

Students attack Abbott over £1,750 speaking fee

Tom Beardsworth

Students have called on Diane Abbott to refund a £1,750 fee she charged to the University of Birmingham to deliver a 50-minute speech.

An online petition describes the fee as a "gross insult to all British students" and asks Ms Abbott to "apologise" for taking it.

Ms Abbott, the MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, was a speaker at the student-organised conference in 2011, which debated the "dynamics of global societies".

The programme praised her as a popular political personality who had spoken out on issues such as tuition fees.

The speaking fee was paid by the university, but the students have argued that the organisation's income is derived from tuition fees.

Jamie Goldstein, who recently completed his history and philosophy degree, signed the petition claiming that the size of Ms Abbott's fee "shows no empathy with students, especially when she's meant to be against tuition fees".

He added that "most university speakers are just interested in interacting and engaging with young



Diane Abbott: critics say that her accepting a fee was a "gross insult to all British students"

people. Could she really not give up 50 minutes for free?"

Ms Abbott defended the fee, saying: "The idea that I routinely charge to speak to students is quite wrong. The opposite is the case. I routinely speak at student, community and political events for free. This year alone I have spoken at nearly 70 events."

The petition, which has attracted hundreds of signatures, was started by Alex Blackburn, a recent President of the Birmingham University Freedom Society, which describes itself as "a campus platform for libertarians and free-marketters".

Mr Blackburn said that the society

'I routinely speak at student and political events for free'

Diane Abbott, MP

had "hosted numerous politicians and other high-profile guests", such as Mark Reckless, a Tory MP, and "none have asked for a single penny in return".

David Dunn, head of the politics department at Birmingham, tried to distance the university from the row. He said: "The idea was to give the

students a budget to let them manage every aspect of the process. They wanted someone who had been on TV to draw in an audience.

"Other speakers who were suggested charged more. Jon Snow charged £7,000, Karren Brady charged £12,000, so when they contacted Diane Abbott she looked cheap by comparison."

Ms Abbott's other speaking fees include £3,000 for taking part in Deloitte's National Women's Day Celebrations. In May she was paid £1,000 as a "VIP guest speaker" at an education conference at Manchester Metropolitan University.