

## Summary of Westminster Hall debate on Tuition Fees

Held on 16 November 2020

- Arranged by the Petitions Committee in response to the five student petitions calling for fee refunds.
- This summary was written and supplied by [Dods](#).

Chris Evans (Lab/Co-op, Islwyn ) begged to move that the House considered e-petitions [300528](#), [302855](#), [306494](#), [324762](#), and [552911](#), relating to university tuition fees.

Evans, who also sits on the Petitions Committee, noted that although each petition differed slightly, they shared a common thread – that of "aggrieved" students who "have not had value for money from universities." He spoke of the debt accrued by students undertaking a three-year course and taking out the maximum maintenance loan, which leaves many with £46,884 of debt before interest.

He told the chamber how most students who had responded to the Committee's inquiry had felt a significant drop in teaching quality during the pandemic – for instance, clinical practice did not take place in some medical courses.

Submissions to the inquiry also highlighted struggles to engage with online learning, a lack of contact hours, a lack of connectivity with tutors and a lack of mental health support across the board. Students also reported feeling "tricked" back to university and said there had been a lack of clarity from Government, with which Evans agreed.

Evans also spoke of the lengthy and complicated process through which students could individually seek reimbursement via the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) and said this wasn't good enough.

Esther McVey (Con, Tatton ) spoke of individual cases and her involvement in helping university students navigate this difficult period. One constituent, she said, had hoped that the situation would force universities to modernise , which they hadn't.

She spoke of a report from SAFER (Student Action for a Fair and Educated Response) which had concluded that universities had prioritized profit over welfare, and found that there had been a lack of adequate support in halls, of regular testing and even food.

McVey asked the Minister to clarify who was responsible for dealing with these issues – universities or the Government – and also how and when issues would be resolved. She asked what pressure Government could apply to universities and what meetings Ministers were having with students to hear their concerns. Finally, she asked if the refund process could be simplified, and if there could be an automatic refund for those who were locked down.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Lab, Streatham ) said that the " commercialisation of higher education" had been a big shame for the country. She spoke to the amount of debt accrued by students during their time at university, and the lack of "value for money" this year in particular . She also made reference to measures taken by the University of Manchester putting up fences to keep students in.

Claudia Webbe (Ind, Leicester East) paid tribute to universities and their staff in Leicester, who she said had produced innovative solutions to the problems they were facing, including regular in-house testing. She cited figures from the National Union of Students (NUS) that 20 percent of students had confirmed they would not be able to pay rent or essential bills this term – she urged the Government to provide financial support.

She asked the Minister to tell universities to halt in-person teaching and help students stay home after Christmas. She also implored the Government to work with student representatives for a clear outcome.

Kim Johnson (Lab, Liverpool Riverside), who sits on the Education Committee, noted that rates of infection had "spiraled" amongst university populations, and that there was no guarantee next term would be any different. It should not be up to individual students to request refunds, she said, and the Education Secretary should develop a system for refunding fees for students who have suffered.

Rachael Maskell, Shadow Minister for Voluntary Sector and Charities, paid tribute to her local universities in York, but also said this did not detract from the experiences of so many students. She criticised the funding model for higher education and said it must be reviewed, particularly if the UK wanted to invest in skills to "deliver the economic output to which we aspire." She spoke of the benefits of high-quality online learning and said this could be the future of education.

Emma Hardy, Shadow Minister for Universities, criticised the decisions – and at times, indecisiveness – of the Government, particularly around the time that university students were expected to return to their campuses. She also pointed out that students did not have access to universal credit for support and said there had been no acknowledgement from Government of the impact of the tiered restrictions, and now the national lockdown.

**Hardy spoke to the figure of £256m, which the Government had said would be used to help students to meet extra costs, but noted that this pot of money had been described as being used in many different ways – far too many, she said, for this amount to cover.** She criticised the Government on this and asked the Minister to outline when university hardship funds would receive "new and adequate" funding. She also asked what further support could be provided in relation to mental health challenges.

Hardy asked the Minister if the Government would reconsider providing free internet access for online learning resources. She further asked what discussions the Minister was having with students' unions and NUS, to support their work in helping students.

She pressed the Minister on how exactly the Office for Students would conduct reviews of online learning, and how universities planned to make up for lost learning. More specifically, she questioned how students who had a placement requirement were being supported and asked the same for PhD students and masters students. She also implored the Minister to not refer to the £256m pot again.

Responding for the Government, Universities Minister Michelle Donelan acknowledged the uncertainty the pandemic had brought to university students, but also noted there had been improvements in mass testing, scientific advances, and a potential vaccine.

Donelan said that Government set the maximum, not the minimum, tuition fee – and that it was up to universities to ensure they were providing the quality of teaching that justified charging the maximum amount. She noted that there is a system in place to pursue refunds, and she directed students towards the OIA if they remain dissatisfied with the internal processes at their institution. She said the OIA process was straightforward, and normally completed within 90 days.

She spoke of investment for universities in adapting to the pandemic and noted a survey by Unite which showed that 81 percent of students were happy they did not defer, while four in five agreed they valued their time there. She said that routes to refund guidance already existed, and that the Government had followed the Petitions Committee recommendations and established a working group which included the NUS, OfS, Universities UK, the OIA, and CMA.

Donelan said, " **Rather than focusing on wide-scale refunds that in reality would make little difference to the money in students' pockets [...] the Government are focusing on the outcomes of the higher education experience.** "

On the £256m figure, she said it was for institutions to use throughout the academic year where they saw fit, and this was why the pot had been so regularly referred to. She noted that the Government had stressed the need to spend this money on reducing digital poverty, and that the Education Secretary had commissioned the OfS to conduct a review into digital learning and teaching.

In closing, Chris Evans said that the core of the problem was that universities currently did not live up to the way in which they had marketed themselves in recent years. This was nobody's fault, but he said it was Government's responsibility to step up to help students in need. He thanked all those who took part for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e -petitions 300528, 302855, 306494, 324762, and 552911, relating to university tuition fees.