Student Council (27.01.21) – Summary of Meeting

Chaired by Victoria Udeh and Maryam Ateeq. 
Agenda and Papers found here.

Updates from the Students’ Union:

- All service provision remains online, with a hope to offer a physical presence when possible.
- All students are encouraged to apply as a candidate in the Students’ Union Elections.

Questions and Answers:

Q: Will the University be refunding students for their on-campus accommodation?

A (Quintin McKellar, Vice-Chancellor): When the initial lockdown happened in March last year, we released students from their accommodation contracts, costing the University £6 million. We were conscious at the time that because we only have one pot of money as a University, whenever we give money back to one cohort of students, it comes out of that pot, and therefore it’s other students who are paying for it.

- There’s a sense that we have to be as fair as we possibly can be to all students, because there are obviously students who are in private accommodation who are not getting their accommodation refunded at this present time, but their tuition fees are nevertheless being used to fund to some extent the accommodation refunds that we are giving to students who are on campus.

- At the start of the year, what we indicated was that we would give students who were affected by a full lockdown, and who are keeping their keys to their rooms, a 50% rebate in their accommodation fees for the period of the lockdown, and now that’s what we are doing.

- There are a few exceptions to that in specific instances, where individuals have had mental health issues, for example, or where they’ve had to go home for some other specific issue, but for the general lockdown facility when people have been stuck in their homes and unable to come back onto the campus, and they haven’t been one of the students in the exempt categories (e.g. Health and Education students, and students doing teacher training), they will be able to apply for and be given a rebate on their accommodation fees, which we’ll be giving at the time of the third payment.

- The reason we’re doing that is we want to ensure that the students who get the rebate have come back and are still engaging with the University, and are still effectively under contract.

Q: Will the University be refunding or reducing students’ tuition fees?
- **A (Quintin):** There’s a wide level of concern across the country as to whether students are getting value for money from their tuition fees, and as a University we are very committed to ensuring that all your learning outcomes will be met as a consequence of the changed provision to the educational delivery that we are giving.

- The way that we’ve changed the teaching programmes to largely online, or in some cases blended, has actually cost the University more than would normally have been the case for a conventional programme.

- We do not therefore intend to give any tuition fee rebate because we’ve been able to deliver the educational programmes which you might have expected.

- For those in final year who have practical classes, we are extending the teaching period by 2 weeks in Semester B, to allow students to catch up on the practical elements of their education that they would have expected.

**Q:** How will the Safety Net Policy work for students this year?

- **A (Quintin):** Last year it worked because we had an understanding of students’ performance through Semester A (when there wasn’t a lockdown), but we don’t have that this year because Semester A was affected by the COVID-19 lockdown in the same way as Semester B is now.

- Last year we were able to benchmark against students’ Semester A performance to ensure that no student did less well than their earlier performance would have indicated.

- This year for our final year students it’s an either or; so if those students have had better results during their second year we’re changing the weighting. What we’d normally do is weight it 25% for level 5 activity and 75% for level 6 activity. This year if students have done better in level 5, we’re going to split the weighting 50/50 instead.

- On the other hand, if students do better in level 6, we’re going to take the top 90% of credits instead, therefore weighting performance to whatever your best outcome was.

- We’ve also looked at some alternative methods that other Universities are doing, and our approach will give students the same level of outcome broadly across the spectrum, as if we did other things.

**Q:** What is the University doing to offer students Mental Health and Wellbeing support?

- **A (Quintin):** There’s been a recent increase in the number of students coming forward with anxiety or mental health issues which is causing a bit of a backlog, so unfortunately I can’t give a full assurance that everyone is getting the response that we would like to give them as quickly as possible.

- Looking at the ratios, it’s as much people who are stuck at home as it is people who are on campus – the ratio is around 60:40.
- Geri Ward (Dean of Students) has a great team, and they are working absolutely flat out to try and ensure that all students who do have problems can get some support as a consequence.

Q: What (financial) support is available to International students, who often pay their own fees?

- A (Quintin): The situation with accommodation is exactly the same as it is for home students, so there’s no difference there.
- The hardship fund that we’ve got as a University and indeed as a country is really derisory; it’s simply not enough to support not just the overseas students but home-based students who have got hardship issues at the present time.
- What we have done with the money that is available to us is distribute it as equitably as we can on the basis of need, but there’s simply not enough money to go around everybody.
- We’ve just seen some data from a review of all the University’s income and costs, and what we can tell you is that overseas students are getting really good value for money compared to any of the comparator Universities that we looked at.
- The data came from an independent review, looking at all the money that comes in from different sources and looks at how much we’re spending on all the different University activities, including the teaching and support activity.
- Of all the Universities (N = 20), our students were shown to be getting the best value for money, but I appreciate that this doesn’t help those who are suffering from hardship as a result of COVID-19.
- For reference, Wales have given £40 million to Universities to support hardship, whereas England has given £5 million – if this was allocated proportionally by student population, it would have instead been around £500 million.

Q: Would it be possible to have more interactive teaching sessions?

- A (Quintin): We’ve been encouraging staff to maintain a level of interactive, synchronous live teaching, and in the three surveys we’ve done looking at this, the results were very positive, in fact more positive than the results we get when we do conventional teaching, though I appreciate that was while we had more of a blended approach.
- I’m hoping that as many colleagues as possible are trying to give you that live interaction, but will take back the message that this is really appreciated, to reinforce that feedback.

