

Please see a letter below from the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, with an update on Government support to universities and students.

Take care and stay safe.

UCAS

### **Message from the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan:**

I understand the uncertainty that many of you will feel at the moment due to the impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of your lives. I wanted to write to you to address as many of these issues as I can and tell you more about the support available to you.

You may also have seen the higher education announcement reported in the press. We have taken these steps to reassure students about the effects of COVID-19 on their education, by introducing a package of measures to boost support for students, stabilise the admissions system, and ease pressures on universities' finances. By doing this, we will safeguard your education and allow you to complete your studies with as little disruption as possible.

This will mean that you can complete your studies and obtain the qualifications you deserve, with as little further disruption as is possible.

### **Accommodation**

I do appreciate that many students will have travelled to be with their parents or carers before the lockdown. The Government is encouraging universities and private hall providers to be fair and clear in their decisions about rent charges during this time. A number of large companies and universities have waived rents for the summer term or released students early from their contracts.

Private accommodation providers who are facing difficulty may be able to access the support packages [announced by the Chancellor](#) to protect businesses. However, it is important to remember that not all landlords operate as a business – some may own just one or two properties, and that rent may be their entire income.

So, I encourage students to approach their landlords to discuss the possibility of an early release from their lease. [As tenants, students are entitled to support](#) if they are impacted by COVID-19, like repayable rent reductions or postponements, and assurances that eviction proceedings cannot begin against them for three months.

It is also important to stress that accommodation providers should not have instructed any students to leave – if an accommodation provider did formally instruct a student to leave the property, then it would not be acceptable to continue to charge student rents.

I have also heard reports of accommodation providers charging students full rent unless they clear their belongings. Let me be clear that students should not travel back to halls to collect their belongings during lockdown, and it is wrong for accommodation providers to be pressurising students into this and linking it with financial penalties.

If you have further questions on accommodation do visit [Unipol](#), who run the code

of practice for private student accommodation.

For those of you already at university, studying during lockdown may be causing some anxiety. There is a lot of support for university students already available, including:

### **Means Tested Maintenance Loans**

Many of you will have applied for a Maintenance Loan for the coming academic year, 2020/21, and some of your families will have seen their income reduced in recent times. We want to make sure all students receive the right amount of support to complete their studies. If you have been awarded the maximum maintenance loan, you do not need to do anything, as you will receive the maximum level of support as planned. If you have applied for support, and have been awarded a lower amount than the maximum, and believe your household income for the current tax year (2020/21) will drop by at least 15% compared to the household income you provided when you were initially assessed, Student Finance England (SFE) may be able to help. [Information on entitlement and how to apply can be found online](#). Like many other organisations, SFE is very busy at the moment, so it's really important to read the guidance fully before making an application or phoning them.

### **Access to hardship funds**

We have worked with the Office for Students, the regulator in England, to help universities draw on existing funding of up to £46m to increase hardship funds for students. Many universities are already using hardship funds to help students who do not have access to technology at home, and you could be eligible for this support. If you do not have the IT equipment or the internet access you need at home to study, and cannot afford to buy it, or if you are experiencing financial hardship because of COVID-19, you should contact your university to find out what support is available.

### **Mental health support**

I understand some of you may be feeling uncertain and anxious. If you feel this way, it is vital that you can still access the mental health support you need. I have told providers that this should be a priority at this time, and many are strengthening their existing mental health services and adapting how they are delivered, so it doesn't have to be face-to-face. I would encourage you to stay in touch with your provider's student support and welfare teams, as these services are likely to be an important source of support during this period of social distancing. As well as speaking to your university, any student who is struggling can access [online resources from Public Health England](#), along with [online support from the NHS](#), and the [mental health charity, Mind](#).

### **Support for students with jobs on campus**

I wrote to universities on 26 March and asked that they pay particular attention to additional financial hardships being faced by student staff who have been reliant on income from campus-based jobs at this time.

My colleague, the Chancellor, has also announced an unprecedented package of support to help pay staff wages and keep people in employment, and my Department has confirmed that universities are eligible for these schemes. If you have a part-time employment contract (whether on or off campus) and are not able

to work because of COVID-19, you should speak to your employer about the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS).

The full guidance on [CJRS](#) and [guidance for higher education providers](#) has been published online.

### **Complaints**

If you are unhappy with any aspect of your experience at university during the coronavirus outbreak, I expect universities to ensure that you continue to have access to support services, including complaints processes. I expect student complaints and appeals processes to be operated flexibly, accessibly, and sympathetically by providers to resolve any concerns. If you are not satisfied with your provider's final response, you can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to consider your complaint.

I remain committed to helping you continue your university studies during this challenging time.

Michelle Donelan, Universities Minister.