

**Friday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

Dear Mark,

I am writing to you in advance of Monday's UEB meeting, where I know some of the following matters will be discussed and also following the close of our recent All Student Vote.

SUSU received a petition request regarding students' fees (along similar lines to the informal petition previously seen by UEB). Having very quickly achieved the required 250 signatures, the petition then proceeded to the All Student Vote stage. 4,832 students voted, with 98% of voters backing the idea that international students should be given a tuition fee rebate. You will be very aware that there is a strong demand at a national level – echoed in the feedback we receive at a local level – that all students feel they should receive some kind of rebate on their tuition fees for this exceptional year.

We recognise that the University has done its best, often very successfully to move learning online but would respectfully remind you that during the major disruption caused by industrial action in 2018 and 2019, students were told they could not have a refund on their tuition fees because those fees did not just pay for teaching, they also paid for facilities such as the gym, sports facilities and the library. All these facilities have obviously not been available to students for a significant part of this academic year. While we of course recognise that these circumstances are beyond the University's control, acknowledging and responding to the impact on students is not and we believe students are entitled to some kind of rebate.

We have also received a lot of feedback from students, in particular the international January starters, who are very worried that they will be required to come to Southampton as soon as Government guidance permits this, and either cannot or are not willing to do so. There are many reasons for students to be in this position, including the lack of flights from their country to a lack of confidence in the UK's handling of the pandemic to needing to shield.

I would like, therefore, to ask you to consider and reply to the following four requests which I put to you on behalf of the student body:

- 1) All students, particular international students (due to the level of their fees and the disproportionate impact they have experienced) should receive a refund for the academic year 2020-21
- 2) Students who cannot or do not wish to return to campus from 8<sup>th</sup> March or 12<sup>th</sup> April should receive an equivalent learning experience (with the exception of those students who are required to attend a face-to-face component of their course in order to progress/graduate). Those students not wishing to return should not be disadvantaged as a result.
- 3) Students who cannot or do not choose to return to campus when they are allowed to should be released from their Halls contracts with no charge incurred for Term 3.
- 4) The University should commit to continuing to work with SUSU and our academic reps to address issues of the consistency of quality of all aspects of this year's learning experience, including assessments and feedback. In due course, we would also like to explore the positive aspects of this year which are worth retaining in future years, even when a return to our previous normality is possible (the flexibility offered by recorded lectures, for example, as well as the use of Teams).

I would be very happy to give further detail of any of the above points.

Kind regards,

Olivia

**Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2021**

Dear Mark,

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak at yesterday's meeting of University Executive Board and your consideration of the requests we put forward in my letter to you last week. I would like to draw out of the discussion some of the points raised around student experience. Over the weekend we conduct a poll of students to gauge their intent to return to Campus after Easter. So far out of 4,194 responses, 44% indicated that they are planning to return to Campus and 36% indicated that they were already on Campus; however, 20% stated they did not plan to return at all. Despite only being a snapshot view, this indicates a significant percentage of the University population who do not anticipate returning to Southampton before the end of the current academic year. Students may not be planning to return due to a plethora of reasons, including shielding family members, unavailable flights/transport, time restrictions, health and safety concerns, etc. This doesn't account for unpredictable factors such as self-isolation.

We therefore strongly believe that for the remainder of the academic year students should be able to study remotely online or in person and should be offered a comparable educational experience whatever their circumstances are. If the University cannot commit to a comparable experience online, then it is failing in its obligations to students as laid out by the OfS. If students are unable to return for any of these reasons, we also believe they should be allowed to leave their halls contracts and still receive the rebate for the last couple of months when they have not been allowed to return to Campus.

As briefly mentioned yesterday I think it would also be helpful for the University to publicise the additional work and money spent this year to make campus safe and maximise the student experience. However, despite the huge amount of work done, I think it is fair to say that the student experience has still not been that of a normal year. This must be considered in University thinking around tuition fees. I'm hopeful the upcoming tuition fees Q&A panel event will provide helpful framing to this conversation.

Once again, I very much appreciate your engagement and support on these and other issues.

