

Is trust broken?

Manchester 2020 highlighted the worst aspects of the tricky relationship that has developed between the student body and universities since the pandemic began.

New students were told they would receive blended learning and that everything would be as normal as possible – but that wasn't the case. Students received little or no in-person teaching; they were ordered to stay in residences, often confined to apartments with people they had never met before; gyms and leisure facilities were closed; green space were fenced off; covid spread rapidly. When a metal fence was put up overnight, students tore it down. When a black student was held up against a wall by security guards and told he looked like a drug dealer, it felt like the university was a faceless corporation more interested in income than in providing a great student experience.

Students are choosing to hold their universities to account on. Students are consumers now, says Cathy Wippell, a third-year student at Manchester and co-founder of Student Action for a Fair and Educated Response (Safer). "It should have been very apparent they were promising something they couldn't deliver," she says. "We therefore demand, as consumers do, money back and compensation for unsatisfactory service."

These issues are not unique to Manchester. Orla Katz Webb-Lamb, a second-year student at Sheffield, has invited students around the country to comment on their experiences via an online survey. "Like eating glass and staring into the abyss," is one response. "We were lied to," says another, "and then expected to produce the same quality of work while also paying the same amount of money for sub-standard experience. Especially when we pay rent for accommodation we were specifically told not to live in."

"A lot of students have realised that we really are being exploited for profit," says Finley Gore, a first-year student at Manchester who is helping to organise a rent strike. "The university's business model depends on income from fees and rent, so they didn't want students to stay away and defer their courses." The resulting "Covid bath", says Wippell, wasn't only a danger to students: "Students' families were put at risk, and the people of Manchester. If money hadn't been a factor that wouldn't have happened."