



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

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13<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Dear Sir Michael,

I would like to thank the Office for Students for its continued hard work in response to the evolving Covid-19 pandemic. Your work is crucial for supporting students and will continue to be critical in the months ahead. I am writing to you now following my letters to providers and students on 30 December 2020, and the subsequent announcement by the Prime Minister on Monday 4 January. I am aware that you intend to communicate with providers following these developments, and I wanted to write to you in advance of that. This is not intended as guidance under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 but is intended to set out the government's position in support of your planned activity in this area. This government's priority is to support the wellbeing of students and staff throughout HE and to enable students to complete their courses and secure excellent outcomes. We are especially grateful to those institutions reporting their Covid-19 testing and case numbers and I would like to emphasise the importance of this. The Government has been very clear that Higher Education providers are expected to maintain quality and academic standards, and the quantity of tuition should not drop. Providers should seek to ensure all students, regardless of their background, can access their studies remotely. You have indicated that you will reiterate to providers their obligation to have regard to relevant guidance about consumer protection law and will ask them to review whether students have received the teaching and assessment they were promised. I would strongly encourage and support that.

Universities and colleges have risen to the challenges of the pandemic, producing interactive, high quality and innovative remote learning. This is more important than ever with the vast majority of students studying solely online. I look forward to receiving in February your review of digital teaching and learning in higher education. I know you are monitoring and assessing quality in providers and I would like you to continue to do so - and to a greater extent during this period when the majority of courses are 100% online.

Nonetheless, this has been a very difficult year for students, and understandably, many are publicly questioning whether they should be entitled to both tuition fee and accommodation cost refunds. I therefore also ask you to continue to encourage groups of students to contact you through your notifications process if they have concerns about on

the quality of tuition, and to ensure providers are aware of that process. I urge you to reiterate to the sector that students should make a complaint to their institutions if they have concerns about the quality of course delivery and that they can take their case to the Office for the Independent Adjudicator if they remain unsatisfied with their providers' response. University complaints processes should remain open and accessible at this time.

We are currently looking at what more we can do to support students and we strongly encourage providers and accommodation providers to review their accommodation policies to ensure they are fair, transparent and have the best interests of students at heart. As you know, we recently announced up to £20 million to help students most in need of support in these exceptional circumstances, for example those struggling to cover accommodation costs as a result of the pandemic, in addition to an existing £256 million universities can use to help those in financial hardship. We value your support in ensuring this money is focused on the students who most need it. It is important to be clear to providers that they should make students aware of the processes in place to support them if they have concerns about their accommodation costs or face particular financial hardship.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my thanks to the OfS for its continued hard work regulating the higher education sector and supporting students during these challenging times, and in particular the flexible approach you have taken to regulation. I appreciate your efforts to ensure a high-quality experience for all students, delivering excellent student outcomes and value for money.

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.

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