



2021-0006528MDPO

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Rt Hon Dame Cheryl Gillan MP

Email: cheryl.gillan.mp@parliament.uk

Your ref: CG47568

25 January 2021

Dear Dame Cheryl,

Thank you for your email of 19 January, enclosing correspondence from a constituent, about the payment of tuition fees and accommodation during the ongoing coronavirus outbreak. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area.

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 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, as the regulator for higher education 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 Office for Students on 13 January outlining the government's expectations of the higher education sector following the new national lockdown. We have also worked with the Office for Students to clarify that universities and other higher education 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 Office for Students 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 for higher education to consider their complaint. More information on this process is available on the Office of the Independent Adjudicator website at: tinyurl.com/Y99LPFA7.

I also recognise that this is a difficult time for students with regards to issues surrounding accommodation and there are some steps that students may take if they are struggling. If a student has already signed an accommodation contract for the new academic year and, because of the outbreak, the accommodation no longer fits their requirements, I would encourage them to talk directly to their housing provider. Some accommodation providers have a cooling off period and, given the circumstances, the government is encouraging all accommodation providers to be as flexible as possible.

Also, 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.

The Competition and Markets Authority has published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by the coronavirus. This sets out the Competition and Markets Authority'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/YA55KRQJL.

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](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/83F5LCZ).

Students experiencing financial hardship as a result of COVID-19 should contact their higher education provider to discuss the additional support that may be available to them.

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](https://www.gov.uk/VQ4MHGA).

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities