

Questions for 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) 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. **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?**
- 2) 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”.
 - a) **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?**

- b) **Will the Government create a blanket policy to provide partial refunds to students, protecting their consumer rights but also the financial sustainability of institutions?**
- 3) 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?**
- 4) If 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.
- a) **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?**
- a) **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?**
- 5) Students in privately rented accommodation are paying for housing they have been asked not to live in this term. They are being punished for trying 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?**
- 6) There is a mental health crisis occurring amongst university students. **How has the Government sought to tackle this, and do you think you have done enough?**
- 7) **Does the Government have plans to tackle the BME attainment gap in UK universities?**

Falmouth Specific Questions

1. In your letter to students concerning their approach to the Spring term, you stated “online does not have to mean inferior,” and “all learning must be accessible.”

In our case, online is not only ‘inferior,’ it is impossible. Our students simply cannot receive the same quality of education through accessible learning, because our practical subjects are unteachable without specialist facilities. ‘Learning by doing’ in a complex environment which promotes experimentation, creative expression and technical development. Amendments made for digital learning cannot be justified as the same value for money or meet our students’ needs. They are missing out on specialist equipment, specialist support and knowledge, and ongoing critical feedback and development of their work. Though the curriculum is informed by theoretical lectures and history, the primary experience of learning is through physical elements. Therefore, we don’t agree that the Universities are responsible for tuition fee refunds when they had no choice but to teach online or attempt blended delivery. **How do the Government seek to aid arts based Universities financially, like Falmouth, so we give back the quality of education and conduct studio-based degrees students rightfully signed up for?**

2. Students on our campus are able to access the library but not their ventilated studios. However, during the pandemic, loaning out a camera has been handled exactly the same as loaning out a book - all items are sanitised and quarantined. A takeaway, equipment booking service could easily be achieved, operating in line with “essential retail” standards.

Furthermore, with only 5,385 students spread across our campuses in Penryn and Falmouth, we are fortunate in that they have a high space to student population ratio, compared to city-based universities. Our unusual situation means we should be allowed to open earlier than metropolitan based Universities considering the lower risk to our students and our lower tiered region.

Our University has proven its ability to return students to campus safely, with evidence of no Covid-19 transmission between students and the wider community last term. Despite this, creative arts courses are being ignored in favour of STEM courses with regulatory bodies when it comes to access to campus. Stopping us from continuing these safe and reliable forms of practise is causing far more harm than good. The chances of students redeeming their work and education solely relies on the reopening of facilities. **When will a return to essential facilities for creative arts courses be permitted? Will Falmouth University be given more clarity and consideration in this respect?**

3. 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. Currently, we have students being forced to work in unsafe conditions in their homes - in many cases their bedrooms. As well as the mental health issues caused by these circumstances, there are real health hazards. We have students attempting to create work without proper PPE, with dangerous power tools and handling harmful materials, all because our students are still trying to create a good standard of work. 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. However, at this moment, the Government urgently needs to support and supplement student learning from home, so that Higher Education treats its students fairly and consistently, as outlined in the Commissioner for Fair Access's Report to the Scottish Government 2020. **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?**

4. 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?**

Exeter Specific Qs

5. The government acknowledged that students studying for GCSEs and A-Levels cannot be expected to complete work under normal circumstances by cancelling exams and making changes to assessments. Meanwhile, university students are completing degrees at home in an untested, unprecedented way, the mental health of vast numbers of students is suffering, students are unable to access the library and other learning resources, including resources left at their term-time accommodation over Christmas, and lecturers (whom students rely on) are struggling with homeschooling, their own health, and the unreliability of technology. **Why has the Government not created national policy to ensure university students are supported and receive fair results, alongside secondary school students?**
6. 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?**

7. 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?**

8. Research bodies such as UKRI have failed to support PGR students. Many projects had to be postponed due to COVID and now students have to fight for funded extensions and support on a case-by-case basis. Students and staff across the UK voiced widespread discontent with the lack of sufficient support for research projects earlier in the year, but were ignored by the Government who claimed they had done enough. Researchers are integral to keeping the UK at the cutting edge of innovation, as seen by their input into Covid-19 vaccination development last year. **Why is there no further support from the Government to provide blanket extensions for PGRs and change the requirements for a case-by-case application for COVID-19 support?**

9. 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?