

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: The Government's Response to Coronavirus, HC 252

Thursday 7 May 2020

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Watch the meeting : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOFPLeE7dqQ&t=71m50s>

Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Martyn Day; Chris Evans; Nick Fletcher; Mike Hill; Kerry McCarthy.

Education Committee member present: Apsana Begum

Questions 27 - 44

Witnesses

II: Sophie Quinn, Petition Creator; Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President, Universities UK, and Vice-Chancellor, Brunel University London; Zamzam Ibrahim, National President, National Union of Students; and Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary, University and College Union.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sophie Quinn, Professor Julia Buckingham, Zamzam Ibrahim and Dr Jo Grady.

Q27 **Chair:** Hello everybody, and thank you very much for joining us for this next session. As well as members of the Petitions Committee, we are hoping to be joined by Apsana Begum, a Member of Parliament and member of the Education Select Committee. We are holding this session today to learn more about the impact of coronavirus and social distancing on students and their university education. This session has been prompted by a petition calling for tuition fees to be reimbursed in light of coronavirus and recent strike action by university staff. It has received over 330,000 signatures.

We are delighted to have the creator of this petition with us today. We are also going to look into some of the implications of the petition's central request, which is the reimbursement of tuition fees, and ask what universities and the Government can do to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on students' education. Our understanding of this issue and the questions we ask today are all informed by the huge response we have had from petitioners and people with a real interest in this subject, who have been in touch with us with comments and feedback. We have had over 23,000 petitioners get in touch, giving more detail on their views and experiences, as part of the Student Room forum, and on Twitter and by email. There was a huge level of interest, so thank you very much to everybody who has taken the time to share their thoughts and experiences with us.

Before we start our questions, I want to ask each of our guests to introduce themselves ahead of this session.

Sophie Quinn: Hi, I am Sophie Quinn and I created the petition to reimburse students for tuition fees this year.

Dr Grady: Good afternoon. I am Jo Grady and I am the general secretary of the University and College Union, UCU.

Zamzam Ibrahim: I am Zamzam Ibrahim, the president of the National Union of Students.

Professor Buckingham: I am Julia Buckingham. I am the president of Universities UK and the vice-chancellor at Brunel University London.

Q28 **Chair:** I will start by asking you, Sophie, to say a bit about why you started this petition and why, particularly, you are asking for the reimbursement of tuition fees.

Sophie Quinn: I am a final-year student, and I created the petition because I felt quite angry and let down by the quality of this year. Particularly as a final-year student, it is something you work towards.



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There are lots of big moments that you look forward to in the final year and they have all been ripped away. Obviously, that is nobody's fault but we also do not have access to lots of the facilities. We have had large disruptions with strikes as well, so that is why I created the petition. The reimbursement of fees is because I feel that I have not gained the quality of education that I have in previous years. This whole year has been completely disrupted by strikes and coronavirus, so that is the reason why.

Q29 Chair: The petition has been signed by over 330,000 people. Are you surprised by how much support it has received?

Sophie Quinn: I knew that a lot of people, the majority of students, felt a similar way to me, but I was surprised that it blew up as much as it did. I thought that it would reach 100,000 but it really did exceed my expectations and demonstrated that the majority of students feel the same.

Q30 Chair: Where a petition receives over 100,000 signatures, generally speaking, as a Committee, we would be debating this in Parliament, in Westminster Hall, in front of a Minister. That is not possible given the current circumstances, but what are you hoping that we get out of today's session? I appreciate you have asked for reimbursement of tuition fees, and that is something the Government have clearly had proposed to them through this petition. If that is not possible, what else do you think universities or the Government should be doing? What would you like to see them do to recognise the impact that this coronavirus situation has had particularly on students?

Sophie Quinn: This initial discussion is a step in the right direction because, as students, we feel that we have been completely ignored as a population group. We have not been addressed at all in any Government policies or speeches.

If it is not possible to get a full refund, I think students would be appreciative if it was calculated financially how much of the tuition fees we have paid and not received the service back. The Government could introduce, probably for first and second-year students more than third-year students, the opportunity to resit the year at no extra cost, or look at ways to ease the financial burden that three years of university costs people.

Q31 Chair: There is the added issue of the potential extra cost of accommodation, but I know we are going to explore that a little further as well. Before I move on to our panel of expert witnesses, are there any questions you would like to be put to them? You started this petition, so you can be in the driving seat.

Sophie Quinn: I would like to ask Universities UK if it has any indication of the number of students who are not able to access the online learning that is being provided, and where the proportion of tuition fees that normally goes towards non-teaching expenses is now being spent. The



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university argued that we are not due a refund from strikes because the fees are paid towards other things, but we now do not have access to those things either. I would also like to ask UCU if it believes that students are being properly supported and that online learning is of the same quality as in-person teaching.

