



All Party Parliamentary Group for Students

Return to Campus

Tuesday 6th October; 11am-12pm

Online event - Zoom

The APPG for Students held a meeting to hear from students and student officers as to the challenges that they were facing with the return to campuses. This is a summary of what was discussed at the meeting -

Student Safety

Many MPs in attendance wanted to know more about what was being done in terms of testing for students. They pointed to outbreaks of coronavirus in local schools and wondered whether there was greater access to testing amongst university students.

A representative from Exeter Guild said that while the university does have its own testing regime this is not as effective as first planned and they are now looking at a 2-3-day turnaround for results. The issue that they identified is that they are limited to testing symptomatic students, despite recent cases as seen in Northumbria.

Other attendees stated that it was very hard to access a test, and there is no testing for asymptomatic students. Pop-up testing centres in student accommodations or areas that students occupy were suggested as a solution as they would reduce anxiety to take a test and improve access. Access to testing is a particular issue for campuses in more rural locations.

Another attendee from Worcester SU stated that mass testing needs to be facilitated by government as currently a university's ability to access testing is dependent on the area they are in. They also stated that healthcare students should be a priority for testing as they support the NHS and local communities. In addition, they called for greater clarity around guidance, as currently students are unsure about the procedures and when they have to self-isolate.

The specific concerns of Muslim students were raised by a representative of FOSIS, who pointed to the lack of trust amongst Muslim students for Test and Trace procedures as they are run by Serco who have a very negative reputation due to their previous work on migrant detention centres and the like. Muslim students are very concerned about handing over their data, and this links back to the Prevent Duty which has placed this burden on Muslim students.

Similarly, some attendees expressed concerns that students were disincentivised from getting tested for coronavirus as universities have not provided plans in case of outbreak and they do not want to be the reason their flat has to self-isolate. They called for greater support so that students would not have to worry about their learning or accessing food whilst self-isolating. One attendee felt that students are left helpless if they get a positive test. There were calls for universities to ensure they upheld their duty of care towards students.

A representative from Birmingham City University SU declared that their SU have organised for food parcels to be delivered to students who test positive for the virus, and their wellbeing team are regularly checking in on students via email and phone.

Moreover, other attendees stated that their universities were taking a punitive approach to enforcement, which they thought created a highly discouraging atmosphere for students when complying with Test and Trace guidelines.



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Student representatives articulated that communication had been lacking on both a national and local level, which was causing a lot of confusion amongst students.

Accommodation

An attendee from Anglia Ruskin SU claimed that despite many students wanting to leave and return to their own homes, their wishes had been ignored by private accommodation providers who have refused to refund students for their rent.

Many attendees noted the excessive prices that universities are charging students for food whilst they are self-isolating.

Representatives from the National Union of Students called for rent reimbursements for those who were forced into lockdown, and the ability for students to leave their accommodation contracts without financial detriment.

Teaching and learning

A representative from Bath SU highlighted the challenges for postgraduate research students, who they claimed were the most affected by the pandemic. As well as suffering difficulties with mental health, work-life balance and future career plans, many of these students have had their research projects grind to a halt as they are unable to work from home unless they have special equipment. This delay will mean many students are unable to finish their PhD's on time. The Officer called for greater support for early career researchers.

One student officer from Sussex SU drew attention to the fact that already over 50% of teaching is being carried out online, and this is causing numerous problems with poor WiFi connections and lack of resources meaning students are unable to access their learning. They claimed that the systems in use were never designed to be used by thousands of students on campus, and now many students are dissatisfied with the online learning they are receiving. The officer also pointed to the dire financial state that many universities are currently in, as this leaves no give in the system, and called for an injection of material support for institutions. They stated that whilst most students might have laptops available they are often unable to handle the specific computer programmes needed for certain courses. They pointed to the fact the maintenance loan students receive barely covering their rent and so not giving them much left to cover these extra expenses.

Others disagreed with the comment that most students already have laptops, as they have many FE students who rely on coming to campus to use computer facilities to complete learning. One attendee from the Highlands and Islands Students' Association had found that their students had particular problems with WiFi connections due to their rural location.

A representative from Birmingham City University SU said that students missing out on placements are really affecting their employability and they would like to know which strategies are being put in place to support international students.

A colleague from Birmingham City University SU explained that digital poverty is a big issue for them, as 40% of their students are from the lowest POLAR quintile. In particular, many of their courses require specialist software, such as for photo-editing and games design, that typical laptops cannot run, and so students need to buy laptops at a much higher price point. 80% of their students have highlighted that their computer is not suitable for their study needs. They called for greater support for students as



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maintenance loans do not cover these expenses because of higher rent costs which take up 80% of loan.

The importance of training university staff in the use of technology was raised by a representative from UCLAN SU. They had heard from students who are currently shielding who had been unable to access education as staff do not know how to record lectures and ensure they are accessible. They pointed to the fact that disabled students had been calling for lecture capture for a number of years. Despite the fact that they have seen a number of students who have started university this year with their confidence crushed by the A-Levels fiasco, they stated that they have a real opportunity to make education transformative, but this must be done in cooperation with students.

One sabbatical officer from UCL claimed that many courses have been fundamentally changed by the move to online learning and despite the qualification being the same this does not make up for the differing learning experiences.

The view from students that they are paying tuition fees of £9,250 for something that they could watch on YouTube for free was expressed by an attendee from Leeds Beckett SU. They said that teaching quality was very hit-and-miss, and teaching is not just about the lectures, but all the facilities that students normally have access to which are now closed. They pointed to the marketisation of higher education, which has led to this situation in which students are demanding their fees be repaid for the poor quality of learning.

Others agreed with the statement that teaching is about more than just lectures pointing to students' reliance on libraries and group study spaces for their learning. They described how working from a student bedroom is highly unproductive as it can be very distracting and not have adequate Wi-Fi. They had concerns that due to this, students may not receive the grades they deserve at the end of this year.

Moreover, one attendee from Leicester SU said that while students at the university do have the option of opting out of on-campus teaching, university management had often tried to split staff and students from supporting each other.

A representative from Swansea University SU raised the issue of students with autism and ADHD, some of whom have had to defer the year due to struggles with accessing online learning.

One MP in attendance asked whether students were looking for fee reductions, refunds or interest rate suspensions. In reply a student officer indicated that this is a very pertinent issue for international students who pay most of their tuition fees upfront. Another said that many international students are still studying in their home countries as they have been unable to come to the UK yet, and so they felt that it was unfair for them to continue to pay extortionate tuition fees.

One representative from University of Exeter Students' Guild had a desire for national guidance around tackling Zoom bombing and cyber bullying as this was something that really disrupted online teaching.

Furthermore, one attendee pointed to students studying practice-based subjects, such as Drama, who have been hit especially hard by the move to online learning. They claimed that the interactivity and group learning usually experienced in-person is very hard to replicate online.



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The point was raised that first-year students are entering the same situation that many students faced six months ago, but without the same practice in how to work from home effectively. A representative from UCL SU claimed that the stress placed upon these students who are entering higher education under these unprecedented conditions should not be underestimated, and universities should be able to afford these students greater compassion and support.

A representative from the National Union of Students said that they had repeatedly raised these concerns with a lack of access to online learning, but so far, they had been ignored by government. They advocated for proper consultation with students, free internet access and an effective strategy for education now and for the post-covid recovery.

Mental health

One student representative from Exeter Guild stated that over 40% of calls made to their nightline at the moment can be directly linked to COVID-19. These are around a variety of issues, including loneliness, health anxiety or a lack of understanding of government guidelines. They expressed particular concern around student parents and mature students, who are often isolated in alternative ways. Increasing anxiety can also be linked to fears around graduate employment, financial pressures and hostility from local communities. Students are graduating into the worst job market they have faced for years, and many are burdened with higher levels of debt. There are fewer opportunities for casual employment for students. Moreover, they highlighted the difficulties for certain groups of students, particularly Chinese students, who are very concerned about the stigma attached to them contracting coronavirus.

A representative from Swansea University Students' Union declared that there is a mental health crisis that was already critical before the pandemic, but has now worsened exponentially. They were shocked by a lack of resources and support with many systems already being at full capacity before the pandemic. A number of students at their university had attempted suicide within the space of a week, and they called for emergency funding and preventative measures to be implemented.

Concerns were raised regarding the news that students may not be able to return home for Christmas and the effect that this would have on their wellbeing. Despite recent announcements that students may be able to return home if they do two weeks of self-isolation, attendees were worried about how this would work in practice as some only have three weeks of Christmas holidays in total. This problem was also raised in reference to estranged and LGBTQ+ students, who often choose to celebrate Christmas with a chosen family, which might be more difficult to facilitate, especially in Scotland where a rule is still in place to only allow two households to meet at one time.

***For further information, please contact the Secretariat, Taidgh Pledger,
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