letter we urge the Education Secretary to meet with university leaders and telecommunications

companies to agree a plan to ensure all students have access to remote learning while they are unable to access campus facilities.

- **The government should work with telecommunications companies to either expand the Get Help with Technology Scheme or introduce a similar scheme that combats digital poverty among higher education students**

Teaching and learning

The impact of restrictions on teaching and learning

We recognise that students are concerned about the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions on their studies.

Universities are working hard to provide remote teaching and support so that students can achieve the required learning outcomes for their course of study. The ongoing efforts of university staff mean that course modules can be completed, resources can be accessed, exams and assessments can proceed where appropriate, and qualifications can be awarded in line with guidance from the bodies responsible for quality and standards and with the relevant accrediting bodies. Careers advice, mental health support and social activities also continue to be provided in a virtual format.

The changing lockdown restrictions, both on a national and local level, provide an additional challenge, however universities have learnt lessons from the spring/summer 2020 lockdown and are well versed in moving teaching between online and face-to-face formats at short notice.

Course requirements

UUK has been working with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) to better understand concerns about lockdown restrictions, including access to placements and assessment methods, and find solutions.

Students requiring access to specialist facilities for learning are particularly affected, and we understand those studying subjects where practical work or access to facilities is not possible under lockdown are feeling particularly penalised by the latest lockdown.

The lack of placements for students who need practical experience is a particular problem and could, if not addressed, mean that students are not able to qualify for crucial public sector roles.

- **Government should focus on what support could be offered to these students, and their needs should be prioritised when the public health position allows for further student returns**
- **Government should work with PSRBs, employers and HEIs to give students the practical experience they need where it is safe to do so, and consider what flexibility can be provided where placements are not provided while ensuring quality and standards are maintained.**

Tuition fees

As noted above, universities have invested much time, energy and financial resource into both online learning and ensuring Covid-secure physical learning environments. At the start of the 2020/21 academic year the majority of universities designed courses that could be delivered via 'blended learning' encompassing both remote and face-to-face learning.

Universities have had to adapt to the fast-evolving public health situation and provide online learning for the start of the spring term for all students not on courses that 'support the future pipeline of keyworkers' (i.e. Medicine, dentistry, subjects allied to health). It remains unclear when other students will be able to return to in-person provision.

Online learning is not inferior to face-to-face learning, in fact there is much evidence at an institutional and sector level to suggest that students are positive about some of the features of online learning and teaching, such as the ability to re-play material, to engage through online chat and more easily share content. In the vast majority of cases students should still be able to meet their learning objectives and progress within their courses or graduate as intended.

- **Government should be clear that where there is wide-ranging support for active and ongoing learning and progression, students should not expect any fee refund from their university**

Complaints procedures within individual universities exist and should be the first port of call for students. If they feel the alternative arrangements put in place were inadequate, they should complain through their university in the first instance. This includes students who have difficulty continuing with their learning e.g. because of illness, caring responsibilities or lack of access to IT. Every university has established process for managing complaints, and will be mindful of extenuating circumstances.

It is right that universities fully investigate all complaints, however if students are not satisfied with the response from their university, they are able to escalate their complaint. In England and Wales this would be to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Students in Scotland can complain to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Students in Northern Ireland can take their complaint to the Public Services Ombudsman. Up to September 2020 the [OIA](#) had received just 120 complaints relating to Coronavirus disruption; for context in 2019 the OIA received a total of 2,371 (the highest ever yearly figure).

Student experience: Catch up

The overarching objective of government and universities should be to support the return of all students - ideally before the start of the summer term. This must be in line with the latest public health advice, and universities should be consulted on decisions about which groups of students should be prioritised.

There are clear benefits for students in being able to return to university: safe access to facilities, such as libraries, being able to undertake group work under Covid-secure

conditions and to make use of their term-time accommodation. This is particularly important for the growing numbers of students who are unable to work effectively from their vacation address, or where this environment, isolation and uncertainty about their future is fuelling mental health problems. Anecdotal evidence suggests there is a greater level of student dissatisfaction with the lack of a 'full student experience' than issues with teaching per se and therefore we believe the value of return for students is also about being able to meet and study with their peers in person, associate (safely) with like-minded individuals through extra-curricular activities, and to live independently.

Universities responded creatively to the challenges of welcoming students, particularly those entering their first year, at the start of the autumn term and stand ready to offer enhanced 'catch up' opportunities for Covid-secure social interaction, face-to-face tutorials, field trips, sports fixtures, volunteering, networking and other activities such as careers fairs during the summer term. Institutions and students now require a clear signal from government that it is working towards the return of all students by the summer term to boost morale and help universities plan for an enhanced summer term offering. Additional government funding should be made available for universities to provide such 'catch up' opportunities, for example to cover the additional costs of staffing and facilities that would be needed to not only provide these activities, but ensure they are Covid-secure.

- **Universities are looking to offer opportunities for students to catch up on aspects of the student experience that have not been possible during the national lockdown restrictions**
- **Government should offer additional funding to facilitate enhanced activities and opportunities for students during the summer term**