Q: What support is being offered to students who have had their placements cancelled?
- **A (Quintin):** The careers and placements office will be doing everything they can to try and help people get placements if this is the case.

- With health courses we deal with a number of health trusts, and unfortunately not all of them have responded in the same way to the most recent lockdown period. Fortunately, those in the east of England have secured the placements so students are still getting them, but some of the trusts in London have said they’re not taking students anymore.

- For those that don’t get placements, the School of Health and Social Work are putting in support mechanisms to try and ensure that those students can catch up – this may not be exactly the same as a placement but it will enhance their learning and hopefully ensure they reach the learning outcomes required.

- To some extent we are at the mercy of the placement providers, but we’re working as hard as we can to encourage them to take students where possible.

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**Q:** Are there any death in service benefits for students on (nursing) placements?

- **A (Quintin):** I would have to double-check but it’s my understanding that we have worked to ensure that students are entitled to this. An alternative would be to take out death insurance, which is something you could enquire about with your School.

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**Q:** One of my module’s grades came back with a mean student grade of 36.9% – how can a University publish grades where the average student is expected to fail, and why isn’t the marking anonymous?

- **A (Quintin):** My understanding is that marking should be anonymous, and the grades distribution you mention does sound bizarre, but I’ll have to take it back to the Business School with the full details in order to provide a complete answer.

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**Q:** Online learning has been completely different, and has not gone well on my course – are students where this is the case eligible for tuition fee refunds?

- **A (Quintin):** It’s best for students to fill in their module feedback questionnaires for specific cases like this, as there are many different modules taking place across the University, all doing different things, but issues can be addressed in the feedback that comes through these forms.

- With regards to the reduction of tuition fees, we will look at specific cases where individuals, for one reason or another, have had specific problems.

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**Q:** Is it possible for students to have some flexibility around their tuition fee payment deadlines?
- **A (Quintin):** The University was carrying £10 million of extended debt last Semester, which is a very difficult situation to be in. The concern that we’ve got about extending people’s payment schedules too long is that it allows students to build up debt, and we don’t want that to happen because eventually they get to a point where they can’t repay that debt, but we are trying to be as flexible as possible.

- Where students are having difficulty, they can engage with the payment colleagues in registry, because they may be able to create a repayment plan which allows them to extend to some extent, but we’d have to be reassured that at some point in the future the student is going to be able to make the payments in order to keep up to date.

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**Q:** Is there a reason why the University hasn’t communicated about the termination of accommodation contracts (in the case of a lockdown) since September?

- **A (Quintin):** My understanding is that there was a recent communication to all students who were in accommodation or had accommodation about the potential rebates.

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**Q:** Will there be any extension to the deadline of 31st January for students wanting to cancel accommodation contracts?

- **A (Quintin):** No we hadn’t’ intended to extend that – it was my understanding that the communication that went out some time ago was very clear, so if students are unaware of that I will have to inquire as to why that might be the case.

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**Q:** Will students be offered a COVID-19 test when they return to the UK on 22 February?

- **A (Quintin):** We will continue to test during the time that we need to continue to test.

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**Q:** What is the University doing to support students arriving into the UK from overseas?

- **A (Quintin):** The guidance is suggesting that they have to self-isolate in hotels near airports, but we are lobbying and negotiating with government to see if we can get students back on to campus because we have some halls accommodation which could be used specifically as a quarantine block.
Q: Are there any plans to have more lines of communication between students and the University?

- **A (Quintin):** This Q&A is one way in which we could do that, and I’d be very happy to come back. We do also have Student Reps on virtually all of the University’s major committees too, so students can feed concerns in through them and the Students’ Union.
- If there were further mechanisms that students would like to see, we would be more than happy to embrace them.

Q: What is being done to support students who no longer have practical classes because of COVID-19?

- **A (Quintin):** The teaching period is being extended by two weeks in Semester B, so we’re hoping to have the facility by May to allow students to catch up with any practical sessions they’ve missed.

Q: Will the financial hit that the University is taking because of COVID-19 affect the viability of certain courses?

- **A (Quintin):** At the moment no, but we always review our courses and do a portfolio review each year, but that’s more to look at the popularity of courses. As long as students are turning up and we’ve created a course which we can run effectively given the level of tuition fees we get, then there shouldn’t be any requirement to cut courses.

Q: How is the viability of courses weighed up – is the focus on student outcome or finances?

- **A (Quintin):** We cross subsidise all the time between different courses; for instance, a lot of our Life and Medical Sciences courses are much more expensive to run than say Business or Law courses, but everyone pays the same tuition fees, so no we wouldn’t sit a course that’s popular with students.

Q: How is the University working to generate opportunities to get links with top companies for the provision of placements?

- **A (Quintin):** The enterprise team are working with businesses across the country all the time to try and ensure that we can engage with them and develop opportunities for people to go and work with them.
Q: Would it be possible to provide students with the full Adobe suite?

- A (Quintin): My understanding is that we have purchased Adobe so that students can have access to it now, but I’d have to confirm that with my colleagues to be sure.

Q: How does online teaching and learning cost more than it would normally cost in-person?

- A (Quintin): There’s been additional expenditure and there’s been a massive reduction in income to the University at the same time (e.g. food services, accommodation), plus the additional costs of all the preventive measures which have been required, including protective hand washing, increased spacing, face masks etc.