



House of Commons
Petitions Committee

The impact of Covid-19 on university students

Second Report of Session 2019–21

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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Petitions Committee

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Summary

The Covid-19 outbreak has hugely disrupted the education of university students, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of people have signed petitions about the impact of Covid-19, as well as strike action earlier in the year, and calling for students to be reimbursed tuition fees and other costs. We have heard many students have experienced difficulties accessing the online content that has been made available, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and courses where students need to use university facilities have been particularly affected. Thousands of students have also told us that the way in which courses are currently being delivered does not represent value for money for the tuition fees they pay.

While all university students have been affected by the Covid-19 outbreak, and many feel they are not currently receiving the quality of education they are entitled to, it is evident that universities have made enormous efforts to continue to deliver university courses in uniquely challenging circumstances. In at least some cases universities have been able to provide courses in a way that students believe is good value for money. While students do have a right to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course if the service provided by their university is substandard, we do not believe that there should be a universal refund or reimbursement of tuition fees to all university students.

Although we do not believe that all students should be reimbursed their tuition fees, we have called on the Government to work with the Office for Students and Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to produce guidance on the circumstances in which university students are likely to be entitled to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course, and to establish a new system which enables all students to easily seek a full or partial refund of their tuition fees, or to repeat part of their course, based on an independent and objective assessment of the quality of education they have received over the academic year. We have also called on the Government to work with universities and the Office for Students to ensure that all students are advised of their consumer rights and are given clear guidance on how to avail themselves of these if they feel their university has failed to provide an adequate standard of education.

The Government has put in place unprecedented financial support measures in response to Covid-19. Given the importance of the higher education sector to the UK economy, and the exceptional circumstances facing both universities and university students, we have also recommended that the Government consider providing additional funding to universities to enable them to pay any refunds university students are entitled to as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak.

The Covid-19 outbreak will have implications both for current students once they leave university, and for students who will be continuing or beginning higher education in the coming academic year. For students attending university in future academic years, we have recommended that any new arrangements that are put in place to better enable students to access refunds for tuition fees be maintained for as long as university courses continue to be affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. For students whose university courses have been affected by the outbreak, we have called on the Government to consider

making additional funding available to students who might want to extend their education after the outbreak, and to provide ongoing employment advice and support beyond graduation in what is likely to be an extremely challenging employment market.

1 Introduction

1. In recent months the Covid-19 outbreak, and the Government's response to this, has had a huge impact on every aspect of life. This has resulted in an enormous number of petitions, raising concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on particular groups of people, businesses, the economy, and other areas of society, and requesting action by the Government to respond to these concerns. There are over 600 open petitions about specific aspects of the Government's response to Covid-19, which combined have received over 4,800,000 signatures. As a result of this enormous level of public interest, in March we launched an inquiry into the Government's response to Covid-19, to better understand and present the concerns of petitioners to Government.¹

2. Several of the largest petitions are about universities and the impact of Covid-19, as well as strike action organised by the University and College Union (UCU) earlier in the year, on university students' education. These petitions call for university students to be reimbursed all or part of their tuition fees. One petition also calls for rent to be refunded. The following four petitions have received a total of over half a million signatures:

- i) e-petition 302855, "[Reimburse all students of this year's fees due to strikes and COVID-19](#)", 347,638 signatures
- ii) e-petition 300528, "[Require universities to reimburse students' tuition fees during strike action](#)", 136,360 signatures
- iii) e-petition 306494, "[Refund university students for 3rd Semester Tuition 2020](#)", 110,505 signatures
- iv) e-petition 304855, "[Refund university rent and tuition fees due to coronavirus](#)", 15,191 signatures²

There are also several petitions specifically about international students, who contribute hugely to UK university finances, calling variously for their tuition fees to be refunded, and for changes to immigration arrangements for students who have been affected by the outbreak.³

3. In light of the significant support for petitions calling for students to be refunded their tuition fees for this academic year, we launched an investigation into how university students had been affected by the Covid-19 outbreak and the strikes that have taken place this year. To inform our work we engaged directly with students, parents, and university staff, including tens of thousands of people who signed these petitions, using an online survey. We also spoke directly to the creator of the largest petition on this issue, Sophie Quinn, a final year student at Liverpool University, as well as representatives from the National Union of Students (NUS), the UCU, and Universities UK. We also questioned

1 Petitions Committee, [The Government's response to Coronavirus](#)

2 Signature counts are as of Tuesday 7 July.

3 e-petition 304442, [Extended Visas indefinitely for International Students](#), e-petition 314710, [Extend proposed Graduate visa route to 2019–20 batch of students due to COVID19](#), e-petition 310825, [Extend Tier-4 visas and waive third-term tuition fee for international students](#), e-petition 318717, [Reimburse international students this year's fees due to strikes and COVID-19](#), e-petition 310054, [Pay international students weekly wage equal to 20 hrs to meet monthly expenses](#), and e-petition 307938, [Temporarily suspend the 20 hour term time work rule for international students](#)

the Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan MP, about the Government's response to these petitions, and the support the Government is providing to university students and the higher education sector.

4. This report sets out our findings and proposes the actions the Government should take in response to the disruption that university students have faced, and the potential impact on their future career prospects. While we decided to examine the issues raised by these petitions in response to the enormous disruption to university education by Covid-19, the recommendations we make in this report should also ensure that students are better able to seek redress in response to any significant adverse impacts to their courses which have resulted from strike action. We recognise that there are a wide range of ways in which the Covid-19 outbreak has affected students—including loss of income and difficulties exiting tenancy agreements—but this report focuses specifically on the issue raised by the most popular petitions: the impact on university courses and the case for, and practicalities of, refunding tuition fees.

