

Briefing for: All staff dealing with staff or student enquiries on the current student debt situation

Update to briefing issued 3 April 2024

To be issued: Friday 7 June 2024

To be sent to: Heads of School, Divisional Directors, Heads of Professional Services for cascade to relevant staff in their areas. Also to be saved on Finance web page and shared in PS Essentials.

Briefing to staff re outstanding tuition fee and University accommodation debt collection, June 2024

This briefing sets out the approach we are taking to collecting outstanding 2023/24 tuition fee and University accommodation debt from students, and explains how staff can support affected students through this process. It follows on from the [briefing to staff](#) issued on 3 April 2024.

As reported in April 2024, teams across the University have been working together to develop proposals for managing student debt collection, with input from USSU. We have sought to balance the need to maximise recovery of income with consideration for the wellbeing of our students and supporting them to continue with their academic studies. It is very important to all of us that our students have a positive experience of their time at University and leave us with the academic outcomes they have worked for.

We are now at the end of the assessment period and entering the final phase of our debt recovery cycle for 2023/34. Student debt remains exceptionally high.

Our approach

We have designed our approach to debt collection in accordance with the following key principles:

- Ensuring a clear and consistent approach across all student groups (returning, finalist, PGT, UG)
- Minimising additional administration tasks for students as much as possible - students can make payments as and when they are able, up to the deadline, with no need to contact Finance
- Allowing maximum time for students who need more time to gather resources, subject to the constraints of the academic timetable and, in some cases, UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) requirements
- Avoiding detriment to academic outcomes
- Being able to manage the approach effectively within our current staff resources (and without negatively impacting student experience or increasing risk for 2024/25).

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education and Students, Professor Kate O’Riordan, wrote to students on 28 May 2024 to explain that no students have been, or will be, removed from their courses or University accommodation this academic year if they are in debt to the University. We will also continue to ensure students have access to IT until the end of the academic year.

Context and Student Engagement

Full details of the context of this debt collection process, and previous student engagement can be found in the [briefing sent to staff](#) in April.

In April, students with debt received an email setting out clear deadlines for payment of 2023/24 debt and a reminder of the potential consequences of non-payment as set out in our contractual terms and conditions.

Students were asked to settle all debt by 31 May 2024 (an extension beyond the contractual payment date of 23 April, for most debt). Students were given a clear due date to encourage as many who were able to, to settle their debt so that we can understand our financial position and identify students who may be struggling and require further contact and support.

Students who still have outstanding debt are now receiving emails during the course of this (week commencing 3 June 2024). For the purposes of communication, we have categorised students as those who expect to graduate in July 2024, those who expect to graduate in January 2025 and those who expect to return to their studies in September. Please see below for the different messages going to each group.

Some students will receive two emails as we are writing to them separately about tuition fee and accommodation rental fee debt.

In all cases, the intention of the University is the avoidance of the potential negative consequences of ongoing non-payment. This is why we are urging students to make any payments they can as soon as possible.

All students experiencing hardship or who are in need of advice or other support are strongly encouraged to contact our [existing support services](#).

Students who expect to graduate in July 2024

Students who expect to graduate in July are asked to settle all of their debt by 4 July 2024. They can make as many part payments as they wish during this period, without contacting Finance.

This due date is the latest we can commit to owing to the requirements of graduation planning and administration and UKVI reporting requirements. It supersedes any earlier dates agreed in ongoing payment plans - all students can take advantage of this extension to 4 July 2024 if they wish.

If debt is not fully settled, students have been informed that:

Tuition fee debt

- the University will withhold the award of the degree, diploma or certificate and any relevant official certified transcript or other formal confirmation of academic achievement until the debt has been paid
- the student will not be permitted to attend a graduation ceremony
- the student will be entitled to receive a notification of their marks, for their personal information but this is not an official transcript.

University accommodation rental fee debt

- the student will not be allowed to attend a graduation ceremony, their degree will be awarded in absentia, and their degree certificate will be sent out by post.

All debt

- if we are unable to reach agreement on the payment of debt after the student has left the University, the University may have to use the services of a debt referral agency to recover the debt owing
- whenever debt is settled by the student in the future, then the student may attend a graduation ceremony and, where relevant, will receive their degree certificate and official certified transcript.

Additional considerations for international students

If the student has not paid their tuition fees and does not graduate this will mean it is not possible to obtain a Graduate Route Visa. More information on the Graduate Route Visa can be found at [Visas and immigration : University of Sussex](#).

Next steps after 4 July 2024

All students with debt will receive a confirmation email in week commencing 8 July setting out the next steps if they wish to attend a future graduation ceremony and, where relevant, receive their degree certificate and official certified transcript, depending on whether the debt relates to tuition fees or accommodation rental fees.

Students who expect to return to their studies in September 2024

Students who expect to return to their studies in September 2024 are asked to settle all their outstanding debt by 30 August 2024. They can make as many part payments as they wish during this period, without contacting Finance.

If debt is not fully settled, students have been informed that:

Tuition fee debt

- the student will not be permitted to re-register for the 2024/25 academic year if they do not clear 2023/24 tuition fee debt with the University.

