

Molly Purcell  
President of Essex Students' Union

17 December 2020

Dear Molly,

I do understand the strength of feeling represented by the referendum result in which over 4,000 students voted in favour of a fee reduction. Your opinions matter a great deal to me and it is in response to the referendum that I am writing to you.

The pandemic has made this a difficult year and your University experience has been very different from what you might have expected in less extraordinary times. For some students, this is the second academic year of disruption to your studies. I am truly sorry that your time at Essex has been affected in this way. I know this term in particular has been extremely difficult.

In response to the referendum result, I have met with you, Mark Kiley Vice-President Education, and the proposer of the referendum Jack Fitzsimons, to listen to your concerns. In that meeting, I explained the reasons why we need to consider any request for a fee refund on a case by case basis, reflecting the circumstances and experiences of individual students. For this reason, I do not believe that the University can either reject or accept calls for fee refunds that would apply on a blanket basis to our students as a whole. That is not to say that there aren't additional University-wide actions that we are taking. In my meetings with you, Mark and Jack we discussed:

- That the delivery of academic programmes in 2020-21 is based on a blended learning approach. The balance between face-to-face and on-line learning has been flexed to ensure that students have been able to progress their studies safely and in a manner that best reflects the pedagogic requirements of subjects and courses. I am committed to re-doubling our efforts to ensure that all our courses deliver their learning outcomes for the benefit of every student and I will ask our Deputy Deans Education to review the learning outcomes to ensure this is the case;
- I highlighted that if students have concerns that their course is not covering important aspects adequately, they should feed this back to their lecturers either directly, through their course representatives, or via Departmental student voice groups, so that the University can take action where things need to be put right. We want to consider the circumstances of each individual student in ensuring that we fulfil the commitments we have made to you and that we are taking all reasonable steps to protect standards and maintain the quality of your learning, in line with the requirements of the Office for Students;
- That the Director of Finance will meet with the Sabbatical Officer team and Jack to discuss how students' fees are spent. In February when we have the latest data, we will also update the '**How we use your fee**' <https://www1.essex.ac.uk/fees-and-funding/using-your-fees/> and our supporting explanation, to ensure we respond to student interest in this;
- That we are committed to working in partnership with the SU to deliver the best possible experience to students; and
- That we will continue to listen and to respond to ways we can provide hardship support to students, as well as supporting student health and wellbeing through the pandemic. In response to the referendum result I have for example asked Universities UK to lobby for additional hardship support from the government.

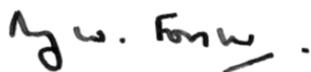
Sadly, we were not in a position to bring all students, including many in their second and third year, onto our campuses in the Autumn Term, as we had planned to as part of a phased return. The national lockdown put in place by the UK Government on 5 November stopped us from doing this – as did the Government's requirement that English universities move teaching on-line from 9 December.

At Essex, our focus throughout this very difficult time has been on supporting you to begin your studies on time, to progress through your course in line with your expectations and achievements and to eventually graduate having earned an Essex degree that has met fully the learning outcomes for the course. Because these commitments mean so much to us, we have made very significant additional investments in your learning and student experience, waived accommodation charges where this was appropriate, and worked tirelessly to ensure we offer our students the best possible experience we can. The following are some of the key actions that we have taken:

- **Dual delivery** – To ensure you were able to start or continue with your studies, wherever you were, we planned and implemented a dual delivery approach, so that students could learn on campus when possible, and on-line if necessary. We also planned our delivery to cope with any spike in infections during the year, to go to on-line only when this was necessary to keep you safe. This approach has I hope provided you with confidence that you can continue your learning whatever the circumstances. We are investing over £10 million to support high-quality on-line delivery and to ensure the quality of your learning outcomes.
- **Support for students in University owned or managed accommodation** – During the first lockdown, we immediately offered accommodation refunds to provide the opportunity for students who wished to go home without being held to their rental payments. We have also offered no-cost flexibility to students to move into or out of University owned or managed accommodation, paying only for periods when accommodation was occupied, irrespective of whether teaching was on-line or in person. We have again ensured no financial detriment for students in University owned and managed accommodation who left their accommodation as a result of the government winter break travel window. The cost to the University of this flexibility in the Autumn term has been £3.6 million.
- **Test & Trace safety system** – For students on our campuses, we have put in place our own test, trace and isolate system. This has cost £1 million and led to us administering 10,000 tests. As part of a wide range of COVID measures, it has helped keep infection rates at the University very low.
- **Students' Union funding** – We have increased funding to the Students' Union so that they can provide extra support for students learning on-line and on our campuses, so that you can have the best Essex student experience we can provide.
- **Enhanced Student Wellbeing & Inclusivity Service** – We continue to invest in our Student Wellbeing & Inclusivity Service as a high priority to ensure it meets your expectations and offers the flexibility that you need. Wellbeing support for students living on and off our campuses has continued and 24/7, year-round telephone and on-line support remains available to you.
- **Hardships funds** – We have more than doubled the funds available to support students in financial hardship this year, from an original budget of £188,000 to a revised level of £430,000. In addition, the range of needs that the fund can assist with has been expanded, now including support with access to technology, with unexpected travel or accommodation costs and help with child-care costs. We've also created extended laptop loans for students who don't qualify for hardship support but need equipment while self-isolating and are unable to access on-campus resources.
- **No detriment policy** – We put in place an emergency assessment policy, still in use, to ensure that no student is disadvantaged or treated unfairly as a result of the pandemic in relation to assessment outcomes.

With the decision about teaching arrangements made by the University's governing body for the Spring Term, I hope that 2021 will be very different from the last 9 months and I very much hope to see you all on our campuses as soon as may be possible in the New Year. In the meantime, I hope that you are all able to stay safe and well.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anthony Forster" with a horizontal line underneath the name.

**Anthony Forster**  
Vice-Chancellor