

8th February 2021

Letter regarding NUS' stance to tuition fee refund/reduction campaigns

Dear Elected Officers of the National Union of Students,

We are writing as a collective of student representatives to express our disappointment at NUS' decision to not coordinate a nationwide tuition fee refund/reduction campaign for students this academic year.

Students have provided us feedback that they are not satisfied with the value of their education this year and we know that from your *Students Deserve Better* campaign you agree with this sentiment.

We wholly support undergraduate and postgraduate students who feel that their education in the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 is not worth the tuition fees they are being expected to pay (whether upfront or through future taxation). This is due to: a lack of face-to-face teaching; a reduction in contact hours; a lack of access to facilities and physical resources needed for learning/research; the cancellation of field trips; a reduction in data-gathering opportunities; the cancellation of events associated with learning/research, such as graduations, exhibitions, and end-of year shows; and a reduction in employability opportunities usually associated with the course. This is not an exhaustive list of the impacts on education provision that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused.

As elected representatives, we feel it is our duty to represent these students by campaigning for a national reduction in tuition fees for the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21. This could be through asking the Government to wipe a portion of affected students' debts, to account for insufficient education provision this year, and to provide financial support for universities where students have paid their fees upfront and therefore need immediate cash refunds.

We usually look to NUS to facilitate the coordination of national campaigns and bring SU officers together for maximum impact. However, in the absence of a campaign by NUS many SUs are having to attempt to coordinate national movements alone¹. We feel let down by the absence of NUS' voice and resources in the tuition fee conversation and believe that as a representative body for all students in the UK, the NUS has a duty equal to ours as Students' Union officers to respond to student feedback with a tuition fee refund/reduction campaign.

We understand that the NUS officers have given some reasons for not pursuing a tuition fee refund/reduction campaign which we will address below:

- 1) **Priority should be placed on rent rebates which will put money back in students pockets more immediately** – we do not believe that these campaigns are mutually exclusive. As SUs, we have stretched ourselves to be able to run multiple campaigns at once this year, according to student demand. NUS is much larger than many SUs and so should be capable

¹ <https://www.lsesu.com/suaf/>; <https://www.thesu.org.uk/voice/campaigns/easethefees/>; <https://nouse.co.uk/2020/10/06/discontent-rises-among-uk-university-students/>;

of doing the same, supporting us to campaign for both rent rebates and tuition fee refunds/reductions.

- 2) ***A tuition free tax freeze would only benefit the highest earning graduates*** – this is true to an extent but, fails to recognise that there are many students whose tuition fees are not paid in full by student loan providers, for example, postgraduate students, international students and many Muslim students, who you yourself have advocated that there be an alternative student finance system for².

Furthermore, this stance fails to recognise the financial, familial and mental health pressures of having a large student debt, regardless of whether that debt is going to be fully repaid. These pressures are more likely to fall on lower earning graduates.

- 3) ***Demanding tuition fee refunds plays into the narrative that higher education is a product/commodity, which NUS want to reject in pursuit of free education*** – we strongly disagree with this suggestion and instead believe that students exercising their rights as consumers in a marketized higher education system will expose the flaws of such a system, leading us closer to free education. Students sitting silently within a marketized system is only going to benefit its continuation.

We hope that you will reconsider your position and support us to lobby nationally for tuition fee refunds/reductions this year. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Elected Students' Union officers from around the UK
(please see corresponding document for signatories)

² <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/letter-to-education-secretary-on-alternative-student-finance-260121>