**Answers from Michelle Donelan**

**Attendees**

Cara Chittenden President Exeter

Elizabeth Marshall President Falmouth

Amelia Banton President Student Experience

Charlotte Agnew President Welfare & Inclusivity

Maariyah Najeeb Exeter MSc Marine Vertebrate Ecology and Conservation,

Exeter Post-Graduate Officer

Jack Wilkins Exeter Ba(hons) English and History, Exeter Education Officer

Megan Kidner            Exeter BMBS Medicine, Subject Chair

*Josh Ordu Peters Exeter Ba(hons) Politics, Exeter Open Officer (substitute)*

Anna Logan Falmouth MA Illustration, Department Representative

Sophie James Falmouth Ba(hons) Games Art, Accommodation Officer

Eva Jiggins Falmouth Ba(hons) Fashion Photography, Course Representative

*Ben Statham-Wilkins Falmouth Ba(hons) Film, Course Representative (substitute)*

**General Questions**

We would like to reserve a space for questions around the new “roadmap” on students returning to university, that is due to be released on the 22nd February.

1. CARA: We were pleased that you announced an additional £50 million in hardship funding for students at the beginning of February. However, on the 18th January the Welsh Government announced an additional £40 million in financial hardship for Welsh universities, and on the 26th January the Scottish Government announced an additional £30 million in financial hardship for Scottish universities. Furthermore, the Government today announced an extra £420 million to support schools in England, but has not matched this for universities.  **Why has the Government not matched the financial hardship funding for students in England, in proportion to the funding provided by other UK nations for significantly fewer students?**

* Have given a time limit for spending. Evaluating need and use once this has been spent  - other governments haven’t been as clear about this. Keeping it under review.
* Additional money provided by tax payer.
* Focusing money on digital hardship and tackling poverty to put the money in the pockets of the students most in need

1. AMELIA: The Government is partially responsible for the marketized higher education model that students now find themselves in. This model seems to be workable so long as money is being taken from students, but when it comes to giving money back to students because a service/product has not been fulfilled, it falls apart. A survey by Quizlet in December found that more than 85% of students want full or partial tuition fee refunds this year – this was carried out even before the third national lockdown. You have stated that “Universities are responsible for their own fees”.

1. **Why is the Government continuing to place the responsibility for tuition fee refunds on universities, despite knowing that refunding 85% of the student population (at least) would bankrupt many, if not all, Higher Education Institutions?**

Unis do not have to charge top fees. The govts rule is that they should not charge if they are not fulfilling their art of the contract. They shouldn’t have taken decisions which left them at risk of bankruptcy.

She agrees some students have not been receiving this (but thinks some have received it). They should go to the student finance department as that's what the money provided by the government is there for.

1. **Will the Government create a blanket policy to provide partial refunds to students, protecting their consumer rights but also the financial sustainability of institutions?**

Restructuring regime is there as a safety net - no unis have yet approached this.

International student numbers have been maintained which has kept money coming in.

OfS can investigate where students haven’t received satisfactory education.

1. ANNA: Postgraduate students have often taken on financial risk to complete their studies, for example leaving jobs and using savings to fund their degrees. International PG students pay double the amount that UK students do and choose to come to our universities because of promised degree aspects. These students have spent much of their degree having no access to practical resources and experiences they are paying for. Falmouth PG students are paying for access to specialist arts facilities, such as large scale printers. Meanwhile Exeter PG students are paying for data gathering and field work experience. Some PG students even had a delayed start date of January and therefore, due to the national lockdown, have never set foot on our campuses. **With this in mind,** **do you feel that you can justify not supporting universities to provide tuition fee refunds to postgraduate students?**

(attendee couldn't make it to ask question)

1. CHARLOTTE: As the DfE allows a phased return to universities this academic year, this will not be applicable to many International Students who travelled home before Christmas, particularly due to stricter new rules around travel. International students are a key part of our learning and research communities.

1. **What is the Government going to do to compensate international students (both financially and academically), who will be paying significantly more for a lesser educational experience than their UK peers for the remainder of this academic year?**

1. **How is the Government going to maintain the good reputation of UK Higher Education in the eyes of international students, in light of the poor educational provisions this year? (Meg - Char will do this)**

Regularly discussing with universities. Some that will be able to complete overseas, however, with the practical courses we want to get back in the 33 countries or financially support those students if we have to keep to quarantine policies. Michelle said that govt has been really flexible with international travel so they don't get into problems with visas.

**Exeter/Falmouth Specific Questions**

1. LIZZY: FALMOUTH - Falmouth students have suffered disproportionately from the lockdown restrictions, and their chances of redeeming their portfolios, work, and education relies on the reopening of the campus. Students are limited to the resources they have at home to produce ‘industry’ level work, which is leading to a lot of our students losing confidence in their creative development and skills. They are missing out on building a meaningful portfolio and exhibiting their work in degree shows, which will ultimately affect their employability prospects.

Luckily, to ensure our students are not kept at this disadvantage and have the body of work they need in order to get a job in their industry, Falmouth University is currently aiming to get students access to facilities and resources in months after their graduation, at the expense of first year rent refunds within student accommodation. However, the Government urgently needs to support Universities like Falmouth in doing this because they are having to use rent refund money to achieve opening the facilities and extending assessment deadlines.

