



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Petitions Committee

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

Thursday 11 June 2020

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Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Elliot Colburn;
Martyn Day.

Questions 110 - 135

Witnesses

I: Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities, Department for
Education.



Examination of witness

Witness: Michelle Donelan.

Q110 Chair: Thank you for joining us for this next session. We are looking at the impact of coronavirus on universities and students. The work has been prompted by a petition calling for tuition fees to be reimbursed in the light of both coronavirus and recent strike action by university staff. It has received over 340,000 signatures.

Sophie Quinn, who created the petition, is calling for students to be reimbursed tuition fees. She told us that she had not gained the quality of education that she had in previous years and that the whole year had been completely disrupted. Today, we are going to be asking the Minister what the Government intend to do about that.

We are very grateful to the Minister for joining us today. She is also a former member of this Committee. We hope that she will appreciate the strength of feeling on this issue and why students, both current and those looking to start in September, are concerned about the value of the education they are receiving, and for which they are paying so much.

Before we start our questions, I ask the Minister to introduce herself.

Michelle Donelan: Thank you, very much. I am Michelle Donelan, the Minister for Universities.

Q111 Chair: The Government enable UK students to go to university through the student loans system, which pays the tuition fees of over 90% of eligible students. What role do the Government have when it comes to protecting university students from being unreasonably disadvantaged by coronavirus, both financially and educationally?

Michelle Donelan: Coronavirus has had such an impact on all sections and all sectors of our society. I think the impact on students has been really stark at a very vulnerable time and important time in their lives in terms of education. They have had an extra pressure added on to them, and I am very aware of that.

Our role is very different from what it is with schools. Universities are, via UK law, autonomous organisations. However, my first intervention when coronavirus hit was to write to every institution in England and remind them of their duty, especially to the most vulnerable students—international students, care leavers and so on—who will be under even more pressure at this moment in time.

Q112 Chair: There is obviously a wellbeing role for the Government. I think the Minister will understand that one of the strongest messages that has come out from the evidence that we have gathered from students is that they find themselves in the position of being consumers within the education market. Many of them have incurred significant levels of debt to invest in their education. Now that that service has been interrupted through strikes and through this unprecedented pandemic that we are all facing, they do



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not seem to have any rights to a refund or an ability to determine the level of service that they will now receive, which is not what they had paid for or what they have incurred significant debt in order to obtain.

Can the Minister understand that this is deeply frustrating for students? They have invested very heavily in their education and in the experiences that they were intending to have.

Michelle Donelan: Definitely. I can completely understand that. I have had several conversations with students and student representatives, including the student union.

To clear up this issue of fees, I do not think it is correct to say that they do not have rights. They definitely do. They are eligible and have consumer rights within law and legal protection.

On the issue of tuition fees, the universities, which are autonomous organisations, set their own fees. The Government set the maximum level. They can then charge a lower level; they have that freedom to do so. When universities decide to charge that full level, they will, of course, want to ensure that the courses are fit for purpose and are going to allow students to progress to their qualifications. A refund as such is really a matter for a university rather than the Government.

Whether a student is entitled to a refund is also dependent on their individual contractual relationship and what they have signed up to do. There is a process in place. I want to echo this and get that message out there. If a student feels as Sophie feels, and I am sure as a number of other students do—they have echoed this to me—the message I have sent out is that there is a process. In the first instance the student should go to their university and make a formal complaint. All universities, in line with consumer legislation, have to have that process in place and correspond with the student.

If they do not get to a satisfactory resolution, they can go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which we set up. It will then review that on a case-by-case basis and examine the situation. Has the university made appropriate changes? Have they delivered a sufficient quantity of courses, et cetera? All those things will be examined case by case. We saw that with the strikes. In fact, there were partial refunds made with the strikes, so that process is in place for students.

Q113 **Chair:** We will definitely come back on some of that. That makes it clear where you feel the Government's role is in this, which is not very extensive. How are the Government supporting—

Michelle Donelan: It really is important that the process of examining whether they should have a fee refund, or what has gone on, should be independent. It should not be the Government going in there because it has to be done on a case-by-case basis. We have seen so many innovative and fantastic examples of institutions using technology and working above



and beyond. It is not fair to say that every student in this country has had a raw deal, because they have not.