2 How the Covid-19 outbreak has affected university courses

5. On Wednesday 18 March the Prime Minister announced that schools would be closing to most pupils,⁴ and they are only now in the process of reopening to some students. Universities, however, have been permitted to remain open throughout the outbreak. This does not mean that university courses have continued as normal. The Covid-19 outbreak and the restrictions and advice put in place by the Government have fundamentally changed the ways that universities are operating, and the experiences students are having. On 13 March Universities UK—which represents 137 UK universities—stated that the way that universities deliver their teaching and other services was likely to change, and that some of the measures that were being implemented included:

- a) Shifting to online delivery of teaching and learning wherever possible;
- b) Encouraging home working of students and staff where appropriate;
- c) Postponing March/April graduation ceremonies, and
- d) Changing examination arrangements.⁵

We consider below the impact of these, and other, changes on students.

The delivery of teaching

6. The delivery of university courses differs across universities and individual courses, but many students feel that their courses have suffered as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. We conducted a survey of people who had signed relevant petitions, which received over 25,000 responses from current students. The vast majority of students who responded told us that teaching hours at their university had fallen and they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the quality of education they were currently receiving. These results are echoed in responses to our request for views on the Student Room online forum.⁶ One user told us:

Half my lecturers just stuck up last year's recordings. The others made the effort to record from home their stuff or do it live and we could type questions they answered during the breaks [...] we haven't had loads of things marked [...] without feedback, we go into exams blind as to what things we need to improve in essay techniques.

Another user said:

I don't find the creation of interactive PowerPoints - which just slow note-taking and half the time don't work to be a maintained standard. Nor is uploading last years, or a year further backs stream capture. I wasn't paying for a lecture delivered to another cohort two years ago. Or when a capture

4 Prime Minister's Office, [PM statement on coronavirus: 18 March 2020](#)

5 Universities UK, [Actions being taken by universities in response to coronavirus](#), 13 March 2020

6 The Student Room, [Petition for fees to be reimbursed due to coronavirus and strikes. Your experience?](#), accessed 7 July 2020

is uploaded as audio only and they start talking about things on screen but with no indication of where they are pointing. Not to mention as a clinical course our hands on practicals being cut crucially short this year. It isn't a case of will the medics, dentists and vets of this year come out as less trained individuals but a question of how much poorer will their practice be. The future care of humans and animals will suffer.

The NUS has conducted its own “Coronavirus and Students Survey” of 10,000 students, which found that 20% of respondents who had been offered online learning did not agree that they were able to access it adequately.⁷

7. It appears that changes to the way university courses are being delivered have disproportionately affected particular groups of students. The Office for Students (OfS) recently told the Education Committee that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face particular challenges accessing online teaching, stating:

We are acutely aware of the challenges facing all students but particularly disadvantaged students when moving from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning. In terms of how many students are unable to access online learning, it is not a binary thing that you either can or cannot. We understand that many students might, for instance, have weak wi-fi or not have the appropriate hardware or are not living in an environment where it is easy for them to work because they are living in a crowded household. It tends to be all manner of things coming together.⁸

These impacts were also borne out in our survey.⁹ The NUS also told the Education Committee about challenges that international students are facing, stating that many of them:

are unable to access content because of restrictions in their home countries and, therefore, unable to complete their courses or get the same quality of learning as their colleagues.¹⁰

8. While universities have made enormous efforts to continue to provide courses since the outbreak began, the transition to online teaching has been a challenging one. Professor Julia Buckingham, President of Universities UK, told us:

[it] 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.¹¹

The Minister underlined the work that had been undertaken to continue university courses, telling us “universities have risen to the challenge and really invested quickly in innovative technology”, and that “[o]nline learning does not necessarily always mean

7 National Union of Students, [NUS responds to OIAHE annual report](#), April 2020

8 [Q235](#), Oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 18 May 2020, HC 254 [Nicola Dandridge]

9 [Annex](#)

10 [Q206](#), Oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 18 May 2020, HC 254 [Zamzam Ibrahim]

11 [Q38](#) (unless stated otherwise all references to oral and written evidence in this Report refer to evidence reported under HC 252, [The Government's response to Coronavirus](#))

inferior learning.”¹² NUS President Zamzam Ibrahim acknowledged this, stating that “institutions have worked as hard as they possibly can to be able to support students”, but also saying: “I do not think they have the support to be able to do that and have not been given proper, clear guidance as to what quality education looks like.”¹³

9. The Minister for Universities acknowledged that “the impact on students has been really stark at a very vulnerable time and important time in their lives in terms of education”, and that “students have had extra pressure added on to them.”¹⁴ When asked what assessment the Government had made of the quality of university teaching during the outbreak, the Minister told us it was not the Government’s job to assess whether there is quality there, and said “[t]hat is why we set up the Office for Students, whose primary focus and primary customer are the students.”¹⁵ She told us that the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates the higher education sector in England, was currently exploring concerns about the quality of education, and would be taking a focused approach to investigating concerns.¹⁶

Assessments and qualifications

10. It is still not yet clear exactly what the outbreak will mean for how students are assessed and how they are able to secure their qualifications this year. The OfS has issued guidance about quality and standards during the pandemic. This states that it expects:

that providers should make all reasonable efforts to enable students to complete their studies, for achievement to be reliably assessed, for qualifications to be awarded securely.¹⁷

The survey conducted by the NUS showed that 74% of students were worried about the impact of the pandemic on their final qualifications.¹⁸

11. Given the disruption to courses, the NUS has called for all non-essential formal exams to be cancelled for first- and second-year students, asking institutions to find flexible solutions to help these students progress to their next stage of learning.¹⁹ They have also called for a national approach to exams and assessments, with a “no detriment” policy to ensure students obtain “at least their average grade so far”.²⁰ Professor Julia Buckingham responded to the requests made by the NUS, stating:

Central to the approaches being taken by universities is a principle of fairness and Universities UK is encouraging its members to consider any adjustments in this light. This means recognising the exceptional circumstances in which students are being taught and assessed while also ensuring that for those individuals graduating or progressing with their

12 [Q116](#)

13 [Q225](#), Oral evidence taken before the Education Committee on 18 May 2020, HC 254

14 [Q111](#)

15 [Q118](#)

16 [Q115](#)

17 Office for Students, [Guidance for providers about quality and standards during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#), April 2020

18 National Union of Students, [NUS responds to OIAHE annual report](#), April 2020

19 National Union of Students, [NUS call for exam cancellation for 1st and 2nd year students and options for those facing finals](#), March 2020

20 National Union of Students, [National approach needed to exams, assessment and ‘no detriment’ policies](#), April 2020

studies this year, the qualifications they are awarded hold their value and meet the requirements of accrediting bodies so as to enable students to progress smoothly into their chosen profession.²¹

The success or otherwise of such endeavours and the true impact on students' qualifications and career prospects remain to be seen.

