

Written evidence submitted by Will Blackledge

Student concerns over government support during COVID-19 crisis: **Continued full tuition fees and rejection of university bailout**

To whom it may concern,

This piece of written evidence will talk about the concerns of myself as a student, which I believe are shared with the rest of the student body. It shall raise these points:

- Rejection of a university bailout means a large funding gap of £2.5 billion (according to a report by the University and College Union) due to the projected reduction of high-paying international students as well as domestic students.
- Students should not be expected to continue to pay full tuition fees for the quality education that has not been delivered – Universities and the University Minister have argued that the quality education is still there, this isn't the case and by the universities' own logic in response to demands for compensation due to strike action, tuition fees do not just pay for teaching, but for all the resources accessible on campus; resources that, due to coronavirus, are no longer available.
- So far, the government has done very little to help students and universities: it has rightly helped spread the cost of the funding gap across the sector by limiting student numbers but in monetary terms has only brought forward tuition fee funding, which would've been going to the universities anyway. The government must do more and accept its wrongdoings.
- **The government should grant the university bailout that is desperately needed and universities should be forced to compensate students for their loss of education.**

1. I hope you are well; my name is Will Blackledge and I am a first year Politics and French student at the University of Manchester. As I am sure you are aware many students, including myself have been forced to return home and continue their courses online due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic that has affected many others also. However, whilst the government has stepped in to support those who are no longer able work, as well as support businesses with loans to keep them afloat, universities, which are essentially run like businesses, have had their bailout application turned down by the government and backed continuing full tuition fees, whilst the courses are simply nowhere near the quality that should be required. This ultimately means students such as myself, who pay £9,250 a year (a fee which was tripled only a few years ago) suffer. I hope you can agree with me that this is wrong, and I will give some reasons as to why.
2. The loss of income faced by universities is great; the amount of high paying international students set to come to the UK next September is projected to be severely low, leaving a huge funding gap for universities to fill. This funding gap is sudden and something many universities are unprepared for citing possible bankruptcy if the government does not provide a bailout. Instead the government's

response has been to reject any form of bailout instead providing the income that comes from next September's first year students early, as well as back continued full tuition on the basis of the continued quality education that is delivered online. I hope you can agree with me that this is fundamentally wrong. The government has issued bailouts for many other industry sectors but when it comes to universities it has let students down once again.

3. Our education is severely impacted by moving our courses online and to argue against this, as your colleague, the University Minister, Michelle Donelan did, is simply wrong; quoted in the Guardian as justifying continued full tuition fees as saying:
4. "We have already seen, over the last few months, courses being delivered online and virtually to an amazing degree of quality... We've always said that we don't believe students would be entitled to reimbursement for tuition fees if the quality is there."
5. I hope you agree with me that this could not be further from the truth and shows ignorance on Ms. Donelan's part. Although I appreciate the effort of university's such as UoM to attempt to deliver courses online, the fact remains that it is not the same, and it is unequivocally worse and lacking quality. My experience has been pre-recorded lectures, seminars over video chat and often the cancellation of these in return for tutors offering to return all questions on set work via email. In regard to my French course, in which the ability to converse in French with students and tutors in a small classroom environment is paramount, the seminars that cover language and grammar modules have for the most part been called off entirely - weekly oral lessons have been cancelled and two hour weekly grammar classes reduced to 30 minute online Q&As which seem so pointless to many that there is no use attending, reducing my usual class of around 20 to just 2. I am sure that you can see it is clearly inarguable that the quality of education received by full-time in-person classes is in no way delivered by online platforms, as claimed by Ms. Donelan.
6. Furthermore, you may or may not be aware of the sets of strikes that occurred over the course of this academic year. Due to the nature of my course I was severely affected, with practically all my classes cancelled, save for a handful every week. These strikes amounted to 22 days of cancelled teaching, affecting 6 weeks of the academic year. Demands for tuition fee refunds due to the loss of education were rejected by the universities. Why? - Our tuition fees don't only pay for our professors salaries but all kinds of university activities and resources, ranging from the libraries and all the resources held within them, the high tech lecture theatres, study spaces and labs, societies, advisors, counsellors and admin staff as well as all other kinds of university investments - these of course, still being fully available for use apparently justified rejection of any refunds. The current situation has seen the libraries, labs and lecture theatres closed, replaced entirely by my bedroom desk in Worcester, as well as practically all society activities cancelled, and access to university staff equally inhibited. By applying the logic of the universities response to the strikes, tuition fee refunds should surely be a given and not brushed off by the government claiming the supposed "amazing quality" of online courses justifies full tuition fees.

7. In a recent petitions committee hearing on the topic of the impact of coronavirus on students, the Vice-Chancellor of Brunel University and President of University's UK, Julia Buckingham, argued against giving compensation as many students had not been affected by strikes, and universities were doing their best to counter the effects of coronavirus. She also said that any students who were greatly affected by strikes and coronavirus should be dealt with in a case-by-case basis. I feel that I am one of these students; I have paid £9250 for an education that simply has not been delivered and I, along with many other students, want this money back. It is not acceptable that universities can be allowed to not deliver the promised quality of education along with all the resources that come with a university campus and charge the same rate that they would any other year. It is not fair, it is wrong, it is not worth £9250.
8. It should be conceded that students asking for a great deal of refunds at a time when universities are already struggling to deal with the financial losses of a reduction of international students is hardly productive. However, this does not take away from the fact that I and many other students have paid £9250 for an education that has simply not been received.
9. I ask you to urge the government to provide the university bailout that is so needed and to look out for students who's education has been ignored, so that when universities are able to generate their expected incomes again, we are compensated partial refunds of the our tuition fees. I also ask that you hold the University Minister, Ms. Donelan to account for her incoherent comments that I find insulting, as someone who has paid £9,250 to sit in my bedroom, 100 miles from Manchester in Worcester, listening to a disjointed call, that can in no way be compared to an in-person seminar or lecture.
10. In an email I recently received from the Constituency Assistant for my Mid-Worcestershire MP, Nigel Huddleston, Helen McMillan, I was told that "once this crisis is over we will be able to evaluate what we did wrong and what was a success". I hope you agree with me that the work of government should be continuously evaluated so that mistakes are not made in the first place. So, I ask that this process of evaluation is carried out fully and the government is made of what it is doing wrong immediately, so that students are not robbed of their money as well as their education.

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