Chair: I do not know if you want to come back and answer those directly. We will hopefully cover those issues as part of the wider questions. If we do not, we will come back to you, Sophie, and we can put those again towards the end.

Q32 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you, Sophie and the witnesses, for coming along today. Perhaps this set of questions will cover the comments that Sophie has just made. Could I begin by asking you, Professor Buckingham, how you think that university courses have been affected both by the strikes and now by coronavirus?

Professor Buckingham: Thank you, Sophie, for all those comments. Across the university sector, we all recognise that this has been an incredibly difficult time for students and, indeed, for staff. We are, of course, working in an environment that none of us has experienced before and we have had to adapt what we are doing at incredibly short notice. It is important that we understand that.

I am sure there are students who have had considerable difficulties, but it would be important to look at those on an individual basis and really understand what has happened to individual students, rather than looking at a blanket response across the whole sector.

Q33 **Elliot Colburn:** That is really helpful. Thank you for that. In a survey conducted of students' views about strike action and coronavirus, there were some quite striking results. Almost 90% said that teaching time had fallen, and almost 80% said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the quality of the education they were receiving. Again, do you think that universities have been able to maintain an acceptable standard of teaching this academic year?

Professor Buckingham: It is important to look at the intensity of the strike across the sector. The evidence we have from Universities UK, which represents 137 universities, is that only 58 institutions had strike action in November. In that strike action, 29.2% of UCU members were on strike and that represents about 5% of the total staff of the universities. The evidence that we have from our institutions is that 79% of them reported no or very low impact on teaching.

When we looked at the spring strikes, the percentage of staff participating was even lower, so it was approximately 3% of the total staff of universities. Again, the universities that we have surveyed have reported relatively low impacts on students.

Q34 **Elliot Colburn:** That is very helpful. Thank you, Professor Buckingham. Perhaps I could bring in Dr Grady and Zamzam now, to ask whether they



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agree with that assessment.

Dr Grady: What I would say, first of all, to Sophie is to reflect back some of the comments that you have just heard. The reason you started this petition and so many people took part in it is that, despite the figures that have just been quoted at you, you really feel that there has been an impact. It is important to recognise that. Staff who teach in universities really recognise that. Staff did not take strike action lightly. Actually, some of the issues you are raising about wanting to be listened to are the same sorts of issues that staff have as well.

What we have found as we have moved into the lockdown period, in terms of how it has affected staff being able to teach—maybe you know this, Sophie; sorry, I do not know what degree you have been studying for the past three years—is that half of teaching-only staff in higher education are on fixed-term contracts. Of those on fixed-term contracts, 40% are on hourly paid contracts. The teaching that you normally receive is most likely being delivered by one of those people.

It is very difficult. I know that the strikes had a big impact but, as we moved into lockdown, a number of universities that had been engaged in strike action took 14 days of strike pay deductions all in one month. A lot of those already insecurely employed staff had that massive financial penalty all in one month despite the union asking universities not to do that. A lot of them just had all their hours cut because universities did not intend to keep them on for the next month, let alone the next year.

From our perspective, it is not about the quality of education. I understand that you went to university because you wanted to have that interaction with your staff. It is about universities asking staff they already do not employ securely to move to do things in a matter of weeks, when proper education that is done online takes years, if not decades. Just ask anyone who teaches at the Open University. These staff are people who are having massive strike pay deductions or who do not know if they are going to have a job in the next month.

My heart goes out to you, Sophie. You feel like you are not being listened to and are being poorly treated. Staff have worked to move mountains to put some things online in this period and to support students pastorally. I do not know what it has been like in your department, but I know in lots of universities students have asked for mitigating circumstances and they have been told no. Staff have really been doing all they can. When we speak to students like you, we want to help you, but staff are really on the sharp end of the way in which universities treat their staff as well.

Zamzam Ibrahim: I echo what Jo Grady has just mentioned. It is important to recognise that education was interrupted through the strikes and that was disproportionately in some campuses, while some campuses were not affected at all. There is a complete difference of experience that many students had, and many students on different courses had as well. It is important to recognise that.



As a part of that, as a lot of students have highlighted to us as the National Union of Students, we recognise that our academics' and teachers' conditions are our learning conditions. Therefore, in order to teach us and provide us with quality education, they need to be in secure contracts. For us, even though there was huge concern, it is important to recognise that the bigger issue and concern we have seen highlighted is how Covid has affected teaching. It has affected many different courses in many different ways, and students are terrified about how they are going to do their assessments, et cetera. The effects that the pandemic has had on teaching have been hugely damaging compared to the strikes.

