

19 January 2021

Dear Alex, Bandy, George, Rachel and Rachel,

RUSU open letter to the University Executive Board

I am writing in response to your recent letter to the University Executive Board raising concerns you have received from our student community about the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their university experience.

Firstly, this year has been extraordinary, as you rightly point out. I am very aware of the challenges our students are currently facing. In particular, the fast-changing government advice has required us all, students and colleagues alike, to adapt quickly to new ways of studying and working. This has often meant implementing changes with little or no warning and with limited detailed government guidance. Our whole community has done this incredibly well and I would like to thank everyone for their resilience and positivity in these difficult circumstances.

While we have had to deliver some of our commitments to our students in different ways, as an institution, we continue to offer a high-quality learning experience and to provide good support to students. This has included:

Education: We have adapted programmes to account for delivery of significantly increased levels of content online and, as government regulation has allowed, continued to deliver as much face-to-face teaching as we can in a COVID-safe environment. Colleagues have also adapted assessments to better fit with our current circumstances and style of teaching and learning. We have worked hard to ensure all students have the opportunity to meet their learning outcomes.

Financial support: Our Student Support Fund and Digital Support Fund have awarded more than £145,000 to students. As well as providing a Halls fee waiver during the spring lockdown, we have also recently announced a similar accommodation fee waiver for Halls students not living in their UPP Halls rooms during the current lockdown from 6 January to 22 February.

Welfare and academic support: Our full range of specialist academic and welfare support teams have continued to support students, including our new COVID-19 Support & Behaviour Team and COVID-19 Case Management Team. We have also provided food and support to those students in self-isolation.

Social opportunities: Since March, our Support Our Students scheme has assisted those self-isolating or feeling lonely, by pairing students to help one another or have someone to talk to. We have also brought all our events together in one place through Get Together Apart, to make it easier to meet new people and enjoy new experiences.

Careers and development: We have held a number of careers fairs online, linking students up with employers. Our Life Tools programme offers talks on a range of relevant subjects, like managing stress or bouncing back from setbacks.

Student voice: We have sought wherever possible to involve RUSU in discussions and decision-making in our COVID-19 response to ensure that the student voice is heard and taken fully into account. We have been grateful for the professional way in which you have represented students in our wider response to the pandemic.

On behalf of UEB, I would also like to respond to the specific points raised in your letter.

Tuition: We will not offer a reduction in tuition fees this year. We have worked hard to adapt all aspects of our provision to deliver on learning outcomes and provide the best learning experience possible for our students this year, in ways that keep our whole community safe. Although we have had to move most teaching online this term, at the government's request and until the government confirms we may resume classes on campus, our blended learning environment was designed with this flexibility in mind, as many students have been unable to be on campus and have been studying online since the beginning of the year. As far as possible we have continued to safely deliver practical sessions for relevant subjects, as well as continuing to provide opportunities such as placements.

We are confident that this flexible approach will enable students to meet their programme learning outcomes, whether they are on campus or studying at a distance.

Students continue to be closely supported through their Schools and our wider network of specialist support services, online and in-person where needed. Facilities have also remained available on campus to the greatest extent possible while responding to government requirements, including the Library, study space and catering.

In order to provide students with the teaching and support they need, and aware that some students are facing financial challenges as a result of COVID-19, we have also made additional investments in areas such as the new COVID-19 support teams, Student Support Funds and Hall fee waivers.

I would encourage any students with concerns about the level of teaching or support they have received to speak to their Module Convenor or Academic Tutor in the first instance, to hopefully resolve this. Students can also raise a formal complaint using the form on Essentials for us to consider and respond to individual instances.

With regards to lobbying the government, I meet regularly with our representative national body, Universities UK, to advocate for the best interests of our whole community and I have also been engaging directly with the Minister for Universities. In all these discussions, I have emphasised the impact on the wider student experience. I will also shortly be sending a letter to our local MPs to highlight some concerns about the impact of the current situation on the University, particularly for those in private accommodation.

Private accommodation: We are committed to doing all we can to support students in private accommodation, as we know they are being equally affected by the current situation as those in Halls. I have written a letter to landlords which we are finalising with you. This will be sent and shared with students as soon as possible.

As noted above, we have made additional funds available for students facing financial hardship and we would encourage any students in this position to review the information on Essentials and contact the Student Financial Support Team for further advice if needed.

No detriment policy: As you know, we have been working to develop plans for exams and assessments this spring/summer, which includes flexible mitigation arrangements to ensure students are fairly recognised for their hard work this year and are not disadvantaged academically due to circumstances arising from COVID-19 that are beyond their control. We are currently finalising our arrangements and hope to update students on the details of this in the coming days.

Student experience: The pandemic has reminded us all that there are some experiences that cannot easily be replicated online, particularly social opportunities which form part of student life. Students are understandably disappointed that such an important time in their lives has not been as they had hoped. We absolutely recognise this, and we all share that disappointment with our community. We have regularly acknowledged the anxiety, frustration, and disappointment that students are facing throughout our communications.

I hope you have seen through your direct involvement with our COVID-19 response that we have sought to do all we reasonably can to support our student community. We understand students come to university for many different reasons. Of course, passion for their academic subject, a desire to learn and exciting future career prospects are very important. But alongside the formal university environment, students also want the informal social experience that comes with being on a university campus, and this is also a significant factor in their decision to come to university.

Within the legal constraints on in-person interaction, we have offered a wide variety of social events and development opportunities online, which have been very successful, including for those who stayed in Reading for the recent Christmas break. We know that RUSU too, subject to these same restrictions, has also offered an extensive range of online opportunities.

With vaccinations now being rolled out nationwide, there is every reason to be optimistic that the situation will improve as we move into the spring. As soon as we are safely and legally able to do so, we will work with you to offer students the many and varied on-campus opportunities that they would usually enjoy.

I hope this letter reassures you that we have made all our decisions with our students' safety and learning outcomes at heart. My UEB colleagues and I thank you for your continued support, through participation at committee meetings, and, more informally, by providing anecdotal feedback from the student community for us to consider – such as the Halls fee waiver.

We look forward to continuing to work with you and your RUSU colleagues to support our students in the coming months. If you have any further questions or queries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Van de Noort', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Robert Van de Noort
Vice-Chancellor

On behalf of the University Executive Board