

PE1807/F

Petitioner submission of 3 December 2020

In response to the Minister's letter I would like to submit the following. While I readily acknowledge the finite amount of funds available for dealing with this crisis, students have unjustly lost out on valuable education worth thousands of pounds. I believe that students were seriously impacted not just by Covid, but also the industrial action which took place over numerous weeks, with little accommodation. This part of the petition and report was completely ignored by the Minister in his response. This is important because the Scottish Government clearly needs to play a larger role with regards to industrial actions going forward. Scottish university students were disproportionately impacted by the UCU strikes of last year and were more likely to have missed vital material in their courses.

The primary reason for bringing this issue to this body and simply not leaving it to the SPSO and universities, is the failure of this process to fairly hear student complaints and get redress. The Minister is wrong in asserting that only a limited amount of students feel this way. The university complaints systems are being delayed more than ever and most timescales for the process are also being delayed. Most students are unaware that the complaints system can even be utilised for the purpose of seeking compensation which also likely leaves students not filing. Even more, universities have announced they will not award compensation, so will not uphold complaints, thus making the process useless.

The SPSO has offered many recommendations for universities in the past, and often these have been ignored. The process of internal university complaints and SPSO is clearly not equipped to handle these types of grievances, especially ones which might negatively impact a university's finances. Universities may not necessarily do what they feel is right, as outlined in the Minister's statement, but do what is in their interests. While universities may go to the SFC for expenditures, there are obviously competing interests with funding requests and universities are more likely to fight for funding in other areas rather than fighting for student compensation. We the students are fighting for compensation right now in the process that is available to us, but this process is simply not geared to producing fair results.

I appreciate that both the Minister and I can take pride in the global reputation of Scottish Universities, as that is why I made my journey here to begin with. However, international students are the students who suffered the most, as they not only suffered an educational loss, but a visible financial loss as a result of the events of last year. They are also the least likely to be able to have access to financial support this year, as the hardship fund is considerably smaller in scale than other financial assisting programs for students. I appreciate that the Minister clearly wants to create a welcoming environment for students where expectations can be met, but unfortunately last year proved that there are shortcomings that need to be addressed, and the current process is just not geared to give students a fair chance nor make sure their expectations are met.