

17 August 2022

Professor Steve West CBE

President

Universities UK

Woburn House

20 Tavistock Square

London

WC1H 9HQ

Dear Steve,

On behalf of UCU, I am writing to you regarding the practice of UK higher education institutions charging non-refundable deposits to applicants who accept a place on postgraduate taught (PGT) courses.

Acceptance deposits for both domestic and international PGT applicants are increasingly common across the sector. In a lot of cases these deposits are non-refundable, except for a limited range of reasons (for example, when students change their mind within 14 days, or when an applicant is unable to secure a visa). This situation appears to have developed 'under the radar' and reflects the increasingly deregulated admissions process and fee structure for postgraduate taught provision.

UCU is appalled at the high cost of acceptance deposits, with many ranging from [£1000-£2000](#), and some institutions charging up to [£5000](#). It is not clear how institutions have arrived at these figures and whether the amount bears any relation to the potential administration costs that may be incurred as result of a student being unable to take up their place. Instead, universities appear to be generating income through restrictive mechanisms which punish those with access to fewer resources.

UCU is also very concerned about the narrow criteria on which applicants are able to claim automatic refunds if they are unable to join a Master's programme. There are many legitimate reasons why a prospective student might wish to withdraw after accepting an offer but these are often excluded from current institutional criteria for refunds. One of the reasons why applicants may not take up a PGT place is due to challenging or changing financial circumstances, and with the cost of living crisis biting for many potential applicants, this is likely to become a bigger issue in the next academic year.

We, therefore, call on Universities UK to call on all its member organisations to review their PGT application processes and where they exist to immediately end the use of non-refundable deposits. Acceptance deposits are one of the many 'hidden costs' that are involved in applying for and studying at UK higher education institutions. Alongside the NUS, we call for institutions to be upfront about the hidden costs for students applying for a higher education course, ensuring mandatory costs are met by institutions, not students.

Removing potential barriers to PGT study such as non-refundable acceptance deposits needs to be part of a wider agenda to improve access, recruiting a more diverse postgraduate community, including at the PGR level. This strategy will require changes to the admissions processes, financial support and transition into study.

Universities UK and individual institutions can no longer in good conscience oversee a system which restricts access and takes money from those wishing to pursue their education goals.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary UCU

