

EMERGENCY POLICY: NUS' RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This policy proposal was submitted formally by the NUS Officer Executive. It has the support of both the current leadership (Officers) and future leadership (Presidents-Elect and election candidates) of NUS.

Summary

This emergency motion addresses the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, setting out the key issues our members face and how we can unite as a movement and work to support everyone affected by this crisis in a very fluid situation.

What's the problem?

The COVID-19 pandemic is the single biggest public health crisis in generations and has already had a profound impact on the UK and around the globe.

NUS must ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of the seven million students and apprentices we represent as an absolute priority as government, sector agencies and wider society respond to the crisis.

From international students who cannot travel home and need visa extensions, to FE students uncertain how they will be assessed as examinations are cancelled, to student renters unable to pay their rent because they have been made redundant to their part-time job and many more, our members have been affected in a myriad of ways.

While many government departments (in Westminster and the devolved nations governments) and agencies are responding to the crisis, with such a fluid situation and with so many challenges the needs of students and apprentices could be overlooked or unintended or unrecognised consequences arise from those decisions which are made.

As well as the impacts on individual students and apprentices, there is a major risk the disruption will undermine the financial sustainability of providers across further and higher education, with enormous consequences for our members long after the pandemic itself recedes.

What's the solution?

Our guiding principles are:

- The immediate safety, health and wellbeing of students
- Preventing students falling into poverty or homelessness due to coronavirus
- Prioritising the most vulnerable communities and those hardest hit by coronavirus including disabled students, students with underlying health conditions, international students, estranged students, students in precarious work, students on low incomes or in poverty
- Supporting, championing and protecting students who are working in frontline services in healthcare, social work, supermarkets, food production and other essential services
- Ensuring that the delivery of education, research and related functions (admissions, regulation etc) are as effective and fair as they can be under the circumstances and only to proceed with delivery where it is accessible and appropriate to do so

Key solutions include:

Institutions, sector bodies and governments should work in close partnership with students' unions and NUS on their changing responses to coronavirus. And they should communicate clearly and directly with students on what's happening.

Governments, institutions and others should work with SUs and NUS to address various detailed issues and challenges across education in the following areas to ensure students are safe, healthy, and aren't falling into poverty or other danger:

- The health & mental health of students and apprentices
- Pay, conditions and support for healthcare students and others pulled into frontline service work
- Student housing
- Student finance
- International student visa extensions
- The cancellation of examination in schools and FE
- The HE admissions cycle
- The regulation and quality of education including apprentices who may not be able to continue in their programmes

Governments should urgently address the following wider issues that disproportionately impact on students:

- Rent and utility bill holidays for those who cannot pay
- Pay replacement for people who are self-employed and in precarious work

As specific solutions are identified, governments in the different nations of the UK must step in to support providers or individual students, especially where this is beyond the means of providers or local government and where private interests are unwilling to help.

Governments must also look to support providers who experience financial difficulties and limit as far as possible the risk not only of provider failure but of cuts to staffing and services which undermine the student experience and the ability of providers to support society at large.

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