Access to university facilities

12. In addition to the teaching of courses, the Covid-19 outbreak has meant university students are also unable to access university facilities, which are also funded by tuition fees.²² These facilities, including those with a clear educational purpose such as libraries and laboratories and more holistic services such as advice centres, have also been closed to comply with social distancing. As a result, students are not receiving the benefit of facilities that they nevertheless continue to pay for. This impacts all students, but particularly those courses involving practical elements such as studio or lab-based work. Sophie Quinn, the university student who started the petition calling for students to be reimbursed this year's fees due to Covid-19 and strikes, told us that:

There are people doing arts degrees and creative degrees [...] who do not have access to any facilities at all but are still expected to produce pieces of work to the same standard.²³

Practical challenges

13. Students are also facing practical challenges as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. Almost half of the students who completed our survey told us they were currently paying for university accommodation they don't need. Others have seen their income fall as they have been furloughed, put on reduced hours, unpaid leave, or been made redundant.²⁴ Zamzam Ibrahim told us that:

The immediate concern 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.²⁵

The Minister told us that the Government had helped universities to enhance their hardship funds, to enable them to look after students.²⁶

Conclusion

14. While universities have not been required to close by the Government, they have felt compelled to suspend face-to-face teaching, and this has resulted in significant disruption to the delivery of university courses. In deciding whether universities should remain open, and how teaching should continue, the priority has rightly been the safety and

21 Universities UK, [Correspondence from Professor Julia Buckingham CBE to Zamzam Ibrahim](#), April 2020

22 Universities UK, [Where student fees go](#), September 2013

23 [Q36](#)

24 NUS, [Coronavirus and students survey](#), April 2020

25 [Q37](#)

26 [Q122](#)

wellbeing of students and staff. The Government has said that its number one priority is the safety of students and staff.²⁷ Similarly, in setting out its response to the outbreak, Universities UK stated that they were prioritising student and staff wellbeing by reinforcing and encouraging adherence to public health advice.²⁸ The UCU has said that staff and student health is their number one priority,²⁹ and the NUS has said that the health, safety, and wellbeing of students is an absolute priority.³⁰ While it is right that the health and wellbeing of students and staff should be the priority of the Government and universities, social distancing measures have unavoidably resulted in huge changes to the way in which universities have delivered courses, and the experiences of students on these courses.

15. The Covid-19 outbreak has hugely disrupted the education of university students. A significant number of students have told us they are not receiving the standard of education that they had expected, feel they are entitled to, or which offers true value for money in light of the amount they are paying in tuition fees. Many students have experienced difficulties accessing the online content that has been made available, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and courses where students need to use university facilities have been particularly affected. We have heard from many students who feel that the way in which courses are currently being delivered does not represent value for money for the tuition fees they pay. Students have also faced a number of practical challenges as a result of the outbreak, including in many cases loss of income and difficulties with accommodation.

16. We have heard evidence that universities, lecturers and support staff have made tremendous efforts to continue to deliver university courses in uniquely challenging circumstances, and some students have continued to receive an excellent education. In at least some cases universities have been able to provide courses in a way that students believe is good value for money. We do not therefore believe that there should be a universal refund or reimbursement of tuition fees to all university students.

27 Government response to e-petition 300628, [Close all universities down for an appropriate amount of time amidst COVID-19](#), 24 March 2020

28 Universities UK, [Actions being taken by universities in response to coronavirus](#), 13 March 2020

29 University and College Union, [Unions set out five tests government and colleges must meet before staff and students can return](#), 23 May 2020

30 National Union of Students, [NUS President's statement on Coronavirus](#), 18 March 2020

3 Refunding tuition fees

17. University students who pay tuition fees are protected by consumer law, and are entitled to seek remedies or refunds if their university fails to provide the education they have paid for. Remedies students might be entitled to if they receive a substandard service include:

- Repeating part of the course.
- A refund, up to the full price of the course.³¹

In this Chapter we consider the circumstances in which students may be entitled to these remedies, and whether the current options for seeking these remedies are fit for purpose.

Current arrangements for university students to exercise consumer rights

18. While students are protected by consumer law if their university provides a substandard service, there is no clear guidance on the circumstances under which students would be entitled to a refund or to repeat part of their course. Universities UK has stated that “Where there is wide-ranging support for active and ongoing learning and progression, students should not expect any fee refund from their university.”³² The Government has expressed a similar position, stating:

Students ordinarily should not expect any fee refund if they are receiving adequate online learning and support.³³

The Government has said that if institutions are unable to facilitate adequate online tuition then it would be unacceptable for students to be charged for any additional terms—effectively being charged twice.³⁴ The Government has more recently made it clear that full tuition fees should only be charged if the quality of education is there, stating:

We only expect full tuition fees to be charged if online courses are of good quality, fit for purpose and help students progress towards their qualification. If universities want to charge full fees, they will have to ensure that the quality is there.³⁵

The Minister acknowledged that many students would rightly feel they had not received the education they had paid for, saying:

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.³⁶

31 Universities UK, [Compensation and refund policies: developing good practice](#), April 2018

32 Universities UK, [Tuition, assessments and fees: Answers to common questions about tuition, assessments and grading during the Covid-19 pandemic](#), accessed 23 June 2020

33 Department for Education, [University students and COVID-19 FAQ](#), 9 April 2020

34 Department for Education, [University students and COVID-19 FAQ](#), 9 April 2020

35 [PQ 41568](#) [on Students: Fees and Training], 13 May 2020

36 [Q116](#)

The Minister also accepted that some students will not have received the right quality of support.³⁷

19. In its response to one of the petitions requesting reimbursement, the Government has described the process by which university students can complain if they are not satisfied with the education they are receiving:

In the first instance, students should speak to their provider to see if they can resolve their complaint. We expect student complaints and appeals processes to be operated flexibly, accessibly, and sympathetically by providers to resolve any concerns. If a student at a provider in England or Wales is not satisfied with their provider's response, they can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) to consider their complaint.

In addition to complaining to their university, and escalating to the OIA if necessary, a university student could take legal action against their university, on the basis of consumer rights law.³⁸

20. The Minister emphasised the importance of independent consideration of whether students are entitled to a refund, telling us that “[i]t really is important that the process of examining whether they should have a fee refund, or what has gone on, should be independent,”³⁹ and that this had to be done on a case-by-case basis. However, there is no standardised process for students to seek a refund from their university in the first instance, and it is up to individual universities to decide how to deal with any complaints or requests for reimbursement. It is only if a student chooses to escalate an unsatisfactory response to the OIA that it is reviewed independently.

21. The scale of disruption caused by the Covid-19 outbreak could mean that a significant proportion of university students have not received the education they are entitled to and are therefore entitled to a refund or other remedy. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this report, and shown by evidence from both our own engagement and that undertaken by NUS, a large number of students feel they are not receiving the standard of education they are entitled to. The Minister told us that she understood that so far there had been a very small number of complaints submitted to universities, but expected more to be made in the coming months.⁴⁰ The Minister subsequently advised us that between March and late June the OfS had only received 58 notifications of concerns about the arrangements put in place by individual providers.⁴¹ The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education has said that it has received fewer than 20 complaints relating to Covid-19 disruption, but that it is very early days and there is usually a significant time lag between the cause for complaint arising and a complaint reaching them.⁴²

22. Given the number of students who have told us they are not satisfied with the education they are currently receiving, and do not believe it is good value for money, it does not appear that the current system—using a university's existing complaints process,

37 [Q127](#)

38 Consumer Rights Act 2015, [section 54](#)

39 [Q113](#)

40 [Q119](#)

41 [Correspondence from Michelle Donelan MP to the Petitions Committee](#), 30 June 2020

42 [Correspondence from Michelle Donelan MP to the Petitions Committee](#), 30 June 2020

and escalating to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education if they do not receive a satisfactory response—is adequate, or indeed practicable, given the potential scale of take-up. In 2018 Universities UK published advice to universities on compensation and refund policies, which stated that “Where a problem has potentially affected a large number of students, such as industrial action, institutions may wish to consider the use of a separate, streamlined process for dealing with groups of complaints efficiently and consistently.”⁴³ However it is not yet apparent that universities have done so in respect of complaints regarding the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak, or strikes.

23. Students have a right to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course if the service provided by their university is substandard, but the exact circumstances in which students should expect to receive a refund or be able to repeat part of their course are not clear. Furthermore, given the scale of the disruption that has been caused by Covid-19—in addition to the strikes earlier in the year—and the numbers of students who may feel they are entitled to some form of reimbursement, it is not acceptable to expect individual students to seek satisfaction through existing complaints procedures or the courts. A new process needs to be put in place to consider complaints arising from Covid-19, and other out-of-the-ordinary events that affect the courses of large numbers of students, including large-scale strikes. *The Government should work with the Office for Students and Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to produce guidance on the circumstances in which university students are likely to be entitled to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course, and to establish a new system which enables all students to easily seek a full or partial refund of their tuition fees, or to repeat part of their course, based on an independent and objective assessment of the quality of education they have received over the academic year.*

24. While it appears that to date relatively few students have raised formal complaints with their universities or taken individual action to seek a refund of their tuition fees, many students are not happy with how university courses are being delivered. It is essential that all students are made aware of their rights, and how to raise a complaint and seek a refund if they are not satisfied with the education they are receiving. *The Government should work with universities and the Office for Students to ensure that all students are advised of their consumer rights and are given clear guidance on how to avail themselves of these if they feel their university has failed to provide an adequate standard of education. This should include details of how to access any new system which is developed in response to our previous recommendation.*

How refunds should be paid for

25. Petitions calling for students to have their tuition fees refunded have variously called for universities to be required to refund the fees themselves, or for the Government to reimburse students who have been affected. Under consumer law, it would fall to universities—as the service provider—to refund tuition fees if they fail to provide the

quality of education students are contractually entitled to.⁴⁴ The Government's responses to petitions on this, and the oral evidence from the Minister, was that the Government regard any refund as a matter for individual universities, as "autonomous institutions".⁴⁵

26. However, while the Minister was right when she told us that the current situation "was not of the universities' making nor of the Government's making",⁴⁶ it is the Government that determined the restrictions that apply during the outbreak, and it is these restrictions that have required universities to change the way they deliver courses. This has led to hundreds of thousands of students signing petitions calling for tuition fees and other costs to be reimbursed. The Government also has a responsibility to consider the impact of Covid-19, and the social distancing restrictions it has put in place in response to the pandemic, on the higher education sector, just as it has done in providing its wide-ranging package of support for businesses.

