Subject line examples: Take action for students/ Students need your support/ Please help students / Your own subject line

Your full name

Insert your address

Your phone number

Dear (insert name),

I am reaching out to you as a matter of urgency.

As with many other sectors, the Higher Education sector has been fundamentally altered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Students have had an inadequate university experience this year, being denied both academic and non-academic opportunities that they were assured they would have before signing up to pay thousands in fees. This has undeniably contributed to the mental health crisis that has developed amongst young people; with NHS England reporting a 284% increase in depression amongst 16-39 year olds. Unlike other sectors, university students have received little recognition for their struggles this year and little support from the Government, often being entirely ignored in Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Covid-19 press conferences. This is despite the cost of this year’s university experience being at least £9,250 (much more for international and postgraduate students).

**Students deserve to be treated better than this** and, as paying customers, **students deserve the right to reimbursement on their tuition fees this year**. The complexities of the Higher Education fees and funding system means that **only the Government can make this happen**.

Write Off Right Now, Forgotten Students and #EasetheFees are among the many student movements advocating for economic justice for students, as a result of the Covid-19 impacts on students' standard of education and wellbeing*.* I am writing to you today, to ask that you listen to their arguments and demands, because alongside millions of students I feel ignored and exploited this year.

**Our demands are:**

**1.** **Write off the student debt** for those who have received Student Finance England Loans in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years. The same should be applied to home students with loans from any of the devolved nations, for parity of treatment; i.e. loans under the Student Awards Agency Scotland, Student Finance Wales, and Student Finance Northern Ireland.

In the year 2019/20, the number of England domiciled students taking out Tuition Fee Loans was 1.1 million (Student Support for Higher Education in England 2020: 2019/20 Full Year and 2020/21 Early In Year, 2020). This rose to 1.2 million undergraduate and postgraduate students taking out loans to study in the 2020/21 academic year (Bolton and Hubble, 2021). Therefore, over 1 million students each Covid-19 impacted year have taken on substantial debt for an unjustifiable standard of education. In all likelihood, none of those students has received the educational experience for which they paid.

* **UK Undergraduate Students**

The current undergraduate Tuition Fee Loan for a UK student is £9,250 per year. Therefore, most UK undergrads have £27,750 or more of just tuition fee debt after leaving University. Their debt will further increase as interest is added.

* **UK Postgraduate Students**

Student Finance England has provided the current postgraduates with the following amount in loans:

· £11,222 if your course starts on or after 1 August 2020

· £10,906 if your course started between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020

· £10,609 if your course started between 1 August 2018 and 31 July 2019

Postgraduate students often leave jobs to study or have children to tend to whilst studying. This places them in an especially difficult financial position and has, in many cases, further reduced their ability to engage with their education this year, where they have home schooling responsibilities etc.

**2.** **Economic Justice** for those who are paying tuition fees upfront.

This may require financial support for universities to give immediate reimbursements to those students, including international students, who have paid for their fees in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years without a loan.

* **UK Undergraduate Students**

As stated above, currently UK undergraduates pay tuition fees of £9,250 a year. Where they have paid this out of their own pockets, they too should be reimbursed to the same extent as students whose fees are paid using a student loan.

* **UK Postgraduate Students**

As stated above, currently UK postgraduates pay tuition fees of upwards of £10,000. Where they have paid this out of their own pockets, they too should be reimbursed to the same extent as students whose fees are paid using a student loan.

* **ALL Undergraduate and Postgraduate International Students**

In 2019/20 there were 538,600 overseas students studying at UK universities; 22% of the total student population. 143,000 were from the EU and 395,6000 from elsewhere (Bolton and Hubble, 2021). On top of the general impacts of the pandemic on university life, international students have been faced with regularly changing international travel restrictions. This has meant that at times, some have been unable to even travel to the UK to access their education. Where they’ve been forced to study remotely, they’ve been faced with a challenging time zone difference, limiting access further. This is all whilst paying more than their peers, and usually out of pocket (Murray, 2021).