Q35 Elliot Colburn: That is really useful, and it helps feed into my next question. You have both touched on it. Could you elaborate a little on the alternative teaching methods that now have to take place because of coronavirus? Do you feel they take enough account of the different circumstances students have, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and international students, for example?

Zamzam Ibrahim: When we talk about online teaching spaces, we need to recognise the privilege of our being able to access reliable broadband and resources such as computers or tablets to do that work. That in itself is something that a lot of students, especially from marginalised backgrounds, do not have access to.

On top of that, it is about recognising and understanding, in the context that we find ourselves in, that a lot of students, from arts courses all the way to modern languages courses, opted for a campus experience for the ability to learn, for example through practical courses, and they have not had access to that. It is important to recognise how that has affected teaching and the quality of teaching.

Even though I have given props to a lot of universities that have tried to do everything they can to accommodate, in such a difficult climate and difficult situation, it is important to recognise that students are not getting the quality of education that they opted for and that they expect. If we are operating in a climate where education has been marketised to students, it falls under the Consumer Rights Act. Students have the right to call out their institutions and say, "This is not the quality of education I opted for and am essentially paying £9,000 for."

When we look at the impact it had on teaching, especially for students who cannot complete their degree, who cannot gain the skillsets that they should be gaining through the university and who should be graduating and going into the job market, there is a huge concern about that skills gap and how we are going to support those graduates beyond this.

Dr Grady: I say this as a former teacher. For anyone who does teach, they will know that teaching is difficult and complicated. You need time to learn from things that have gone well and things that have not. You need



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time to plan and improve your materials, and to do research in universities to improve those materials. This is why job security is so important to teaching in universities. This is one of the reasons why UCU took strike action.

With lockdown, the move to rapidly trying to provide things online has demonstrated that this is all the more important right now, because the staff who were doing this type of teaching are often on extremely insecure employment contracts in universities. The sector, as it stands at the minute, is facing a massive loss of income. It is projected to be £2.5 billion.

If we are going to keep our sector going, with the sort of teaching standards it is renowned for across the world, and keep that up for however long this period of not being able to be back in the classroom lasts, that transition needs to involve an injection of cash. It means employers keeping everyone employed, not seeking to make those most insecurely employed redundant as soon as possible or to ramp up the workloads of the staff who remain in employment. I have had some members this week report to me that their universities have abandoned the workload model so that they can have them teaching as much as they want. It means injecting cash so that we can have all hands on deck, to ensure students like Sophie still get exactly what we have always been able to provide, albeit through a different medium.

As a union of people who provide education, we have a real role to play in that. I have already mentioned the Open University, but other universities have provided distance learning for a long time. I used to do quite a bit of distance learning in one of my previous jobs. This is what our students deserve, but it is what the most insecurely employed people, who are the future of academia and HE, deserve as well: to have their employment underwritten for the next year—really for the next two years; it is the least they deserve—so that, as lovely as it is to see a student like Sophie through this virtual meeting, we do not have to keep having these debates. It is a bit of a no-brainer if we want to protect education and the quality that we have in the UK.

Q36 **Elliot Colburn:** There is one final question from me. This is for Professor Buckingham and Dr Grady. Could we talk about the guidance that has been issued to universities from the Government, the Office for Students and Public Health England about how to keep their staff and students safe? Do you feel as if enough guidance has come through and, if not, what guidance are you missing to enable universities to continue to operate safely?

Professor Buckingham: We have been following the Government's advice very closely on social distancing, and all universities responded very quickly to ensure their staff and students are safe. One of the difficult things was that we all have students who live in residences. A big concern was to protect them and make sure they are well looked after.



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Many of the students who are home students were able to go home before the lockdown started, but quite a number remain on campus. In my own university, we have about 1,300 students living on campus. We have been very careful to make sure they are properly protected. We have put in a lot of additional support, and we have had to manage students who are self-isolating, so we have had to arrange for meals to be delivered to their rooms, et cetera. The health and safety of our students and our staff has been absolutely uppermost in our minds with everything we are doing.

To go back to a point Jo made earlier, staff are working incredibly hard at the moment. I am concerned that many of my staff are working long over the call of duty, and it is absolutely important that we all look after each other in these very difficult and very challenging times.

Dr Grady: We have had concerns about health and safety in universities since way before 12 March. UCU represents not just staff who work in universities but also those who provide adult education and education in colleges and prisons. We called for the ending of all unnecessary or non-essential face-to-face teaching in universities before the lockdown happened. We were disappointed that universities were not included in the shutting down of schools and colleges.

