



**Michelle Donelan MP**

Minister of State for Universities

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tel: 0370 000 2288 [www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus)

Dear colleagues,

I continue to be grateful for the huge amount of work being done across the sector to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on our students and providers. I promised I would keep you updated of developments and so here is some of the latest information following the Prime Minister announcement on 23 March.

The latest guidance on staying at home and staying away from others can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others>

### **Students in residence halls in England**

The majority of students in this country live away from home and while many students will already have travelled home, I know those who have not are concerned about what they should do now.

The Government's advice is that **students remaining at university in England should now stay where they are and not attempt to travel**. If they are living in student halls, or private rented accommodation, they should remain there and stay indoors while current restrictions are in force. As the Prime Minister said, staying put and remaining indoors are now crucial to slow the rate of transmission of COVID-19, to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, and save the lives of fellow citizens.

I recognise that this inevitably places more pressure on your institution's student accommodation and support services. I know that many of you had already planned provision for students who cannot travel home or have no alternative residence, such as care leavers or estranged students. I expect you will now be making additional arrangements to accommodate additional numbers.

This will include ensuring you are able to provide a range of services, including catering and cleaning, and also student health and welfare. In particular, I know that many of you are bolstering your existing mental health services, and adapting delivery to means other than face-to-face. These services are likely to be an important source of support during this period of isolation. This support is especially necessary for those students in houses in multiple occupation away from campus. My officials are talking with key stakeholders to consider how we can best support you with offering such additional mental health support.

I recognise that running additional services for students staying on campus may well have an implication for numbers of critical workers. Whilst we recognise this, I would ask you to keep this to an absolute minimum.

We are also working with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that Local Resilience Fora (LRFs) in each area of the country are aware of the distinctive needs of our higher education sector and are prepared to offer assistance. We are looking to ensure that LRFs understand how the skills, expert knowledge and, in some cases, facilities of HE providers could benefit the wider community and that join-up on business continuity could be a powerful tool in the national effort to tackle the virus. If there are issues about how this is working in practice, please let me know.

## **Student Finance**

As per my previous letter, I would like you to reassure students 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. You may also wish to ensure students, particularly those in paid employment, are aware of Government's new Corona Virus Retention scheme, which is detailed further down.

I would like to reiterate that I trust you will continue to communicate clearly with residential students on rents for this period and administer accommodation provision in a fair manner.

## **Visas**

I can confirm that on Tuesday 24 March, the Home Office updated their visa guidance to provide greater certainty for international higher education students and staff in the UK currently unable to return home due to COVID-19. This covers three main issues: visa extensions, in-country visa switching and distance learning.

### *Visa extensions*

No individual who is in the UK legally, but whose visa is due to expire, or has already expired, and who cannot leave because of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, will be regarded as an overstayer, or suffer any detriment in the future.

Anyone whose leave expired after the 24 January and who cannot leave the country because of travel restrictions or self-isolation will have their visas extended to 31 May 2020.

**Individuals must contact the Coronavirus Immigration Team email to advise of their situation – please see contact details further down.**

### *In-country visa switching*

Individuals (students or staff) who cannot leave the UK due to travel restrictions or self-isolation and wish to stay in the UK in the long-term would ordinarily need to apply for a visa from their home country. Where individuals would normally be required to return to their country of residence to apply for a visa in a different category, they'll now be able to apply from the UK to switch.

### *Distance learning*

Tier 4 students are not normally permitted to undertake distance learning courses. However, due to the current exceptional circumstances, the Home Office will not consider it a breach of sponsor duties to offer distance learning to existing Tier 4 students in the UK or who have

chosen to return overseas but wish to continue their current studies. Sponsors do not need to withdraw sponsorship in these circumstances.

New international students who have been issued a Tier 4 visa but have been unable to travel to the UK are permitted to undertake distance learning and sponsorship does not need to be withdrawn.

