

University challenge

The pandemic lockdowns have posed a series of difficult questions to universities. Today we live in a world where they have been told to go over to remote learning for all but a few courses like medicine and some other scientific areas that require laboratory and practical work in a specialist location.

There is first the issue of accommodation. Many students with or without help from parents have signed on for a year's rental in student accommodation. The students will not be able to use this and some are asking for rental reductions or cancellations of the agreements. Private landlords say they have to provide the facility whether the student uses it or not, pay any debt interest on the borrowings to own it, and meet service and utility charges to keep the building going. Some of the private landlords depend on the income from the letting to buy the basics and are not rich. Other private landlords are richer individuals or better financed companies or charities.

Some of the landlords are the Universities themselves, providing student accommodation on the main campus or owning properties nearby. They too may have taken on debts to build and own the housing and need revenue to pay the maintenance and utility bills.

The second issue is payments for tuition. Some students think there should be a discount or rebate for remote teaching. They argue that they agreed to tuition fees on the assumption of face to face teaching and lectures which are no longer available. The Universities reply that they still have the same staff on the same salaries and are providing teaching on line so the full tuition fee should still apply.

In a situation like this there is a tussle between the student, the University, the landlord and the state over should pay the bills. Where both students and university unite to say the state should subsidise, they are saying all taxpayers should make a contribution. This will include people who did not have the benefit of going to a university and people earning less than the student hopes to earn following graduation. The same may be true of smaller landlords, if they were expected to take some of the hit.

In many cases students are being told they have to pay for full tuition fees and accommodation even though they are living at home and learning on line. Do you think this is the right answer?