For example, I spoke to RADA the other week. It has managed to put on amazing courses for its students using technology, yet the very nature of its subjects would presume that it would not be able to. It is not the case that every student is in the situation that this petition highlights.

Q114 Chair: For students whose courses have been affected very significantly by coronavirus—and there are many in that situation—one of the things that has been raised with us, which is a very practical thing that the Government could do, is that they are unable to claim universal credit because of being in employment that is not covered by coronavirus support schemes. They are also not able to exit tenancy agreements where they are in private rented student accommodation that they no longer need.

Students appear to be falling through the net because they are neither employees whom the Government are supporting, nor are they able to extract the support they would normally get as students in this current situation.

What are the Government doing to support students during this period?

Michelle Donelan: I have worked very hard with the Student Loans Company to make sure that, despite the impact of coronavirus on them as an organisation, all student loans are delivered on time. That is the primary source of income for most students. Students are eligible, if it is appropriate, for the coronavirus job retention scheme. Obviously, that will not apply to all students, and we appreciate that fact.

The key source of hardship funding is from universities themselves. What we did quite early on in this process was to work very closely with the OFS so that it could loosen up some of the regulation around the access and participation money, so that that can be accessed for universities. That has been to the tune of £23 million for both April and May. We have also extended that for June and July. Universities can access that to enable them to have those hardship funds.

Some of the things we advocated using it for were mental health support, technology, connectivity or money to help with accommodation or hardship—all those things. On the accommodation point, a number of providers gave refunds to students; some did not. The key source for students if they feel they are in financial hardship is to go to those institutions. Most of them already have those hardship funds, and in a sense we have bolstered them with more money so that they can assist those students.

Q115 Elliot Colburn: Notwithstanding the autonomy of universities and what we have discussed so far, I want to pick up on the issue of quality, which was raised earlier.

There has been a view expressed by the Government, and indeed by the



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universities themselves, that there is no need to reimburse tuition fees if the quality of the education is still there, notwithstanding the different way it is now being delivered. The survey the Petitions Committee carried out found that 79% of respondents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the quality of the teaching they were receiving.

Have the Government made an assessment of the quality of university courses and the impact that coronavirus and, indeed, strikes have had on these?

Michelle Donelan: At the heart of our policy is students and the best interests of students. They are the ones who are getting the most out of their education, and, as Catherine said before, they are the ones who are investing heavily in this education. We originally set up the Office for Students for this very purpose and they regulate. At the moment they are having a number of polls to identify problems around, potentially, quality or concerns. They then have a more focused approach to investigate.

We must remember as well that quality is a registration condition of a university. They can in effect have their degree-awarding powers removed from them if there is a concern. What the OFS does as well is to track the complaints via the Office for the Independent Adjudicator, which I mentioned before, to see if there are patterns around that. The Office for Students has also invited students, third parties, parents and everybody to come forward and lodge those complaints.

In relation to the Government's decision around tuition fees, we do not really have a decision here. As I said before, the institutions are autonomous. They do not have to charge the maximum fee if they do not want to or if they do not believe that they are providing that value. There is a process in place if the student feels that the quality is not there or they are not getting the volume of education that they should be getting.

Q116 **Elliot Colburn:** Can we carry on focusing on the actual courses and the way in which education is being delivered to students at the moment, notwithstanding what you have just said?

The engagement we have had with petitioners has identified that coronavirus appears to have had a greater impact on vocational and skills-based courses, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and international students. The National Union of Students has told the Education Committee that 20% of students surveyed could not even access online courses.

Notwithstanding what we have spoken about so far, are the Government looking at how students in different circumstances, particularly those from the disadvantaged backgrounds that we have spoken about, have been affected by the outbreak?

Michelle Donelan: I really do not want to underestimate how severely students have been impacted by this virus, as has every section and sector of society. It has been unprecedented and unexpected. The ramifications



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have been stark. I believe that universities have risen to the challenge and really invested quickly in innovative technology.

I take on board that there are numerous students who are unhappy, and there will be circumstances where students, quite rightly, feel that they have not had the deal that they have in effect paid for. That is why we have the process in place so that that can be examined, looked at and then they may get a partial refund.

The more practical, vocational and creative subjects were always going to be trickier. I have spoken to a number of universities that have got around those challenges. QAA produces guidance to help to support universities in meeting those requirements and working with professional bodies so that their courses can be accredited and lead to those jobs that they are trying to achieve. The Office for Students also published more guidance.