In the weekend prior to lockdown, some universities were still holding open days. There were universities that had their libraries open as usual. We were incredibly concerned about this, because we knew at that moment in time it was all about trying to prevent the virus being spread from one person to another by engaging in needless contact. The fact that our members were unable to not go into work, and that the order had not been given to universities, was a deep concern to us. Part of the concern was that it was predicated on the idea that universities themselves were resistant to that command from Government.

Part of the problem is what is underpinning this conversation. It is not a surprise that a student like Sophie is not really happy about what they have received this year, because they have been encouraged to think of themselves as a customer for a long time. They have been promised a certain type of education and a certain model of delivery that has been denied to them. Of course, you are going to be angry when that happens and I think universities, in the move to lockdown, did not act as quickly as they could have done, because they did not want to do something that their nearest competitor was not doing and perhaps upset students and trigger further complaints.

I would have preferred to see something far more directive from Government about what returning to campus and to campus teaching should look like, because that is the most responsible thing to do for the health and safety of students as well as of staff, who will be corralled, to a certain extent, to do what their employer is asking them to do. There have already been discussions that some subjects may go back earlier



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because they are considered to be subjects that are more essential to be face to face, whereas some could be online for longer. Pedagogically, I disagree with that.

To answer your question briefly, we definitely did not have enough in March, and Government really need to ask why Public Health England takes universities less seriously than schools in terms of contracting and spreading the virus.

Zamzam Ibrahim: We did a survey of over 10,000 students, and we found that students felt their institution had responded quite quickly, but they were disappointed and thought that the Government had not responded quickly. It is important to highlight that. They particularly highlighted, as we have been highlighting with the Department for Education, the issues around accommodation and campuses, and the differing approaches that different institutions have taken.

One thing we need from the Government is clear guidance on what adequate teaching looks like. We have not had that and, therefore, there has been a varied response by many different institutions. Therefore, many different students doing the same degree in different institutions are receiving very different types of online learning.

Chair: The premise of this whole petition is that students have paid quite a significant price for their tuition in addition. That is the framing of this petition and why it has been framed in the way it has. I do not know if you want to come in at all, Sophie, in response to anything, or if you are happy that we carry on asking the questions. You are welcome to come in at any point if you want to.

Sophie Quinn: Some institutions are trying really hard, but that is not the case for all of them. I have had so many people contact me on social media, sharing their stories with me of where they have not even met their academic tutor this year because of strikes and industrial action. There are people doing arts degrees and creative degrees, as mentioned, who do not have access to any facilities at all but are still expected to produce pieces of work to the same standard. That is important to mention as well.

Q37 **Apsana Begum:** My question is really for Zamzam. Can you tell us a bit about how students in particular have been affected both by the strikes and now by coronavirus? What are the main concerns that have been expressed to you by students about both?

Zamzam Ibrahim: There is an array of issues. As a result of the strikes initially, there was a concern about loss of teaching time. In a campaign we ran, we worked with student unions locally and with institutions to ensure that either the lost teaching time was recovered or that the money saved from that was invested back into some form of education for their students.



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The concerns we have seen around the Covid crisis have been quite heartbreaking, in the sense that a lot of students have experienced a huge loss of income. A lot of students are terrified about what their degree is going to look like, whether, if they are in first or second year, they will be able to progress to the next year, and, if they are in their final year, how they will be able to graduate and what the job market will look like.

A huge number of concerns have come out of this. The immediate concern, which sometimes does not allow me to sleep at night, is knowing that a lot of students have experienced a huge loss of income. We know that students do not have access to universal credit like most of society so, when they come out of pocket, they do not have access to any form of state benefits. One thing we are doing as part of the campaign for a student safety net is to ensure students can access food. A lot of universities and student unions locally have worked together very well to set up food banks on campuses. The University of Bath has been a great example. It has moved all its students to student spaces, to make sure no students are sharing the same toilets, et cetera, and it is also providing three free meals for students on campuses.

The role does not fall on the institutions to provide for those students. Even though those institutions need to make sure their students have the best ability to get quality education and are not paying for accommodation they cannot afford, the Government play a role in making sure students have access to some kind of funds to be able to survive through this period, as a lot of people have lost work.

More concerning than that, a lot of students would like to see either a reimbursement, the option to redo or a write-off of their debt. Even if it is a sentiment, to write off the debt of the students who have been affected this year would be an important gesture for the Government to make, for the simple fact that, in reality, the UK student debt system is broken. We know that 47% of it will probably not be paid back anyway. That raises some things around our education system and how we value teaching quality.

Dr Grady: I just want to reaffirm something from earlier. The strike action that happened, coinciding with Covid and everything that has happened since then, has had a condensing impact on students like Sophie. It is worth reiterating, because it is fundamental to the business model that universities are built upon, that those strikes took place because we were trying to close the gender pay gap that at some universities is higher than in the private sector. We were trying to close pay gaps that disproportionately impact on BME members of staff.

