

61 New Road
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SN15 1ES

10 February 2021

RE: Support for Students

Dear Michelle Donelan,

We hope that you and your loved ones are keeping safe and well at this difficult time.

We, the Sabbatical Officers at Royal Holloway Students' Union, are writing to you on behalf of students at Royal Holloway University of London, in relation to the severe disruption and difficulties students have faced over the last 11 months due to the pandemic.

Throughout the last 11 months, students within Higher Education have received little support from the Government, not even warranting a mention during Boris Johnson's announcement of a new lockdown on 5 January nor any recognition regarding the impact this would have on them. Students have been continually forgotten and unsupported, despite the vast majority of them abiding to the lockdown rules in order to protect vulnerable members of society.

Whilst the University has worked hard to provide support in terms of online education and hardship funding, the academic experience and quality has been inconsistent and significantly reduced from that of previous years, despite all efforts by University staff. We are sure you are also aware that many students have faced significant financial hardship during this time, due to the loss of paid part time work, and the requirement for many to continue paying rent for private housing despite Government advice not allowing students to return to these properties. University staff have worked incredibly hard during this period, but this does not mean that students, and Universities themselves, do not need further support.

Students are continuing to pay tuition fees of £9250 for UK students, and significantly more for international students, to receive an educational experience that is much reduced from previous years. Students have a right to high quality education, in which they have made significant investment. The experience that students are receiving this year is fundamentally different, and students should not be asked to pay their full tuition fee for this experience.

The University themselves are unable to reduce their tuition fees without putting their financial security at risk. There are significant base costs that haven't changed in regards to the University's delivery of education, such as fixed costs associated with facilities, staff required to deliver the academic tuition, and all of the usual support services. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in the cost associated with the IT provision required to continue to deliver these academic and support services, as well as the much reduced revenue from Halls of Residences where rent has rightly been refunded. This has thrown all usual concepts of University budgets out of the window and means that Universities are running at a significant deficit.

Therefore we are asking you, in your role as Universities Minister, to work with colleagues in Government on behalf of students **to provide additional funding to Universities in order to allow tuition fee compensation for all students.** We note that in your previous letters you advise

students to complain directly to the University. As Sabbatical Officers we see this for what it is, a clear avoidance and deflection tactic by the Government which demonstrates an overly simplistic and a clear lack of understanding of the catastrophic financial impact the pandemic has had on individual Universities, which will be unable to offer widespread compensation without additional Government funding. Not to mention that students are unable to complain to their institutions and the Office for Independent Adjudicators about the quality of their course, which is the key issue students are facing.

We are also calling on you in your role as Universities Minister to work with colleagues in Government on behalf of students **to provide additional funding to Universities for mental health and wellbeing services** which have seen an exponential increase in support for students during this challenging period and have provided a lifeline for so many.

Furthermore, many students are continuing to pay rent in private properties that they are not currently using due to the current lockdown. Our President, Kate Roberts, and Principal at Royal Holloway, Paul Layzell, have called for flexibility from local landlords during this difficult period for students. Additionally, we would like you in your role as Universities Minister to work with colleagues in Government on behalf of students **to allow students no-penalty early release from tenancy contracts or rent obligations**, which has already been implemented in Scotland.

Where financial support is required to implement rent reductions or holidays by landlords and accommodation providers, the Government should provide this financial support, students should not be the ones to absorb the financial impact of the pandemic. In future, we would like to see the Government go further in ensuring greater protection for student tenants, however in the meantime we hope you can address these immediate issues.

We urge you to act on behalf of all students in UK Higher Education and enact these measures to protect students during the pandemic.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our letter, we would be grateful for your support and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Kate Roberts, RHSU President

Alissa Chohan, RHSU VP Education

Henn Warwick, RHSU VP Wellbeing and Diversity

Lucy Brown, RHSU VP Societies and Sport