



2020-0032862POSoS

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP

By email: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

24th September 2020

Thank you for your letter of 22 June, addressed to ministers, enclosing correspondence from your constituent, [REDACTED] about post-16 education.

Firstly, I would like to thank all staff working in the post-16 education sector for their hard work in responding to the unprecedented challenge that we currently face. The ability of the sector to continue to provide education and support to learners in institutions across the country is vital, now and for the future.

Having a highly skilled workforce in the UK was vital before the COVID-19 outbreak and will be even more important as we recover. We had previously announced additional funding of £400 million in 2020-21 for 16 to 19 education, along with £1.5 billion in new capital funding over five years to upgrade the further education (FE) college estate and an extra £120 million to create an Institute of Technology in every part of the country. We are also providing an extra £3 billion, over the course of this Parliament, for a new National Skills Fund to help people learn new skills and prepare for the economy of the future. We continue to look at future investment requirements to be in a great position to increase the skills in our workforce to support economic recovery.

We recognise the financial impact of COVID-19 for providers, and we are working to make changes where we can. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) will continue to pay grant funded providers their scheduled monthly profiled payments for the remainder of the 2019-20 funding year. In addition, ESFA allocations for 2020-21 have been confirmed, and payments will be made in line with the national profile. For colleges in significant financial difficulties the existing support arrangements remain in place, including short-term emergency funding.

Furthermore, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced an extensive and unprecedented package of support measures for businesses and employees. We have provided guidance on staff that post-16 providers are able to furlough; further guidance regarding a supplier relief scheme for providers funded under a contract for services with ESFA will be published when available. We are working closely with HM Treasury to monitor how the support packages benefit FE providers and to consider any further action.

We are focused clearly on the implications of the closures, including how providers will reopen and transition to normal operations. We want learners to be able to continue to study. Colleges and providers are moving more learning online to allow students to continue with studies remotely and any strategy for ongoing learning should be informed by the needs of their staff and students, and their home learning environments.

Regarding higher education (HE), we are committed to supporting our world-class institutions and will continue to work closely with the sector to manage the impact of COVID-19 and secure HE stability and sustainability.

The Office for Students (OfS) has stated that one of its key priorities during the COVID-19 outbreak is to support the financial sustainability of the sector. Providers with concerns about their financial viability or sustainability have been encouraged to contact the OfS at the earliest opportunity. The OfS has adapted its reporting requirements to focus on threats to liquidity and short-term viability, enhancing its ability to identify risks to individual providers as well as patterns across the sector.

HM Treasury has announced a wide range of support, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and more detailed business support packages, including the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CLBILS) and the Coronavirus Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF). The CLBILS, which may be relevant to many HE providers, opened for applications on 20 April. Larger HE providers may also wish to explore the CCFF and should liaise with their bank to discuss eligibility. If their bank does not issue commercial paper, UK Finance has published a list of those banks that are able to assist.

HE providers that meet the published criteria for the loan and financing schemes should approach their bank and begin to apply for the relevant scheme, if they believe they require that support. Further details of these schemes can be found on GOV.UK here at: [tinyurl.com/Y83ww639](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-business-interruption-loan-scheme), and on the British Business Bank website, at: [tinyurl.com/Ybw4eka2](https://www.bbbk.com/press-releases/coronavirus-business-interruption-loan-scheme).

Whilst HE providers are independent and responsible for their own decisions regarding employment issues, it is important that they take appropriate measures to protect the health, safety, and welfare of staff at all times. This includes providing support for those who are now adapting to new working or teaching practices and delivering essential services from home.

We expect universities, like all employers, to give due consideration to their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the way their employment practices affect different sections of their communities and staff at different stages of their careers. We expect that in most circumstances HE providers will continue paying their staff as usual as delivery of teaching moves largely online, and staff maintain key services, including those for students remaining on campus. Where this is not the case, providers may be eligible for the CJRS, as previously mentioned.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills wrote to heads of providers on

26 March and asked that they pay particular attention to the financial hardships faced by hourly paid and student staff who have been reliant on income from campus-based jobs at this time.

The government recognises the important contribution international staff and students make to our world leading HE sector. We are working in collaboration on a wide range of issues, and the needs of international staff and students are, and will remain, at the heart of this work. The government will apply discretion under current circumstances to ensure that international staff and students are not negatively impacted if they find themselves in a position where they cannot comply with certain visa rules. Full guidance for those affected by changes to UK immigration and borders can be found on GOV.UK at: [tinyurl.com/YANZZ5QP](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-for-international-students-and-staff).

Universities are anchor institutions in their local areas, and many are civically engaged in ways that benefit their wider communities and economy. The government supports moves to put universities' civic engagement on a more strategic footing by the introduction of Civic University Agreements, and many universities have signed up to such agreements with their civic partners, which include FE colleges. I am pleased to see many examples of universities helping with the immediate response, and in the medium and longer term there will be a key role for them to help the country recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Finally, in recognition of the current circumstances, we have allowed the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) awards to be extended until summer 2021. Ensuring teaching quality in the HE sector will be important in the recovery, and decisions on the future shape of the TEF will be taken in due course, as the government considers and responds to Dame Shirley Pearce's independent review.

I hope that I have demonstrated the importance that we place on the post-16 education sector, both during the current difficult time and as we look to the future. Our plans continue to evolve as we further develop our support and publish additional guidance. I look forward to maintaining our engagement with the UCU and reiterate my thanks to your constituent for their part in supporting their students.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a large circular flourish at the end.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education