

Alistair Jarvis
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Friday 27th March 2020

Dear Alistair Jarvis,

Open letter to Universities UK on Student Renters

The issue of student housing has been particularly high on the agenda for government, the sector and students in this academic year. UUK hosted a productive roundtable on the topic and has worked with NUS via the the Universities UK/GuildHE Code of Practice for University Managed Student Accommodation. We have really appreciated the lead you have taken on this topic and the effective work that UUK has dedicated to assisting student renters. I hope that this will continue during this current epidemic.

Coronavirus has crystallised many of the issues that students face as renters and immediate action is needed by universities to prevent a series of crises.

NUS is making five 'asks' of universities who own and/or manage student accommodation. The full rationale behind these asks is outlined in [our recent WonkHE article](#). We are also writing to all private sector PBSA providers, PRS landlords and are working with parliamentarians and government on these issues. I am writing to you to seek UUK's support for our asks and to help in communicating them to your membership. We would ask you to write to all of your members encouraging them to take the necessary steps to implement these asks.

1. Universities must stay updated with, and implement best practice public health guidance, communicate clearly with their tenants and provide maximum support.

The government has released [guidance](#) and we want to see all universities implementing this in full and staying updated with any changes to it. It is vital that tenants are communicated with clearly and often regarding the public health provisions that are being put in place in their accommodation. In addition, students must be supported fully, both materially and pastorally, through the crisis by universities – especially if/when they must self-isolate.

For students who are particularly at-risk to Coronavirus, NUS want to see universities putting in place additional support. This may include supporting those students, if they wish, to move to a less shared accommodation option in their accommodation portfolio, such as a studio or en-suite room, at no additional cost.

Now more than ever, universities must also ensure they are communicating through all possible mechanisms with other accommodation providers and landlords housing their students in the local area to ensure the safety and welfare of their students.

2. Every university must offer a no-penalty early release from tenancy contracts or rent obligations for the current and next academic year

All universities have now either ceased operation or moved provision online and closed the majority of their campus facilities. Many students will either have to, or wish to,

return to an alternative residence as a result of Coronavirus. The government's latest advice is that students should now remain, during this period of lockdown, in their current residence and not travel.

However, many students have already left their university accommodation early and should must be offered the opportunity of a no-penalty release from their tenancy contract or rent obligations at the earliest opportunity. Many universities have already done this, as have private sector providers such as Unite and Liberty Living, but the sector must have a collective, uniform response. Placing additional financial pressure on students in this time of crisis, when they are not even utilising the accommodation, is wrong.

It is possible that lockdown procedures or a delay to the next academic year will prevent many students from moving into accommodation that they have already signed an agreement for.

If this happens, universities should offer a similar release from contract for those students. If a student wishes to be released in either of these situations and rent has already been taken for forthcoming months, it must be refunded along with their deposit.

We believe universities will largely be able to absorb these costs however we understand that financial pressure on the sector as a result of this crisis is real. For those universities that would be placed in demonstrable crisis, NUS would support the opening of discussions with government to support them to do the right thing by your tenants.

3. Absolutely no evictions must take place for the duration of the crisis

The government guidance for universities and PBSA providers is very clear on the issue of evictions. In addition, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [confirmed a holistic ban on evictions](#) for at least 3 months. We understand that these measures now protect students renting via License Agreements.

Many students will need to overstay their tenancy contracts as a result of Coronavirus. It is imperative that these students are allowed to remain in university accommodation for as long as they need. Housing insecurity at this time is not only an issue of student welfare or social justice but an urgent public health need.

In addition, we know that Stand Alone, the Unite Foundation, Become and NNECL have written to accommodation providers regarding the needs of estranged and care-experienced students and we ask you to also implement their asks.

4. Any tenants who are financially impacted by the Coronavirus must have their rents subsidised, significantly reduced or waived entirely for 6 months

Many students who remain in accommodation will be experiencing financial hardship. Student finance systems in the UK are paying their final instalments. However, we know from a wealth of data that student finance rarely covers the cost of rent in university accommodation.

Students rely on support from their families, wages from part-time work and private debt to meet their living costs. The first two of these income streams are likely to have been significantly impacted by the current crisis and to ask students to be saddled even more with the latter would be wrong. In addition, many students do not receive student finance and others may be forced to overstay their contracts without having financially

planned to do so.

Whilst we continue to call on government to financially support students in this time of crisis, if universities have students who face difficulties paying their rent, we are asking institutions to significantly reduce or waive entirely those obligations for 6 months. Indeed, given that many students have now been instructed to stay put, when they may have moved out and taken the option of a release from contract, this should be done pre-emptively.

Under no circumstances do we want to see students building up rent arrears to be paid back at a later date. The current crisis has no immediate end in sight and saddling students with such debt is unacceptable. In addition, under no circumstances must the small number of institutions who are still utilising illegal academic sanctions to recover rent arrears debt continue to do so.

5. Suspend all rent increases for the next 12 months

Finally, whilst we do not know exactly what the future holds we know that it would be wrong to exacerbate the financial difficulties of student renters at this time. We are asking all universities to suspend any rent increases during this crisis for current tenants and any that were planned for the next academic year.

Universities are landlords to hundreds of thousands of students and in this time of real crisis, it is essential that they show leadership. The actions outlined in this letter which we are asking universities to take protect students in the here and now. However, they could also impact on the actions of other landlords and by extension the millions of renters across the UK who are currently facing a deeply uncertain time.

Yours sincerely,

Eva Crossan Jory,
Vice-President for Welfare
National Union of Students