**Why are we demanding this?**

**Standard of Education and Experience**

During the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years, students have had greatly reduced in-person teaching, methods of assessment drastically altered, limited access to on-campus facilities such as libraries, laboratories and studios, placements and field trips cancelled, and graduations and exhibitions put online. Students have been assured time and time again that a “blended learning” approach (a combination of online and in-person learning) is sufficient to replace the academic experience they would normally expect. According to a recent poll however, the majority of students feel that “blended learning” has been “ineffective”, or “very ineffective” (Tidman, 2020). *Write off, Right Now*, conducted a student survey into student satisfaction, finding that 23% of students want to defer or suspend their studies or are unsure about continuing with their studies. This is a concerning indication of students’ poor experiences of learning this year, which could have significant ramifications on the finances and reputation of the UK Higher Education sector.

80% of this year’s graduates are worried that Covid-19 will affect their university grades (Uffindell, 2020) and only one in three graduates are confident about securing a graduate role, down from 49% pre-pandemic (Uffindell, 2020). An ineffective “blended learning” model has left students lacking the skills and confidence they need to enter the job market, which is seeing rising unemployment since the start of the pandemic (Statista, 2020). Modern languages students will be graduating without sufficient conversational practice; Geology students will be graduating without practice of studying real rock samples, only photos; and Fashion Design students will be graduating without a complete portfolio of work to show employers. With all this in mind, it’s no surprise that more than 85% of university students feel they should get some form of tuition fee refund this year (Tidman, 2020).

For more examples of students’ stories during the pandemic, see the Instagram page @easethefees.

**Students Financial and Mental Wellbeing**

A poor standard of education, uncertainty about the future, consistent financial burden, and a reduction in social and extra-curricular opportunities over the last year, has led to a mental health crisis. 52% of students’ report their mental health being negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (NUS, 2020). Of those students who have sought help for a deterioration in their mental health, only 57% are satisfied with how they’ve been supported (NUS, 2020).

Easing the financial burden on students and the anxiety of debt repayment will go a significant way to reducing pressures on students’ mental health. Furthermore, it will rebuild trust between students and the Government, who have not only overlooked the struggles and injustices against students over the last year, but have used students as scapegoats, blaming them for spikes in Covid-19 cases.

**Why is tuition fee reimbursement the Government’s responsibility?**

We understand that there have been a number of previous petitions put forward to the Government regarding higher education and financial compensation, such as, ‘Require universities to partially refund tuition fees for 20/21 due to Covid-19’ (Petition 324762, 2020). The Government’s response to these petitions has been to simply pass the responsibility for quality of education, complaints and tuition fee reimbursements onto universities and the OIA. For example, saying that “universities are responsible for setting their own fees. Any lowering of fees would be their decision” (Petition 552911, 2020).

The Government is feigning ignorance of the fact that commonly universities do not have the level of financial reserves that would enable them to reimburse tuition fees *en masse* (for students who have paid fees upfront), nor the power to write off student debt (for students who have taken out loans to cover their fees). The Government alone has the power to resolve this, by agreeing to the approach set out above.

A 2020 report for the House of Commons stated that the Government expects that only 25% of current full-time undergraduates who take out a loan will repay it in full (Bolton, 2020). As such, the real impact of the “write off” of student debt that we ask for in Demand 1, is substantially less than the full amount of any amount refunded. It is also worth bearing in mind that the impact of any loan refund is delayed until the time when those students who have the benefit of the refund would have been repaying that part of their loans – which is years from now. In the meantime, the impact on current students’ mental health, and their optimism for the future beyond graduation would be entirely positive.

For parity of treatment, this write off would need to be accompanied by Demand 2, where the Government takes responsibility for financially supporting institutions to provide immediate reimbursement to those students who self-funded their tuition fees.

As mentioned previously, the Government has tried to pass responsibility solely onto the shoulders of educational institutions, despite knowing that issuing refunds *en masse* is not financially sustainable. The Government itself has overseen the creation and continuation of a marketised higher education system, which has proved unworkable once students begin to truly behave like consumers. Therefore, it’s the Government’s responsibility to “bail out” higher education institutions this year, and review the higher education fees system going forward, so that we never again find ourselves in this situation of student exploitation and institutional instability.

Regards,

**Insert name/Signature**