

## **Written Evidence submitted by the National Union of Students (NUS) (GRC0020)**

### **Introduction**

1. The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of almost 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we represent the interests of more than seven million students. NUS represents students and students' unions to ensure that education is transformative, skills and learning are accessible and every student in the UK is empowered to achieve their potential.

### **Executive Summary**

2. NUS carried out a survey of 9,827 students across higher and further education between Friday 27 March and Monday 6 April to discover their views on how COVID-19 had affected them. In the survey 20% of students reported that they were unable to access their education online and 33% of students did not agree that the education they were receiving was of adequate quality. This means they are at a critical risk of losing out on this year of education.
3. While it is clear that effort is being made to put provision online, and staff especially should be commended for this, it is not adequate that students are dissatisfied with their learning experience. The unique difficulties that disabled students face have not always been addressed by universities or government, with 21% of those who receive learning support saying they have not received adequate support to enable them to continue their work to the best of their ability throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.
4. Our survey found that of those who have a placement as part of their course, over three in four believe the current Covid-19 outbreak will have a negative impact on their ability to complete their placement and similarly for those on vocational courses around four in five believe the Covid-19 outbreak will have a negative impact on the vocational element of their course.
5. For international students, who have paid many thousands of pounds, a failure to provide some financial recompense will be seen as enormously unfair, and risk damaging the reputation of UK higher education.
6. Despite suggestions that fee reductions or refunds would not be due to students where 'adequate online teaching', there is not a clear definition as what counts as adequate teaching. Placing the responsibility on individual students to make individual complaints is neither equitable nor efficient.
7. The fairest option for all students is to give everyone the ability to retake the entire year of their education at no additional cost, in recognition of the disruption caused. Access to redo the year must be combined with extended eligibility for maintenance support, to ensure that it is an affordable option for all who choose to do so.
8. If students choose not to redo the year they must have any fees they have paid in 2019/20 reimbursed or debt written off. For home and EU students who have paid fees via student loans, this should occur by cancelling or writing off any related student loan debt and any

interest accrued. For international students and others who have paid upfront, this should occur through direct reimbursement, with universities and colleges accessing a central fund to underwrite this cost.

9. For those who opt for reimbursements or write-offs we have been careful to ensure that these proposals do not risk institutional sustainability, as we recognise the enormous financial difficulties facing institutions at this time. Instead we propose that the governments across the UK collectively write-off any debt accrued for this year's education and that the UK government establish a central pot of funding, with equivalents established through the Barnett formula, to which institutions can submit claims to reimburse their international students and any others who have paid up front. We recognise there may be specific student groups who need tailored solutions such as allied healthcare students.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on teaching**

10. COVID-19 has had a massive impact on all students, as campuses have closed and all teaching has been moved online. While institutions have been quick to respond to the crisis this does not mean that students are able to engage with learning, or are receiving adequate support at this time.
11. Our survey of 9,800 students revealed that 20% of students were unable to access their education online and 33% of students did not agree that the education they were receiving was of adequate quality.
12. We have heard evidence that international students are not able to access key course content in their home countries due to restrictions.
13. Many students do not have adequate resources to learn at home due to a lack of space, poor technology, bad Wi-Fi connections, or other responsibilities such as childcare or looking after family members. While recent government announcements to help institutions direct funding to provide technology to students are very welcome, this will not be adequate for all students and for those who do benefit they have already missed out on many months of teaching.
14. Even for those students who do have the technology necessary to benefit from online learning the effects of currently studying during a global pandemic often mean they will struggle to engage with their teaching. In terms of individual priorities throughout this pandemic, students very understandably rank their health first, followed by education and then finances.

### **Other impacts of COVID-19**

15. Coronavirus has impacted every area of education, with its impact on students' final qualifications and exams an overwhelming concern for 72% of students. Across the board 85% of students are worried about exams and assessments.
16. The Covid-19 pandemic has crystallised and exacerbated a pre-existing crisis in affordability and rights for student renters. Inadequate maintenance packages and soaring rents have

forced students to rely on wages, family income and commercial debt to pay their rent and these income streams are not sustainable in the current crisis.

17. Nearly three in four students are concerned about their ability to pay rent as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. One in three are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned. Added to this one in four students say there is some likelihood that they will need to stay in their current property beyond the original planned contract date – and thus pay rent for longer than they budgeted for – it is clear that a student rent arrears crisis is hurtling toward us. In addition, 1 in 3 students who vacated early are being held to rent obligations.
18. Financial concerns over rent have to be seen in the context of students' wider financial situations. 95% of students are concerned about the economy, and 81% about their own job prospects. 61% of the respondents were in paid employment alongside their studies, and 18% have been furloughed, while 14% have been asked to take unpaid leave, 12% have had reduced hours and 11% have been made redundant.
19. Half of students say that the income of someone who supports them financially has been impacted by COVID-19, with one in five of those students saying that it has had a major negative impact. 80% of students are concerned about their ability to manage financially during the outbreak, with this even more common among disabled students.
20. For international students it has also created issues around visas. While Home Office measures to automatically extend visas to 31<sup>st</sup> May have been very welcome there are worries for those who plan to study in the UK from September but may not longer to meet English language testing requirements due to testing centres being closed.

#### **Impact of absence of national solution to fee reimbursements**

21. A whole cohort of students would lose faith in the UK's education system if they are not financially reimbursed for missed teaching. It would also result in these students who are likely to graduate during one of the most severe recessions this country has ever seen being saddled with extraordinary levels of debt without the teaching hours to show for this.
22. Prospective international students are highly likely to know someone who is also studying abroad in their chosen destination, and these students can be influential in the decisions prospective students make, be that in regard to institution, course or country of study. With opportunities for international recruitment set to decline it is essential that institutions provide all international students with a positive perception of their experience of the UK's education system.
23. Without clear definition it is impossible for students to judge whether their online learning has been adequate. While the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Office for Students (OfS) have issued guidance to providers on what adequate teaching involves, similar information has not been provided to students.
24. The current processes set up to deal with complaints are not adequate to deal with the level of complaints that we are likely to see as a result of Coronavirus. The Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) received 2,371 complaints in 2019, if even 1% of students in higher education were to complain to their institution and have this passed on to the OIA

this would represent roughly a tenfold increase in the number of complaints they had to deal with.

25. Students are still likely to seek reimbursements and we are sure that some will be successful. But the fairest option for all students, and the best way to ensure that the current complaints processes are not overwhelmed is for the UK government to take a national approach.

*May 2020*