University accommodation rental fee debt

- students will not usually be able to access new University managed accommodation arrangements until their debt has been paid but they are encouraged to contact Student Support for advice and support if required
- if accommodation rental fee debt remains at the end of their course of study, students will not be permitted to attend a graduation ceremony, their degree will be awarded in absentia, and their degree certificate will be sent out by post.

All debt

- if we are unable to reach agreement on the payment of debt after the student has left the University, the University may have to use the services of a debt referral agency to recover the debt owing.

Additional considerations for international students

If an international student is not able to re-register they will be withdrawn from their course. As required by law, the University will report this withdrawal to UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) within 10 days. UKVI will then assess the status of their Student Route visa, which is likely to be cancelled.

Students who expect to graduate in January 2025

Students who expect to graduate in January 2025 are asked to settle all of their debt by 19 November 2024. They can make as many part payments as they wish during this period, without contacting Finance.

This due date is the latest we can commit to owing to the requirements of graduation planning and administration and UKVI reporting requirements and supersedes any earlier dates agreed in ongoing payment plans - all students who expect to graduate in January 2025 can take advantage of this extension to 19 November 2024 if they wish.

If debt is not fully settled, students have been informed that:

Tuition fee debt

- the University will withhold the award of the degree, diploma or certificate and any relevant official certified transcript or other formal confirmation of academic achievement until the debt has been paid
- the student will not be permitted to attend a graduation ceremony
- the student will be entitled to receive a notification of their marks, for their personal information but this is not an official transcript.

University accommodation rental fee debt

- the student will not be allowed to attend a graduation ceremony, their degree will be awarded in absentia, and their degree certificate will be sent out by post.

All debt

- if we are unable to reach agreement on the payment of debt after the student has left the University, the University may have to use the services of a debt referral agency to recover the debt owing
- whenever debt is settled by the student in the future then the student may attend a graduation ceremony and, where relevant, will receive their degree certificate and official certified transcript.

Next steps after 19 November 2024

All students with debt will receive a confirmation email in week commencing 2 December setting out the next steps if they wish to attend a future graduation ceremony and, where relevant, receive their degree certificate and official certified transcript, depending on whether the debt relates to tuition fees or accommodation rental fees.

Additional considerations for international students

If the student has not paid their tuition fees and does not graduate this will mean it is not possible to obtain a Graduate Route Visa.

More information on the Graduate Route Visa can be found at [Visas and immigration : University of Sussex](#)

Support from Finance, the Student Centre and in Schools

In Finance we have increased our resources and improved management of our enquiry system to make things simpler and faster for students who need to speak to us.

Designated School and Student Centre staff were briefed in April and will be briefed again in June so that they can resolve common questions for students and staff, and make sure students know where to access the information they need. These staff will also be able to provide feedback to Finance colleagues to help them to improve the student experience.

How all staff can support students

Colleagues should be aware of the common situations we have seen where students' tuition fee debt has built up, and how to respond (*in italics*):

- Some students are aware of their financial situation but leave things to the last minute which can often lead to stress and delays (*Please encourage students to take financial matters seriously, to plan ahead and act as soon as possible*).

- Some students simply don't see emails that require action (*Please encourage students to check their emails from Finance*).
- Some students, particularly overseas students or those who have other support needs, have not fully understood the action we need them to take (*Please either take the time to read through emails with the student or refer them to the designated School resource*).
- Some students need advice to understand the personal or academic impact of a decision, for example if they are unable to pay and therefore considering taking a period of temporary withdrawal (*Please refer them to the [My Sussex portal](#) where they can raise an enquiry with specialist advisors for individualised advice and guidance*).
- International students at risk of withdrawal due to tuition fee debt may need support to understand the impact on their student visa (*Please refer them to [student visa information on the Student Hub](#) and/or encourage them to contact an International Advisor by [raising an enquiry via My Sussex](#) under My International Journey*).
- Some students are in hardship or have other challenges affecting their ability to act which they feel unable to share with Finance (*Please continue to refer these students into the [existing support services](#) for students in line with existing referral protocols*).
- Some students who report that they have paid their debt have not settled the debt fully (*Please encourage the student to check their due debt on Sussex Direct and contact Finance if necessary*).

Further questions and advice

If you have further questions or comments regarding the process to collect student debt please contact Sian Thomas (Deputy Director of Finance) or Jacinda Humphry (Chief Financial Officer).

Students with queries regarding their outstanding balances should email creditcontrol@sussex.ac.uk or telephone 01273 678076 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10am to 1pm and 2pm to 4pm.

The Student Centre offers advice and guidance to students on issues such as managing your money and managing your mental health. All students can take advantage of the financial advice and information provided by the University at [Money advice : University of Sussex](#) on the Student Hub. There is also information about financial support from the University Hardship funds and welfare loans and Blackbullion's free financial education platform.

For information and guidance on student visas, students should be referred to the [Student Hub](#). A student wishing to contact an International Advisor should [log an enquiry through My Sussex](#) under My International journey.