

Written evidence submitted by the Petitions Committee (GRC0004)

Petitions Committee: online evidence session on universities and students

Activity

The Petitions Committee Team used posts on the Student Room Forum and an online survey sent to petition signatories to help the Committee understand how coronavirus and strike action have impacted students' education, and to try and identify the popularity of possible solutions or mitigations.

The survey was sent to people who signed a number of related petitions, most notably one calling on the Government to [Reimburse all students of this year's fees due to strikes and COVID-19](#), which has received over 330,000 signatures to date.

We have summarised the key themes below and illustrated them with quotes from respondents.

Response (as of 1pm, Monday 1 May)

24k responses to survey

108 comments on The Student Room

Survey of petitioners

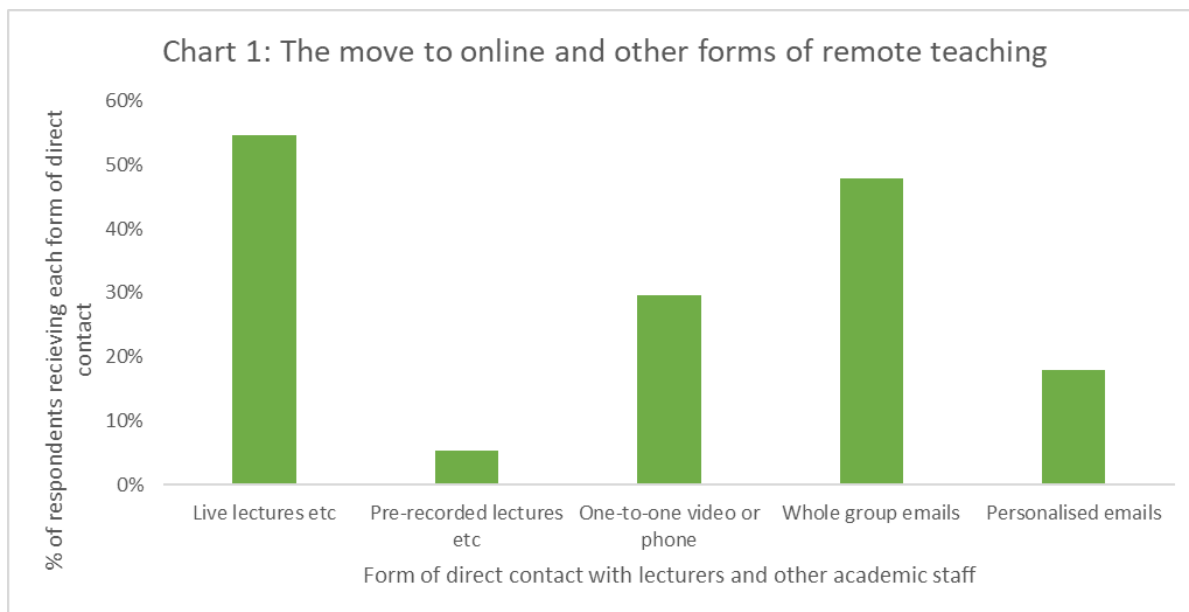
As of 1pm on Monday 1 May, the overwhelming majority (88%) of the 24,055 petitioners who had completed the survey described themselves as current students. 9%

had a child or other relative who was a student. A very small number of academic staff completed the survey.

Key themes:

The move to remote teaching has negatively impacted students' learning

- 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.
- Nevertheless, according to 71% of the (admittedly small) sample of sixty-nine staff who completed the survey, the overall 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 receiving live-streamed lectures, through video or audio (see chart 1).



- 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.

Quotes:

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."*

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

'CoffeeAndPolitics', The Student Room: *"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."

