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Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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Dr Ben Spencer MP

Email: ben.spencer.mp@parliament.uk

Your ref: BS11401
5 February 2021

Dear Ben,

Thank you for your email of 26 January, on behalf of your constituents, about the payment of tuition fees during the ongoing coronavirus outbreak.

This has been a very difficult time for students which is why we have prioritised education from the start of the pandemic. We are continuing to work with the sector to ensure that all reasonable efforts are being made to enable students to continue their studies. The government has been very clear that higher education (HE) providers are expected to maintain quality and academic standards, and the quantity of tuition should not drop - providers should seek to ensure that all students regardless of their background have the resources to study remotely. This is more important than ever now with most students studying solely online.

Universities are autonomous and responsible for setting their own fees, up to a maximum of £9,250 for approved (fee cap) institutions. The Office for Students (OfS), as the regulator for HE providers in England, has made it clear that HE providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and academic standards, which set out requirements to ensure that courses are high-quality, that students are supported and achieve good outcomes and that standards are protected, regardless of whether a provider is delivering its courses through face-to-face teaching, remote online learning, or a combination of both. In deciding to keep charging full fees, universities will of course want to ensure that they can continue to deliver courses which are fit for purpose and help students progress their qualifications.

We continue to engage with the sector in discussion on this issue. I wrote to the OfS on 13 January outlining the government's expectations of the HE sector following the new national lockdown.

We have also worked with the OfS to clarify that universities and other HE providers can draw upon existing funding from the student premium to increase their hardship funds for students.

Providers are able to use the funding, worth around £256 million for academic year 2020/21, towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of IT equipment, and mental health support, as well as to support providers' access and participation plans. Students can access this support if they are experiencing financial difficulties. Additionally, on 2 February I announced that we will be making available to universities up to £50 million to support those that need it most, particularly disadvantaged students. This is in addition to the £20 million we announced in December, bringing the total to £70 million for this financial year.

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. We expect providers to ensure that continuing and prospective students receive the clear, accurate and timely information needed to make informed decisions.

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. More information on this process is available on the OIA website at: tinyurl.com/Y99LPFA7.

As the situation develops, the government wants to ensure that students continue to leave university with qualifications that have real value, reflect their hard work and allow people to progress. We have published an FAQ on the impact of coronavirus on HE students on GOV.UK at: tinyurl.com/VQ4MHGA.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Michelle Donelan', written in black ink on a white background.

Michelle Donelan MP
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