



2021-0005278MDPO

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

Rt Hon Jonathan Ashworth MP

Email: jon.ashworth.mp@parliament.uk

Your ref: SJ/JA37969

12 March 2021

Dear Jonathan,

Thank you for your letter of 14 January, addressed to the Secretary of State, on behalf of the Chief Executive of University of Leicester's Students' Union, Mr Gareth Oughton, about the various difficulties that students have been facing during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area and I apologise for the delay in my response.

Thank you for your policy suggestions, they have been passed on to the relevant policy teams.

The Government has actively engaged with stakeholders across the Higher Education (HE) sectors, including the National Union of Students, around the Government response to the pandemic. This has been fundamentally important and has allowed us to develop a suite of measures to mitigate against the impact of the virus on the sector. We will continue to work together as we progress through the step-by-step plan to ease restrictions in England.

We have seen some fantastic and innovative examples of high-quality online learning being delivered by providers across the country. Universities are responsible for their fees, but the Government has been clear that if universities want to continue charging the maximum amount permitted, they are expected to maintain quality and academic standards and the quantity of tuition should not drop. They should ensure all students, regardless of their background, have the resources they need to study remotely. The Office for Students (OfS) monitors online teaching to ensure standards are met, and there is an established process in place for students with concerns about their education.

If providers are unable to facilitate good online or in-person tuition, they should seek to avoid charging students for any additional terms they may need to undergo as a consequence – avoiding effectively charging them twice. We continue to engage with the sector in discussion on this issue.

I wrote to the OfS on 13 January outlining the government's expectations of the HE sector following the new national lockdown. Following this, the OfS wrote to provider accountable officers, setting out the actions it is taking in connection with providers' compliance to existing regulatory requirements. The OfS has produced specific guidance as to how compliance will be assessed in the light of the pandemic. This is available on the OfS website at: tinyurl.com/3T7KF3BR.

Whether or not an individual student is entitled to a refund of fees will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between the provider and student. If students have concerns, there is a process in place. They should first raise their concerns with their university.

The OfS has produced guidance on practical ways in which students can complete their studies whilst ensuring quality and standards are upheld. This covers teaching, learning and assessment during this difficult time. More information is available on the OfS website at: tinyurl.com/YXUNFWBL.

Regarding accommodation, the Government plays no role in the provision of student residential accommodation. Universities and private accommodation providers are autonomous and are responsible for setting their own rent agreements. Whether a student is entitled to a refund or to an early release from their contract will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between them and their provider. Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support, contact details for which are available on its website at: tinyurl.com/83F5LCZ.

This has been a very difficult time for students and we encourage universities and private landlords to review their accommodation policies to ensure they are fair, clear and have the interests of students at heart.

We recognise that in these exceptional circumstances some students may face financial hardship. The Department for Education has worked with the OfS to clarify that providers are able to use existing funds, worth around £256 million for academic year 2020/21, towards hardship support. We have also made an additional £70m of student hardship funding available to higher education providers this financial year.

Providers will have flexibility in how they distribute the funding to students, in a way that will best prioritise those in greatest need. Support might include help for students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location. The funding can be distributed to a wide population of students, including postgraduates (whether taught or research) and international students. We will continue to monitor the situation to look at what impact this funding is having.

Turning to mental health concerns, we recognise that many students are facing additional mental health challenges due to the disruption and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Protecting student and staff wellbeing is vital - it is important that students can still access the mental health and wellbeing support they need during this time in particular.

HE providers are best placed to identify and address the needs of their student body and decide what welfare support services to put in place. At the start of, and throughout the pandemic I have asked HE providers to continue to support their students as a priority, which has included making services accessible from a distance. We encourage students to stay in touch with their provider's student support and welfare teams as these services are likely to continue to be an important source of support.

Many providers have bolstered their existing mental health services and adapted delivery mechanisms, including reaching out to students who may be more vulnerable, and I asked them to ensure their services adapted to online provision where necessary. Staff at universities and colleges responded quickly to the need to transform mental health and wellbeing services, showing resourcefulness and there are many examples of good practice.

I have been engaging with universities on this issue and have written to Vice Chancellors on numerous occasions on this, most recently in December. I have also convened a working group of representatives from the higher education and health sectors, as well as students to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the pandemic.

This group has created a resources document, collating the guidance, tools and services available to support students' mental health. This information is now being spread through the networks of taskforce members, such as university and student representatives, so universities can raise awareness of the support available and empower individuals to seek help.

We are working closely with the OfS and the sector to ensure that we are doing everything possible to give students the support they need at this difficult time. To support this, I announced a new online platform, Student Space, to enable all students at English and Welsh universities to access vital mental health and wellbeing support.

Funded with up to £3 million by the OfS and led by Student Minds, the Student Space platform bridges any gaps in student support during the pandemic and is designed to work alongside existing services. It offers a whole range of help including preventative support and immediate interventions for those in distress, from therapeutic interventions, to stress relievers, suggestions for strengthening mental health, and quality-assured on-line resources such as peer support platforms and volunteering opportunities. This resource has recently been extended to support students for the whole 20/21 academic year.

Furthermore, we have asked the OfS to allocate £15 million towards student mental health in academic year 21/22 through proposed reforms to Teaching Grant funding. This is in recognition of the fact that we understand that the transition from school to university will be especially challenging this year.

Over £9 million has also been provided by the government to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need. Students struggling with their mental health can also access support via online resources from the NHS, Public Health England via the Better Health - Every Mind Matters website, and from the mental health charity Mind.

Students who are struggling with their mental health at this time can also access online resources from Public Health England, on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/U8X9FN9](https://www.gov.uk/tinyurl.com/U8X9FN9), the NHS website Every Mind Matters at: [tinyurl.com/Y2894EEZ](https://www.nhs.uk/tinyurl.com/Y2894EEZ), and through the mental health charity MIND at: [tinyurl.com/Y7HVJ7XF](https://www.mind.org.uk/tinyurl.com/Y7HVJ7XF).

I hope that this is helpful in replying to your constituent. Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities