

Universities During The Covid Crisis: Let's Milk Those Student Cash Cows!

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. So here is the new British university business model - charge full price to students for their course and accommodation, then only deliver around 15 percent of the cost whilst restricting access to their digs. Now, the master stroke: Rebrand all of this as 'blended online learning' and claim because of Covid, there is no alternative. It's a massive money-maker. But it's also an indication of how egregious the unholy trinity between money obsessed chancellors, overpaid administrators and rent seeking landlords has really become.

Ross Joining me to discuss how students have been treated during the pandemic are the National Outreach Coordinator for Pause or Pay UK, Ben Dusserre-Robinson, and to Net Tshisekedi, the founder of Queen Mary University Rent Strike. Welcome to you both. Ben, let's start with you. It's clear people know, intuitively, that students have had a really rough ride during this pandemic. Just explain the context that students find themselves in now and how this 18 months has affected learning.

Ben Dusserre-Robinson So when the government first went into lockdown, finally, in March 2020, we were told to go home and our campuses were closed. And that meant an entire rejigging of our programmes on our behalf and also the faculty and staff's behalf. Courses that require material outcomes rely on industry standards and state of the art facilities. Without those, the programme and the courses are simply not what we applied or became indebted for.

Ross And the difference there is that if you go home and you're doing online learning through Zoom or Microsoft teams or whatever it is, you're not actually in a studio space touching product, touching physical objects and learning that way. It's all hypothetical learning through a screen. Is that the division?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson That's right. It becomes speculative.

Ross Right. But you need access to those resources because you've paid for access to those resources. But actually what you're doing is sitting at home talking about theory?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Yeah, yeah, exactly. And in that context, there's a huge divide in between your expectations and, you know, the final outcome. But obviously this is an unprecedented situation. And so students were understanding of that. You know, it was very new for all of us, not just the university, but us as well. And so we were trying to grapple with it. But very soon we understood that the universities were sort of working behind the scenes without involving us in the conversation.

Ross And what were they doing behind the scenes?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson We don't know what they were doing behind the scenes.

Ross What did you intuitively think that they were doing or what did you sense that they were doing behind the scenes? Question is, how were they not working with you?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson They were trying to normalise the situation. They were trying to make it seem like everything was under control and that they were going to lower the outcomes, expectations, so our sort of metrics for grading would be lowered, adjusted, to what we could and could not produce within this situation.

Ross So they are denying you access to the products and services that you need. And the way of hedging that, or offsetting that, is going back to the testing bit and then lowering any of the criteria there?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Exactly. But as a creative student, because Pause or Pay is focused on studio-based learners, we're mostly working with creative students, although we've been in touch with other students in more academic universities because of the sort of wealth of knowledge that we've gathered. But for studio based learners, there's three sort of vectors to consider in this situation. The first one is the social. And I think anyone who's had to work from home throughout the pandemic will understand this, that moving away from a dedicated workspace into your home comes with huge challenges. So, you know, you might have children at home, you know, babies, young children, older children that you have to look after that, you know, that creates this new environment where focusing is not so easy. You've also got, you know, people living with abusive partners or housemates, etc. that are also in difficult situations. And then you've got the disabled students, you know, students with learning disabilities who suddenly cannot rely on the facilities that they once relied on to carry out their work.

Ross Or a support network? So that's the first, the social. What's the second vector?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson The second one is the intellectual vector, which is quite important to underline, because that's the point where you're suddenly asked to come up with ideas without any exterior forces. You're relying on one medium for your knowledge gathering, and that's online. So learning online is possible and it's been done before. You know, many students have learnt online before the pandemic. So think of online tutorials and researching papers in online libraries.

Ross But that doesn't remove the fact that you are operating in a vacuum, which is what you're getting at?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Exactly, yeah.

Ross And what's the third vector? We've had the social. We've had intellectual. What's the third?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson The physical. The physical is in relation to the space and the material that you're using to create your work because studio based learners rely so heavily on material. So you wouldn't believe the number of stories we've heard of students injuring themselves while trying to adapt to this situation. So obviously there is a will to adjust and adapt. Our tutors have encouraged us to make do and, you know, make something out of

nothing, etc.. So by doing that, you've got a situation where people are asked to turn their bedrooms into ceramic studios, painting studios, photography dark rooms, wood workshops. That's just impossible. You can't do that. And, you know, it comes with a health and safety issue of, you know, people trying to experiment with things which are not OK to do in a home setting.