27. In 2018/19 universities received just under £20 billion in tuition fees and education contracts, accounting for almost half of all income for the higher education sector.⁴⁷ If even a significant minority of students were successful in seeking refunds from their universities this could have a significant impact on university finances. The proportion of university income made up by tuition fees varies hugely across the sector, so the impact of being required to refund tuition fees to a large number of students could have significantly different impacts on different universities.⁴⁸ Universities are also facing the prospect of reduced income in the next academic year. Research by London Economics, produced for the UCU, showed that Covid-19 could lead to over 200,000 fewer first-year students attending university this autumn, which could cost universities £2.5 billion.⁴⁹ Universities are therefore potentially facing obligations to reimburse students for past fees at the same time as future income could fall.

28. The Chief Executive of Universities UK, Alistair Jarvis, has said the Government "must take urgent action to provide the support which can ensure universities are able to weather these very serious challenges, and to protect students, maintain research, and retain our capacity to drive the recovery of the economy and communities".⁵⁰ The UCU has called for a "clear and coherent plan" from the Government to ensure universities and colleges can retain academic capacity now and help build for the future.⁵¹ This call has been supported by the NUS.⁵² The Government has announced a range of measures to protect students and the higher education sector from the impact of Covid-19,⁵³ which the Minister told us included £700 million in financial support,⁵⁴ but is silent on the matter of student refunds.

44 Competition and Markets Authority, [The Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic, consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds](#), April 2020

45 Government response to e-petition 304855, [Refund university rent and tuition fees due to coronavirus](#), 16 June 2020, [Q112](#)

46 [Q117](#)

47 Higher Education Statistics Agency, [What is the income of HE providers?](#), Table 1, accessed 26 June 2020

48 Higher Education Statistics Agency, [What is the income of HE providers?](#), Table 1, accessed 26 June 2020

49 London Economics, [Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university finances: Report for the University and College Union](#), April 2020

50 Universities UK, [UUK response to London Economics report](#), April 2020

51 UCU, [Protect universities and colleges now so they can lead recovery](#), UCU tells minister, April 2020

52 NUS, [NUS backs UCU call to address future of FE and HE in wake of Covid-19](#), April 2020

53 Department for Education and Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, [Government support package for universities and students](#), May 2020

54 [Q123](#)

29. When pressed on whether the Government would shoulder the financial burden that could be involved in reimbursing students who have received a substandard education, the Minister for Universities told us:

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.⁵⁵

30. If a university has failed to provide the education a student has paid for, the student is entitled to a refund from that university. However, given the likely impact of Covid-19 on universities—which could cost them around £2.5 billion in fees and teaching grant income alone—there is a risk that a large number of students requesting and being entitled to a refund could have a serious and detrimental effect on the sustainability of the higher education sector. That is not, however, a reason to prevent students from receiving any refunds to which they are entitled.

31. The Government has put in place unprecedented financial support measures to respond to Covid-19, paying the salaries of hundreds of thousands of employees nationally, and funding grants and loans for a huge number of businesses and industries. These are exceptional actions, in exceptional circumstances. *Given the importance of the higher education sector to the UK economy, and the exceptional circumstances facing both universities and university students, the Government should consider providing additional funding to universities to enable them to pay any refunds university students are entitled to as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. The Government could also consider alternative means for reimbursing students, where an independent process has found that they are entitled to a refund, such as reducing student loans of students who are entitled to a refund.*

4 Looking to the future

32. This report focuses on the requests of petitions calling for students to be refunded tuition fees for the current academic year, but the Covid-19 outbreak will have implications both for current students once they leave university, and for students who will be continuing or beginning higher education in the coming academic year.

The next academic year

33. It is too early to say exactly what the Covid-19 outbreak will mean for students in the next academic year, but guidance published by both the Government and Universities UK indicates that the outbreak will affect how university education is delivered. Last month the Government published guidance for the higher education sector on reopening buildings and campuses, which aimed to help higher education providers understand how to minimise risk during the Covid-19 outbreak and provide services to students.⁵⁶ Universities UK has also set out a series of principles for universities to consider when emerging from lockdown and considering making changes in light of guidance on social distancing.⁵⁷

34. While it is too early to know what effect the Covid-19 outbreak will have on university courses in the next academic year, there will not be a return to business as usual. We hope that all universities will be able to effectively deliver every university course to the standard that students are entitled, but if this is not the case students whose courses are affected by the Covid-19 outbreak in the next academic year should have the same easily accessible recourse to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course that we have recommended should apply to students in the current academic year. Any new arrangements that are put in place to better enable students to access refunds for tuition fees, where they believe they are not receiving the education they are entitled to, should be available to all students whose courses are affected by the Covid-19 outbreak in future academic years.

Supporting students whose courses have been affected by Covid-19

35. In addition to concerns that students are not receiving value for money as a result of the impact Covid-19 has had on university courses, many students are concerned about how their future could be affected as a result of disruption to those courses. Sophie Quinn told us:

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.⁵⁸

36. The Minister acknowledged that “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.”⁵⁹ She told us that some institutions had “been doing online forums with

56 Department for Education, [Higher education: reopening buildings and campuses](#), June 2020

57 Universities UK, [Principles and considerations: Emerging from lockdown](#), June 2020

58 [Q44](#)

59 [Q134](#)

work-related skills, interview skills, and so on”, but said there was more the Government can do in this space.⁶⁰ Following the session the Minister wrote to us to say that the Government was “working with the universities sector to identify the overall range of support offered to graduates who are looking to enter the labour market or continue their studies at this challenging time”, and committed to send us more information on the steps the Government has taken once they have been rolled out.⁶¹

37. University students whose courses have been affected by Covid-19, particularly those in their final year, are understandably concerned about the impact the disruption to their courses could have on their futures. We welcome the Government’s acknowledgment of these concerns, and its plans to look at the overall range of support offered to graduates who are looking to enter the labour market or continue their studies at this challenging time. *As part of its work to consider support offered to graduates entering the labour market, the Government should consider making additional funding available to students who might want to extend their education—either by retaking part of their course or taking additional courses—after the outbreak, and to provide ongoing employment advice and support beyond graduation in what is likely to be an extremely challenging employment market.*

