



Students'
Union
Bath Spa

**Bath Spa University
Students' Union**

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Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities
Member of Parliament for Chippenham
House of Commons
London
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11th December 2020

Dear Michelle Donelan,

I am writing to you as the President of Bath Spa University Students' Union both on behalf of students studying in your constituency at Bath Spa's Corsham Court campus and in your role as Minister of State for Universities to express my concerns about the current experience of students across the country.

The main purpose of my role is to represent all Bath Spa University students, and their experience this year has been like no other. They have had to spend the majority of their days in cramped rooms that were not designed for comfortable living and have had little to no opportunities for social interaction. In addition to this their learning has been mostly online which multiple studies have shown is extremely fatiguing and can be damaging for students' wellbeing. They are also experiencing financial hardship as the significant but necessary Covid-19 restrictions, particularly those placed on the hospitality industry, have meant that the part-time jobs students rely on to survive simply don't exist.

Bath Spa University has improved and increased their support for students such as upgrading the internet provision in student accommodation and increasing mental health support for students. We in the Students' Union have created a 'buddy system' and have also been running multiple online events to try and enable students to socialise and interact with each other. Unfortunately, as is the case across the United Kingdom, students are spending so much time looking at their screens for learning that they do not want to engage with online social activities and are therefore becoming isolated and lonely.

In a recent survey of our students, we found that 52% of respondents have felt lonely at least once a week. Comments we received included "My mental health is failing, I can't make friends so I feel isolated", "I haven't left my room" and "I'm not in a healthy head space". The BBC recently reported on the National Union of Students (NUS) survey which found that nationally, more than 50% of students say their mental health has declined since the start of the pandemic. Students deserve better and we

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9BN.

believe the Government should better fund university and NHS mental health services to ensure students get the support they require. Students' Unions also need greater investment to continue providing the essential services we provide. Today, the Scottish Government announced additional funding of £750,000 specifically to support NUS Scotland and student associations to provide vital welfare support for students in colleges and universities - I would welcome such a move from Westminster.

In terms of their academic experience, whilst Bath Spa students have adapted to blended learning, their experiences differ significantly depending on which course they are studying and their access to computer equipment, study space, specialist resources, facilities and in-person teaching. Students are understandably questioning the value for money of their current university experience. In the same survey I mentioned earlier, Bath Spa students told us "I know the University is doing their best given the circumstances but it's still nowhere near as good as proper university learning", "Expensive for the quality of education", "Virtual learning is terrible for a Creative Music Technology degree - online lectures wherein we have to follow along certain techniques on Digital Audio Workstations/Software is arduous and grating" and "The value for money with everything being online is not acceptable".

As well as questioning the value for money of their education, students are also questioning why they were encouraged to move to a city, and pay for rent either in university accommodation or private accommodation, when very little in-person activity (teaching and extra-curricular) is permitted. I have received many emails from students asking for the University to provide them with rent and/or tuition fee refunds. They believe they have simply been used as 'cash cows' by the Government. The response from the Government in the recent Parliamentary debate was woefully inadequate. There was an assertion that individual institutions are able to consider refunds on tuition fees and accommodation. However, I strongly believe that no one institution could provide refunds for their student bodies without entering into financial difficulties, which is especially true of smaller universities such as Bath Spa. I urge you in your role to work with colleagues in Government to take action in response to the extremely poor experience of students this year.

There has also been persistent negative rhetoric regarding students and the pandemic and the way they have been treated by the Government is quite frankly unacceptable. They are being blamed for spreading Covid-19, which recent data reports do not support, and which forgets that they were told to move across the country by the Government and their universities and that many have also contributed to the country's response as key workers. There was a failure of national guidance and policy for institutions prior to the start of term, the guidance to enable students who would like to travel home for Christmas came far too late, and the fact the only recently published guidance on returning to campuses in January fails to take into account how universities other than Oxbridge operate demonstrates how students have been consistently let down. Not only were students encouraged to travel home between 3 - 9 December, they are now being asked to stagger their return in January, which means that some students are being asked to pay up to two months' rent for accommodation they won't be using - this is unacceptable.

Students are facing the prospect of another few months of a miserable experience, whilst accommodation is filled at 100% capacity, future outbreaks are inevitable, as a recent Public Health Scotland publication confirmed. Whilst the Government provided £3m to fund the mental health platform Student Space and have recently announced an additional £20m of funding to support students, this simply isn't good enough given the extent of the issues students are facing. Students deserve better.

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I note that in your comments on some of these issues you have passed the buck back to universities stating that students can complain to their institution, which is of course true. However, this fails to take into account the lack of adequate guidance, support and funding universities have received in order to successfully navigate the issues created by the pandemic. Universities have, on the whole, been doing their best in difficult circumstances whilst navigating unhelpful and last-minute directives from Government, with no additional financial resources. In your recent appearance on BBC Question Time you suggested that students can also complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). However, this fails to take into account the fact students are unable to take a complaint about quality to the OIA; which is at the heart of many of the issues students are facing right now.

I know that many people are facing difficulties as a result of the pandemic but students have been largely forgotten and ignored. I am asking you in your role as Universities Minister to work with colleagues in Government on behalf of students and the difficulties they are facing as a result of the pandemic in these key areas:

- Students to be given the right leave their accommodation contracts (university and private sector) without financial detriment
- Additional funding for universities to provide tuition fee and rent refunds
- Additional funding and support for universities and Students' Unions for mental health and wellbeing services to adequately address the current crisis
- Recognition of the vital role Students' Unions have and continue to play in supporting students throughout the pandemic
- The creation of an effective strategy for higher education both now and for the post-Covid recovery

Students deserve better, they are the future of our country and deserve more credit and support from their Government than they are getting. I look forward to your response.

Kind Regards,

Emily Casey
President