

University of Exeter Students' Guild
Devonshire House
Stocker Road
Exeter
EX4 4PZ

Dear Ben,

I am writing to you as Full-time elected officers of University of Exeter Students' Guild as we are very concerned of the impact that the COVID-19 epidemic will have on students in your constituency. The National Union of Students has surveyed 9,872 students from across the UK and has found clear evidence of some of the impacts that COVID-19 is going to have on students. We are proposing that the government adopt a Student Safety Net to protect students against some of the worst of these effects and hope that you will support us in these calls for £60million of additional hardship funding for students, an economic package for education leavers and the chance for every student to retake his year of their qualifications, or have their debt written off or fees reimbursed.

The NUS's survey paints a clear picture of life as a student during the Coronavirus pandemic. While education institutions close and try to adapt to teaching online, the survey confirms what students' unions have argued not just now but for generations: students do not exist in a bubble, and in a moment of huge social change like this each and every area of their lives is impacted.

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.

However, two of the hardest hit groups of students are those on vocational courses and on placement, and disabled students. Three quarters of students on a placement are concerned that it will have a negative impact on their ability to complete it, and 79% of those on vocational courses are concerned that the vocational element of their course has been negatively impacted. Those who receive support to learn at their institutions are severely impacted by the move to online learning. Only half of those in receipt of support agreed that they continued to receive adequate support to work through the pandemic. Disabled students were also more likely to have financial concerns than non-disabled students.

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. 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. In addition, 1 in 3 students who vacated early are being held to rent obligations.

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In order to solve their financial worries, students need a solution which can be flexible enough to adjust to their personal circumstances with as little bureaucracy as possible. This can only mean university and college hardship funding, which is designed to be as open and fair as possible regarding eligibility. However, we know that many of these hardship funds cannot provide for all students who require support, and some will have run out of funds by this time of year. Therefore, we are calling on the government to provide central funding for these hardship funds to ensure no student is left financially vulnerable as a result of the current crisis.

Similarly, those set to leave education are concerned about the situation that they will be facing when they do. 95% were concerned of the impact on the wider economy. Similarly, 81% of students are concerned of the effect that the Coronavirus crisis will have on their own job prospects and 71% are concerned of the impact it will have on their employability. They must be given reassurances at this troubling time and government must act to support these students, who set to lose out massively.

Education leavers, along with all those in vulnerable and precarious situations in the job market, must be protected in this scenario. We would like to see the UK government introduce a grant equivalent to one year's training for education leavers that can be used for further training and education, retraining and other activity that will improve their job prospects.

Many of our students also feel that they have not received the level of teaching they would have expected this year, especially given the significant disruption caused by strikes and now COVID-19. Over 300,000 students have now signed a petition nationally asking for tuition fees to be reimbursed, including 1021 students in your constituency.

The fairest option for all students is to give everyone the option to retake the entire year of their education at no additional cost, reimburse those students who have paid tuition fees upfront and write off the tuition fee loans for this year for those who have paid fees via student loans. 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.

I hope that you will agree with these proposals for a student safety net consisting of extra hardship funding for students, a grant for education leavers to go toward further education or training, and the option for all students to redo this year or have their fees reimbursed or written off. We would be delighted to work with you to lobby the government and ensure that these measures are introduced for all of our students.

NUS have created some graphics that you could share over social media to express your support for the campaign. They are available [here](#).

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Hoyle – President
Penny Dinh – Vice-President Education
Sunday Blake – Vice-President Postgraduate
Katie Heard – Vice-President Welfare and Diversity
Olivia Harvey – Vice-President Activities