I feel that universities have had all the guidance and support to be able to put on those practical-based subjects. It will be a very different picture in the next academic year, when we will be looking at a much more blended type of learning than strictly online.

I need to make one point here. Online learning does not necessarily always mean inferior learning. In fact, sometimes it can mean superior learning because you can utilise different types of technology. I completely agree that there are students who feel extremely upset and short-changed out there, but there are also students who do not feel that way. It is important to see both sides.

Q117 Chair: I totally appreciate that there will be students from whom we have not heard who are happy just to get their degree and have managed to get through this year as best as possible. But we have heard from a huge number of students for whom that is not the case, and they are left deeply unhappy with the situation.

You have already mentioned that students will have to take that up individually with their university on a case-by-case basis. Do you really think it is reasonable for what could be 2.4 million students in university education to take an individual action against their university to claim for the education that they believe they have paid for but have not received?

Michelle Donelan: There are examples of innovative and fantastic technology and education. It is not true to say that all students in the country have not received an education for the last term of this academic year. One thing we were very conscious of was that we did not want a gap in provision for those students, because that would be the worst-case scenario. One of the good things about all this is we have not closed universities like we did the schools and other sections of the economy and society. Students have continued to be able to learn, which is a very positive thing here.

Yes, it was a different type of learning because this was an unexpected pandemic. It was not of the universities' making nor of the Government's



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making. Every country around the world has seen an impact on its HE sector and every section of society. Our universities have risen to that challenge.

There are a number of students who feel disgruntled and upset about what has happened over the last term. I endorse their feelings to be able to do that, but what we need to do is have a look at those case-by-case scenarios. There will be some students who have a very solid case and others who do not.

It also depends on the contract that they have with their individual institutions in terms of the law. We have a process in place that can individually look at those cases. I feel that that is the most thorough and accurate way to be able to examine how much, if any, a student is entitled to in a tuition fee refund.

Q118 Chair: What evidence base do the Government have about the quality of education that is currently being provided to university students?

Michelle Donelan: We have an independent body, the Office for Students, whose primary job is as a regulator of the sector. There is obviously the minimum bar, which is the registration condition in terms of quality. Every day, OFS is monitoring the quality of HE. It has invited complaints to come into it so that it can examine them on a daily basis. It is doing polling. It is looking at all those things. That is the independent regulator. It is not the Government's job to assess whether there is quality there. That is why we set up the Office for Students, whose primary focus and primary customer are the students.

Q119 Chair: But given that we are being petitioned, and the Government are being petitioned, to take action for those who are unhappy, do you have the statistics from the Office for Students on the level of current satisfaction with university education?

Michelle Donelan: I spoke to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator this week about the number of complaints that it has received. It is obviously very early days because complaints can come in up to a year afterwards. There are a number of complaints in, but it is a very small number at the moment. They anticipate that more will come in.

I do not have the exact data on how many complaints the OFS has received, but I can certainly ask it for that and then submit it.

Chair: That would be helpful; thank you. That would help to inform the report that we are going to produce at the end of this inquiry.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Minister, the president of Universities UK told us that individual students could complain to their universities if they were not happy with their courses. The Government's response to the petition requesting refunds or reimbursement has made it clear that this is a matter for individual universities.

What are the options available to students if they believe they are not



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receiving the standard of education they have the right to expect?

Chair: I am sorry, Tonia—

Tonia Antoniazzi: I have just asked Chris's question; I do apologise.

Q120 **Chair:** The question I was going to ask, which I realise I did not ask you, Minister, was: one of the resolutions that the Government are being asked to try to get the universities to consider is supporting students' ability and right to retake and resit the year, where they feel this year has been so disrupted by not just coronavirus but by strikes.

Are the Government considering that? Is there something that the Government can do to try to assist and support that on behalf of students? Not all of them will want it, but what about those who do want that as a resolution?

Michelle Donelan: I think you are talking about current students for the option of deferring. I know I am labouring a point, but universities are different from schools and we need to frame our discussion around that. They are independent, autonomous organisations in British law. We do not have the legal power in essence to compel them to do that.

