

Dear Rachel, Bandy, Rachel, George, and Alex,

Thank you for contacting me about support for students.

I am writing to provide you with a further update as I have now received the following response from the Minister of State for Universities:

"Dear Matt,

Thank you for your email of 19 January on behalf of your constituents, about the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing and mental health of university students and their concerns regarding university fees.

I am concerned about the impact of the pandemic on higher education (HE) students and we must do all we can to mitigate its effects. Protecting student and staff wellbeing is vital; these are difficult times and it is important students can access the mental health and wellbeing support they need.

HE providers are best places 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.

I have 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 to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the pandemic.

This group has created a resources document, collating the guidance, tools and services available to support students' mental health. This information is now being spread through the networks of taskforce members, such as university and student representatives, so universities can raise awareness of the support available and empower individuals to seek help.

We are working closely with the Office for Students (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 recently been extended to support students for the whole 2020/21 academic year.

Over £9 million has also been provided by the government to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need. Students who are struggling with their mental health at this time can also access online resources from Public Health England, on GOV.UK at: tinyurl.com/U8X9FN9, the NHS website Every Mind Matters at: tinyurl.com/Y2894EEZ, and through the mental health charity MIND at: tinyurl.com/Y7HVJ7XF.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has overall policy responsibility for young people's mental health and we continue to work closely with DHSC to take steps to develop mental health and wellbeing support. The government is committed, through the NHS Long Term Plan, to investing at least £2.3 billion of extra funding a year into mental health services by 2023-24. This will see an additional 345,000 children and young people, and adults, able to access support through NHS-funded services.

This year the NHS will receive around an additional £500 million, to address waiting times for mental health

services, give more people the mental health support they need, and invest in the NHS workforce.

Regarding tuition fees, 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. I recently announced that we are also making available up to £20 million of hardship funding on a one-off basis to support those that need it most, particularly disadvantaged students.

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,
Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities"*

I appreciate that you may have already been aware of much of what is in the response, and it is disappointing that the issue of accommodation costs was not addressed by the Minister here.

I understand that some universities have been able to reach agreements on at least partial rent refunds with their students, as have some independent student housing providers. I am supporting calls for all universities and providers to engage with student representatives on this, recognising the clear injustice of students paying for housing and services that they are unable to access.

Please be assured that I am continuing to press the Government to ensure all young people receive the support they deserve.

Yours sincerely,
Matt Rodda M