New international students who have not yet applied for a visa but wish to commence a course by distance learning do not need to travel to the UK to do so and therefore do not require sponsorship under Tier 4.

*Further information from the Home Office*

Full details covering the above visa issues above can be found at the following link: [www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-uk-visa-applicants-and-temporary-uk-residents](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-uk-visa-applicants-and-temporary-uk-residents) Home Office's Coronavirus Immigration Helpline remains open: 0800 678 1767 (open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm – calls are free of charge if made from within the UK).

The Home Office asks that customers check gov.uk first as that is the central source of information, but if individuals remain concerned about their immigration status they can contact: [CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk).

## **Exchanges**

The FCO is advising British nationals against all non-essential international travel for an initial period of 30 days. All UK students and staff currently studying on exchanges (Erasmus+, or other schemes involving terms or years abroad) or working temporarily overseas are strongly advised to return to the UK now when and while commercial routes are still available.

The latest [guidance on social distancing](#) also recommends avoiding all non-essential use of public transport, where possible so you are all strongly advised not to have students or staff embarking on overseas travel as part of their studies or work responsibilities.

The FCO's latest advice can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus>

## **Regulatory framework**

The Government and the Office for Students (OfS) are aware of the additional demands on all Higher Education Providers at this time, and have been working together to review what steps could be taken to help alleviate some of the burdens of the regulatory framework:

- The OfS have set out reduced regulatory requirements focused on priorities related to the pandemic and paused all existing consultations.
- You also will be aware that REF 2021 has been delayed until further notice, with a new submission date to be announced in due course.
- Current TEF awards will also be extended until summer 2021, and decisions on the future of TEF will be taken in due course, as the Government considers and responds to Dame Shirley Pearce's independent review of TEF.

## **Finals**

The OfS will shortly issue guidance on how to ensure students complete their studies whilst maintaining quality and standards. This will cover teaching, continued learning and assessment during this difficult time.

It is important that you support students and enable them to leave with qualifications that have real value and that reflect their hard work and allow them to progress.

My officials are working closely with the OfS and the QAA to help ensure that PSRBs remain confident that maintaining quality and standards will not affect the accreditation of degrees.

## **Support for staff**

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

We recognise that there are employees whose roles are essential to allow you to continue providing education and other services, including research and work to fight the effects of COVID-19. We have empowered you to identify essential staff but expect you to review the list of key workers in your business continuity plans in order to minimise the number of people who are required to travel in the current circumstances. And, of course, you should also ensure that all staff follow the guidance on social distancing.

I know that many of you are also considering how to provide for the wellbeing and security of your staff at this time. I ask that you pay particular attention to the additional financial hardships that are being faced by hourly paid and student staff who have been reliant on income from campus-based jobs at this time.

I expect that in most circumstances you will be able to continue paying your staff as usual. Where this is not the case, the new Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme put forward as part of the HMT package of support will be set up to help pay staff wages and keep people in employment. HMRC are working urgently to get the scheme up and running and we expect the first grants to be paid within weeks. The Government is aiming to get it done before the end of April.

Full guidance on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is available here.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/covid-19-support-for-businesses>

## **Universities support for Covid-19 national effort**

Universities are at the front line in the immediate challenge of Coronavirus, from the work to develop and manufacture ventilators and hand sanitisers to mapping the genome of the virus.

This is all being done while universities are acting quickly to care for staff and students within their own institutions. The pressures are great, but I am asking you all to think creatively about the different ways in which you can support the effort more widely.

Many of you are already looking at what research, equipment, and accommodation facilities you can offer and encouraging students to sign up to the NHS volunteering drive. There will be many other ways that you will be best placed to identify, building on your close relationship to the health and other front line services. I know you will respond to this call for assistance with your tradition of civic responsibility and expertise.

I am also sharing again the link where students can sign up to volunteer to support the NHS: <https://www.goodsamapp.org/NHS>

I would like to acknowledge again the formidable work that you are all doing and thank you for everything you are doing to look after your students and staff.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

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