

2437 (Student Rent & COVID: A Campaign Approach)

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Summary:

Let's make no mistake, the COVID-19 pandemic has TRANSFORMED students' experience of university not just at UEA but across the country and it has presented many new and difficult challenges on top of already existing pressures. Throughout this you guys have remained vocal about these pressures and continue to help us challenge the University to provide the necessary support that is needed. Most recently, we've been able to both work with and demand from the University concessions and assistance on several things including:

1. An 8-week rent rebate for those in UEA Accommodation
2. An 8-week rent rebate for those in soft nomination agreements, e.g. Pablo Fanque House
3. The implementation of a thorough Safety Net & No Detriment Policy
4. The removal of reassessment fees
5. The re-opening of the Edith Cavell building as an area of respite for our students in the NHS
6. Free parking on Campus for placement students
7. An agreement with the University as to the nature of club membership refunds.
8. And a final agreement that SAM refunds for sports club memberships will be made at the end of the academic year in light of how much sport will have taken place.

This is just a drop in the ocean we're not done yet. We know that together we've got a lot of work to do in the coming weeks and we hear you guys loud and clear.

Yet one of the major challenges as outlined above concerns the imposition of the latest lockdown on Tuesday 05th January 2021 and its impact on student accommodation and rent. These consequences are a direct impact of the lack of Government support for higher education throughout this pandemic. Like many universities, UEA is not immune to the financial impact of COVID and the damning absence of Government support for students & higher education is telling at a time when students clearly deserve better. Whilst UEA has taken steps to offer an 8-week rent rebate for those students unable to occupy their UEA accommodation, the financial constraints of COVID and the absence of Government assistance for universities and their students has meant that their action on this front remains limited. In truth, it simply isn't enough, and our students deserve MORE. If the Government can support businesses, then it can support students too.

Council Notes

- *Prior to the impact of COVID-19 the plan was that UEA would have a controlled deficit of £3 million – this deficit was 'controlled' as it was being invested into developments around the University.¹*
- *However, given the rapid impact of COVID-19 on revenue and also on the need to invest in measures against it, UEA is now projecting an overall operating deficit of £18.8 million for 2020/21.²*

¹ <https://www.uea.su/blogs/blog/activities/2021/01/22/financial-transparency/>

² Ibid.

- *We acknowledge that the University has sought to mitigate this with furlough, increment freezes, & pay cuts for senior staff and the executive team.*
- *On the other hand, we estimate that the UK Government has spent approximately £210bn on the pandemic including offering £112bn to support UK businesses.³*
- *In comparison students have received next to NOTHING.*
- *This call for Government action is quickly becoming a cross party issue. Not only is there support from Liberal Democrat & Labour politicians but there is also increasing backing amongst Conservative MP's for the Government to support and provide for student rent rebates & tuition fee refunds, as seen in the House of Commons on Tuesday 12th January 2021.⁴*
- *Just the other week, the Liberal Democrat MP Wera Hobhouse & the Conservative MP Sally-Ann Hart added their voices to the matter. Hart called for Downing Street to acknowledge the "...**raw deal...**" that students have had this year and called for greater Government support for students, suggesting that: "**We can start by reducing their university fees for the COVID-19 period and not asking them to pay rent on the accommodation that they are being asked not to stay in.**"⁵*
- *On Monday 18th January, Emma Hardy the Labour MP for Hull West & Hessle slammed the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson for the fact that students are paying rent on properties they have been instructed not to use and called for them to acknowledge and take action on the pressures that many students are now facing.⁶*

Council Believes

- **We believe** that the way the Government has treated students throughout this pandemic is inexcusable.
- **We believe** that students do deserve rent rebates!
- **We believe** that at present, UEA cannot finance the necessary rent rebates that students rightly deserve as a result of COVID and its financial impacts → THIS SUCKS we know but we will continue to push UEA to support students better in other ways.
- **We therefore believe** that the responsibility to finance these rent rebates sits with the Government!
- **We believe** that this is the time for students and higher education institutions alike to unite and DEMAND from the Government full and comprehensive financial support, including the provisions for rent refunds both in University Accommodation & in the Private Sector.

Council Resolves

³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID-19-cost-tracker-2020-09-08.pdf>

⁴ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-01-12/debates/A9F122DF-3DB0-404A-9DF0-CF1709E14DA2/Covid-19#contribution-5957E440-54A8-449D-B4A0-F6A537331916>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-01-18/debates/B67D4948-CC32-4345-A070-8A94B23D8C92/FurtherAndHigherEducationEndOfTransitionPeriod#contribution-E5AB2B9B-B828-46FC-9D34-627DC3AA6085>

1. To mandate the Full-Time Officers to work with Students, Student Unions and other Higher Education Institutions such as NUS to lobby the Government that the below demands are met:

We demand that the Government:

- Reimburse universities for the loss of accommodation revenue so they can reimburse students for accommodation they can't use in the academic year 2020/21.
 - Increase funding for universities to meet the costs of increased and high-quality online learning and teaching, COVID secure face-to-face learning and teaching, and additional student mental health and wellbeing costs.
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2. As part of this campaign against the Government, to also mandate the Full-Time Officers to:

- Begin & promote a comprehensive letter writing campaign to local officials and the Government detailing our above demands, in alliance with other Student Unions.
 - To provide the resources and templates for students to do the same, including postage costs.
 - If they are in a position to do so, to also encourage students to ask their parents and/or guardians to also participate in the same letter writing campaigns.
 - To write to the Minister of Universities & the Secretary of State for Education, detailing our disappointment and our demands.
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3. To also mandate the Full-Time Officers to work with and push the University to ensure that the demands that follow are met:

We demand that the University:

- Increase the size and scope of the University hardship funds to aid digital poverty, students from widening participation backgrounds and international students, whose financial experience is largely inequitable in comparison to home students.
- Actively monitor the quality of online teaching.
- Support students/the SU in demanding the Government provide financial support for universities and students.
- Provide sufficient provision to support student mental health.
- Actively work towards greater financial transparency with their students, providing regular updates as to the fiscal condition of the organization as far as they are allowed.
- Have the Vice-Chancellor participate in a live online Q&A with students.