60 [Q134](#)

61 [Correspondence from Michelle Donelan MP to the Petitions Committee, 30 June 2020](#)

Conclusions and recommendations

How the Covid-19 outbreak has affected university courses

1. The Covid-19 outbreak has hugely disrupted the education of university students. A significant number of students have told us they are not receiving the standard of education that they had expected, feel they are entitled to, or which offers true value for money in light of the amount they are paying in tuition fees. Many students have experienced difficulties accessing the online content that has been made available, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and courses where students need to use university facilities have been particularly affected. We have heard from many students who feel that the way in which courses are currently being delivered does not represent value for money for the tuition fees they pay. Students have also faced a number of practical challenges as a result of the outbreak, including in many cases loss of income and difficulties with accommodation. (Paragraph 15)
2. We have heard evidence that universities, lecturers and support staff have made tremendous efforts to continue to deliver university courses in uniquely challenging circumstances, and some students have continued to receive an excellent education. In at least some cases universities have been able to provide courses in a way that students believe is good value for money. We do not therefore believe that there should be a universal refund or reimbursement of tuition fees to all university students. (Paragraph 16)

Refunding tuition fees

3. Students have a right to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course if the service provided by their university is substandard, but the exact circumstances in which students should expect to receive a refund or be able to repeat part of their course are not clear. Furthermore, given the scale of the disruption that has been caused by Covid-19—in addition to the strikes earlier in the year—and the numbers of students who may feel they are entitled to some form of reimbursement, it is not acceptable to expect individual students to seek satisfaction through existing complaints procedures or the courts. A new process needs to be put in place to consider complaints arising from Covid-19, and other out-of-the-ordinary events that affect the courses of large numbers of students, including large-scale strikes. *The Government should work with the Office for Students and Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to produce guidance on the circumstances in which university students are likely to be entitled to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course, and to establish a new system which enables all students to easily seek a full or partial refund of their tuition fees, or to repeat part of their course, based on an independent and objective assessment of the quality of education they have received over the academic year.* (Paragraph 23)
4. While it appears that to date relatively few students have raised formal complaints with their universities or taken individual action to seek a refund of their tuition fees, many students are not happy with how university courses are being delivered. It is essential that all students are made aware of their rights, and how to raise a

complaint and seek a refund if they are not satisfied with the education they are receiving. *The Government should work with universities and the Office for Students to ensure that all students are advised of their consumer rights and are given clear guidance on how to avail themselves of these if they feel their university has failed to provide an adequate standard of education. This should include details of how to access any new system which is developed in response to our previous recommendation.* (Paragraph 24)

5. If a university has failed to provide the education a student has paid for, the student is entitled to a refund from that university. However, given the likely impact of Covid-19 on universities—which could cost them around £2.5 billion in fees and teaching grant income alone—there is a risk that a large number of students requesting and being entitled to a refund could have a serious and detrimental effect on the sustainability of the higher education sector. That is not, however, a reason to prevent students from receiving any refunds to which they are entitled. (Paragraph 30)
6. The Government has put in place unprecedented financial support measures to respond to Covid-19, paying the salaries of hundreds of thousands of employees nationally, and funding grants and loans for a huge number of businesses and industries. These are exceptional actions, in exceptional circumstances. *Given the importance of the higher education sector to the UK economy, and the exceptional circumstances facing both universities and university students, the Government should consider providing additional funding to universities to enable them to pay any refunds university students are entitled to as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. The Government could also consider alternative means for reimbursing students, where an independent process has found that they are entitled to a refund, such as reducing student loans of students who are entitled to a refund.* (Paragraph 31)

Looking to the future

7. While it is too early to know what effect the Covid-19 outbreak will have on university courses in the next academic year, there will not be a return to business as usual. We hope that all universities will be able to effectively deliver every university course to the standard that students are entitled, but if this is not the case students whose courses are affected by the Covid-19 outbreak in the next academic year should have the same easily accessible recourse to seek a refund or to repeat part of their course that we have recommended should apply to students in the current academic year. *Any new arrangements that are put in place to better enable students to access refunds for tuition fees, where they believe they are not receiving the education they are entitled to, should be available to all students whose courses are affected by the Covid-19 outbreak in future academic years.* (Paragraph 34)
8. University students whose courses have been affected by Covid-19, particularly those in their final year, are understandably concerned about the impact the disruption to their courses could have on their futures. We welcome the Government's acknowledgment of these concerns, and its plans to look at the overall range of support offered to graduates who are looking to enter the labour market or continue their studies at this challenging time. *As part of its work to consider support offered*

to graduates entering the labour market, the Government should consider making additional funding available to students who might want to extend their education—either by retaking part of their course or taking additional courses—after the outbreak, and to provide ongoing employment advice and support beyond graduation in what is likely to be an extremely challenging employment market. (Paragraph 37)

Annex: Summary of public engagement

Background

To inform our work on this subject we sought the views of petitioners through an online survey and posts on The Student Room online forum. This digital engagement was run to help us understand how coronavirus and strike action have impacted students' education, and to try and identify the popularity of possible solutions. Below is a summary of the responses received across these two digital platforms.

Survey of petitioners

This survey was sent to over 330,000 petitioners who signed any related petitions. As of 3pm on Monday 8 June, the overwhelming majority (89%) of the 28,254 petitioners who had completed the survey described themselves as current students. 9% had a child or other relative who was a student. A very small number of academic staff completed the survey.

Student Room forum

The post on The Student Room had elicited 160 comments as of 3pm on Monday 8 June.

The move to online and other forms of remote teaching

Below are some of the comments we received on the move to online and other forms of remote teaching.

Survey respondent: "During this quarantine, only one lecturer has made the attempt to do an online class, and that was only regarding an assignment, not even teaching, just ensuring we could actually complete the assignment."

Survey respondent: "I am struggling to complete assignments as I have not been taught virtually anything and I really struggle to learn as effectively online."

The Student Room user: "My lecturers haven't even tried to do online lectures. They've said it's too difficult for them to do technologically."

The Student Room user: "Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are impacted the most. Some may not have access to the internet or a laptop and even if they do, they won't have a stable internet connection and a quiet place to work unlike their privileged counterparts."

The Student Room user: "Half my lecturers just stuck up last year's recordings. The others made the effort to record from home their stuff or do it live and we could type questions they answered during the breaks...we haven't had loads of things marked...without feedback, we go into exams blind as to what things we need to improve in essay techniques."

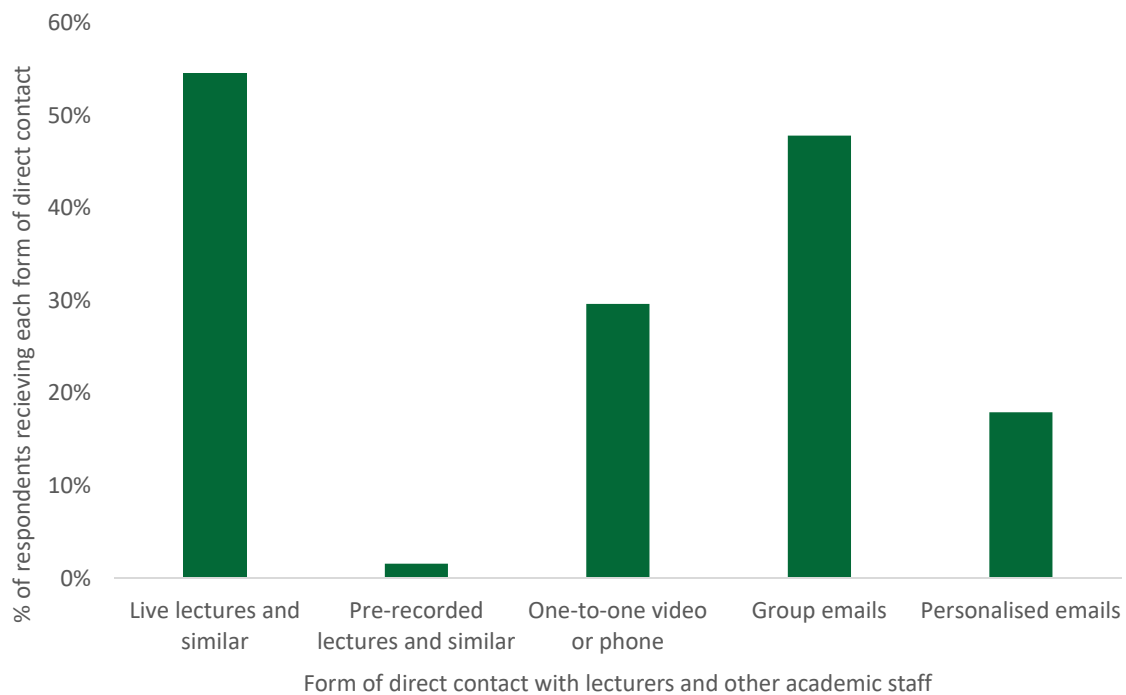
The number of teaching hours students are receiving has decreased since social distancing rules were imposed, according to 87% of students and 94% of parents who completed the survey

In addition to coronavirus, 65% of students told us their studies have also been affected by strike action by academic staff earlier this academic year.

According to 74% of the (admittedly small) sample of seventy- staff who completed the survey, the teaching workload of academic staff at universities appears to have either stayed the same or increased.

Since social distancing rules were imposed, universities have introduced new and adapted forms of direct contact with lecturers and other academic staff for their students. More than half are still receiving either live video or audio lectures (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: The move to online and other forms of remote teaching



Respondents also expressed concern about the impact on international students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom were felt to lack access to fast internet and other technology required to fully access online teaching.

Value for money and quality of education

Below are some of the comments we received on the value for money and quality of education.

Survey respondent: “The cost of my education...I was strongly willing to invest in because I trust the education system as a whole is essential for my future career. By ‘as a whole’ I mean physical resources, such as a library or a lab, social resources, such as societies and special targeted events and lastly but not least, human resources, such as being surrounded by people

with same interests and having a constant exchange on current topics with them. ‘Online’ university only offers one resource: academics. I can easily get that from an online course (nowadays even free). Or by self-studying from a textbook.”

The Student Room user: “I don’t find the creation of interactive powerpoints - which just slow note taking and half the time don’t work to be a maintained standard. Nor is uploading last years, or a year further backs stream capture. I wasn’t paying for a lecture delivered to another cohort two years ago. Or when a capture is uploaded as audio only and they start talking about things on screen but with no indication of where they are pointing. Not to mention as a clinical course our hands on practicals being cut crucially short this year. It isn’t a case of will the medics, dentists and vets of this year come out as less trained individuals but a question of how much poorer will their practice be. The future care of humans and animals will suffer.”

Survey respondent: “We lost all of our international courses, events, networking opportunities, and even access to university facilities, like the library and data terminals”

Survey respondent: “Some universities have cancelled exams completely and allowed students to pass into the following year whilst others are still implementing them for the same course which puts a lot of students at a disadvantage.”

Of the students who completed the survey:

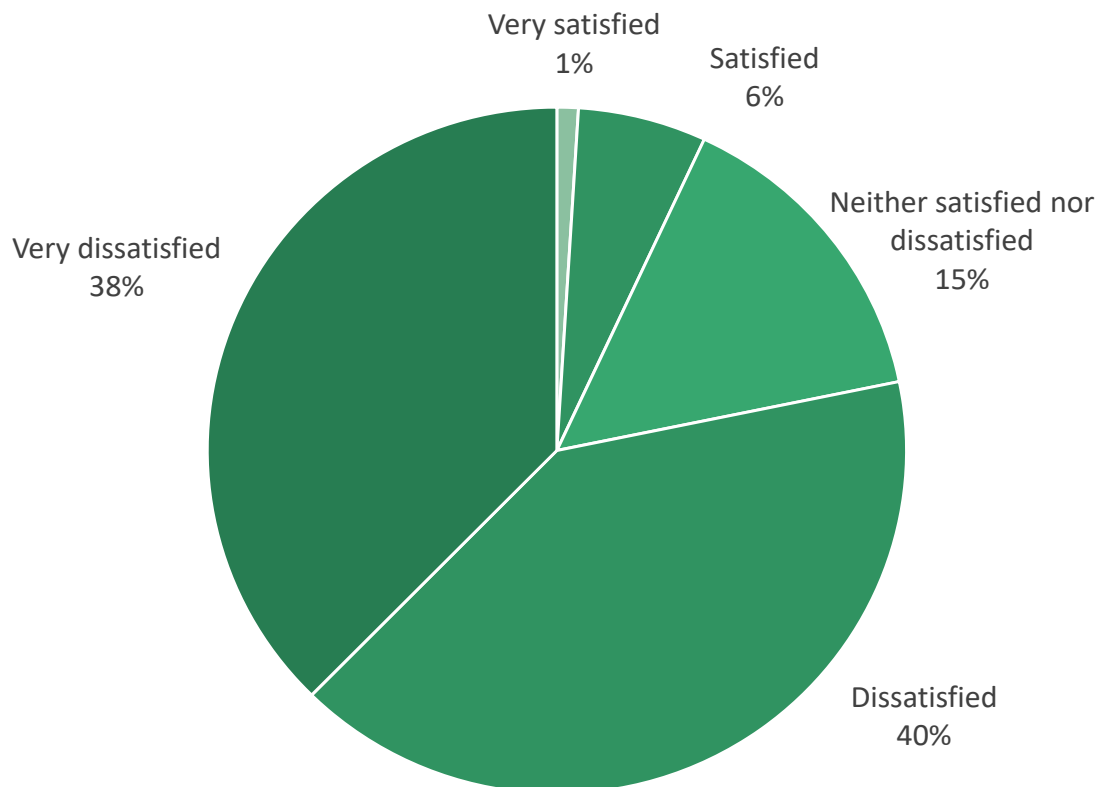
- 98% are currently paying tuition fees
- 47% are paying for university accommodation they don’t currently need

Students are concerned about wide variations and inconsistencies from lecturer to lecturer, course to course, and university to university in:

- i) The format, quantity and ultimate quality of teaching and other interactions with academic staff
- ii) How their coursework and ultimate grades are assessed

Many students told us they feel unfairly disadvantaged compared to others who are paying the same level of tuition fees and whose lecturers, course coordinators or universities are providing better quality support and/or displaying more flexibility and understanding with regard to assessing their progress.

Overall, only 7% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of the education they are currently receiving (see Chart 2). The vast majority of students, 78%, told us they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. This compares unfavourably with results from the Office for Students (OfS), whose most recent annual survey in 2019 showed that 84% of the students who completed it were satisfied with the quality of their course at that time.

Chart 2: Student satisfaction with the quality of their education

In contrast, 59% of academic staff agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “My university is currently doing enough to provide a high-quality education to students”.

Students’ concerns about the quality of their education are not solely about self-interest. They are concerned not only about their career prospects and earning potential but also their ability to master their subject and thus carry out their desired role to a high standard.

Solutions

Below are some of the solutions proposed by people who responded to our survey and forum.

Survey respondent: “(The Government should) encourage universities to settle on the same teaching style for all their courses and possibly between different university’s during this pandemic. It seems unfair that some students get only the lecture slides whereas others get online lectures (at my university for computer science we get the lecture slides whereas law has online lectures). Any student will be able to tell you that there is a huge difference between learning from lecture slides and learning from lectures where lecturers go over topics in more detail than is found on the slides.”

The Student Room user: “I know that most universities are not private institutions, but most private schools have given a tuition fee decrease for the final term which students will not be attending. If a private school can do that, when they are practically reliant on those funds, I feel that universities should be able to as well.”

Survey respondent: “Address student accommodation companies...who have made students pay for accommodation they aren’t using and hand their key in despite having to pay”

Survey respondents were asked to rank five hypothetical measures that might mitigate the perceived impact on their education and its value for money. In descending order of overall popularity, these measures were ranked as follows:

- i) Partial refund of fees for 2019–20 academic year
- ii) Full refund of fees for 2019–20 academic year
- iii) Favourable changes to students’ grades or grading thresholds
- iv) Reduced fees for 2020–21 academic year
- v) Additional teaching outside normal term time once universities re-open

Respondents were also asked what more they thought the Government should do to address the impact on their studies. The most common request was for the Government to work with universities and private university accommodation providers to provide support to those paying for university accommodation they don’t currently need or can’t use (2246 respondents). Many reported demands by private providers to pay in full, while others received partial refunds or discounts. Some were still subject to demands for full payment despite being forced to leave their accommodation by their provider.

Formal minutes

Tuesday 7 July 2020

Members present:

Catherine McKinnell, in the Chair

Elliot Colburn Nick Fletcher

Martyn Day Mike Hill

Chris Evans Tom Hunt

Katherine Fletcher

Draft Report (*The impact of Covid-19 on university students*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 37 read and agreed to.

Annex and Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Thursday 07 May 2020

Sophie Quinn, Petition creator; **Zamzam Ibrahim**, National President, National Union of Students; **Dr Jo Grady**, General Secretary, Universities College Union; **Professor Julia Buckingham CBE**, President, Universities UK, Vice-Chancellor, Brunel University

[Q27–44](#)

Thursday 11 June 2020

Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities, Department for Education

[Q110–135](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

GRC numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 National Union of Students (NUS) ([GRC0020](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2019–21

First Report	The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave	HC 526
First Special Report	Fireworks: Government response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019	HC 242