We were taking strike action because we were saying that we should not be exploiting precariously employed staff by putting them on fixed-term contract after fixed-term contract after fixed-term contract, even though they provide the bread and butter day-to-day teaching that students



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require. These are ongoing issues, and the dispute was about asking employers to get together with us and come up with a way to make these things better over time.

As I was saying earlier, in this lockdown period the most precariously employed, insecure staff are the ones expected to rush to get all this stuff online, despite the fact that a proper educational approach would take months, if not years. You are talking about people who do not know if they have a job next month, let alone next year. You are talking about people who, because they are not part of the securely employed staff of the university, do not have a laptop provided to them by their employer. They are being asked to do this in their kitchen or bedroom, probably in a shared flat, because that is what the bulk of the precariously employed staff at university have to live like.

It is really unfortunate for students that all of this has coalesced within one year, but we would ask people to understand that we are fundamentally fighting for staff to be treated better, in order to deliver an education that is not just of the quality that students like you deserve, but that makes them proud and that they have the time to deliver. If you are being kept on a nine-month contract rather than a 12-month contract, you do not have the time to be updating your teaching materials. If you do not know if you are going to be employed, and you are having to apply for 50 different jobs instead, you do not have the time to invest in that. Universities have taken the decision to employ people who do the bulk of teaching provision to people like you, Sophie, in that way. It is really unfortunate now that things are unravelling in a big way because of how things have been forced to move with Covid, but it is avoidable.

UCU has put forward a bailout package to the Government that is asking for £2.5 billion to underwrite the sector, because that is what we need as a result of the loss of income from student fees, which the sector has come to rely upon. If the Government are willing to do that, it will save £6 billion in the long run, which is a conservative estimate, and it will save 60,000 jobs. I hope this will be the last conversation we have about students feeling that they have not had the type of quality education moved online, because universities will not be looking to cut staff and cut costs as they know that the money is there from the Government.

Professor Buckingham: I have to say that I do not recognise the environment that Jo is talking about. While there certainly are hourly paid staff in some universities, they do not make up the majority of people who are teaching students. In fact, Universities UK has been doing some work with UCEA, and we would like to with UCU, to look at the issue of hourly paid staff.

I want to come back to the points that were made earlier. First, we are very concerned for students who have lost their part-time jobs and we know that many of them depend on the income from those jobs to make



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ends meet. That is a very serious concern. Many universities are using hardship funds, where they can, to try to help those students and, in many cases, to support them with laptops and other technology that they do not have access to. We had the example of food banks, and that practice is actually quite widespread across the sector.

I want to move on to the issue of progression and graduation for final-year students because this is incredibly important. Every one of my colleagues across Universities UK is working incredibly hard and doing their very best to ensure that as many of our students as possible will be able to progress into their next year of study or to graduate this summer.

Different universities will be at different stages in the process because the shape of the academic year differs from university to university. Some universities like my own do their teaching in two long terms, so we in fact finish teaching just before Easter, and our students are now mid-way through their exams. Other universities spread things out over three even-length terms. What is happening in different universities is different, and it is important that we understand that context. Where they are with developing their assessment processes will depend on where they are in their academic cycle.

It has been tough to transition from traditional types of exams, which I am sure we have all experienced, to developing online assessments. We are doing our very best to progress that. Universities have worked very hard to look at ways in which there can be safety nets for students while at the same time, very importantly, making sure we uphold our quality and standards. I do not think anybody would want us to lower either the quality or the standards when it comes to qualifications.

The Quality Assurance Agency, the QAA, and the Office for Students have been very helpful in developing new guidelines to help us with these frameworks. You will all recognise that many of our degrees are accredited by professional bodies, so we are having to work very closely with each of those professional bodies to make sure everything we are doing is in line with their requirements. It would be very detrimental to the students if we put in place an assessment process and the professional body then said, "This does not meet our requirements; therefore, that qualification is not valid." Those things are taking a considerable time. PSRBs are being very helpful, and I think we are through that process now.

The final point I want to make relates to the job market. Our hearts go out to all the students graduating this year, because it is clearly going to be very tough. We at Universities UK are doing a piece of work at the moment that will be designed to try to help and support students during this difficult phase, to give them the best guidance that we possibly can in how they can go about developing their careers. It is tough for them, but we really want to help them.

Q38 **Chair:** I want to go back to something you said at the very beginning of



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your comments. It takes us back to the question around this petition, which is why Sophie has brought us all here today. You said that you do not agree with the assessment as described by Dr Grady. I just want to ask how you do see it. What is your explanation for almost 90% of those we surveyed as part of this inquiry saying that teaching time had fallen and almost 80% saying they were dissatisfied with the current quality of education? Dr Grady set out how she views that as having possibly come about. How do you see it?

