



**Michelle Donelan MP**  
Minister of State for Universities

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2<sup>nd</sup> February 2021

Dear students,

This has clearly been a hard and challenging time for all of us in education with an unprecedented scale of disruption caused by the global pandemic. We made a national decision to prioritise education so that you did not have to delay your academic journeys or lives, but that does not mean we underestimate the fact your university experience has been so very different over the last year. This virus has taken so much from all of us and the impact on young people and students has been stark. That is why, at every stage, I have worked with universities to prioritise mental health and wellbeing.

I want to thank you for the patience and dedication you have shown in response to the disruption caused to your studies by the pandemic. We appreciate that concerns about new coronavirus variants and another national lockdown announced on 4<sup>th</sup> January have affected many people's sense of wellbeing, especially that of students given the majority are now studying 100% online and not in their term time accommodation.

Throughout this pandemic I have been working with universities to prevent students getting into hardship. We have ensured that £256 million worth of student premium money could be used flexibly in this academic year. In December we announced an initial £20 million of additional hardship funding and I am now announcing an additional £50 million for this financial year taking funding available to £70 million which can be used by April. We will continue to monitor the situation going forward and look at what impact this funding is having.

The funding will be distributed by the Office for Students to universities, who will ensure it reaches those in greatest need including international students and postgraduates. We believe Higher Education institutions are best placed to help those of you who are impacted by the pandemic. Support may include assistance for students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location, or those of you who may have been unable to keep jobs based close to your term-time accommodation (if you are not able to access the Coronavirus Job Retention Support Scheme (CJRS)). Alternatively, support may include help for you to access teaching remotely, or for those of you who have already applied for hardship funding previously but now need additional support.

I welcome the decision from many universities and accommodation providers to offer rent refunds and I am encouraging all large-scale private accommodation providers that have not yet done so to join them and offer refunds or other financial compensation. We are asking all providers of student accommodation, including universities, to make sure that their rental policies have your best interests at heart. We also urge them to communicate their policies clearly and be fair.

I know how difficult the past year has been and I want to thank you again for your resilience at this challenging time. I want to reassure you that your education, health and wellbeing remain at the top of my agenda. Please continue to access the mental health and pastoral support provided by your Universities, should you need to. I chair a mental health and wellbeing working group which includes the OfS Student Panel and Student Minds along with many sector representatives and we have been working with other government departments to communicate what support is available and are also looking at what more we can do. We have launched the Student Space platform, run by Student Minds. The Minister for Children and Families and I are also chairing a Mental Health Education Action Group which will look at mental issues for students and staff across all stages of education. We have asked the OfS to dedicate £15 million of the Teaching Grant to initiatives to support student mental health especially with the transition from school/college to university.

I also want to use this opportunity to reassure you that I am working closely with universities and the professional bodies to ensure that you can all graduate on time and at a world-class level despite the disruption that the pandemic is causing. The Prime Minister recently announced that unfortunately we cannot allow the return of any more students to university until at least the 8<sup>th</sup> March – this is three weeks after all those most at risk (in the first four priority groups) will have been vaccinated. In the week commencing the 15<sup>th</sup> February we will conduct a review based on the impact of the vaccine roll out, looking at mortality rates, infection rates and the pressures on our NHS. During the commencing the 22<sup>nd</sup> February we will announce the plan for university students and other educational settings.

As a government we want to get you back to face-to-face studying as soon as possible, but we have to follow the science and prioritise the NHS and saving lives. The scientific advice remains that Higher Education teaching settings are very low risk. The concern is regarding the mass movement of students back to campus, as well as reducing community transmission in general.

There are exceptions for some students; the guidance for students returning to, and starting, High Education in spring term 2021 sets out that Higher Education providers should also consider supporting the return of students in exceptional circumstances; for example, where students do not have access to appropriate alternative accommodation, facilities or study space, or who need to return for safety or mental health reasons.

A number of students have contacted me about no detriment policies. As autonomous institutions it is for universities will make their own judgements about how best to ensure students' achievements are reliably and fairly assessed. Adopting a 'no detriment' policy may well be one way for universities to achieve this. We will continue to work closely with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher

Education (QAA), professional bodies and the OfS to ensure students continue to leave university with qualifications that have real value, reflect their hard work and allow people to progress.

I am also thankful to all HE staff for their tireless work to ensure that young people do not have to put their lives or their academic journeys on hold. We have been clear that universities are expected to maintain quality and academic standards and the quantity of tuition should not drop. I have been impressed by the innovative and dynamic approaches so many providers have taken to online learning.

However, if you have concerns, there is a process in place. You should first raise your concerns with your university. If your concerns remain unresolved, you can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to consider your complaint. We expect providers to ensure that continuing and prospective students receive the clear, accurate and timely information needed to make informed decisions.

Finally, if you are currently attending University, I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that you should be tested twice upon your return to University facilities, and providers should now also be offering twice weekly testing to all students eligible to be attending. It is crucial that eligible students engage in this programme so that we can reduce and better manage outbreaks of COVID-19 and work towards the wider re-opening of Higher Education institutions.

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.

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**Minister of State for Universities**