**Can anything be done in this instance for the sake of both supporting the University's efforts and supporting the students needing to find future employment?**

Encourage universities to look at easter holidays to see what can be done (falmouth don't have easter), summer's last resort (tenancy may be up/ contracts with staff), it can be explored in certain areas. Commissioned UK are looking to build back extra time into the system, by looking at staffing and resource costs/ time. We will also be working with industry employers to offer opportunity and understand the situation. However, the financial help University is getting is healthy, and next year OFS have offered a support package for smaller and specialist, which is a £10 million pot, However, will need to take the point away.

1. JACK: EXETER - Russell Group Universities are reluctant to provide significant mitigation policies to protect students’ grades this year, as they fear it will affect the quality and standards of their degrees, and their reputation in the sector. **In the case that the Government refuses to create national policy, will you put securities and recommendations in place so that universities’ reputations are not affected by actions taken to protect student outcomes in this exceptional year?**

Universities are autonomous - cannot mandate them in law to do particular things in this space and aren’t the best experts to do so (unis know their students better).

Govt have said they expect unis to understand challenges facing students and help mitigate these - recognises positives and negatives of no detriment policy.

Will continue to reiterate to unis that they must understand challenges students face and to communicate the protective measures in place well.

1. SOPHIE: FALMOUTH - In many cases students are being charged for rent over the lockdown period, as small and specialist universities especially simply cannot afford to refund the rent of so many students. Is anything going to be done to address the fact that students have been paying for accommodation that they are still not allowed to return to, and that whether a **student’s rent is being refunded is down to an unjust lottery of which university they happen to go to?** For example, Exeter are receiving rent refunds but Falmouth Students are not, however, we share the same halls. This imbalance is hard for students to accept.

Also, students in privately rented accommodation are paying for housing that they have been asked not to live in this term. They are being asked to spend not insignificant amounts of money on rent, as part of the effort to stop the spread of Covid-19 by not travelling back to term-time accommodation. Your response has been to ask Private Landlords to consider partial refunds, but you have provided no incentive or requirement for them to do so. **Will you push harder for refunds for students in privately rented accommodation, and commit to reviewing private student housing legislation as a whole, beyond the pandemic?**

We are urging private landlords to put students' interests at heart. This is one of the key impacts that has been particularly hard. This might have put them into hardship (hence the money given by the government). Students need to go to University to access hardship. We keep all of these things under review. [sophie: Exeter verses Falmouth refunds because of circumstances]. The government can’t force Falmouth to do it:  Michelle to get a call in with Falmouth and OFS to help aid. Take it away. [Cherilyn: local MP piped up]. Michelle will take this individual case away.

1. MEGAN: EXETER - Recent information has shown that there is a big increase in students applying to study medicine at university, **what do you think are the impacts of this and what is the role of the Government to support medical students?**

Last year removed the cap in place for medical students. Manifesto commitment to increase no.s of nurses and doctors. Govt wants to continue to increase places for medical students. Highlights role medical students have played in fighting pandemic.

Concerned about poor mental health amongst all students - thinks that stark transition Extra funding going to mental health next year.

Going to continue to raise issues of hardship across the government.

1. EVA: FALMOUTH - Falmouth University is in a very different situation to most universities; with only £62.3m income yearly, only 7% of this comes from government grants. The university spent £2.9m on PPE and in making the entire campus ‘covid - secure,’ However the lockdown after Christmas still stopped the access to our facilities, these resources for building our portfolios are in many ways more important than the actual degree we receive at the end of our education, hence the University is trying its best to stay open for the summer and help us access the facilities. Can we perhaps sort out a plan where the students could have a rebate on their maintenance loan (as this is done by parental income - students from lower income families will be affected more), so they can afford to stay over the summer, or at least some sort of subsidisation for halls of residence from June to August so they can amend their portfolios and make up the lost time? This will really help the third year students who have suffered disproportionately already and will have to set out to industry without enough work to show for their time in education.

Avoid students over summer, because of tenancy and accessing resources.Time that is left, make it intense because of what’s less. Looking at maintenance, 50% of students don't pay this back. Looking at getting money into their pockets now. Sector is looking at ramming the term with everything, to make the time for portfolios. Take it away to explore it with them. [cherilyn is looking from a local level]

Taking away the prospect of doing something over summer to support facility usage.  
Speaking to industry and they think they can squeeze everything in without having to teach into summer but she will take away that creative arts students might need it.

Looked into maintenance loan relief etc. but 50% of students don’t pay back loans.

1. MARZ: EXETER - Our students face graduating this year without the employability skills needed to confidently enter the workplace. Many have had practical learning sessions, field work, internships, work experience opportunities, and extra-curricular opportunities cancelled. **How is the Government providing additional employability support to the next generation of workers, entering a sunken**

**economy with less experience than usual and low confidence in their skills?**

This is something she’s working with the task force. Uni is looking at this space. There are more concerns for this cohort and the economy. Communicate with business to be confident to employ and students to feel confidence. Show how robust courses are. Skills toolkit - Help boost your Cv etc...to make students more employable, online courses etc… Working on a number of initiatives.