Professor Buckingham: The transition to online teaching, as Jo Grady has indicated, is not a simple process. It has taken colleagues time to adapt the material they have and, of course, it is a new experience for the students. It is something that is very different. It has been a learning curve—it is perfectly fair to say that—for all of us. It is a learning curve for the students as well, because they are not familiar with that type of learning environment. Colleagues across the sector have worked very hard and have tried to do their best to enable the students to have the learning opportunities and, most importantly, to achieve the learning outcomes that the degree requires. Some of that does, unfortunately, mean learning differently.

Chair: To clarify, you are suggesting that it is the students who are responsible for the level of dissatisfaction they have with the tuition that is being provided.

Professor Buckingham: No, I am not. I am saying that this is a very challenging environment for all of us. I understand that students have found it very challenging because it is a different environment. If I were in that position and I were facing my finals, I would be very worried that I was being taught in a different environment and my whole life had been shaken up. It is very different. I know, as part of that survey, students have expressed concern that they are not having the campus experience that they would normally have. My heart goes out to them, because I can still think back to my final years at university and what a mixed experience that final term was: the horror of finals mixed with the joy of all the other celebrations. They are missing out on a rite of passage, which I think is very unfortunate.

The difficult thing is that we are all on unknown territory. It is very uncomfortable for staff. They are working incredibly hard to develop learning materials and to ensure they are the best that can be offered in a relatively short space of time.

Q39 **Chair:** I think it was Sophie who made this point earlier. When concerns were raised about the amount of teaching that had been missed out on due to the strikes, one of the reasons given for not being eligible for a refund of any of their fees was that they still had access to the whole campus. That was part of their experience and they could still utilise that. Therefore, that was what their fees were paying for.

In this experience, many are reporting that not only are they not getting



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the teaching that they would normally be paying for through their fees, but they are not getting their experience of the campus either. They want sympathy, they want understanding and they want to be heard but what they are also asking for in this petition is a refund of the fees as a result. I wonder what your view is of the actual ask within the petition that Sophie and 330,000 other students are making.

Professor Buckingham: As I said earlier, it is very important to look at individual cases. Universities have procedures for looking at concerns and complaints raised by students. My approach would be to recommend that students who are seriously concerned take it up with their university in the first instance. If they do not get a satisfactory answer from the university, they can then take it to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which operates in England, and to the other bodies in the devolved nations, which will take an independent and objective view of the situation.

The situation will differ enormously from course to course, from student to student and from university to university. As I explained, the shape of the academic year is very different in different universities. I hope that students will feel well supported, and I hope the majority do.

Q40 Apsana Begum: I have a couple of quick follow-up questions. Zamzam, you briefly mentioned the debts, which is one type of intervention that you would like to see or that you think would be helpful to students in terms of Government intervention. We have had a sizeable minority of respondents to the Petitions Committee survey raising concerns about paying for student accommodation and, in some cases, students being required to leave their place of accommodation.

How do you think we should see students protected when it comes to student accommodation, in particular where landlords or universities are not doing enough are not doing enough in this area? It would be good to know from you.

Zamzam Ibrahim: First, I agree with what Professor Buckingham said. Most universities have been doing phenomenal work and responding as well as they can. I recognise that staff and academics are both working incredibly hard in this difficult time.

It is important to recognise that this is a traumatic period and a lot of young people are worried about the financial impact, but also about their health, like the rest of society. Everything else has halted but students are still expected to do assessments and assignments under abnormal conditions. Every institution would recognise the current crisis as a PMC and it is important to recognise that not a single student in this country is currently receiving the education they were supposed to be receiving. That is a clear thing we can all agree on. That is incredibly important to highlight.

Secondly, like I mentioned earlier, students do not have access to other forms of resources. We have seen, with students massively affected



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through the loss of income, concerns about accommodation. Though university providers, student accommodation providers and campus-based providers have mostly released students from their rent, most students who live on campuses rent from private providers, and private providers have not released students from those contracts. Therefore, students are finding themselves in huge hardship. We did a survey where 40% of students said that they have cut back on their eating just to be able to pay their rent. It is an incredible and terrifying thing to recognise that young people are facing this.

In terms of the issues from accommodation moving forward, a lot of students have already entered contracts and we are probably going to see a huge increase in the number of students going campus-based. We have spoken highly of the need to ensure that student accommodation providers, as well as private providers, are given clear guidance on what safety looks like, and that we get proper advice now on opening up our campuses for the semester to come and what that is going to look like, to keep our students safe.

