



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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Friday, 20 March 2020

Dear Colleague,

I am grateful for the huge amount of work being done across the sector to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on our students and institutions. Our entire higher education sector has such a key role to play during these unprecedented times.

While the resourcefulness you are demonstrating is truly impressive, from fast-tracking digital teaching solutions to wider business continuity planning, I am asking you to be ready to have your ingenuity and resilience tested to the maximum.

As the Prime Minister made clear on Wednesday 18 March, the coming weeks will require a community effort to deal with a challenge greater than most of us have faced in peacetime. I know universities will step up to this challenge, both in the way you look after students and in the contributions you will make to wider society.

Frequent monitoring of the latest Public Health England (PHE) guidance will help with this challenge: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings>

Attached to this letter is a list of frequently asked questions, which I hope will offer you further guidance.

UK COVID-19 response

Wednesday's statements by the Prime Minister and Education Secretary on the changes to the operational models of schools and colleges show how much shielding measures need to ratchet up to deal with the outbreak.

Against this fast-moving background, it is vital we do all we can collectively to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector and its students.

This will include making online teaching provision as widespread as possible for the summer term. I appreciate the great steps you have already taken in this area and ask that you let my Department know should you require support to help further progress the shift to online provision.

As many of you are already demonstrating, cessation of face-to-face teaching in favour of online provision is not closure. It is a move that enables compliance with social distancing guidance. We need to keep working with you to understand what the developing range of options for distance teaching looks like and ensure we support students where necessary.

My Department is working with the Home Office to avoid students and providers being penalised if online provision inadvertently leads to non-compliance with Tier 4 visa rules. We are keen to provide clarity on this position as soon as possible.

I know you will continue to follow the latest PHE advice when considering what activities to continue providing, and that you are liaising with your local Health Protection Teams for the latest advice. My Department is working with BEIS regarding the impact on research activities and is ready to support any conversation you may have.

While many of your students will have an alternative residence to student halls, or may already be living at home, a significant number may be care leavers, estranged students, or international students for whom there is no alternative accommodation easily available or who are not able to get home because of travel restrictions. It is essential that these students are reassured that their provider will continue to support them through these difficult and unsettling times.

You will know how best to provide this support, and I am sure you will agree that as a minimum we should aim to ensure some institutional accommodation is kept open and is available to these students, along with relevant staff who will support halls management, even in the event of wider university closure.

This support is especially important for such students who are disabled or have health vulnerabilities. In preparation for supporting these students to be ready for all eventualities, I would like to ask you, as a matter of urgency, to ensure you hold comprehensive and up-to-date information on the numbers of students who may fall into the following categories:

- International students currently on campus, for whom there is no alternative accommodation easily available or who are not able to get home
- Care leavers
- Estranged students
- Disabled students
- Students who live with people in high-risk groups, such as grandparents or family members with suppressed immune systems.

In addition to providing accommodation, you will need to consider other support services for students who remain on campus, who may or may not be self-isolating.

This includes practical support to ensure they can access sufficient food and

medical and cleaning supplies, along with mental health support. Counselling and mental health advice needs to be given in line with social distancing guidance so students, counsellors and advisors are protected.

My Department stands ready to support you in any discussion that is needed to ensure you have access to the right resources to care for them. The Chancellor has also announced a series of wider measures to support employers and employees, recognising the significant impacts caused by COVID-19.

The pastoral care provided by many providers is world class, and this pastoral care has never been more important, both for students who need to remain at their university and for those who have moved away.

Communication with the sector

Because accurate communication is so important, I am working to ensure the information flows between institutions and the Department are as strong as possible. We are actively supporting the Universities UK-led Sector Coordination Group, and are providing guidance on GOV.UK (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings>) relating to all educational settings.

Together with the Office for Students (OfS), as the regulator in England, we will supplement this guidance with more HE-specific information, ensuring all registered providers receive timely communications. You are also welcome to contact me for advice on any concerns or ideas you have, or simply to update me on your plans and what you have achieved so far.

The flow of information with Local Resilience Fora (LRFs) is equally important and my Department is working with UUK and other partners to set up links between providers and LRFs to enable plans for tackling COVID-19 to be robust. I am encouraged that the development of robust LRF plans will be supported by a new taskforce of senior experts from local government, public health and adult social care.

I would particularly like you to reassure students that plans developed with LRFs will take account of the need for supply of food, medicines and cleaning products to be available for those students remaining in university accommodation.

In communicating with students, we need your help to reassure them that we understand how important it is to them that they complete their courses and how we believe that the moves so many providers are making to online teaching and assessment will facilitate this.