Many thanks,  
Olivia

**Friday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

Dear Mark,

Many thanks for your considered reply and your continued commitment to listening to and prioritising student voice.

#### *Tuition Fees*

I am aware and hugely appreciative of the tremendous effort the University community has made to orchestrate a year that has been as safe and engaging as possible. As you have mentioned the University has also incurred additional costs as a result of this effort. However, this does not mean that students have had the experience they expected or deserved.

On the back of our All Student Vote, I must urge you to reconsider your stance, particularly with regard to international students. International fees are set by the University at a higher rate than for home students. As you have highlighted, students studying online have not been able to have the on-campus engagement with other students and their lecturers, in person opportunities or been able to benefit from the wider University facilities. Additionally, a major draw for international students is the chance to immerse themselves in British society and culture and experience the Southampton Community, none of which has been possible this year. On top of this, many have incurred significant additional costs and complications.

I therefore ask the University to join with SUSU and the 'Aldywch' Group of Students' Unions in lobbying the Government for further financial support. I note the recent [article from Sir Anthony Seldon](#), former Vice-Chancellor of Buckingham University, in which he urges universities to lobby Government for a better settlement for students. I am pleased the University was able to top up its funding to support students with additional OfS funding and utilise this to support students with online learning grants. However, as seen by the quick uptake, this money has not gone far enough to support our students.

#### *Return To Campus*

Regarding students' online learning for the third term, I think this is an insufficient approach. I am aware that other Russell Group Universities have decided to continue to deliver online-only learning until the end of the academic year, bar practical and clinical based subjects. We do not feel this is the correct approach either and welcome the fact that the University is keen to reintroduce face to face teaching and educational experience, which a huge amount of our students are desperately keen for. However, for some students returning to campus will be extremely challenging, and the University pressuring these students to do so is unhelpful and unfair. Our data continues to suggest that around 20% of the student body are unable or do not intend to return to campus after easter. This is due to a plethora of reasons including students shielding, unable to arrange transport, having underlying health conditions, no longer having accommodation contracts, awaiting government confirmation pre travel ect. This means a return to campus could be hugely expensive and complicated if not impossible. For example, a student who is currently living in China may not know if they can return until 5<sup>th</sup> April; they would need to then book flights, which will of course have a lead time, then travel to the UK and quarantine for two weeks. This is assuming they do not contract COVID-19 and further isolate at any of these stages. They will then of course have a limited time left on their accommodation contract and have to return home and self-isolate again. In the worst case, this could lead to over 6 weeks spent self-isolating in 2 months.

We are grateful that Southampton continues to commit to blended learning, but for the short teaching period remaining we urge the University to be flexible for its students' needs. The language

used around this is critical to ensure students do not feel pressured by the University to return. I would also like to emphasise that I was concerned by the line in your reply around a focused return to in-person teaching and learning. The pandemic has forced many new ways of learning and working, and it was my understanding from conversations I had been privy to in the past, and your later commitment to learn from the very different ways of engaging this year, that the University was looking to capture some of the benefits online learning has brought for future educational delivery. In particular, recorded lectures are a topic SUSU has been campaigning for over many years, and this year we have received hugely positive feedback on this.

#### *Halls*

I was disappointed to hear that students will still have to give 28 days' notice if wishing to cancel their halls contract. This will result in students having to pay a month of fees for accommodation they are unable to return to. We again would ask the University to reconsider this approach and allow students to cancel without a notice period. Additionally, I am still unclear if students who do decide to cancel their contract in term three would be able to receive the term two rebate. Previously the University had stated students had to return after April in order to receive this rebate, which would be given as a credit against their term three fees. Having hosted a halls feedback forum recently, I know a huge amount of confusion still exists around the term two rebate and possibility of cancelling contracts complicates this further. Could you provide some clarity on this?

#### *Working with SUSU*

I am very grateful for your continued commitment to work with SUSU and our representatives. I have strongly felt this year that the University has a keen and genuine passion for student voice, but it is always reassuring to hear this directly.

Many thanks once again,

Olivia