

UEA Students' Union

Union House

University of East Anglia

Norwich

NR4 7TJ

Tuesday 12th January 2021

Clive Lewis MP

20 Bank Plain

Norwich

NR2 4SF

Dear Clive Lewis MP,

We are writing to you both as the Full-Time Student Officers at the University of East Anglia's Student Union and as constituents worried about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – in particular this third national lockdown – on students across the country. We are concerned about the financial pressures on UEA and NUA students in academic year 20/21 as a result of being charged for accommodation they are unable to occupy because of Government regulations and the COVID-19 virus.

At present, the current guidance only permits students to cover the following courses to return to campus for face to face teaching:

- *Medicine and Dentistry*
- *Subjects allied to medicine/health*
- *Veterinary science*
- *Education (initial teacher training)*
- *Social work*
- *Courses which require Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body assessments and/or mandatory activity which is scheduled for January which cannot be rescheduled.*

The guidance also maintains that those students who are not in the above subject areas are required to “...remain where they are wherever possible.” As such, following the Government's guidance advising students to travel home for the winter break, a large proportion of UEA students remain unable to occupy their rented accommodation in Norwich. In light of these measures, and the Vice Chancellor's decision to suspend most face-to-face teaching until March, UEA has agreed to provide an eight-week rent rebate for those in UEA accommodation. Whilst a student-led Rent Strike team

continue to lobby the University for further rebates, students in PBSAs and private-rented accommodation have received no rebates. As a Students' Union, we are in the process of writing to our Home Run landlords to encourage them to take their tenants individual circumstances into greater consideration over the coming months.

This student rent crisis is one part of a larger problem. The pandemic has transformed the student experience, presenting them with many new and difficult challenges on top of their existing pressures. These include adapting to online learning, paying for accommodation they can't or don't need to occupy, and the stress of the ever-changing national restrictions. The pace of change has left many students at UEA and across the UK worried and confused. Access to campus facilities is restricted and students have not had access to the typical events run by clubs, societies, support groups, activities and events all of which are key parts of the University experience. These and other factors have contributed to an overall decline in student experience, which alongside significant mental health and fiscal pressures.

Many of the challenges faced by students in academic year 20/21 have been exacerbated by the complete lack of Government support for Higher Education throughout the pandemic. So far, we estimate the Government has spent approximately £210bn on COVID-19 relief, including £112bn that went to support UK businesses. Meanwhile, not a penny has been spent to support universities with learning and teaching costs or accommodation fees despite the challenges Higher Education Institutes now face.

Students need an advocate in parliament. We believe that you and the Labour party can be the voice of students, and help them receive the support they deserve. We ask that you lobby the Government with us to demand that they:

- Reimburse students either directly or via universities, PBSAs, or private landlords for accommodation they can't occupy in academic year 20/21
- Require universities, PBSAs, and private landlords to offer contract release without penalty for term-time accommodation that students have either been unable or unwilling to use because of Government regulations and the COVID-19 virus
- Increase the funding for: mental health support, greater academic support offered to students in learning and assessment.
- Increase the size and scope of 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.
- To commission an independent enquiry to determine fair tuition fees for students while attending a British University in the period March 2019 until the end of the pandemic (referred to as the Affected Period) and to also freeze interest rates on student loans. This is to reflect the enormous disruption to students and their ability to take advantage of the opportunities normally available to them at university

- Provide funding for universities to directly provide partial refunds to self-funded students, including international students, for the Affected Period in accordance with the findings of the independent enquiry
- Reimburse Universities the additional costs for making campus COVID secure, increased online teaching provision, and loss of accommodation and catering revenues, ensuring where necessary this funding reaches students eligible for rent refunds
- Provide funding to international students either directly or via universities to ensure they receive equitable financial mitigations to home students during the Affected Period
- Instruct the Office for Students (OfS) to cease grade inflation monitoring for at least two years after the Affected Period so universities can fully and effectively mitigate the academic impact of the pandemic without having to factor in grade inflation regulatory oversight
- Instruct the Competition Markets Authority (CMA) to formally define what is meant by 'a quality student experience' and assess whether British universities have delivered a quality experience that meets the offer made

In addition to your support for students across the country, we ask that you support UEA and NUA students by:

- Encouraging local PBSA providers and private landlords to reduce or reimburse student rent for the period they are unable to occupy their accommodation and allow students to terminate their contracts early without penalty
- Encouraging private landlords not to put student houses on the market during this lockdown period, or to facilitate house viewings during periods of lockdown. Students should not be put at risk of COVID transmission through house viewings, nor should they be rushed into contracts without being properly able to consider their housing options for academic year 21/22
- Lobby UEA to:
 - Increase the amount and scope of the student hardship fund and promote it effectively to students
 - Actively monitor the quality of online teaching
 - Ensure they are providing sufficient provision to support student mental health
 - Support students and uea(su) in demanding the Government provide financial support for universities and students

This crisis is highlighting issues that students have been raising for a long time. We urge you to act on behalf of us and put pressure on the Government to enact these measures so students are protected in times of crisis and closures.

Thank you for taking the time to consider these matters. We would be grateful for your prompt attention to the issues raised here and look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

				
Em Anderson Welfare, Community, and Diversity Officer	Ayane Hida Postgraduate Education Officer	Lizzie Payne Activities and Opportunities Officer	Callum Perry Undergraduate Education Officer	Hamish Williams Campaigns and Democracy Officer