



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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Dear colleagues,

I want to thank you again for your continued hard work and the dedication of your staff in response to the disruption caused by the pandemic. I know that concerns about the new coronavirus variants and another national lockdown will have affected many people's sense of wellbeing, including that of university staff and students - your work in this area is crucial and will continue to be vital in the months ahead.

I want to emphasise that I and the government recognise just how challenging and difficult the last year has been for students. As you know the government's guidance asked the majority of students not to return to campus at the beginning of this term, due to the need to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. This has meant that many students are being asked not to reoccupy their term time accommodation. As a result of these exceptional circumstances, some students may face financial hardship, with some students now incurring additional costs at their alternative address.

I am grateful for the work you have already done to support students during these unprecedented times, including the provision of pastoral support and steps taken to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of students.

Following on from the £20m we made available to higher education providers in December, we will be making available an additional £50m of hardship funding this financial year. This will bring the total of new funding available for student hardship to £70m for this financial year. The funding will be distributed by the Office for Students. Universities will continue to have flexibility in how to distribute it to students, including international students and postgraduate students, ensuring that it best prioritises those in greatest need. Higher education providers are best placed to assess student hardship locally, but support might include, for example, support for students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location, or an inability to maintain their employment - potentially in a job based close to their term time accommodation (if they are not able to access the Coronavirus Job Retention Support Scheme (CJRS)) or help for students to access teaching remotely. We are working with the Office for Students to allocate these funds, and further detail will be set out shortly.

I have asked higher education institutions to ensure their hardship policies allow students to apply for support more than once. This is because we are allocating this to specifically help those in the most need, which may include some students that have already obtained help from hardship funds.

I know many students and other groups are questioning if they should be entitled to accommodation cost refunds. I welcome the news that a number of you, plus several private providers, have already offered rent refunds for students who have been asked to stay away from their accommodation and I would encourage others to join them and offer refunds or other financial compensation. Over the last few weeks we have been asking all providers of student accommodation, including universities, to make sure that their rental policies have students' best interests at heart and are communicated clearly. I would like to use this opportunity to reiterate this message to ensure that policies are fair and that students know the policies in place.

The measures set out here aim to target support at those students with the greatest need and we will continue to monitor the situation going forward to look at what impact this funding is having. Thank you for your continued support and please pass on my thanks to all your staff and students' unions who have ensured that students are being supported during this difficult time.

I continue to really value your direct input, particularly through our regular taskforce meetings and my calls to Vice Chancellors. As always, if there is any more I can do to support you, please get in touch with me or my team.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

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