

Dear Ms Reed

Thank you for your letter on behalf of University of Southampton Students' Union on support during the coronavirus pandemic.

I appreciate that the past 12 months have been incredibly challenging for you and your fellow students. The last year has posed a number of significant challenges to society and students have suffered particularly acute disruption to their lives and education in order to help protect those more vulnerable than themselves. I commend the resolve of the student population in Southampton in following the rules.

I am encouraged to hear that you recognise the huge efforts which your university has gone to in order to provide the best possible student experience in highly challenging circumstances. You recognise that the university has incurred additional costs in providing this education to you as it grapples with providing online tuition whilst maintaining its excellent facilities. International students provide a critical source of income for universities in the UK and subsidises the education of home students. I'm sure you will recognise the university's ability to provide discounted tuition fees is therefore limited. It is very difficult for the Government prioritising financial support for foreign students to fund a discount.

I understand that inevitably some students will have seen significant pressures on their income as a consequence of the pandemic. Some will no doubt have suffered significant hardship for a variety of reasons. I know the University of Southampton seeks to support students through the Student Support Fund, including providing short term support for those struggling to pay for essentials. I am also aware that the SUSU also does excellent work in supporting fellow students with financial problems.

The Government has provided enhanced support for students through a number of schemes. The £70 million hardship fund was not intended for all students, but instead was created to provide targeted support for the students who are most in need. I know that some students have benefitted significantly from other government schemes, particularly from furlough. Throughout the pandemic, the Government has been focused on supporting the most vulnerable in society and I hope you will agree this is the right approach.

You raise an important point about supporting young people and graduates as they seek to enter the employment market. The Kickstart Scheme is designed to assist young people aged up to the age of 24 by funding job placements for those at risk of unemployment. This is providing a significant incentive for employers to take on young people including graduates in order to develop critical workplace skills. Such placements will be available up until the end of December 2021. I will happily raise your wish that more support could be provided to my colleagues.

I am also grateful for you sharing for the report from the APPG which echoes many of the requests which you have made. I will consider this carefully and continue to advocate the interests of students with my colleagues in government.

Thank you once again for contacting me on this important issue.

Best wishes

Royston

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