



2020-0031529POSoS


Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP

By email: hilary.benn.mp@parliament.uk

24 September 2020


Thank you for your email of 16 June, enclosing correspondence from your constituent, [REDACTED] about the impact of COVID-19 on further education (FE) and higher education (HE) and the University and College Union's call for action on this matter. I apologise for the delay in responding to you.

I would like to thank all staff working in post-16 education for their hard work in responding to the unprecedented challenge that we currently face. The ability of the sector to continue to provide education and support to learners in institutions across the country is vital, now and for the future.

Having a highly skilled workforce in the UK was vital before the COVID-19 outbreak and will be even more important as we recover. We had previously announced additional funding of £400 million in 2020-21 for 16 to 19 education, along with £1.5 billion in new capital funding over 5 years to upgrade the FE college estate and an extra £120 million to create an Institute of Technology in every part of the country. We are also providing an extra £3 billion, over the course of this Parliament, for a new National Skills Fund to help people learn new skills and prepare for the economy of the future. We continue to look at future investment requirements to be in a great position to increase the skills in our workforce to support economic recovery.

We recognise the financial impact of COVID-19 for providers, and we are working to make changes where we can. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) will continue to pay grant funded providers their scheduled monthly profiled payments for the remainder of the 2019-20 funding year. In addition, ESFA allocations for 2020-21 have been confirmed, and payments will be made in line with the national profile. For colleges in significant financial difficulties the existing support arrangements remain in place, including short-term emergency funding.

Furthermore, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced an extensive and unprecedented package of support measures for businesses and employees. We have provided guidance on staff that post-16 providers are able to furlough; further guidance regarding a supplier relief scheme for providers funded under a contract for services with ESFA will be published when available. We are working closely with HM Treasury to monitor how the support packages benefit FE providers and to consider any further action.

We are focused clearly on the implications of the closures, including how providers will reopen and transition to normal operations. We want learners to be able to continue to study. Colleges and providers are moving more learning online to allow students to continue with studies remotely and any strategy for ongoing learning should be informed by the needs of their staff and students, and their home learning environments.

Colleges and other providers should consider how best to support disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. They can provide digital devices and internet access using their flexible bursary funding and can apply for additional funding if required. Providers should also be sensitive and responsive to the wellbeing needs of both students and teachers, recognising that health and caring responsibilities will disrupt teaching delivery and learning for individuals while they are closed. The department grant funds two organisations, Jisc and the Education and Training Foundation, to support colleges and staff with online learning.

Our priority is to ensure that students and adult learners can progress as planned to the next stage of their lives, including starting university, college or sixth form courses, apprenticeships, securing a job or progressing in work. Where breaks in learning are required, we want to ensure learners can resume their 'classroom' learning and continue to a successful completion. We are in regular contact with representative organisations and stakeholders and this will continue. Routine Ofsted inspections have been suspended and, due to the cancellation of summer exams and assessments, we will not publish any school or college level performance data based on summer 2020 assessments and exams. However, Ofsted inspection and the school and college performance tables are an important part of the accountability system and there are no plans for these to be cancelled in the long term.

Regarding HE, we are committed to supporting our world-class institutions and will continue to work closely with the sector to manage the impact of COVID-19 and secure HE stability and sustainability. The Office for Students (OfS) has stated that one of its key priorities during the COVID-19 outbreak is to support the financial sustainability of the sector.

Providers with concerns about their financial viability or sustainability have been encouraged to contact the OfS at the earliest opportunity. The OfS has adapted its reporting requirements to focus on threats to liquidity and short-term viability, enhancing its ability to identify risks to individual providers as well as patterns across the sector.

On 4 May, the government announced a major package of support for HE providers. As a part of this, we announced a reprofiling of Quality-related Research (QR) funding in England, bringing £100m forward as a short-term measure to help safeguard university research and act as a reassuring signal to the research sector. We also announced a joint BEIS/DFE Ministerial Task Force on the sustainability of university research to identify and assess impacts facing universities and consider approaches to help address these.

HM Treasury has announced a wide range of support, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and more detailed business support packages, including the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS) and the Coronavirus Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF).

The CLBILS, which may be relevant to many HE providers, opened for applications on 20 April. Larger HE providers may also wish to explore the CCFF and should liaise with their bank to discuss eligibility. If their bank does not issue commercial paper, UK Finance has published a list of those banks that are able to assist. HE providers that meet the published criteria for the loan and financing schemes should approach their bank and begin to apply for the relevant scheme, if they believe they require that support. Further details of these schemes can be found on GOV.UK here at: [tinyurl.com/Y83ww639](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-large-business-interruption-loan-scheme), and on the British Business Bank website, at: [tinyurl.com/ybw4eka2](https://www.bbbank.co.uk/coronavirus).

I recently wrote to providers to set out what should be done for students in terms of their education and welfare, including the quality of the student experience and the continuation of high academic standards. Whilst this letter supports our efforts to engage with providers to ensure provision continues across several key areas, neither government nor the OfS are being overly prescriptive about precisely how providers should achieve these aims. We understand that a 'one size fits all' approach for HE providers is not necessarily the best approach. The letter is available at: [tinyurl.com/Y8xcta7r](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-education-welfare).