However, we also have to put it in perspective. They have had one term disrupted, which is completely understandable in terms of their grievances, but if a student then wanted to resit a whole year or defer they would have to look at the ramifications on their life. Some universities are letting them do that—it is very true—but some are not because of the flow of students.

In the first instance, a student should talk to their university and try to get their university to understand why they believe it would be in their best interests, but also to think, if they did defer for a year, what they are going to do with that year. We are living in a strange time where international travel will be limited. Jobs may be limited. I want students to consider their options because I would like them to do something that is in their best interests and not delay their lives and progression into the labour market at the end of their degree.

Q121 **Chair:** Let me put another challenge to you, Minister. I know you have referred on a number of occasions to the fact that universities are independent businesses and that each individual student needs to resolve the issues that they have with their independent university.

Is it not the reality, though, that for these students this is not a genuine marketplace? They cannot just pick up their stuff and go somewhere else or choose another organisation if they are not happy with what the university is offering. Is there not an uneven strength of arms in these negotiations? Do the Government not have a role to play, when they have intervened so significantly to support so many businesses, and quite rightly so, during this unprecedented pandemic? Students feel that they have been forgotten because, really, they do not have the right to take their business elsewhere. They have to accept what is given in these circumstances. That is what is causing such grave concern.



Michelle Donelan: First, I do not want any student to feel that they have been forgotten; they certainly have not. Our primary goal is to ensure that their institutions can survive and thrive throughout this process and afterwards. That is why we introduced a stabilisation package on 4 May. Primarily, we need to stabilise the sector and ensure that their institutions continue so that they can get the education in which they have invested and that they expect.

Secondly, we have supported students with the maintenance loans but also with additional support in hardship funding. We are monitoring the situation daily. I talk to the student union on a regular basis. I have regular engagement with students. I am looking at doing more in terms of mental health with the Office for Students. It is not true that we have forgotten students. It is just a very different set-up than in schools and in other parts of the education system in the UK.

Chair: It is a genuinely private sector as well. That is the difficulty. These fall between education and private employers, which is what is presenting such a challenge to the current student cohort.

Tonia was going to ask specifically about some of the challenges that universities are facing as a result of this crisis.

Q122 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** The Government have taken exceptional action to mitigate the financial impact of coronavirus on workers and businesses—we know that—providing billions of pounds in grants. Is there not a case for taking similar action in respect of students who have lost out educationally?

Michelle Donelan: We have done a great deal economically for every sector, including the university sector—up to £700 million in Government loans and support.

I repeat some of the comments I have already made around the fact that students are continuing to get maintenance loans. Universities have not closed; they are still getting an education. If they have concerns around that education, there is a process in place.

We have bolstered universities' ability to enhance their hardship funds to the tune of £23 million for four months—a very substantial amount. My first letter to the sector was student focused. It reminded them of their obligations to look after their students, especially in mental health support and the most vulnerable among their student bodies. That continues to be my conversation with the sector, and ensuring that that is happening on the ground. While they are autonomous organisations, both the OFS and myself are making sure that students are at the forefront of their aims and decisions.

Q123 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** It could have a massive impact on the universities, because if they have individual claims taken against them it appears that the coronavirus could cost them around £2.5 billion in fees and teaching grant income. Given that, is there a case for students to be reimbursed?



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What support will the Government provide to avoid universities being put into that financially precarious position? While the individual will have to go and claim their money back, that is going to have an impact on so many of them.

Michelle Donelan: It is fair to reinforce the fact that there have been examples of innovative and fantastic use of technology over the last few months. I do not envisage every student in England and Wales coming forward and seeking a refund on their tuition fees. They might not even be eligible. That is a decision for the Office of the Independent Adjudicator as to how much, or what proportion, they would be eligible for.

In terms of the financial strain on universities, that is why we introduced the stabilisation package on 4 May. It included that £700 million of support; things like the coronavirus job retention scheme; access to Government business loans; £100 million from QR funding; reprofiled tuition fees to £2.6 billion, so helping with the cash-flow situation.

All those things were designed to stabilise the sector. There is almost a safety net that we have built in. We said in that package that we would have a process—a structured transformation process—where, if an institution has gone through all those hoops and done all those things, and is still suffering severely financially, they could enter into this structured transformation process.

We are very much putting the health of the institutions and their longevity at the forefront of our work. I, for one, fully appreciate the challenges and the impact that coronavirus has had upon them and will continue to have. That is why I have so many calls with stakeholders every day. I know that the OFS is regularly monitoring the financial health, and it reports to me on a weekly basis on what is happening on the ground and whether we have any severe issues to worry about in terms of timeframes around certain institutions.

Q124 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Many institutions depend on research and on international students. With the potential loss of students and the inability to do the research because of coronavirus, is it possible that many courses and institutions are going to be at risk regardless of what the Government have put in place?

Michelle Donelan: You are quite right; there is a cross-subsidisation between international students and research. In addition, that package also announced a cross-ministerial task force on research. We have now had three meetings of that, which also includes DA representation. It is solutions focused. It is a productive task force that is helping with that agenda.

I also know that BEIS is working across Government on the research agenda to try to give the sector more solutions to fix this issue that you have identified. Moving out of a coronavirus Britain, our research base will

be more important than ever before in the building back of our economy and society. We fully appreciate that.

The other topic you referenced—international students—is really my top priority at the moment. They are predictions at the moment and not a reality. We still have a window of opportunity to attract those international students to come and study in the UK.

My message is based on fact. The UK is open and ready for business. We are flexible. We have innovative online learning, but in most parts it is going to be a blended learning that is on offer from September onwards. I am working with the Home Office to try to ensure that we are as flexible as we possibly can be in our visa regulations so that we are not putting up any barriers to international students.

I am working very hard on communications in those markets as well so that we can really land those messages to the students who are looking to see what country they should study in during the coming academic year.

Q125 Tonia Antoniazzi: On the point of the task force, you have said it has had three meetings. Will you be able to feed back to the Committee the aims, objectives and outcomes of the task force? I think that would feed in very well to this inquiry.

Michelle Donelan: Yes. I do not see why not. I had better clear it with my co-chair, Amanda Solloway, but I cannot see why not. That is a very reasonable request. I will chat to her, and I am sure I can get you that information.

Q126 Martyn Day: Before I start with my own questions, I have a follow-up on one of the points you made in the last question about the flexibility for international students with visas. A number of them would be looking to perhaps retake the year that has been messed up. Is there flexibility to support future visa applications, which will obviously run for a longer period?

Michelle Donelan: These are the issues that we are examining with the Home Office. Our priority across Government is to be as flexible and as accommodating as we can be, in a safe way, to international students so that we can ensure that they continue to study here and access some of the world's finest institutions and courses.

Q127 Martyn Day: We have heard a few times now that it is the Government's view that it is a matter for the individual universities if there are to be any refunds and that no consideration is really being given to a reduction in student debt.

Is it fair that students whose education has been so dramatically affected by these external events will be leaving university with the same student debt as previous and future years, but potentially with a substandard quality of education?



Michelle Donelan: I would argue that the impacts of coronavirus are not fair on anyone, nor were they anticipated or expected. They are not fair on any section or sector of society. There will be cases where students have not received the right quality of support; I am confident of that. That is why we have a process in place. That is what happened during the strikes. There were partial refunds administered. I do not think it is true that that has been the situation across the board, but there is a process in place for those students. Nothing about this virus—or the impacts of this virus—is fair in any way.

Q128 Martyn Day: By reducing student debt, the Government could reduce the financial burden on students wanting to retake a year because of the coronavirus situation, recognising that many students have not had the experience that they would have expected and, indeed, paid for.

Would you commit to reconsidering this?

Michelle Donelan: We need to be realistic in terms of what we have just been through and the asks of our Treasury. Commitments have already been made to every sector of the economy in terms of what can be delivered.

When we look at what has happened with students, we have managed to have a situation in this country—which has not been the case in every country—where we have not closed universities. Students have still continued to get an education. There has not been a gap or disruption in their educational provision, unlike other sectors of our own education system in this country. They have still continued to get their maintenance loans. We have enhanced their hardship funding. If there is a problem in their individual cases, there is a process in place to get those refunds.

Q129 Martyn Day: You mentioned the increase in the hardship funding. Earlier you said it was £23 million over the next four months. Obviously, we are in a moving feast and things are changing all the time in this crisis. The Scottish Government, by comparison, have announced bringing forward £11.4 million for their hardship fund. How does the hardship fund in England compare with that?

