

UK students in precarious situation during the pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic has had a devastating impact on UK students. As the WSWs reported, many have been charged rent for vacated student accommodation and threatened with eviction.

In addition, many students and often their parents have lost jobs or been furloughed, depriving them of income and making it extremely hard to pay for their accommodation or daily necessities.

Adding to students' stress, they have also had to make do with online learning in the final term of this academic year. Due to the lockdown, lessons have been abruptly cut and replaced with hastily put together online alternatives. Online learning is notoriously unreliable, depending on the teachers' familiarity with online tools as well as the suitability of the subject to being taught on the internet.

Of course, to be able to do that in the first place, students must have both a laptop and a decent internet connection to be able to attend the lesson, which is not guaranteed. This leaves students in a situation where they are not only paying exorbitant sums in tuition fees (£9,250 a year for domestic students and up to £26,000 a year for non-UK/European Union students, or up to £56,800 for some medical degrees), but they are not receiving anything in return!

An online petition demanding the reimbursement of all this year's fee due to the pandemic has gathered 345,731 signatures as of the time of writing. Another one, that only asks for refunds for the third semester, has 109,282 signatures. The petitions raise the fact that online lessons are inferior, usually consisting of simple PowerPoints and lacking any interaction with staff. Students justifiably disagree with paying for low-quality learning materials and for campus facilities they have no access to.

The petition collected enough signatures to be brought before the House of Commons Petitions Committee. The Committee now has until September 23 to decide whether to bring the petition to a debate in the House of

Commons. Two hearings have taken place so far. During the first hearing, with student representatives, the committee was told that students were feeling "angry and let down" and had not got what they paid for.

The government's response has been predictably dismissive, with a one sentence reply instructing students that are unhappy with the quality of their courses to complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) individually. At the second hearing, when the Petitions Committee pressed for a more detailed response, the Universities Minister Michelle Donelan made clear it expects all higher education providers to enable students to complete their studies and "avoid charging students for any additional terms", but made only a passing reference to the quality of the provided studies. It merely encouraged "universities and private hall providers to be fair in their decisions about rent charges for this period."

Students have reacted angrily, calling it "insulting" that they will be charged full fees for online courses. Jake, a student from Leeds university told the BBC, "There has clearly been no consideration of students with this decision. I pay tuition fees to go to my university in person, to be taught at my university in person, to access the facilities of the university—libraries, societies, sports facilities—in person."

Other students are making their opinions known on social media. The BBC quotes Livi, posting on Twitter: "So by September I'll have lost almost £3,000 to rent a house I'm not even living in, and tuition fees will still be max even if it's online—something about this seems unfair."

The situation is even more outrageous for international students, most of whom choose to study in the UK due to the lack of high-quality higher education in their own countries and are charged exorbitant prices to do so. In the same article, the BBC quotes Rose, an international

student at Manchester University, expressing regret at paying so much: “I paid £19,000 for my course. We’re not a rich family. That’s all the money my family have. I feel so guilty for using it all up for this.”

Due to the impact of the coronavirus crisis, UK universities face a massive loss of funds for the year 2020/21, with an estimated 47 percent drop in international student numbers, and a 16 percent drop in domestic enrolment. The fall in domestic and international student enrolments is having a devastating effect on UK universities due to their overwhelming dependence on tuition fee income, as central government funding into higher education has been cut to the bone.

In response to these historic financial losses and a proposed all-out assault on university workers’ pay and conditions, the University and College Union (UCU) pathetically pleaded with the Johnson government to “stand behind” universities and to “[underwrite] funding lost from the fall in student numbers.”

These dismal appeals have fallen on deaf ears, with the Conservative government refusing to allocate a single penny in additional funding. Instead, a misnamed “support package” will bring forward £2.6 billion worth of tuition fees (paid by the government as a loan to students)—which universities would have received anyway—and £100 million in advances on research grants to universities.

There is also the issue of next year’s courses. While it is expected that teaching will be at least partly online, the government has said that students will still be charged full price for their studies. This will push students further into debt, in conditions where unemployment is soaring and the possibility of finding a decent job after graduating is less and less likely.

According to the job search website Adzuna, graduate job openings have fallen by 77 per cent since the beginning of the year, with 100 graduates now competing for each role. Average graduate salaries have already slipped by 3.3 per cent from £24,000 last year to £23,200.

As a result, up to 20 percent of students are trying to defer their studies. In ordinary times, students have the option to take a year or more out of their course if they need to, for any reason. But there are reports that some universities, in an attempt to squeeze more profit at less cost from students, are blocking all attempts by those who want to interrupt their studies because of the virus, unless they can show they are in an at-risk group for infection. This measure will affect poor, working class students the hardest, as they would be the most likely to need the

money saved by deferment to make ends meet.

The universities have a financial incentive in lying to the students and claiming that they will provide a safe, on-campus experience come autumn, even if they cannot provide it. New students favor on-campus teaching to online courses and the universities which promote that will attract a larger number from the diminished student pool.

According to a survey conducted by the UCU, 71 percent of students would prefer to push back the start of term if it meant they had more in-person and less online teaching. Coupled with the denying of deferment, students will be put in the impossible situation of giving up on their higher education or studying in unsafe and inadequate conditions.

The situation confronting both students and lecturers is the outcome of a process begun before the COVID-19 crisis. Since the 1997 Labour government, universities have been turned into money-making enterprises, whose main concern is the generation of revenue, and who view students (especially international ones) as nothing more than cash-cows.

The Socialist Equality Party stands for the democratic right to a free and high-quality education for all youth. We demand the cancellation of all student debt. Billions of pounds need to be made available to reorganize courses in a way that makes them safe and accessible to all students during the pandemic. All university employees must be paid full wages, whether they are able to work or not.

The fight for these demands can only be taken forward by the formation of democratically elected rank-and-file committees of university workers and students. These must be independent of the trade unions. Such committees are essential to organize a nationwide, unified struggle to defend all jobs and basic rights, and protect university staff and students from unsafe COVID-19 conditions. The committees must turn to workers and students internationally, who are facing similar critical struggles against the impact of the worsening global crisis.



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