



2021-0005796POSoS

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
By email: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

15 May 2021

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 13 January, enclosing correspondence from your constituent, setting out their concerns about the payment of tuition fees and rent for student accommodation for the 2020/21 academic year, and mental health and wellbeing due to the coronavirus outbreak. I Apologise for the delay in responding.

This government absolutely recognises that this is a difficult and uncertain time for students, but we are working with the sector to make sure all reasonable efforts are being made to enable students to continue their studies. We have seen some fantastic and innovative examples of high-quality online learning being delivered by providers across the country.

Universities are autonomous and responsible for their fees, but the government has been clear that if universities want to continue charging the maximum amount permitted, they are expected to maintain quality and academic standards and the quantity of tuition should not drop. We expect providers to ensure that continuing and prospective students receive the clear, accurate and timely information needed to make informed decisions. They should also ensure all students, regardless of their background, have the resources they need to study remotely and help to achieve qualifications that both they and employers value.

It should be noted that it is an Office for Students (OfS) registration condition that providers must deliver well designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.

The Minister of State for Universities, Michelle Donelan, wrote to the OfS in January outlining the government's expectations of the higher education (HE) sector. Following this, the OfS wrote to provider accountable officers, setting out the actions it is taking in connection with providers' compliance to existing regulatory requirements. The OfS has produced specific guidance as to how compliance will be assessed in the light of the pandemic. This is available on the OfS website at: tinyurl.com/3T7KF3BR.

Whether or not an individual student is entitled to a refund of fees will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between the provider and student. If students have concerns, there is a process in place. They should first raise their concerns with their university. If their concerns remain unresolved, students at providers in England or Wales can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for HE to consider their complaint. The OIA's website gives details about eligibility criteria and how to make a complaint at: tinyurl.com/SM3ECA5.

I should make clear that the government cannot become involved in individual disputes between English universities and their students, nor does it review OIA decisions. This is to safeguard the OIA's independence.

With regard to examinations, all providers are responsible for the administration of their own exams and assessments and providers will contact affected students directly with further information about examinations.

Regarding accommodation, the government welcomes the decision from many universities and accommodation providers to offer rent refunds for students who need stay away from their term-time address and urges others to join them and offer refunds or other financial compensation.

Students can surrender their fixed term tenancy early if they reach an agreement with their landlord. If they have a joint tenancy agreement, all tenants will need to agree to the surrender. However, even if their circumstances have changed due to the effects of COVID-19, they still will not have an automatic right to leave early.

If a student thinks their accommodation provider is treating them unfairly, they can raise a complaint under the accommodation codes of practice if their provider is a code member. The codes are on the Student Accommodation Code website at: tinyurl.com/L7DW2EM. Students can find information on how to complain on the Unipol website at: tinyurl.com/Y822MBSK.

If their HE provider is involved in the provision of the accommodation, students at providers in England or Wales, who have exhausted their provider's complaints process, can ask the OIA to consider their complaint.

Students may be entitled to refunds from certain accommodation providers depending on the terms of their contract and their particular circumstances. Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support, contact details for which are available on its website at: tinyurl.com/83F5LCZ.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has also published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by the coronavirus. This sets out the CMA's view on how the law operates to help consumers understand their rights and help businesses treat their customers fairly the guidance is available on the GOV.UK website at: tinyurl.com/YA5KRQJL.

This includes publishing a restatement on 30th November 2020 on their views on Consumer Protection Law. This is available at: tinyurl.com/23NMHD99.

The government is aware of the disproportionate impact the crisis will have on some students. We have made an additional £85 million of student hardship funding available to HE providers in the 2020/21 academic year. This money is in addition to the £256 million of Student Premium funding HE providers are able to draw on this academic year towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of IT equipment, and mental health support, as well as to support providers' access and participation plans.

Providers will have flexibility in how they distribute the funding to students, in a way that will best prioritise those in greatest need. The current measures aim to target support for students in greatest need and the government continues to monitor the situation going forward to look at what impact this funding is having. Students experiencing financial hardship as a result of COVID-19 should contact their HE provider to discuss the additional support that may be available to them.

Turning to mental health concerns, HE providers are best placed to identify and address the needs of their student body and decide what welfare support services to put in place. At the start of, and throughout the pandemic I have asked HE providers to continue to support their students as a priority, which has included making services accessible from a distance. We encourage students to stay in touch with their provider's student support and welfare teams as these services are likely to continue to be an important source of support.

Many providers have bolstered their existing mental health services and adapted delivery mechanisms, including reaching out to students who may be more vulnerable, and I asked them to ensure their services adapted to online provision where necessary. Staff at universities and colleges responded quickly to the need to transform mental health and wellbeing services, showing resourcefulness and there are many examples of good practice.

Minister Michelle Donelan has been engaging with universities on this issue and have written to Vice Chancellors on numerous occasions on this, most recently in December. I have also convened a working group of representatives from the HE and health sectors, as well as students to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the pandemic.

We are working closely with the OfS and the sector to ensure that we are doing everything possible to give students the support they need at this difficult time. To support this, I announced a new online platform, Student Space, to enable all students at English and Welsh universities to access vital mental health and wellbeing support.

Funded with up to £3 million by the OfS and led by Student Minds, the Student Space platform bridges any gaps in student support during the pandemic and is designed to work alongside existing services. It offers a whole range of help including preventative support and immediate interventions for those in distress, from therapeutic interventions, to stress relievers, suggestions for strengthening mental health, and quality-assured on-line resources such as peer support platforms and volunteering opportunities. This resource has been extended to support students for the whole 20/21 academic year.

Furthermore, we have asked the OfS to allocate £15 million towards student mental health in academic year 2021/22 through proposed reforms to the Strategic Priorities Grant funding. This is in recognition of the fact that we understand that the transition from school to university will be especially challenging this year.

Over £10 million has also been provided by the government to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need. Students struggling with their mental health can also access support via online resources from the NHS, Public Health England via the Better Health - Every Mind Matters website, and from the mental health charity Mind.

I hope that this is helpful in replying to your constituent, and I wish them every success in their future studies.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', with a large, stylized 'G' and a horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education