Admissions

The Government has [set out today](#) that all students taking exams will be awarded a grade which fairly reflects the work that they have put in. This does not mean awarding students their predicted grades: Ofqual will develop and set out a process that will provide a calculated grade to each student which draws on a number of different pieces of evidence, and will work with the exam boards to

ensure this is consistently applied for all students. We need universities to work with us to reassure students that these grades will be equally valid to those in previous years, and their hard work will be rewarded and fairly recognised.

Accordingly, there is no reason for the usual admissions cycle to be disrupted. Universities should not begin making their offers unconditional ones, and applicants should not feel pressured to accept such offers as they will be awarded a formal calculated grade.

For students who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance, they will have the opportunity to sit an exam at the earliest reasonable opportunity, once schools are open again. While I recognise it cannot be guaranteed in every circumstance, I would like universities to show the utmost flexibility to ensure that such students are able to begin their course with a delayed start time.

I am pleased Universities UK has confirmed institutions will be flexible and do all they can to support students to progress to higher education. Universities are responsible for their own admissions. As in any year, it is their responsibility to ensure they only make firm offers to students they can accommodate.

COVID-19 mitigations

I know, from engagement with the sector so far, that many providers are already seeking workarounds to normal modes of operation. I am very grateful for these efforts, although I must now ask that you urgently consider what more can be done. This is likely to include how skeleton staff arrangements can be put in place quickly should circumstances dictate.

I know you will be thinking how to manage the unprecedented disruption to your recruitment plans and about how you can enrol students for the start of the next academic year, among both international and domestic students. We will work closely with the sector to mitigate this disruption as far as we can, alongside partners including the Home Office, the British Council, UCAS, and Ofqual.

We are also working closely with the OfS to ensure that we understand the potential financial implications of the issues and risks COVID-19 is bringing to bear on the sector, and to keep abreast of developments.

We have asked the OfS to act appropriately as the sector rises to the COVID-19 challenges and I am pleased with the flexible approach now being taken on conditions of registration and with the decision to pause existing consultations and routine information requests to help reduce the burden on you while more pressing demands arise around tackling the virus.

I would like to assure you that the Student Loans Company (SLC) is planning to make Term 3 tuition fee payments as scheduled and that students will continue to receive maintenance payments on the scheduled dates, whether or not campuses are closed or learning has moved online. I trust that you will communicate clearly with residential students on rents for this period and administer accommodation provision in a fair manner.

For timely maintenance payments to happen, providers must confirm in the normal way that students are in attendance, but should contact the SLC if that proves impossible as a result of widespread staff absence. Providers should also confirm in the usual way registration of any new starters in the latter part of the 2019/20 academic year so that the SLC can make their maintenance payments.

I am keen that we continue working together to understand the financial impacts on the sector.

Last but not least, I am grateful for your thoughts as to how providers can work closely and supportively with their local communities and play a leading part in the national effort to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. I will also be in contact to discuss ways in which your students can best support their communities.

Some of you have already started thinking about making technical facilities and medical expertise available to your wider community or supplying people with the right skills and knowledge to support in other areas of the education system. I want to hear more about ideas like these and help you translate them into action.

The country's need for support from its world-class higher education system has never been greater. The Government will do all we can to help you give that support.

Yours sincerely,

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

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

ANNEX A – Frequently Asked Questions

HE and COVID-19

- The Government's key priority is the health and safety of staff and students.
- We support the considered and proportionate steps that universities and colleges are taking to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, e.g. moving teaching and learning/assessment online. This is in line with social distancing guidance.
- Ministers are working with Universities UK and other sector bodies to assess the impact of COVID-19 on higher education and explore ways to support students and staff and minimise disruption.
- We expect providers who decide to close down face-to-face provision will continue to look after those students and we are already working with them to lend support where it is needed.
- Frequent monitoring of the latest Public Health England (PHE) guidance is highly recommended: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings>

What does the announcement about closing schools mean for universities?

- We are not currently proposing to extend the transition and requirements of schools and colleges to HE providers, but expect them to make their own judgements based on latest PHE guidance. Many institutions have already shifted to online learning offers and we expect many more are considering how best to do this.
- Universities have a unique status and role – many of them provide an actual home to international students, estranged students or care leavers who may have nowhere else to go.
- We are providing guidance on GOV.UK relating to all educational settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings>). Together with the Office for Students (OfS), we will supplement this guidance with more HE-specific information, ensuring all registered providers receive timely communications.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- We are working closely with the HE sector and OfS, as regulator, to ensure that we understand the potential financial implications of the issues and risks COVID-19 is bringing to bear on the sector, and to keep abreast of developments.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

I'm an international student and my visa is about to expire and I'm going to overstay – what do I do?

- If international students have questions about attendance with regard to visa rules, individuals are advised to contact the Home Office's Coronavirus Immigration Helpline on: 0800 678 1767 (open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm - calls are free of charge if made from within the UK). Alternatively, they should email: CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk.

My university has moved to online provision but my visa says I can't participate in online learning – will I be penalised?

- We are working quickly across government to ensure all existing rules and regulations, which may be appropriate under normal circumstances, are suitably flexible. If international students have specific questions about their own visa status, they are advised to contact the Home Office's Coronavirus Immigration Helpline.

Why is the UK Government's response different to that of my own country?

- The UK Government is adhering closely to scientific advice and guidance. As this changes, our advice will change to match the level of the threat. In doing so our immediate priority remains the health and safety of all UK nationals and overseas nationals in the UK, including HE staff and students.

ACCOMMODATION AND OTHER STUDENT SERVICES

If we're not attending university in the third term, do we still have to pay rent?

- For Term 3, we trust that HE providers will communicate clearly with residential students on rents for this period and administer accommodation provision in a fair manner.

If universities close, what happens to international students, students estranged from their parents and care leavers, who have nowhere else to go?

- If a student's provider has advised that they are formally closing, this will count as agreement for them to return home.
- International students, students estranged from their parents and care leavers, among others (including students with disabilities), may find it more challenging to return home. Higher education providers are urged to ensure that sufficient accommodation is available for these groups, should they need it, even where providers are closing face-to-face teaching and research spaces; they are also being asked to ensure staff are available to support with halls management.

How will HE providers ensure that critical services are maintained for those students who remain in university or college halls of residence (including privately owned halls)?

- HE providers have been asked to aim to ensure staff (e.g. catering, cleaning and laundry staff) are available to support on halls management, even in the event of wider university closure. Counselling staff should also be available to support on isolating students' mental health. This support could be provided virtually.
- We are working to improve joint continuity planning between HE providers and Local Resilience Fora to consider how to ensure availability of supply of food and medicines.

Will HE providers ensure welfare/mental health services are on offer for students who remain in student accommodation/are unable to return home?

- We would expect HE providers to ensure that students continue to have access to a counsellor or mental health adviser to support their wellbeing. Online resources are also available to support students, including that provided by the mental health charity, Mind. The NHS site also lists mental health support apps (<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>).

ADMISSIONS AND EXAMS

What will young people with university offers do?

- The grades awarded to students will have equal validity to the grades awarded in other years and should be treated in this way by universities, colleges and employers. There is no reason for the usual admissions cycle to be disrupted.
- We welcome the constructive approach taken by the main sector representative body, Universities UK, who have said that universities will be flexible and do all they can to support students and ensure they can progress to university.

Do universities need to start making unconditional offers / should I accept an unconditional offer now that exams are cancelled?

- The grades awarded to students will have equal validity to the grades awarded in other years and should be treated in this way by universities, colleges and employers.
- There is no reason for the usual admissions cycle to be disrupted. Universities should not begin making unconditional offers and applicants should feel no pressure to accept such offers, as they will be awarded a formal calculated grade for each exam they would have taken.

Will students be able to graduate this year?

All providers are responsible for the administration of their own graduation

procedures. The Department and the Office for Students are working with all providers to help support them with their decisions and to find the best way forward for the benefit of all students affected. Providers will contact students affected directly. Graduation ceremonies are likely to be delayed given current health advice.

STAFFING

What is Government doing to support outsourced university staff who may be affected by COVID-19?

- The Chancellor has announced a series of wider measures to support employers and employees, recognising the significant impacts caused by COVID-19
- Universities are independent institutions and are responsible for their own decisions on employment contracts and pay and pension provision. While respecting the independence of the sector, it is important that universities consider the impact of short-term and casual contracts, as well as those employed by outsourced services, on staff at this time.
- It is particularly important that universities who rely on outsourced staff, such as cleaners, catering or security, to maintain the delivery of critical services and infrastructure, including student accommodation or medical research facilities take appropriate measures to protect the health, safety and welfare of their staff.

CIVIC ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

What more can universities do to help?

- Universities have a key role to play within their communities and we believe that there will be considerable appetite within the HE sector to support national needs. The Government has been approached by institutions offering use of biomedical facilities and researchers. Government is also considering how students in relevant disciplines might be able to make valuable contributions, including in schools and other educational institutions.