

PE1807/D Petitioner submission of 16 October 2020

I welcome the Ombudsman Office's submission and think that it does provide evidence that there is a desire by many students for the aims of this petition to be realised. I think it is worth noting that many students are not aware of the formal processes, as well as the fact many complaints are still being worked out through the university system. Despite universities stating that they will not compensate students for shortfalls of last year, a full complaints process is necessary before even raising it with the SPSO. University complaints departments are still impacted and have notified complainants their responses will be delayed. I can personally attest that my complaint had not been elevated past the first stage of the internal procedure after over a month of constant contact. This is required despite the universities already stating the outcome in advance. I believe as the SPSO alluded to there are many cases still at the university level or were decided by the universities with the students opting not to press on with further proceedings.

I believe that the submission also raises a valid point about how there will likely be further calls for tuition reductions or compensation, shortly after the spreading events that happened in halls. While it is debatable about what universities advertised to students this year and how much students would have been able to anticipate what this year would look like, it cannot be denied last year that students would have been able to anticipate or mitigate both industrial action or the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of payment of fees or enrollment. This petition, while focusing on students of last year, could provide a framework for future issues regarding universities' obligations for students. The framework laid out in this petition of giving additional funding to universities for the expressed purpose of direct compensation of fee paying students, is the only one that universities would be willing to comply with as it is in their interest.

I think it is clear to see that universities failed to meet the expectations as students missed weeks of content and the new formatting led many teachers unable to provide the same educational standards. Appropriate mitigation measures were not in place as they were unable to mitigate the impact of the industrial action on students nor were they able to mitigate the damage done in the transfer to online teaching as many students were still missing out on valuable content due to inaccessibility of proper technology not just on the part of students but more often on the part of lecturers themselves.

While members of the committee have suggested that this matter should simply be delegated to the universities to handle directly, I do not believe this is fair as the university complaints system is always geared towards outcomes in the universities interest. The SPSO while helpful in setting recommendations, many do not recommend compensation and universities, still do not adhere to some of the recommendations even when it is simple as a written apology. The only other action is court action which is costly, time consuming, and frankly inaccessible for most students.

While the Scottish government in their response to this petition look at the ways they have funded universities since the beginning of the pandemic, it does not minimise the disruption caused last year, and in most instances do not actually change the help most students receive. The hardship fund and the digital poverty program are

being used for the most needed students among us, but many more students still struggle financially, especially now that most student jobs such as those in the hospitality sector are all but gone and recently graduated students are unable to find new jobs.

The Scottish Government and this Parliament does have some responsibility and interest in the affairs of Universities as public institutions as these measures and other actions this year have shown. The government has an interest in maintaining the welfare of these students as they stimulate the economy of Scotland and engage with Scottish institutions. The treatment of these students on the part of universities across the end of last academic year and this academic year has led to high levels of student dissatisfaction, which could in turn lead to less fee paying students coming in the future due to the reputation of the universities being lost.

The framework laid out in this petition of giving additional funding to universities for the expressed purpose of direct compensation of fee paying students, is the only one that universities would be willing to comply with as it is in their interest as the funding should not be otherwise allocated.