

## **The Union: APPG Students Submission**

1. What are the main ways in which learning in your university has been affected by the pandemic?

The University shifted its delivery from the traditional approach of several subjects spread over the year simultaneously to a consecutive block teaching approach; taking each unit one at a time in 6 week blocks. The intention was to be a blended model of mostly online learning with 4 hours of in person teaching. The pandemic, and its intensity in Manchester, has frustrated the ability to have any of the in person elements throughout the year, with very little taking place. We have been in touch with our students regularly, gathering their opinions on the provision and feedback is that purely online delivery cannot meet the standards of the usual in person model. Students have raised the following points:

- Isolation and loneliness leading to poor motivation
- an inability to discuss complex academic issues freely and deeply
- Poor internet connections due to several people in a household using the internet for schooling, university, or work at the same time interfering with academic delivery
- Curriculum designed to be delivered in person being moved into an online format, rather than having curriculum content designed to meet the new format, there simply wasn't time to redesign all courses to this extent
- A lack of access to learning spaces, specialist equipment, years in industry and practical based courses requiring the delivery of events or the creation of portfolios
- Students have faced problems at both undergraduate and postgraduate level with research projects, either seeking ethical approval or being able to explore areas of usual practice. This lack of experience may disadvantage students when they enter the job market.
- Poverty, students have been unable to find the additional income through part time work in most cases. The Union typically employs around 160 student staff members, this year we have employed 50. Most rent liabilities exhaust or exceed the student loan entitlement for the year, the lack of additional income has caused practical difficulties for many students without means of family support and added to poor mental health.
- PGR students have been unable to extend stipends to complete their work due to pandemic related delays

2. How has this varied between courses and levels of study?

Students in their final year, have expressed concerns as their final classifications are mainly determined by final year Undergraduate performance. Those studying courses requiring lab time (biology, physiotherapy, chemistry), specialist equipment (geography, fashion and textiles) or the practice of skills (acting, film making) have been particularly vocal. They express concern that their degree will not be valued by future potential employers. Many students degree choices included a year in industry that will provide experience and form the basis of their final year project, this have largely been frustrated.

PGR students have been particularly affected. The pandemic has delayed a significant amount of field research, extending the period of the projects. Funding for PGR students is time based and many students have not been able to find funding to

cover the extended period, jeopardising the entire project or causing severe financial hardship.

3. How do you think that any problems could be mitigated (e.g. additional teaching, changes to assessment, etc)?

We believe at Manchester Met, the University have put significant mitigating measure in place, these have included the block teaching approach, boosting internet signals for students, creating best practice models for online teaching, no detriment policies, changes to assessment format amongst others, however it is clear from students that they feel it is impossible to fully, or even mostly, mitigate the impact of the pandemic. The University appeared to recognise the value of having some element of in person teaching in place by attempting to put in place a blended model. Even small amounts of in person teaching makes a significant difference to the effectiveness of a mainly on line model, aids understanding, alleviates isolation and motivates learners. This proved impossible to deliver legally and morally. Despite significant efforts of the university the current approach does not equate to the previous delivery, only the fees remain the same.

*'I've only been in once since my course started on the 14th Sept , and honestly was one of the happiest days of my life because was the only day I actually felt like I was in university, looking at all your facilities , it was just amazing, and I felt so proud!! , being inside constantly at home just always on my computer or writing has been the most boring thing , I do enjoy and have interest in my course , I love learning about the human body and it's mechanisms but the constant same type of work just every day can be so straining and tiring to a point where I'll try to avoid it because of how it makes me feel.'*

#### *Level 4 Healthcare Student*

Some vocational courses, including teacher training and health professional have also been thrust into the front line of the pandemic at the outset of their careers. They have placed themselves in harms way in the fight against Covid all whilst paying for their tuition and funding themselves through loans. This situation seems absurd and the greatest level of refund, possibly 100%, should be considered for these students.

The question does not ask about domiciled, however particular circumstances exist for the majority of international and European students and how alienating and isolating their experience has been. They have had limited opportunities to build social networks or connections, have been restricted in their ability to reconnect with their families and friends and have the experience of undertaking an enforced and less effective model of learning in a second language.

4. Do you think compensation or financial rebates would address student concerns?

Yes

5. If yes, what level of compensation do you think would be appropriate, and how should it be funded/delivered?

Typical in person levels of undergraduate in person delivery is 16 hours. The University lowered this to 4 hours at the start of the year and has been unable to deliver even that for the majority of the courses. It is important to appreciate how the lack of any in person teaching negatively impacts on the overall course delivery. The everyday routine of online activity and the restrictions on personal interaction should be accepted, before we consider courses with specialist needs as described above. We believe the starting point for all courses should be a 50% refund, rising for specialist, practical or vocational courses to around 70 %.

6. Any additional comments?

Students pay their tuition fees to the university in return for particular returns, teaching, access to resources, the opportunity to gain a qualification. Students also choose to go to university for a number of different reasons that, whilst not part of the contract form a significant motivation in their decision and choice of institution and course. These include self discovery, creation of lifelong friendships, the opportunity widen their sense of diversity, sporting development and volunteering. These consequential benefits, that significantly contribute towards our general society and values, are very much in the minds of students when they decide to go to university and pay their fees. They have been almost completely negated for this year's students with little or no opportunity to join societies, sports clubs or volunteer to gain skills and pursue a deeply held belief. These activities aid a sense of belonging, a sense of belonging is known to aid attainment and progression at university as well as further post university careers. This element is almost completely removed from this year's experience.

Part two: Accommodation

7. Some students have not needed, or have been told not to access, university accommodation for periods during this year due to limits on face-to-face teaching, although this has not affected all. Roughly what proportion of your students have been affected in this way?

60%

8. Roughly what proportion of your students usually live in (a) university-provided accommodation, (b) privately-rented purpose-built student accommodation, (c) privately-rented houses, or (d) are local/commuter students?

a) 11% b) 19% c) 25% d) 45%

9. How do you think students who have (a) not required their accommodation or (b) not been permitted to return to university in January as per Government guidance should be compensated?

They should not have to pay for the periods they could not access their accommodation. Students should also be allowed to withdraw from the contract without further liability if it is no longer financially viable or useful. Students entered into a contract in the belief, held by most people, that there would be elements of in person teaching and some elements of social interaction. This has proved not to be the case and students have been legally tied to an expensive resource that is largely useless.

10. Additional hardship funds have been made available to assist with this and other issues; how effective have those funds been?

Hardship funds have been crucial for many students and have undoubtedly helped. However, hardship funds are intended to help qualifying students with a wide range of hardships. Student hardship goes beyond rent, it includes day to day living, food, transport, utility bills and course materials.

At Manchester Met over 70% of our students undertake part time work in typical years as 40%+ of our undergraduate population come from a family with a household income of less than £26,000 pa. Hardship fund awards are usually around £1100-£1500 and cannot fully mitigate the huge loss of student earning potential resulting from the pandemic.

There are also qualifying conditions, students are expected to have income from part time work unless they have a valid reason. If not, they will be deemed to have part time income regardless. Therefore the true situation of the student is not assessed. In typical years this would be much fairer than in this year where there simply isn't the work for students. Additionally, post graduate and international students are much less likely to qualify.

Finally, whilst accepting the point that hardship funds can cover rent, it would seem unfair to prop up private providers profit margins from money designed to protect access to education for the poorest students under the OfS agreement. Universities do not use these funds to pay for their own costs, such as hall rent. It does not seem to be in the spirit of these funds to use access money to pay private providers who have so far done little to to accept the situation and to continue to profit from students with little income at a time of global emergency.

11. Any other comments

Universities are not for profit organisations (mostly), private hall providers are not. To some extent the providers have been placed in a position of advantage due to their links with HE. It seems fair that such large providers should not profit to the extent of previous years at the expense of people who are often amongst the poorest in society, especially this year with the lack of employment opportunities available to students through gyms, retail and hospitality.

There are many small landlords, with one or two houses who are dependent on their income from students that should be considered separately. Support for these landlords should be provided through the form of grants if the benefits can be passed on to the students.

Flexibility should be offered to students as to the rate of loan they receive or are awarded. Those who have decided to stay at home as a result of the lack of in person teaching should not have the living at home rate imposed upon them due to the exceptional circumstances.