

Dear Rt Hon Neil O'Brien MP

Re: Impact of COVID-19 on University Students

We write to you as lead representatives of the student body at the University of Leicester Students' Union, asking you to take urgent action as the MP for Harborough, Oadby & Wigston. We urge you to read this letter with a view to posing the demands we have made of the Government in the form of Parliamentary questions on behalf of the numerous students living within your constituency.

Given the events of the past months and the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) cases in the UK, students have been unable to access any in-person teaching since late November as a result of Government steps enacted to allow students to travel home for Christmas. Latest DFE guidance currently prevents from students in all courses other than Medical or Education until mid-February at the earliest, with no fixed return date agreed.

Throughout the pandemic, students have been a continual afterthought of Government policy; being asked to pay full tuition fees, which will then be paid at the same level as predecessors who benefitted from a rich student experience that featured in-person teaching and a wide array of extracurricular and support services which are impossible to replicate remotely.

Beyond the educational debts incurred; students have also been asked to sign up to accommodation contracts which they have been unable to live in for significant periods of the year – either in Universities or in the private sector, with very few providers willing at this stage to reimburse their tenants.

Students have also born an unimaginable toll on their mental health since March; the result of intersecting anxieties over their personal and family health, loneliness and isolation created by their inability to meet peers, perpetually shifting boundaries that they are expected to study within and a broader environment in which they have been scapegoated for transmission rates increasing despite a lack of robust evidence.

We are calling on the Government to take urgent action to provide direct support students and to provide additional funding to Universities to deliver local support for students whose experience



does not reflect value for money. Furthermore, we are calling on the Government to place impact on students at the forefront of their decision-making processes, as opposed to the status quo since March.

Specifically, we are calling on you to ask the Government via Parliamentary Questions to:

1. Work with the Student Loan Company to remove 50% of tuition fee debt incurred by students in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic year
2. Provide funding for Universities to offer partial refunds of 50% to postgraduate, international and other students who privately fund the cost of their tuition
3. Increase funding for Universities to offer proportionate rebates for students in halls who entered into accommodation contracts for the 2020/21 year
4. Provide funding for private sector landlords and purpose built accommodation providers to offer proportionate rebates for students living in the private housing sector
5. Legislate to enable students who wish to break University or private-sector accommodation contracts early to be able to do so, due to being unable to access their term-time housing for significant periods of the year
6. Provide additional funding for Universities to invest directly in additional mental health support, community building initiatives and for student hardship grants
7. Work closely with Universities and NHS Mental Health Service providers to ensure students are able to access support free at the point of access, which can move between their term-time address and non-term time address.
8. Work closely with the Office for Students to provide clear guidance to Universities that ensures they are able to implement schemes that consider the impact of the pandemic on academic performance, without fear of reprisal over grade inflation



9. Ensure the Competition Markets Authority formally assess the offers made by all UK Universities for the 2020/21 student intake

10. Provide leadership on the issue of the matter of complaints and tuition fees in the face of the pandemic, rather than siphon them through the unfit-for-purpose student complaints system currently handled across individual institutions and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator

On behalf of the students at the University of Leicester, we demand that urgent action is taken now to right the wrongs experienced since March 2020. Students at Leicester and across the country deserve better. We're sure you would agree your constituents deserve better.

We would gladly meet you to discuss these requests in further detail and look forward to the forthcoming positive action the Government will take.

Kind regards,

Hannah Belcher, Tony Magaia, Mia Nembhard, Elle Phipps, Adnan Rahman & Karli Wagener

Students' Union Executive Officer Team

