



2021-0005187MDPO

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP

Email: bennh@parliament.uk

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Dear Hilary,

Thank you for your email of 12 January, on behalf of a number of your constituents, setting out their concerns about the payment of tuition fees and rent for student accommodation for the 2020/21 academic year further to the coronavirus outbreak, as well as mental health and wellbeing.

This government absolutely recognises that this is a difficult and uncertain time for students, but we are working with the sector to make sure all reasonable efforts are being made to enable students to continue their studies. We have seen some fantastic and innovative examples of high-quality online learning being delivered by providers across the country.

We expect universities to continue delivering a high-quality academic experience and help students to achieve qualifications that both they and employers value. Furthermore, it should be noted, that it is an Office for Students (OfS) registration condition that providers must deliver well designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.

Universities are responsible for their fees, but the government has been clear 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 OfS monitors online teaching to ensure standards are met, and there is an established process in place for students with concerns about their education.

Where a student complaint cannot be resolved through the institution's complaint processes, the student can ask for their complaint to be reviewed by an independent body. If a student exhausts the internal university procedures (i.e. receives the Letter of Completion) and is not satisfied with the final outcome, they can contact the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA).

The OIA's website gives details about eligibility criteria and how to make a complaint at: tinyurl.com/SM3ECA5. The government cannot become involved in individual disputes between English universities and their students, nor does it review OIA decisions. This is to safeguard the OIA's independence.

With regard to examinations, all providers are responsible for the administration of their own exams and assessments and providers will contact affected students directly with further information about examinations. 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/Y7U47B4Y.

Turning to accommodation, if a student has already signed an accommodation contract for the new academic year and, because of the outbreak, think it may no longer fit their requirements, I would encourage them to talk directly to their housing provider. The government encourages all providers of student accommodation to review their accommodation policies to ensure that they have students' best interests at heart. We also urge them to communicate their policy clearly and be fair.

Students can surrender their fixed term tenancy early if they reach an agreement with their landlord. If they have a joint tenancy agreement, all tenants will need to agree to the surrender. However, even if their circumstances have changed due to the effects of COVID-19, they still will not have an automatic right to leave early.

If a student thinks their accommodation provider is treating them unfairly, they can raise a complaint under the accommodation codes of practice if their provider is a code member. The codes are on the Student Accommodation Code website at: tinyurl.com/L7DW2EM. Students can find information on how to complain on the Unipol website at: tinyurl.com/Y822MBSK.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by the coronavirus. This sets out the CMA's view on how the law operates to help consumers understand their rights and help businesses treat their customers fairly the guidance is available on the GOV.UK website at: tinyurl.com/YA55KRQJL.

Students may be entitled to refunds from certain accommodation providers depending on the terms of their contract and their particular circumstances. Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support, contact details for which are available on its website at: tinyurl.com/83F5LCZ.

Turning to mental health concerns, 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 HE and health sectors to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the pandemic.

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.

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).

We have worked closely with the Office for Students to help clarify that providers can draw upon existing funding to increase hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by COVID-19. Providers were able to use this funding, worth £256 million for Academic Year 2020/21, to go towards student hardship funds and mental health support. Additionally, on 2 February I announced that we will be making available to universities up to £50 million to support those that need it most, particularly disadvantaged students. This is in addition to the £20 million we announced in December, bringing the total to £70 million for this financial year

I hope that this is helpful in replying to your constituents, and I would like to thank you for writing on these important matters.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Donelan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities