



Michelle Donelan MP

Minister of State for Universities

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT

02 February 2021

Dear Colleague,

This continues to be an incredibly difficult time for us all, and our entire higher education sector has such a key role to play during these unprecedented times. I have previously written to higher education providers and students, and asked for my thanks to be communicated to you, but now I am writing directly to you as staff, working at every level, throughout higher education and in students' unions, to thank you for everything you are doing to support students and maintain the delivery of higher education.

The government has prioritised education during the pandemic so that students at all levels can continue their education. It is crucial to the health and wellbeing of students and young people that we allow them to access the university education that they have been working towards throughout their lives. However, this would not be possible without the work you are doing. I know you are all working creatively and tirelessly to support your institutions and students under difficult and uncertain circumstances, transforming the learning environment and providing both academic, pastoral and welfare support to your students. I am immensely grateful for the huge amount of work being done to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on our students, universities and communities.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen universities develop innovative and dynamic online learning. Indeed, I am sure that many of the innovations we have seen over the past few months will contribute to a new baseline for the way teaching is delivered, support is offered, and student communities are built and maintained.

I am also acutely aware that in many cases campuses have remained open in some capacity, with staff working to maintain essential services. Whether that has been to support students living in halls; continue essential research; manage critical infrastructure – including meeting unprecedented demands on IT networks and digital services; to provide libraries and study spaces; or to help keep campuses safe, clean and secure for those that have had to use them, I am grateful.

While higher education providers and students' unions are independent organisations, responsible for their own decisions on employment issues, it is important that they take appropriate measures to protect the physical and mental health, safety and wellbeing of all staff, at all times. I am grateful for the work that has taken place by and with health and safety teams to respond to guidance and adapt campuses to create the safest possible working environment for all staff.

I would also like to extend my thanks to those staff who have taken on new roles or reprioritised their workload to deliver coronavirus testing. This testing is a vital part of our strategy to interrupt the transmission of the virus and protect students, staff, and others on campus.

I know employers take their responsibilities seriously and are working with staff and unions to address the understandable concerns you may have during the pandemic. The collaboration necessary in these extraordinary times was demonstrated by the efforts of trade unions and the Universities & Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) to develop principles on how to keep campuses as safe as possible and ensure the health and wellbeing of HE staff, students and visitors.

In order to help employers make informed decisions, we have provided guidance on reopening campuses and buildings. Where it was necessary, we confirmed universities could access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) to help pay wages and safeguard jobs. We have also issued guidance on the critical worker status of HE staff which confirms that higher education staff can be critical workers for the purposes of access to education. This is to help ensure that those staff who need to access school places are able to do so.

This virus has taken so much from all of us and the impact on students has been stark indeed. I know that student hardship is a concern for us all. Last year the government worked with the OfS to allow flexibility in the use of £256 million in government funded student premium money. In December we announced £20m of additional hardship funding and I have also now made available a further £50 million for this financial year taking it to £70 million. Higher Education providers are best placed to assess student hardship locally, but support might include, for example, the needs of students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location, or help for students to access teaching remotely.

I would like to acknowledge again and thank you for the formidable work that you are all doing at this challenging time.

I would be grateful if unions and university leaders can please ensure that this letter is shared with all staff through your branch and staff networks.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end of the name.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities