

Russell Group response to APPG for Students inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on students' tuition and accommodation

- 1.1 The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining an outstanding teaching and learning experience and world-leading research. Our universities teach a quarter of all undergraduates and four out of five doctors, and support over a quarter-million jobs across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this timely and important inquiry launched by the APPG for Students.
- 1.2 This is a very challenging time for students, who have shown resilience and adapted admirably to the difficulties posed by the pandemic and the impacts on their university experience. We would like to take this opportunity to thank students for following the rules set out by Government and working with us to help manage outbreaks of the virus.
- 1.3 In recognition of the uncertainty, strain and mental distress being experienced by many students this year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, our universities have developed a range of programmes and initiatives to respond to students' needs¹ and support both their wellbeing and learning experience during this difficult year. These include:
 - (a) Tailored support for students who are in self-isolation
 - (b) Delivering mental health and wellbeing provision online and through telephone counselling, as well as bolstering face-to-face support and peer-to-peer programmes
 - (c) Investing in high-quality online learning and offering additional academic support by investing in new staff and academic programmes
 - (d) Increasing bursary provision and hardship funding.
- 1.4 Our universities have also re-designed their learning, teaching and assessments for this academic year to ensure that students are still able to meet the learning outcomes set out for their course. This has taken a tremendous effort on the part of all our academic and support staff, who continue to demonstrate their commitment to the education of young people by working tirelessly to adapt the delivery of teaching and learning in response to public health guidance.
- 1.5 The costs to institutions of making their campuses Covid-secure and moving to a blended model of teaching and assessment has been significant. For example:²
 - (a) King's College London estimates it will spend over £14 million through the 2020/21 academic year on achieving a safe campus. The biggest cost is expected to be over £5 million on creating enough space for social distancing. It expects to spend another £4 million on masks, wipe pods and sanitisers, £2.5 million on extra cleaning and £2 million on providing water, boosting air quality and extra wash points. The remainder will be spent on signage and barriers.
 - (b) The University of Manchester estimates that it has spent nearly £6 million on Covid-19 safety supplies and resources, including personal protective equipment, signage, sanitiser, screens, cleaning materials, external cleaning, IT and audiovisual items and student support.
 - (c) The University of Exeter's costs between March and September, inclusive, amounted to nearly £2 million. This included investment in a staff and student testing service, moving and storing furniture, hiring marquees, cleaning, washing machines, making alterations to buildings and paying professional fees.

¹ <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5883/how-russell-group-universities-are-supporting-students.pdf>

² <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-he-student-trends-2020-11-universities-spend-millions-on-covid-secure-campuses/>

- 1.6 In addition to the investment our universities have made in providing support to students, making their campuses Covid-secure and moving to a model of blended learning, they have also prioritised retaining staff and continuing the funding of vital research by implementing recruitment freezes, pausing capital projects and applying pay restraint at senior levels.

2. Accommodation and student hardship

- 2.1 Many universities were forced to reduce in-person teaching in December as a result of the introduction of the student travel window and many students who expected to be back on campus for the start of the new term this year have not been able to return due to national restrictions and the ensuing guidance from the Department for Education.³
- 2.2 Russell Group universities have been considering how best to support students in light of these changes and the differential impacts they will have on students depending on their course of study. All of our members have announced policies to either reduce rent this term; to not charge students who are not using their accommodation; or to provide rent rebates on the basis of when students return to their accommodation.
- 2.3 These policies are in addition to the flexible options and support our members have been offering students with regard to accommodation this year, for example, allowing them to easily defer and cancel their accommodation contracts, providing accommodation to students affected by family breakdown, and arranging support such as food and care packages during periods of self-isolation or quarantine.
- 2.4 Unite Students' announcement to offer a 50% rent discount to students who have been prevented returning to their studies due to coronavirus restrictions has been welcome. However, whilst our members have been liaising with provider partners, private landlords and city councils to see what more can be done, many students renting rooms or houses from private landlords are unlikely to receive such compensation. It is therefore the case that depending on their accommodation and the provider, some students will experience less support in terms of rent flexibilities and rebates than others. We therefore think there is a strong case for centralised support from Government.
- 2.5 Government has increased the £256 million 'student premium' budget, allocated to institutions by the Office for Students, by £20 million this year to recognise the impact on individual students arising from the Covid-19 pandemic⁴. However, given this fund was cut by £16 million in May 2020⁵, this only represents a £4 million uplift to a budget intended to support disadvantaged students across the sector in 'normal' years.⁶ £4 million across the sector is not sufficient to support the number of additional students experiencing hardship this year and the costs of the extra measures that universities have put in place to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on students, including additional mental health and wellbeing services, academic support, digital delivery of courses, support for students in self-isolation, and increases to their bursary provision and hardship funding.⁷
- 2.6 **We would encourage the Government to consider what additional financial support they could offer to students, such as a specific Covid-hardship fund for the most affected students to complement the support being provided by universities.** For example, The Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany is providing emergency non-repayable grants for students facing acute, pandemic-related hardship throughout the winter semester (November 2020 until end of March 2021).⁸
- 2.7 We consider this is especially important at this time given the many students who rely on part-time work to supplement their maintenance loans. Few will have been able to carry out such work during the pandemic and are also unlikely to have benefitted from the furlough scheme.

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/950583/Students_returning_to_and_starting_higher_education_in_Spring_Term_2021_FINAL_v3.pdf

⁴ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b5879d1d-56af-4cb7-9fd9-e64a940e775c/funding-for-hardship-2020-21-final-for-web.pdf>

⁵ [Recurrent Funding for 2020/21](#), May 2020, Office for Students:

⁶ Further details are covered in an article on WonkHE from 20 October 2020: <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/all-the-times-that-dfe-has-respent-the-same-money-on-students-hit-by-the-pandemic/>

⁷ <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5883/how-russell-group-universities-are-supporting-students.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.studentenwerke.de/en/content/faqs-students>

3. Tuition fees

- 3.1 Our universities are fully committed to safeguarding the quality of their offer to students. In response to the pandemic, they have re-designed their learning, teaching and assessments for this academic year, investing heavily in online resources and delivery, to ensure that students are still able to meet the learning outcomes set out for their course.
- 3.2 This has taken a tremendous effort on the part of all our academic and support staff, who continue to demonstrate their commitment to the education of young people by working tirelessly to adapt the delivery of teaching in response to public health guidance.
- 3.3 Given the measures our universities have taken, we are confident that the majority of students will still be able to achieve the learning outcomes set out for their course of study, despite the different modes of teaching delivery and methods of learning this year. We therefore do not consider that there is a case for blanket tuition fee refunds.
- 3.4 However, it is conceivable that the public health measures in place to restrict the spread of Covid-19, including Government's guidance to prevent the return of most students to in-person teaching this Spring term⁹, and additional pressures on clinical placements, will mean that some students on specialist training may not be able to achieve the learning outcomes set out for their course in this academic year. Such a situation would be through no fault of the institution or the affected students and **it is crucial that the Office for Students and the Government support institutions in such circumstances and ensure that students are not disadvantaged.**
- 3.5 In the event that students due to graduate this academic year need to complete additional study through the summer and/or into the next academic year, we consider that additional measures would be needed from the Government to support such students. **These measures should include ensuring these students don't find themselves in breach of any terms of their existing student loan. The Government should also provide financial support to cover the cost of any additional teaching and living expenses incurred so that such students are able to complete their studies without incurring additional expenses.**

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⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/950583/Students_returning_to_and_starting_higher_education_in_Spring_Term_2021_FINAL_v3.pdf