Students deserve support and recognition for their hard work and dedication, and many universities and colleges have moved rapidly to develop new ways of delivering courses through online teaching and alternatives to traditional end-of-course exams. All providers must continue to meet ongoing conditions related to the quality of their courses and the standard of qualifications they award, and they have significant freedom to decide how best to do this. We are working to ensure that providers continue to consider and meet the needs of all their students, particularly those most vulnerable to disruption or who may be unable or less able to engage remotely. If, despite all efforts, students need to repeat part of their course, we would expect providers to carefully consider whether it is appropriate to expect students to pay an additional fee. Consumer law continues to apply, and therefore providers must consider whether that has implications for the approach taken.

We know that many students will be distressed by this unprecedented situation, and that the measures the government is taking to stop the spread of COVID-19 will affect many families. People struggling with their mental health during the COVID-19 outbreak will be offered additional online support and practical guidance to help them cope.

The £5m Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund, administered by Mind, will fund additional services for people struggling with their mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 outbreak. This could include telephone and online support services for the most isolated and vulnerable.

From the very start of this outbreak, my top priority has been to protect students' mental health and wellbeing. 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 recently announced a new online platform, Student Space, which will 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, Student Space has been developed to bridge those gaps in student support which have become apparent during the COVID-19 outbreak and is designed to work alongside existing services. It will offer 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.

We expect individual HE providers to work towards ensuring that all provision, online or otherwise, is equally accessible to all students, no matter where they are based or accessing UK courses from. Many providers are bolstering their existing mental health services and adapting delivery by means other than face-to-face. These services are likely to be an important source of support during this period. Providers have been asked to consider how their approach to enable completion of studies will affect all students, in particular those who may be most vulnerable to disruption. This includes students unable or less able to access remote learning for whatever reason, together with care leavers, those estranged from their families, and students with disabilities.

We are also doing everything we can to promote good mental health in schools and colleges. This includes a variety of measures, including the creation of new Mental Health Support Teams to work in, or near, schools and colleges to provide earlier access to a wider range of support and treatments. Teaching, learning, and assessment in HE continues. We are working with the sector to ensure universities can make all reasonable efforts to enable students to continue and complete their studies, for their achievements to be reliably assessed and for qualifications to be awarded securely.

Students must continue to receive a good standard of education, and we understand this could be distressing for students if they feel their provider is not taking measures to ensure this. Where this is the case they should, in the first instance, speak to their provider. We expect student complaints and appeal processes to be operated flexibly, accessibly, and sympathetically to resolve any concerns. If this is not possible or if they are unhappy with the outcome, they can take their complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for HE. The OIA covers student complaints concerning HE providers in England and Wales.

Universities offering high quality tuition online will continue to charge fees and student loans will be paid directly to the university at the start of the third term for the current 2019-20 academic year. Students who cannot complete their current year of study may qualify for an additional year of fee loan support to pay their fees under standard arrangements. In addition, eligible students undertaking a repeat year of study due to compelling personal circumstances, such as COVID-19, will qualify for an additional year of fee loan support for their repeat year. However, if providers are not able to facilitate students to complete their studies then I would urge them not to charge tuition fees for any additional study needed.

Many HE providers will also have hardship funds to support students in times of need, including emergencies. The expectation is that where any student requires additional support, providers will support them through their own hardship funds.

The government has worked closely with the Office for Students to help clarify that providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by COVID-19. Providers were able to use OfS Student Premium funding worth around £23m per month for April to July this year and £256 million for Academic Year 2020/21 starting from August towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of IT equipment and mental health support, as well as to support providers' access and participation plans.

While HE providers are independent and responsible for their own decisions regarding employment issues, it is important that they take appropriate measures to protect the health, safety, and welfare of staff at all times. This includes providing support for those who are now adapting to new working or teaching practices and delivering essential services from home.

We expect universities, like all employers, to give due consideration to their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the way their employment practices affect different sections of their communities and staff at different stages of their careers. We expect that in most circumstances HE providers will continue paying their staff as usual as delivery of teaching moves largely online, and staff maintain key services, including those for students remaining on campus. Where this is not the case, providers may be eligible for the CJRS, as previously mentioned.

Writing to heads of providers on 26 March, we asked that they pay particular attention to the financial hardships faced by hourly paid and student staff who have been reliant on income from campus-based jobs at this time.

The government recognises the important contribution international staff and students make to our world leading HE sector. We are working in collaboration on a wide range of issues, and the needs of international staff and students are, and will remain, at the heart of this work. The government will apply discretion under current circumstances to ensure that international staff and students are not negatively impacted if they find themselves in a position where they cannot comply with certain visa rules. Full guidance for those affected by changes to UK immigration and borders can be found on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/YANZZ5QP](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-for-international-students).

Universities are anchor institutions in their local areas, and many are civically engaged in ways that benefit their wider communities and economy. The government supports moves to put universities' civic engagement on a more strategic footing by the introduction of Civic University Agreements, and many universities have signed up to such agreements with their civic partners, which include FE colleges. I am pleased to see many examples of universities helping with the immediate response, and in the medium and longer term there will be a key role for them to help the country recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak.

In recognition of the current circumstances, we have allowed the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) awards to be extended until summer 2021. Ensuring teaching quality in the HE sector will be important in the recovery, and decisions on the future shape of the TEF will be taken in due course, as the government considers and responds to Dame Shirley Pearce's independent review.

I hope that I have demonstrated the importance that we place on the post-16 education sector, both during the current difficult time and as we look to the future. Our plans continue to evolve as we further develop our support and publish additional guidance. I look forward to maintaining our engagement with the UCU.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education