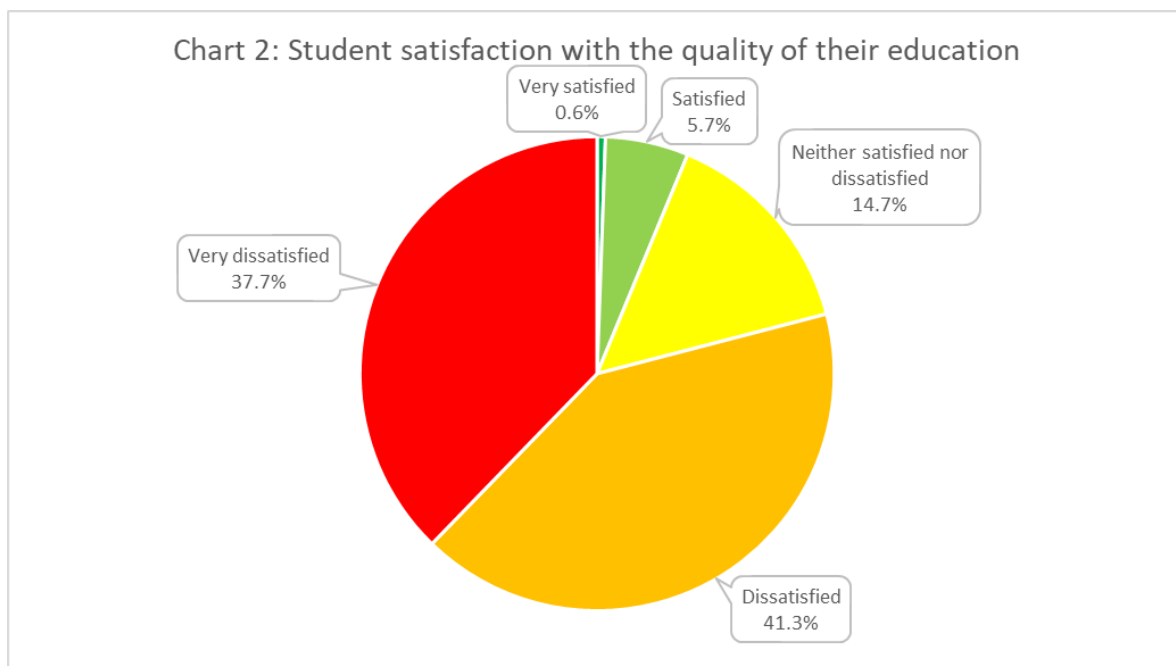
'Catherine1973', The Student Room: *"Half my lecturers just stuck up last year's recordings. The others made the effort to record from home their stuff or do it live and we could type questions they answered during the breaks...we haven't had loads of things marked...without feedback, we go into exams blind as to what things we need to improve in essay techniques."*

Students feel they are not currently receiving good value-for-money

- 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:
 - The format, quantity and ultimate quality of teaching and other interactions with academic staff; and
 - How their coursework and ultimate grades are assessed
- Many students told us they feel unfairly disadvantaged compared to others whose lecturers, course coordinators or universities are providing better quality support and/or displaying more flexibility and understanding with regard to assessing

this their progress, yet are paying the same level of tuition fees.

- Overall, only 6% 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, 79%, 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 time¹.
- In contrast, 57% of academic staff agreed or strongly agreed 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.



¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/student-satisfaction-rises-but-universities-should-do-more-to-improve-feedback/>

Quotes:

Survey respondent: *"I was strongly willing to invest in (the cost of my education) 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."*

'TheWannabeFarmer', The Student Room: *"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."*

A partial reimbursement of fees is felt by most to be justified

- 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:
 1. Partial refund of fees for 2019-20 academic year
 2. Full refund of fees for 2019-20 academic year
 3. Favourable changes to students' grades or grading thresholds
 4. Reduced fees for 2020-21 academic year
 5. Additional teaching outside normal term time once universities re-open
- Beyond the options presented above, respondents were asked what more they thought universities and 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.

Quotes:

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."

'justme2001', The Student Room: *"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"*