

COVID-19 HITS HIGHER EDUCATION

Jack Beswick, Coventry

Coronavirus has affected every facet of society and has already deeply impacted students. Working class students graduating from secondary schools and colleges this year have already had to mount a herculean campaign against the government just for the chance to take up their rightful places at university.

Thousands of students across the country managed to force the government to scrap Ofqual's classist standardisation model for grade calculation and replace it with teacher assessed grading instead. This was a stunning victory for students, made even more impressive given the (at best) feeble support from the leader of the 'opposition', Keir Starmer. However, it should also be noted that while the A-level grades u-turn stole many of the headlines, the weeks long BTEC results delay will have had a potentially catastrophic impact on hundreds of thousands of BTEC students hoping to go to university this year.

The results fiasco marks just one way in which the coronavirus pandemic has affected students. With Covid 19 forcing many university courses to move online (for safety reasons), students are understandably angry at still having to pay the full rate of tuition fees. In the words of one caller on LBC radio: "You're paying £9,000 to do it all online and watch a few PowerPoint slides? It just doesn't add up." It's obviously right that universities consider staff and student safety but he's right, it doesn't add up – especially for practical based courses where access to university facilities will in many cases be heavily limited for safety.

However, it's important to recognise that the problems in Higher Education are systemic. As exposed by an anonymous university staff member writing for OpenDemocracy, the nature of the transition of higher education funding to a private model based on student fees has directly led to a situation where universities have encouraged students to move to university with promises of 'blended' learning and campus experience

that they cannot necessarily fulfil in order to secure income. It is also important to point out that these extortionate tuition fees should not be charged even when we are not in the midst of a global pandemic. A properly publicly-funded higher education sector is the only way to guarantee that both students and staff are treated fairly and are not placed at the whim of the profit motive of university senior managements. Incidentally, these same senior managements are not shy of paying themselves obscene salaries whilst at the same time claiming financial difficulties.

Tragically, moving students into halls of residence has led to disastrous consequences in terms of the pandemic. There are thousands of students currently living in lockdown in their halls of residence across the country – unable to leave their halls to get essentials like food due to outbreaks of coronavirus on campus. That these same students are now facing the possibility of a lonely prospect of Christmas away from family while simultaneously being blamed by the government for the second wave of coronavirus that we're now seeing is nothing short of scandalous.

Socialist Alternative demands that tuition fees are abolished, that higher education is fully nationalised, run democratically and made freely accessible to everyone.

Socialist Alternative extends solidarity to all students and staff in higher education. With a second spike of coronavirus now happening and the worst economic crash in 100 years looming large, there has never been a better time for students to join Socialist Alternative and fight for socialist change!



WHAT WE SAY

- Scrap tuition fees! For free, fully funded education for all – cancel student debt
- A real living maintenance grant for all students
- Drive the market out of Higher Education! For a socialist education system, under the democratic control of education workers and students