

University of Southampton Students' Union
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Dear Mr Smith, Ms Nokes, Mr Brine, Dr Whitehead;

I am writing to you on behalf of the University of Southampton Students' Union and the 23,000 students we represent in Southampton and Winchester, regarding worries and issues that our members have raised in relation to their student experience. We are asking for your support in lobbying Government for further support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has indiscriminately affected students in multiple ways. Students from across the world accepted their offers from UK universities with the reasonable expectation of an in-person, on-campus experience for their studies and research. Students have had extremely limited on-campus engagement with other students and their lecturers, nor been able to benefit from wider University facilities. Additionally, a major draw for international students is the chance to immerse themselves in British society and culture and experience the local community, none of which has been possible this year. On top of this, many have incurred significant additional costs and complications.

We are aware and hugely appreciative of the tremendous effort institutions such as the University of Southampton have made to orchestrate a year that has been as safe and engaging as possible, including incurring additional costs as a result of this effort. However, this does not mean that students have had the experience they expected or deserved and, while we appreciate these efforts, they have not adequately compensated for the dwindling student experience throughout the pandemic. Only 15% of our students identified as feeling happy in our October welcome survey, and this week ONS research suggested that [over a quarter \(26%\) of students reported feeling lonely "often or always", compared with 8% in the wider population](#). Many have identified a lack of community and interaction this semester, difficulty in making new connections and difficulty adapting as significant contributing factors. Combined with poor mental health (according to research by the ONS, [almost two-thirds](#) of students have indicated that their well-being and mental health has worsened since the start of the autumn term 2020) and differing workload pressures, it is understandable that students are ending the year feeling exhausted and discontented.

Higher education in the UK has completely changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the educational experience has failed to match that of a traditional academic year. Instead, students have spent thousands of pounds in tuition fees and accommodation costs and been left to bear the cost of a university experience that has not delivered the value that they have paid for. This is a nationally shared student experience and we have joined together with other students' unions to share experiences, campaign and stand as a [united front](#).

As you will be aware, many students feel that the Government's response to the plight of students has been inadequate. The UK Government has released £70m in additional hardship funds for England, which equated to less than £15 per student for the University of Southampton. This pales in comparison to the [£40m for just 8 universities in Wales](#) and [£37.7m in Northern Ireland](#) and is insufficient for the additional costs and lost income students have experienced this year. Additional Government support is an urgent priority. Increased hardship funds are important, but they only address one of the ways that the pandemic has affected students so disastrously. According to research conducted by the National Union of Students¹, concerns about paying rent were more likely amongst international students, BAME students, and those commuting to university, with 15% saying they were extremely concerned about making rent payments in November. Many also shared worries about payment of utility bills. According to the NUS, over two thirds of student renters (69%) are worried about their ability to pay rent with around a quarter having been unable to pay rent (22%) or bills (27%) during the pandemic. This builds on further research from Citizens Advice which showed that 16% of students are currently in rent arrears and 29% have cut back on food. According to the same survey, one in five students working alongside their studies had had hours reduced and one in ten had lost jobs. The number of students in part-time work has fallen to a fifth in comparison to a third in the summer.

This month, 4,832 of our students voted on a motion about tuition fee rebates and 98% backed the call for international students to be given a tuition fee rebate. You will be aware that there is strong demand at a national level, echoed in feedback we receive at a local level, that all students receive a rebate against their tuition fees for this year. Students are demanding fee compensation in recognition of the fact that the experience they have received does not match what they reasonably expected to be paying for, and we stand with them on this. If we do not secure substantial sector wide funding from the Government that works for both students and institutions, the sector will be left compromised, with students burdened by unjust financial costs and/or universities facing a precarious financial outlook.

During the Summer, following University and Government guidance, students from across the world travelled to Southampton in order to pursue an education with the understanding that a physical presence was required for in person teaching despite the ongoing pandemic. Since the start of the academic year, many students have had little to no face-to-face teaching and therefore, had no reason to be paying rent in Southampton or Winchester. In addition, and in line with Government guidance, many students returned home for the winter break in December, only to be instructed to remain at home, leaving many of them paying rent for rooms they no longer occupy. According to the [National Student Accommodation Survey 2021](#), during this academic year, university students have wasted approximately £1 billion on vacant accommodation.

Students now face increasing uncertainty and stress as to where they stand in relation to rent payments. Since December, many of these students have been studying in far from ideal conditions, often taking on extra caring responsibilities while sharing space and wi-fi connection with siblings being home schooled and parents working from home. Digital poverty and inequality introduce significant barriers for students and existing inequalities and disadvantages have been further

¹ Referred to in the All Party Parliamentary Group for Students' recent report following its inquiry into tuition and accommodation costs during COVID-19.

exacerbated by these conditions, in addition to the detrimental effect on these students' mental health. Students are also facing an incredibly tough job market to step into with the unemployment rate among recent graduates [more than double the rate](#) for UK workers. Students have also lost the chance to gain valuable skills and experiences from the opportunities provided through extra-curricular activities, clubs and societies, placements, internships, field trips etc. We are asking for your help in ensuring Government focus on employment support for recent graduates.

We appreciate these issues are complex and require significant investment. However, the current Government response is simply inadequate. We would be more than happy to meet to discuss these issues in more detail. Therefore, we are calling on you to support the recommendations in the recently released All Party Parliamentary Group for Students' [Report](#) following its inquiry into tuition and accommodation costs during COVID-19. We believe that the APPG's inquiry was balanced and evidence-based and its recommendations are reasonable and measured. We urge you to lobby the Government to implement all 6 recommendations made in the Inquiry's report.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience and working with you on behalf of higher education students at the University of Southampton.

Yours sincerely,



Olivia Reed,

University of Southampton Students' Union President, 2020-21