To whom it may concern,

This letter details some of the hardships that an under-represented group of people in this pandemic, the students (of Bishop Grosseteste University, in this case), have faced during this time leading up to what would have been our graduation ceremony. A celebration that not only marks the end of our Higher Education journey but places us in a newfound societal construct of adulthood in which no previous generation before has had to face due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students, throughout the pandemic, have been marginalized due to the global health crisis. Collectively, we have all understood our needs being pushed aside so that other people’s needs could take precedence due to a decline in health or a circumstance that outweighed our own. However, it is our time to speak about the gross misconduct and negligence that we believe the university has commited throughout this time. If anyone was to ask us about our time at Bishop Grosseteste University, as one student eloquently put, it would be “bittersweet”. Don’t get me wrong, I have made many friends at the university and for my course in particular, many of the tutors and student support networks have gone above and beyond to help us, in any way they could. This was highlighted more when the ongoing pandemic affected our learning. However, the management of the situation, including how the movement of an in-person graduation to a virtual one was announced, has much to be desired. Despite our best efforts to help the university recruit new students, the higher members of the university council still neglect their duty of care to us as students. The least the university could have done is tried to postpone the graduation or try to compromise methods to help support the students in their want, and to minimize the risks posed by COVID-19. It is important to note here, that we are not causing a fuss due to hatred of the university but doing so as we feel let down and unaccounted for. We have been on the receiving end of a constant bombardment of small disappointments with graduation being the final straw.

‘Vaccination is now open to every adult in the country: 84% of adults have got a jab and 61% of adults have had two doses’ (Javid MP, 28 June 2021). Surely this statement from the Health Secretary along with the COVID-19 testing that people now have access to proves how low risk the ceremony could be under proper and careful planning. Despite the cases rising, today, there were 116 cases in Lincoln where the National Average is 102 (Look North, 30 June 2021). It is true that cases may be increasing, but deaths still remain extremely low. To add insult to injury, the guidelines that the university provided us with, myself being a drama student and others in the same or similar ‘practical’ departments have had to interpret these as best we could at our own risk. Why now, when restrictions are ending, and cases are much lower than before, is the university worried about our health and risks we may face under the university? Why does it seem to pose an issue, now, to attend our own graduation at our own risk and discretion?

The Health Secretary also stated that ‘The number of people needing hospital treatment for COVID-19 has doubled since the start of May. Admissions are most clearly increasing in the North East and South West of England so we’ve been boosting testing centres and vaccines in those areas and keeping a close watch on the numbers. I spent my first day as Health Secretary just yesterday looking at the data and testing it to the limit. And whilst we decided not to bring forward step 4, we see no reason to go beyond 19 July. Because in truth: no date we choose comes with zero-risk for COVID. We know we cannot simply eliminate it – we have to learn to live with it. We also know that people and businesses need certainty. So we want every step to be irreversible. And make no mistake, Mr Deputy Speaker: the restrictions to our freedoms must come to an end. We owe it to the British people, who have sacrificed so much, to restore their freedoms as quickly as we possibly can – and not to wait a moment longer than we need to. So Mr Deputy Speaker, with the numbers heading the right direction — all while we protect more and more people each day – 19 July remains our target date. The Prime Minister has called it our ‘terminus date’’ (Javid MP, 28 June 2021). Surely the university would want to follow in the governments footsteps and advice and celebrate, in the best way a university can, the end of restrictions and lockdown. Otherwise, this serves to be a very disappointing end to our university experience.

On the 16 June 2021, following the government announcement on 14 June 2021, the university sent their students an email to ‘update you on the University’s position on our planned face-to-face Graduation ceremonies’ (BGU, 16 June 2021), with the information that ‘The University will wait until the next statement by government which is due on 28 June before deciding definitely whether our planned, face-to-face events can proceed this year. We appreciate that this will be at short notice, however our aim is to maximise our chances of hosting graduation and celebration events in-person. If there is no guarantee given by government on that date that all restriction will be lifted on 19 July, our only option will be to cancel the ceremonies scheduled to take place in Lincoln Cathedral. As outlined in your initial invitation, this would mean that your graduation event will revert to an online ceremony (BGU, 16 June 2021). When this first announcement was made, this took two days for the university to decide on. In the Graduation Update we all received on 29 June 2021, it took the university one day to make the decision to cancel the graduation. Surely this can’t have been enough time to weigh up all possible options and compromises they could find to give the hard-working students of Bishop Grosseteste University a graduation they deserve. In this update the institution states ‘that whilst the signs are promising, they are not conclusive’ (BGU, 29 June 2021). They are referring to the same statement quoted above by the Health Secretary. The university then states that ‘The Vice-Chancellor has weighed up all the evidence and the risks involved and, based on the outcome of last night’s statement, with regret we have taken the decision to cancel the face-to-face celebrations in the Cathedral’ (BGU, 29 June 2021).

Other universities have already had graduations for their students, being much bigger universities than Bishop Grosseteste University. Among these is the University of Cambridge which held in-person graduations on the 30 June 2021 through to the 3July 2021, whereby ‘The ceremonies will be professionally recorded and made available online: your family and friends will be able to access this during the ceremony, so that they can watch and listen as you process through the Senate House’ (University of Cambridge, 2021). Why can these students have a graduation when restriction have not been eased yet Bishop Grosseteste University have admitted defeat when the restrictions of our freedoms are meant to have come to an end?

Alongside all of this, many people, students and families are complaining of a lack of communication and reassurance from the university in response to their complaints of the lack of graduation ceremony and the handling of the cancellation of the in-person event. It is important to note here that not a single student has been consulted in the making of this decision and students are seemingly treated as statistics rather than individual. The opposite is a selling point which the university prides itself on and flaunts in their recruitment process. Whilst I would agree with this in terms of teaching, in this instance, it feels untrue due to its poor communication. The university and the events company have given the students until 4 July 2021 to get a refund for all graduation related products and services. This means that phone lines and the website is jammed with people trying to get a refund as they have spent hundreds of pounds on their graduation day. We understand and appreciate any monetary or personal losses that the university may have faced during the pandemic and have the greatest sympathy for the institution and staff, but students have also faced this, losing jobs, even if small and part-time, it can make a difference to a student’s living allowance. Despite this, students were still compliant with the costs of graduation with little to no complaint as that is how much they wanted it to take place.

Although the petition in favour of an in-person graduation now has over 800 signatures, the President of the Student’s Union, Erin Bell, has stated that ‘unfortunately petitions are not recognised by the University as the Students Union is the only recognised democratic route for these types of things.’ This means that everyone has to send an email to the SU, something which is more time-consuming and harder for those with full-time jobs, or those who want to remain anonymous to file against the university. There are no more Student Council meetings for the year therefore the student voice cannot be recognised there, and the Student’s Union did not have an initial say in the matter so why would they now? I hope that the University replies to the students and general public and works with them, instead of against them to at least compromise a proper way to celebrate the end of the students Higher Education journeys.

Faithfully,

A very disappointed and disheartened student,

Bobbie Brader

On behalf of the students and individuals who signed the petition and the graduates of Bishop Grosseteste University 2020 and 2021