Ross What could possibly go wrong? How have the universities reacted to the demands of Pause or Play? Firstly, what are your demands? And secondly, what have been the university's reaction to it? Because I think what we've gathered from what you're saying is you can't just transpose studio based learning, put it in a domestic environment. Then I was going to say, anyway, adjust is probably the most diplomatic way of saying the exam criteria and saying, don't worry, we'll normalise this, it'll be fine. So what have your demands been and what have been the reaction to the demands?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Well, it first started with a hashtag from MA students from the Royal College of Arts in London. It went viral. Essentially they were asking the senior management teams of their school to include them in the conversation of how to adjust to this situation. And then that blew up sort of spilt over to CSM students, Central St. Martin's. And then they went over to Glasgow School of Art. And then suddenly it was a national movement and a national campaign.

Ross And what were the demands from that movement?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson The demands were essentially pause the courses and allow for students to defer their year without any consequences to their visa status, their academic track records and their financial situations. So when you're pausing your studies, you then forego the student loans. And in a pandemic, you can't just pick up bar work. You know, you can't pick up a shift anywhere. So if you were to stop studying at that time, you would lose everything. So it is quite a complex and layered set of demands in itself. The second one is pay to refund the course. If you're not going to allow us - which they didn't - to pause our studies, then you should refund us for the lost time.

Ross Instead of just normalising the situation and keeping hold of that money? Have there been any examples across the world where universities have paused or reimbursed?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson So we're mostly, well, actually, that question itself hits an ideological nerve, because when you begin to start talking about reimbursements, you're accepting that fees is this sort of status quo and we don't believe in Pause or Pay that paying fees is necessary or should happen. So when we talk about the future of education, the future of education is free. And you've got to just look at, you know, most of our European neighbours. A lot of the higher education in Europe is free. Like we focus predominantly on the U.K. because that's where our group is even though we've had conversations with people abroad. No, there hasn't really been cases, but there has been individual cases of students being quite successful going through the official complaint procedure, which is an internal procedure within the university. So it's been very quiet and it has happened very individually. And they've made sure to keep it very quiet when it has happened because they're obviously scared of the precedent it might set. You know, if one university decides to reimburse the

students, there's going to be a domino effect and the whole system is going to fall like a house of cards.

Ross Net Tshisekedi from Queen Mary University Rent Strike, it's not just the ideological aspect around fees here, is it? Because when you really think about it, rent when piled on top of fees, it's not exactly a propitious start for students, is it? Generations coming before haven't had the double whammy of fees and massive rent. You went about your business to try and enact a rent strike. Just talk us through why you did that and how successful it was.

Net Tshisekedi So before the year began in September, our university contacted first year students convincing them to come to campus with the promise of a blended learning approach, where some classes would be online, some classes will be in person. What actually happened is that for the majority of students, everything was online. So it was very clear that they just wanted students to come to campus so they can pay rent so they can justify paying rent for their halls. So initially we got together as an organising group just to see what we can do about the pandemic and when we saw what happened at University of Manchester, where students occupied a building and started to rent strike, we thought it was a good idea to do a rent strike of our own because it was so clear to see how the university was essentially treating students as cash cows. And on top of that, we had students living on campus living in really poor conditions. I'm talking about rodent's, mold, leaking, flooding. We had one student who lost hundreds of pounds because her clothes were damaged by mold that was coming out of her flat. So we figured that the only way that the university would listen to us is if we withheld money that they care about so much. So, yes, we started the rent strike in January and managed to get over 350 students to sign up. And the campaign started off really well because not long after we started, the 30 percent discount on rent was offered. But that already presented a challenge because the university was already pressuring students to take the offer by some arbitrary deadline that they set. And on top of that, they only offered the 30 percent discount to undergraduate students, not postgraduate students. So there we were like trying to fight this offer that was clearly not enough. And unfortunately, the university ignored almost all of our requests just to meet with management. We were acting in good faith. We were trying to push the university to essentially do what's right for the students. We don't believe we were asking for much. So we saw, through statistics, that on average, students spent one billion pounds on unused accommodation, which is why we thought it was fair to receive discounts, receive rebates. And for the future, we believe that students should be allowed to leave their contracts without a penalty. It's just so frustrating how universities - and I'm not just talking about mine because we organised as a network of universities where over 50 universities joined - would make decisions under a falsehood of helping us. Why would you make these decisions without actually consulting the students, consulting the people that have been affected so badly by this pandemic?

