

Submission from University Alliance to APPG Student Inquiry:

“Impact of the pandemic with specific reference to students call for rebates in tuition and accommodation payments”

University Alliance (UA) is the voice of professional and technical universities. We represent 12 large to mid-sized universities working at the heart of their communities. Alliance universities work with industry and the professions to deliver the workforce of today and tomorrow through practical, skills-based learning and applied research. Our members are:

- Anglia Ruskin University
- Birmingham City University
- University of Brighton
- Coventry University
- University of Greenwich
- University of Hertfordshire
- Kingston University
- Leeds Beckett University
- Oxford Brookes University
- University of South Wales
- Teesside University
- University of the West of England, Bristol

Alliance universities have adapted quickly continuing to provide high-quality teaching and learning to students, including targeted and enhanced hardship funding and support. They have invested heavily in providing Covid secure campuses and continue to work closely with government to navigate and adapt to the uncertainty ahead. The overwhelming majority of staff have risen to the challenge and adapted rapidly and innovatively to the situation, working tirelessly to ensure learning outcomes are met and students receive the support they need. Alliance universities have also made a significant contribution to the national effort to tackle Covid-19, including volunteering their facilities, equipment and frontline support.

These efforts and the impacts of successive lockdowns have resulted in lost income and additional expenditure, and the picture is continually evolving. In 2019/20 the total impact of income loss and additional expenditure across all 12 UA members was over **£85 million**. In 2020/21, this is likely to be even greater given the cost of accommodation refunds resulting

20 January 2021

from the current national lockdowns. Accommodation refunds are anticipated to cost some of our member universities an average of £450,000 a week.

Our universities are determined to continue delivering for their students, staff, communities, and regions, and we hope this submission contributes to understanding the scale of the financial impact they are absorbing as they do so, and the importance of government intervention to ensure this role can continue.

The impact of the pandemic on students' tuition and/or accommodation

We are naturally extremely troubled by the plight facing our students due to the disruption caused by this truly horrifying pandemic. Our universities have moved swiftly to adapt their own provision, as well as providing wellbeing and financial support to those students most affected by issues universities cannot control, such as the collapse in part-time employment opportunities, and the mixed approach of private landlords to offering rent reductions or refunds.

Tuition impacts

As we noted in our submission to the OfS review of digital teaching and learning in English higher education during the coronavirus pandemic, the experience of swiftly moving to the delivery of fully and blended digital learning has been transformative to higher education, and institutions have learned a great deal in a short space of time. The resource implications of delivering a wide range of digital teaching and learning models include not just the appropriate hardware and software, but training for both staff and students. It is important to note that progress has been built on work that has been in train for many years. Alliance universities had already made considerable investment in data management and digital tools to improve the student experience (e.g. learner analytics software), as well as CPD for staff, prior to the pandemic.

There have been challenges, and ongoing barriers to overcome, but universities have also amassed a wealth of evidence about the benefits of blended learning over the last several months; and notably the role it can play in addressing differential outcomes for certain groups of students, including commuter students, disabled students, international students, and student parents. Alliance universities have found that many of their students are *more* engaged by the digital experience than traditional face to face delivery, with some feeling more comfortable engaging online. Digital delivery also makes it easier for staff to engage with students on placement. In addition, student engagement with support services has increased considerably. That said, some services such as counselling can be difficult to deliver digitally if students do not have sufficient privacy at home.

Digital inclusion (often referred to as digital poverty) remains a pressing issue throughout the education system. Alliance universities have invested significant resources to provide a digitally inclusive environment for their students, for example by delivering laptops to students' homes and providing designated socially distanced space on campus for commuter students to study. Despite this, they are still not able to meet all students' needs. More support from central government is needed.

There has been a prevailing view that digital and/or blended models are not as effective or valuable as face-to-face teaching and learning. They are also falsely assumed to be cheaper. These assumptions are underpinned by a traditional model of a student studying full time and living in halls. In many Alliance universities, more than half of students commute from home, with many balancing studying with work and other responsibilities. For many non-traditional students, digital teaching and learning is working well and some even prefer it.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected disadvantaged students, and whilst our universities have worked hard to identify problems and offer solutions to support these groups, they continue to experience increasing demand for their hardship funds and other support mechanisms. All Alliance universities have enhanced their existing hardship funds and introduced targeted support for students experiencing financial difficulties during this period.

However, this has been done through leveraging existing funding, and government support is needed to deliver the necessary support to meet the increasing demand. The Secretary of State for Education and the Universities' Minister have repeatedly pointed to the £256m (and more recently the additional £20m) student premium funding in 2020/21 as funds universities have received to support student hardship during the pandemic. This of course ignores the important fact that this is an existing funding stream and the costs of supporting students to succeed have been significantly exacerbated by the pandemic. All universities are being asked to do a lot more with the same pre-pandemic levels of funding, on top of the financial pressures from income losses.

Accommodation impacts

The issue of accommodation is a challenging area to address given the complexity of how the market operates and who is impacted.

Recognising that many students are paying for accommodation they are unable to access, due to national lockdown restrictions, the majority of Alliance universities have stepped in to provide some form of financial relief for students within their owned residences. This will cost an average of £450,000 per week in some cases, with one Alliance university estimating that refunds granted for the period of the national lockdown will hit £6m.

However, this support is only available to students within university owned accommodation, and we are concerned about the equity of this as a solution for those students in alternative residences. Universities can provide some support to those students through hardship funds, but this will be limited to those most in need.

Views on compensation and how this might be funded and delivered

Our key recommendations are:

1. To recognise the impact of the pandemic on students living costs, all students should be offered access to **increased maintenance loans through the Student Loan Company**. The government should also explore whether a proportion of the loan amount could be issued as a grant, either on a blanket or targeted basis.
2. To ensure universities can target support where it is most needed, including through hardship funds, and ensure the ongoing costs associated with the pandemic do not impact on the learning experience, the government should significantly **increase student premium funding**.

These are high-level proposals, and we are keen to be part of a collaborative effort with government to scope these in detail.

As we have outlined, despite the challenging circumstances, Alliance universities are continuing to support students to achieve their learning outcomes and are actively developing contingency plans to ensure this continues to be the case if the current national lockdowns are extended. Our view is that tuition fee refunds should only be given consideration on an individual, case-by-case basis, through existing complaints and appeals processes.