Dr Grady: I just thought it was important to reiterate once again that institutions that are renowned for providing distance learning have spent years doing this. Staff who do distance learning often only do distance learning. It is a particular skill where people need time to find the materials, whether it is a virtual learning environment or other types of distance learning. It is not a trick that you can pick up in just a week or two.

In the last six to eight weeks, we have seen staff who have not done that kind of thing and who have had very little or no support from their institution to very quickly upskill in any way or to manage their workload so they do not have to do all of the numerous other things, in the context of a global pandemic where they are home schooling their own children or queuing for hours to get their shopping, being expected—unsupported, whether through technology, broadband at home or any of those things—to pick up a skill that people who do genuine distance learning as their profession have spent years doing.

There needs to be a real commitment to underwrite this sector, so that we do not lose academic capacity and people who are already employed on fixed-term contracts do not have to worry about how they are going to pay the rent. As tragic as some of the student stories Zamzam has just talked about are, staff have those issues as well. When we were balloting our members last year for industrial action, it was not as uncommon as you would like to think that I spoke to UCU members who had had to spend time in temporary accommodation because they did not earn enough from their various fixed-term contracts in universities.

It is really a moral stain that one of the most seemingly prestigious sectors in our economy, which so many students want to travel from around the world to come and study at, maintains not only students in this type of existence but its staff as well. When we are talking about



what we are going to do in the longer term, not just this interim period, to properly support students—and that might be education or virtual counselling sessions—it is about genuinely supporting the staff who are going to be doing that work. It is not about scrapping the workload model so you can just make them work more, and the model does not exist anymore so the hours become fictitious. It is not about cutting staff straight away so that you balance the books. It is about universities really working with us, and Government hopefully coming up with the money to properly underwrite this sector, so that no student suffers a detriment but that academic capacity is not lost, and staff and the economies they live within do not suffer as well.

Sophie Quinn: Professor Buckingham suggested earlier that perhaps universities look at it on an individual basis. I appreciate what she is saying. However, all students have been affected by it, especially the coronavirus situation. All students have been expected to adapt to online learning. As Professor Buckingham and Dr Grady have said, the staff also have to adapt to try to teach us as well. They are unsure on what to do. We are unsure on what to do, but we have not been given deadline extensions or really much sympathy about the situation.

Perhaps looking at it on an individual basis would not only be a waste of university resources and quite inefficient, but all students have been affected by this situation. Yes, I understand that lecturers are trying hard but some people really are not getting the support they need. I know some people in different universities whose emails have been ignored for weeks by their lecturers as well.

Q41 **Martyn Day:** I have a general question to everybody. I think Zamzam has probably answered this question already. Do you think the students are getting the education they have paid for and, if not, should they be entitled to some form of recompense?

Zamzam Ibrahim: No, I do not think students are getting the education they paid for. Regardless of how you slice the pie and how you frame the argument, I do not think a single student in this country is receiving what they turned up to university for. I believe they should have the option to either redo, have a write-off or be reimbursed.

Dr Grady: As I indicated earlier, and as the qualitative comments of this petition reveal, the truth is that students are not happy. I have been trying to argue this afternoon that they are not unhappy because of staff, but because students are paying exorbitant fees, are encouraged to behave and think of themselves as customers within that context and are not getting what they were told to expect. I do not think it should be a surprise to anybody in that context that they are not happy.

The package that UCU is calling for is to underwrite the sector. In that sense, there would not really be a financial detriment if people wanted to study again. If the Government were to go with the sort of approach that the NUS has put forward, we would support that, but we would say it is essential that the staff who work in universities and the students who



study within them are central to quite how that is decided going forward. As I have just been saying, the staff, who are essential to the provision and delivery of education, are really not being involved in the conversation of how we manage this crisis going forward.

Professor Buckingham: It is, of course, fair to say that students are having a very different learning experience from the one that any of us would have liked them to have or, indeed, could have envisaged that they would have. I genuinely think that universities are doing all they can to make sure students achieve the learning outcomes they need to achieve in order to progress.

Just picking up on the point of repeating the year, I can understand why some students might feel that was a good idea, but I would urge them to think very carefully about it. If they have achieved the grades they need to progress, they need to think about whether that is the best use of their time. If they have obtained their degree and they want to spend another year at university, I would have thought that, rather than repeating the year, it might be more advantageous to them to consider doing a master's degree. I would think much more broadly about that issue.

I want to come back to the point that Jo has made repeatedly about the financial pressures on universities. I recognise those, only too well, and we need to recognise the very real risk, on the very close horizon, of an enormous loss in international student numbers next year. If it reached its totality, it would cause, according to our arithmetic, a £6.9 billion hole in the budget. The risks to university finances are very serious. I know the Government are in dialogue with Universities UK to try to find ways to resolve those problems and I hope very much that we can. Otherwise I am fearful that some institutions will be at risk, and that, of course, will have a hugely disadvantageous effect on students, on the staff and on the local economies, which are very dependent on those universities.