Michelle Donelan: I talk to my DA counterparts weekly, sometimes daily, during this coronavirus pandemic. I am fully aware of this. I spoke to my counterpart Richard Lochhead this week, so I am fully aware of the Scottish plans.

What we have done is to allow more flexibility around the funding. It is £23 million per month. We did £23 million in April; £23 million in May; £23 million in June; and £23 million in July. I believe the Scottish Government have moved forward funding from August. We could have done that, but we also appreciate the fact that this virus is going to have ramifications that last for months, if not years, especially around things like mental health and other support that students will additionally need in the next term. We would not want to rob Peter to pay Paul, in effect.



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Q130 Chair: In looking to the future, Universities UK has published principles for universities emerging from lockdown that make it clear that students arriving at or returning to university in September will have a very different experience from the one that they might have been expecting when they applied or when they were there previously.

What are the Government doing specifically—I know that you have referenced some of this—to make sure that universities are providing the quality of education that students expect and are entitled to, and indeed can be of the standard and the quality that attract the same level of students to maintain that vibrancy of the system, and international students as well?

Michelle Donelan: At the moment, the most important thing is to give students the certainty and for institutions to be fully transparent on what they can expect, so that they can make those decisions about whether to go to university, which course to do and which institution to go to. Before self-release comes up, they have that opportunity to change their mind, even about the institution and the course.

We published guidance last week where we were very clear that institutions need to provide that transparency around what their course will look like in the blended offering. Obviously, it is all caveated, because changes in Public Health England guidance and the virus could very much change that, but at the moment they should give students as much information as they possibly can.

The OFS did the same thing. It published consumer protection advice this week that outlines the same requirement on institutions to do that. The students starting in the next academic year will be in a different scenario from the ones in the last because they will obviously have more information on what to expect and how their course will be structured. It will be much more blended in nature rather than solely online.

I think it is also fair to say that institutions will have had months to prepare for this now. The expectation of what they can deliver will be much higher. We are expecting much more innovation and reliance on technology that will really help to provide these courses. It will be a different picture for students starting in the next academic year.

Q131 Chair: One of the things that has been put to us is that if students are facing a lower quality of education, or something different that they are not expecting or that does not appeal to them in the same way, to what extent are the Government encouraging deferral so that people can hope that within 12 months the landscape might be more back to normal or, indeed, offer a reduction in fees? Are the Government doing anything to support universities to do that?

Just as you were talking, an analogy came to mind. I do not know if you have a gym membership, but I am aware that gyms cannot provide the same level of service. You cannot go to the gym; the Government have mandated that that is not possible. Therefore, most gyms will have frozen



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their fees for this period. While a limited number of online services are offered, or perhaps outdoor activities only, they are providing a reduced fee structure. That is a private business.

Universities are also private. It begs the question: why are universities not offering a more flexible and consumer-focused funding structure while they carry out these adjustments in the way they deliver their services, in the same way as other private businesses are having to do?

Michelle Donelan: The best person to ask for that would be the universities themselves. It is their ability to do that; I cannot mandate them to do it or in any way decide for them. They have the freedom to do that within law. As I said at the beginning, we only set the maximum fee level.

In some of my conversations with universities, they argue that online is not necessarily a cheaper provision. In this country, we did not have institutions that were already geared up en masse to provide online teaching. They have had to invest in technology at a rapid speed to be able to deliver that quality. They would argue that online does not necessarily mean cheaper. Online does not necessarily mean inferior either, which is a point that I made earlier.

In relation to your first point around deferrals, my personal message to any student thinking about this would be to really think about what is in their best interests. What are they going to use that year for if they defer? As we said before, they are probably not going to be able to travel. The labour market will be precarious. Do they really want to delay their academic studies when we now have institutions that have spent even longer perfecting their online offer?

It will not solely be online in the new term for the majority of providers. They have said that it is going to be a blended offer, with some online and some in person. We are advocating and encouraging universities to make sure that the support is there in mental health and pastoral care, and that they are thinking about the student experience.

Something we have not touched on is that a number of students also go to university wanting the student experience, the social life and the soft skills they can build, the networks and connections. It is the university's job to find innovative ways to be able to get round the barriers that we have at the moment and to be able to facilitate that.

Q132 **Chair:** I used your language in referring to universities as private businesses, but in reality—

Michelle Donelan: Autonomous organisations.