Ross Ben Dusserre-Robinson and Net Tshisekedi, welcome back to Renegade Inc. It strikes me during that first half, we've fleshed out the problems and a lot of people watching will think you've got to empathise with students having to go through this. Of course, no one foresaw the pandemic, but the reaction that universities have had to the pandemic what you're getting at is that they've normalised it. What you're getting at is they've gone about their financial business in exactly the same way. People will empathise with that and say, 'No, that's wrong'. Let's just look at why that's been the case. If you look at, for instance, pay in universities. Now, if you look at all of the top brass, they're on mega salaries and also this

becomes part and parcel with the marketisation of universities. So students aren't students anymore. Actually, their customers. Just talk a little bit about this and what your experiences of that departure has been.

Net Tshisekedi What I would say, quite frankly, it was quite appalling to see the, I would suppose, imbalance that's come to light due to the pandemic. For instance, we have our Principal - hi, Colin, by the way - who's on 300,000 a year and doesn't pay any rent. Yet he is presiding over our university, trying to squeeze rent out of students who can't even use their room. Furthermore, we've also been working with QMUCU and Unison, the union associated with our university, who've been fighting for employees at the university who are at risk of losing their jobs or having cut hours because of the pandemic. And it's just quite frustrating to see how the people at the top are completely fine whilst the rest of us are just struggling and fighting just to be treated fairly.

Ross I don't know who Colin is.

Net Tshisekedi Colin Bailey, Queen Mary Principal.

Ross Got you. I'm sure he'll be very happy with a mention. He doesn't pay any rent? Are you certain about that?

Net Tshisekedi Yes. The university provides housing for him.

Ross How did this rent strike end? Obviously the university knows that they've got a massive problem on their hands. How did it end?

Net Tshisekedi The rent strike ended with the university refusing to give the discounts that we won to strike participants. And this is because they don't want rent striking to be set as a precedent, as a form of protesting against universities, which is what they told our SU.

Ross Now is there not massive hypocrisy here, especially from a generation of people who didn't pay tuition fees at university? Isn't there massive hypocrisy here?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Yeah. We've seen how shaky the ground is they are standing on really is throughout this whole period of time. So groups like Pause or Pay, groups like Rent Strikers across the UK have put a lot of pressure on these people within senior management roles, Vice Chancellors and the likes. And we know that they've been in conversation with each other. We know that for certain. And we know that they have been sort of holding out on, you know, giving into our demands or even having the conversations, opening up the rooms of discussion. The way it's functioning, the way we've understood it to function, is very simple. You know, it's a neoliberal system of management whereby there's no one to take the blame and no one to answer for when it comes to these difficult situations. And it's like, you know, you ask about these potential conversations that we've had with our senior management teams, the few of us who have managed to have meetings with them, were told we've got no money.

Ross The neoliberalisation model that's infected university, university learning, the learning experience, has also changed the fascia of universities. In his book, *The Talent Code*, a man

called Coyle writes about what he calls Chicken Wire Harvard's. And Chicken Wire Harvard's are where great talents can go. And the facilities aren't amazing, but they are adequate. But it does mean people aren't distracted by the flashing lights of wonderful state of the art. They can actually do the work in a more humble environment. Has too much capital been spent on campuses to make them look sort of shiny?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Absolutely. I mean, you just have to take a look at the Central St. Martin's campus in Kings Cross. The building itself houses, bougie cafes and restaurants. It's got this huge shiny water feature fountain in front of it. Huge amounts of capital have been invested in commercial outlets all around that area. It just doesn't really represent an art school anymore. So you really have to ask yourself, how far can this system of higher education really go? There's actually quite an interesting figure, stat, that's come out recently out of a survey done by the Institute of Economic Affairs, which shows that 73 percent of young people are actually quite favourable of socialism and don't really agree with capitalism anymore. So that tells me that the next generation of students probably won't want to subscribe to this mode of learning. They just want to get on with the learning and just be in a space which accommodates their creativity in some way.