Zamzam Ibrahim: I want to highlight that it is not always about progression. It is important to recognise that a lot of students have lost out on teaching and skills that they would like to gain and to use in their fields. The reason that we have called for a redo, a write-off or a reimbursement is that students should have the option to retake a semester or a year if they would like to or, if not, they should have the right to have their debt written off or be reimbursed.

You highlighted how international students are going to be affected. International students are terrified, especially those who have gone back home and are either mid-course or towards the end of their course, about how that is going to affect them and their finances. That is incredibly important to recognise. The reason we have called for this is not as a detriment to universities. This is not the fault of institutions or students. It is out of all our hands, but it needs to be supported by the Government and it needs to be recognised.

Q42 **Martyn Day:** The witnesses have been pre-guessing what I was planning



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to ask next, and they have pretty much covered it, so I am very grateful for that. One of the most popular options in the survey data that we had coming back is that students would like to see at least a partial refund of their fees, and the next most popular option was a full refund of their fees. What do you think of that option and, in particular, what would be the impact on universities if there was to be any form of refund?

Dr Grady: What we have been saying throughout all of this—and the issue that is being discussed today is just part of the problem—is that we need proper support from the Government. One of the reasons we want to see the sector underwritten going forward is that there is potentially a real problem if this money is taken out but is not put back in.

I just received a message from a member who is watching this. This is an indication of how much the sector takes free labour from academics and non-academic staff in universities. This is one particular department in one university. They want to take marking from doctoral students, who often do a lot of the marking in departments, in order to save £5,000. This particular department already has 18 years of overtime owed to everybody in the department because of how much work they do over their workload model.

I am trying to put this in the broader context that it is not just fees. There is so much work that needs doing and, in order to keep staff in universities for the next six months, 12 months or 24 months, this is kind of a side conversation about the funding that needs to happen.

Q43 **Chair:** Thank you. That is helpful. Professor Buckingham, do you have a response? If the universities started having to refund fees at least partially or in full for the last year, what situation would that leave universities in?

Professor Buckingham: It would put many of them under severe financial pressure. The cost to the sector so far in this financial year, which ends in July, is roughly £780 million according to our calculations. Much of that, of course, is refunding hall fees to students, as well as loss of conference income and other income for the activities that we run during the summer. The financial pressure on universities at the moment is very considerable.

If we had to refund fees, those figures would become very much greater. As I said earlier, it could put some institutions at risk and then there would be all the downstream effects of that. Those would affect not just the students in that institution, for which it would be horrendous, but the staff, the local economies and the capacity of the sector to contribute to the recovery from Covid. I really believe the sector has a very important part to play going forward in helping the recovery of the economy and in helping the social fabric of the country to recover. We are responsible for producing highly skilled individuals who go into jobs in the health service, the public sector and the private sector. We are also the institutions that



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drive research and innovation. I would therefore be very concerned about the financial risk to the sector.

Q44 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We are out of time, so I want the final word to go to Sophie. Is there anything else that you would like to add or to conclude with? The final word definitely must go to you because this is your petition that we are debating.

Sophie Quinn: Thank you. I would just like to reiterate my point that students are quite frustrated because the question about our tuition fees—so where the money is actually going, since we do not have access to facilities—is still unanswered.

As a final-year student, lots of my peers and I are really worried about not being able to get a job. As all of you probably know, it is difficult in normal circumstances to get jobs and graduate schemes. In this situation it is even more difficult. Is there any way that it could be known publicly that we are not the “coronavirus graduate year” and that we have not just been handed grades? I know quite a few people might assume that we have just been given a grade. GCSE and A-level students have just been given one, so people might assume that we did not have to do any work or have been given a predicted grade. Is there any way that that could be made known publicly to the employers?

Chair: Thank you very much, Sophie. You have put the concerns of the 330,000 people your petition is representing really powerfully today. Thank you very much to all of our panel members. It has been a really rich discussion today. It has raised as many questions as it has answers but this is something that will feed into our report. This is very much about investigating the issues, presenting them to Government and finding a way through this situation that can hopefully create something more positive at the end of it.

If you have thoughts after this event, do not think, “I wish I had said that.” You can email us and let us know, and we will feed it in as part of the inquiry. I know doing things online is not as easy as in person, and it has been scientifically shown that our brains function slightly differently online than they do in person as well. Do email in and let us know if you have further thoughts, suggestions, concerns or ideas. Thank you very much for your time today. Thank you very much, Sophie.