Q133 **Chair:** That is an important clarification. We have already discussed the financial challenges faced by the university sector and some of the practical challenges posed by the current situation. Of course, we are pleased that you are working with the Home Office to resolve some of those issues. In



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reality, our universities are absolutely core to our local and regional economies. They perform a huge role within the public sector in partnership with the private sector. They are very much constrained by the ability to obtain public funding, whether that is for research or development, and by the fees structure set by the Government.

Is there not more that the Government can do to support the universities through this crisis, which in turn will enable universities to be able to better support their students?

Michelle Donelan: The package that we announced on 4 May was in response to what the sector itself had asked us for. There were student number controls that the sector itself had called for, primarily by the mechanism of UUK, the largest sector body, to stabilise the system. That has students at the heart of it. For instance, one week before all that happened, we had 30,000 unconditional offers made by institutions that had mainly never made unconditional offers before. That was putting a number of pressures on students to make decisions quickly that were not necessarily in their best interests.

As I said before, the package freed up £700 million-worth of support in business loans and access to the job retention scheme, and so on. We have reprofiled the tuition fees to £2.6 billion. We have moved forward £100 million of QR funding. We have been trying to help with stability of the sector and with the cash-flow problems of the sector.

We are working on some of the longer-term problems, trying to ensure that we can mitigate any potential loss of international students. We have the safety net with the structured transformation system. We are also trying to deal with the research issues with the task force. I said that BEIS is also working closely on this across Government to try to look at the possibility of more solutions. We had the £100 million in the announcement that was reprofiled in QR funding.

Another thing that the package announced was the fact that students have not had that same level of pastoral and tutorial time over the last few months with teachers and advisers. We have bolstered clearing to add a new section called "clearing plus", where, if they self-release, they then also get proactive communications on what institutions and courses their results would leave them eligible for.

We are really trying to put the students' interests at the heart of this and at the forefront of our agenda in what are very difficult times. With all the support that you have mentioned across other sections of society, I think it is fair to say that coronavirus will still have an impact and a ripple because this has been an awful experience for everybody. My heart does go out to every student that has been affected.

Q134 **Chair:** I want to finish with something that Sophie, our petitioner, said in her testimony, which stood out for me. She said that her intake in their final year are really concerned about the job market and graduate



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schemes, which are challenging at the best of times, as we know. They do not want to be written off as the coronavirus graduate year and for employers to feel like this year group have somehow been handed grades rather than completing the year for them, which we know is not the case.

What consideration have the Government given to the graduate job market this year, and what support can be given to graduates? It is not just in their role as students at the moment but as they move forward into this brave new world.

Michelle Donelan: This is a really important topic because we have seen reports about what could be to come, and from the Treasury themselves in terms of the economy. This is going to be very worrying for students on top of what has already been a very difficult time. Their job prospects will be at the forefront of their minds.

I am currently working on this. I have spoken to UUK and commissioned it to come to me with its ideas on the subject and how we can really work with our institutions to ensure that the support is there.

We have seen institutions already rising to this challenge. Some of them have been doing online forums with work-related skills, interview skills, and so on, but I think there is more that we can do within this space. I am working on this, and should we get more details added before your report is written I shall write to you with them.

Q135 **Chair:** Thank you very much, and thank you for joining us today. We appreciate your taking the time to be here and answering the questions from us, very much guided by the petitioners. We realise that this is a complex issue. The resounding message that we have had from students is that many of them do not feel that they are getting value for money in their education. They feel that they now face fewer opportunities as a result of this crisis, and they feel a bit ignored and caught in the middle between universities that provide their education and the Government who pay for it up front. They have the challenge of being consumers but being unable to vote with their feet because they have already paid for the service that they feel they are not getting in return.

I appreciate that you have given all the responses on that, but we will use the information that you have given us today to inform our report. We very much hope that we have made the voice of the petitioners heard during this session today and through the report that we will produce.

Thank you very much for your time today, Minister.

Michelle Donelan: Thank you. I have very much enjoyed the session. I think it was very useful to talk about the perspectives of students. I try to liaise with them every week, and I know there are a number of concerns up and down the country. I hope it will provide comfort to those who did not know about the processes already in place, and I urge any that do have concerns to take up those processes, as I do any student who writes to me.



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Chair: Thank you very much.