

BRITAIN'S STUDENT CRISIS

The forgotten victims

By **Steph Spyro**

A STUDENT forced to study in a camper van while paying thousands for digs she cannot use says she feels like one of the pandemic's "forgotten victims".

Third-year Charlotte Ashley Higgins, 20, faces a £4,000 bill for the private accommodation she hasn't been able to return to since leaving in December.

She has since been holed up in the van on the drive of the family home in Sutton Coldfield.

Charlotte – doing a degree in criminology, criminal justice and law – admitted she needed "peace and quiet" away from her three younger siblings. She said: "The house is a bit crazy. They're home-schooled and I'm trying to do uni work."

"The van is somewhere I can go to get peace and quiet from the hustle and bustle."

She admitted the worry about returning to her student place while at the University of Wolverhampton had taken a toll on her mental health.

The fear of not being safe there while still stumping up for it led to her taking four weeks off her part-time job while in a "quite bad



place". Charlotte – who is backing the Daily Express Fair Deal for Students campaign for rent rebates, hardship funds and lower tuition fees – said: "I've tried to get out of my contract and end my tenancy. I don't feel safe returning to the accommodation if the state it was in before December is anything to go by. I'm not going to put myself in that position again."

"I felt we were treated very, very unfairly and I just feel com-

pletely ignored." Students have wasted nearly £1 billion on accommodation they cannot use this academic year alone, according to a survey by the Save the Student! website. It works out at an average £1,621 a head.

But Charlotte believes lodgings providers have also been forgotten. She said: "I don't think they have the support from the Government to provide students with what they need."

"Without support, they can't give refunds – which is a really hard pill to swallow. As students

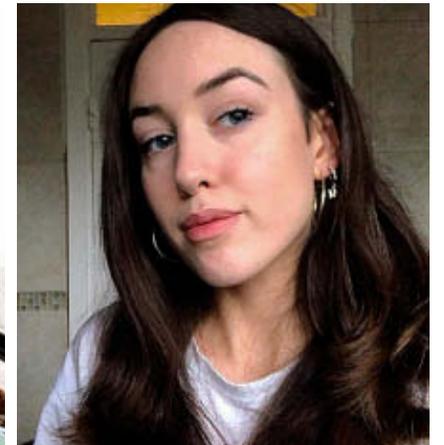
we've seen the furlough scheme, Eat Out to Help Out and the intervention with exams like GCSEs and A Levels.

"But we haven't seen anything being done for us apart from the cash injection which is going to hardship funds...which are basically impossible to access and qualify for."

"It's been difficult being the forgotten victims of the pandemic."

Another casualty is second-year criminology student Maya Cooper, 19, who admitted it has been "difficult". Her family live in London

Pictures: DARREN QUINTON/BPM



Hard lesson...Charlotte in the van on family drive, left, and Maya, top

but she is studying at Liverpool John Moores. Maya – among the thousands who signed accommodation contracts believing in-person learning would partly resume – said: "Having to choose between home or being at university without family has been really hard."

"Also being home and having to try and help my mum financially – but also being tied to a flat that I'm not living in has been really, really difficult."

"I'm still expected to pay at least £1,500 every few months. My accommodation [bosses] told me I should travel back despite the Government urging us to stay as my course is not 'essential'."

University life is far from normal – so why must I pay normal fees?

AFTER enduring months of exam uncertainty and grade confusion, it was a relief to be promised I could start my first year at university and expect an experience not too far from "normal".

My experience is far from normal. I haven't even been on campus yet.

Luckily, my degree course is now online, much like that of the Open University. It is convenient, good quality and enjoyable.

The difference is that I am paying far more than Open University students – £9,250/year versus around £6,000/year (for the same course).

I, along with thousands of other students, have been completely mis-sold this education.

Libraries are closed or at limited

Lydia Harrison-Graham, 19, from Marple, Stockport, is in her first year at Newcastle University studying Modern Languages, Translation and Interpreting

capacity, facilities for my course are shut and in-person lectures are off "until further notice".

So why am I not being given some of my money back? The simple answer is these billion-pound universities do not care.

Whilst my debt is racking up, mental health issues also start to creep in. Nearly 75 per cent of students feel their mental health has worsened since Covid-19.

Being confined to a small box room, paying on average £550 a month cannot help. And it gets worse...the only support that the most vulnerable have had is emails

or notes with a list of helplines to call if "you're feeling down".

What kind of support network is that? I chose to stay at home for my first year. The only positive is that I'm not being ripped off for accommodation.

Throughout this pandemic, there has been a lack of clarity and responsibility taken, not just in education. What I want, along with the rest of the student population, is a partial refund.

If a holiday company can give a money-back guarantee for changes due to Covid-19, the same should apply to my education.



Call for action... Student Lydia wants a partial refund of her university fees



Human touch...dolphins have similar personality traits

Dolphins not oceans apart from humans

By **Dan Townend**

DOLPHINS have developed a number of similar personality traits to humans, experts claim.

A project, which studied 134 bottlenose dolphins, has helped researchers understand how human personality traits have developed independently of immediate environments.

Lead author Dr Blake Morton, a psychology

lecturer at the University of Hull, said the team chose dolphins because, like primates, they are intelligent animals who live in social groups but are very different in many other ways.

He said the findings, which began in 2012, identified a convergence of certain personality traits – especially

relating to curiosity and sociability – despite dolphins evolving in a completely different environment from primates.

Dr Morton said: "Dolphins were a great animal for this kind of study because, like primates, they are intelligent and social."

He added that the most widely accepted model of human personality is defined

by five traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism.

"It is vital researchers conduct further studies because not only will it lead to a better appreciation for species living within the depths of our oceans, it will lead to a better understanding of ourselves," Dr Morton said.