Ross These students don't want the bells and whistles anymore. What they want are practical spaces, humble spaces, that allow them to express their talent. But the neoliberal investor, the neoliberal dean, the neoliberal stakeholder, shareholder, whatever you want to call them, will come with the argument, 'They've never had it so good'. When I were a lad we had outside loos' and all that stuff. And now they've got bougie, as you put it, bougie cafes. The point is the students don't want these. True or false?

Net Tshisekedi I mean, yeah, of course they don't want it, because if they're going to try and say, 'oh, you've never had it so good', I highly doubt that students back then were in this much debt. I highly doubt that students back then were paying so much rent for places that they can't even use. I don't want a massive water feature built on campus when we've got students dealing with mould and rats. Are you joking me? I think it's ridiculous. It's like it's just smoke and mirrors to try and hide the fact that the capital needs to be invested into the students. And you need to stop exploiting students as well.

Ross You can almost hear the neoliberals going, 'You're a radical Marxist. What's wrong with water features'?

Net Tshisekedi I think that's also such an issue where when we're asking for just a basic standard of living that that's going to be painted as like radical Marxism, it's just this annoying culture war that's been created because of students deserving better and wanting better than what we're currently being given.

Ross The beauty about neoliberalism - and I say beauty in an ironic or sarcastic kind of way - is it's formlessness. Very, very, difficult to attack the system because it's like stacking jellyfish, right? You attack this little bit and you can't get there because we haven't got the answers. You've got to go round the thing to this block because she's going to do with this. How have you been able to get some traction to say, 'No, no, this is it. We don't want you dissembling any more, deflecting anymore. These are our demands. This is what we need. We've had enough of the marketisation of education'?

Net Tshisekedi I guess the main point is the fact that we withheld so much money that that's what forced them to listen to us, because, yeah, when you look at the structure of neoliberalism, they care so much about money. And I would say another way that we've also managed to get them to like pay attention is thanks to the press because they weren't listening to us. But universities they care more about their image more than a lot of things. So like getting the press involved and having community support, getting MPs to publicly show support. That's what's been a successful tactic. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, you know, everyone loves a protest. We could have gotten everyone together and protest on campus, but we had to get more creative ways of like putting pressure on the university by organising like online demonstrations and getting press attention.

Ross If we turn it on its head then, the pandemic for you guys, you've taken some short term pain, no doubt about that. But it's been quite a good thing because you've been trailblazers to get people to ask fundamental questions about the marketisation of education. So actually, you're in a position now where the pandemic has expedited it. This is going to happen anyway. This has ripped the plaster off a lot quicker. And now these conversations are a lot more live. What can people do to start pushing these conversations on and get university back to where it was, which is a place of learning instead of a client-customer relationship?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson So mobilise, organise, you know, I'd say join a union. But our student unions are not doing the job that they have been set up to do.

Ross Why aren't they doing their job?

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Because they seem to just sort of pander to the senior management of the universities.

Net Tshisekedi Absolutely. Yes, exactly. That's been the main issue with our student union. And in our final meeting with them, once we ended the strike, that's what they told us. They were concerned about keeping their seat at the table. But at what cost? - at the cost of failing the students that they were meant to represent. So, yeah, there needs to be an overhaul of what student unions are supposed to do for their students, because like you just said, they are far too concerned with like - I mean, again, not every student union, but I'm speaking more about my one at this point - with their relationship with the university and management, that they did not do enough to support the rent strike - a rent strike that represented every student that has been exploited and treated badly by universities because of the pandemic.

Ross People watching this who have suffered silently, often in isolation, hearing what you've got to say and thinking, that's my experience, too. What do you say to them? What do you say to those students? What should they do to take action, to try and sort the situation out?

Net Tshisekedi I say mobilise and organise with fellow students, because I will say with certainty that every university in this country has been made aware of the tactics and the actions of universities and their management. So I would urge you to start organising together to hold your university accountable. So what we plan on doing, although the rent strike is over, it's definitely not the end. We're going to set up a renter's union and we're going to continue as a grassroots organisation, by the students for the students, because unfortunately,

the university's actions and the SUs inaction, which would be a better word, has created a need for this space. And we will continue to hold the university to account and we will continue to expose any wrongdoings that are done to students.

Ross Benn Dusserre-Robinson, Net Tshisekedi, thank you both very much for your time.

Net Tshisekedi Thank you very much.

Ben Dusserre-Robinson Thank you.