



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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Thursday, 9 April 2020

Dear International Students,

As Universities Minister, I wanted to write to you to provide reassurances that we have taken action to keep you safe and to mitigate the worst effects of COVID-19 on you and your education.

The COVID-19 outbreak is an unprecedented situation and poses significant challenges to higher education, its students and staff in virtually every country around the world. Government is adhering closely to the most up-to-date scientific advice, which is available publicly online. As this changes, our advice will change to match the level of the threat. Using this scientific advice, as well as Public Health England guidance, we are working closely with the higher education sector on a wide range of issues and your wellbeing is, and will remain, at the heart of those discussions.

I want to emphasise to you that our Government not only recognises, but also appreciates, the positive contribution that you and all international students provide to the UK – socially, culturally and economically. You enrich the university experience for all students, bringing greater diversity to university and college campuses, as well as fresh ideas and new perspectives. This cultural exchange helps build life-long friendships, as well as laying the foundations for future networks, and important business, political and diplomatic bridges.

We want you to enjoy your time in the UK and to get the most out of studying at our world-class universities. To mitigate the worst effects of the virus on your student experience, we are working closely with universities and I am pleased to see that the sector is making every effort to enable you to continue your studies – including moving learning online either in the UK or in your home country – so that your teaching and assessment can proceed.

Our first priority, however, is your health, safety and wellbeing. I have been discussing with universities the additional support that they can give to both domestic and international students. I wrote to universities in England on 20 and 26 March, urging them to prioritise the needs of all students who remain at their university accommodation. This includes the large number of international students who have decided to stay in the UK or cannot travel home. They have a duty of care to you, which they recognise and will carry out. This includes continuing to provide accommodation if

you cannot travel home or have no alternative residence. Universities will also offer a range of support services to students, including support for catering and cleaning, and providing support for mental health which is a key consideration for me.

Many providers are bolstering their existing mental health services, and adapting delivery to means other than 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. If you are struggling with your mental health at this time, you can also access online resources from Public Health England, along with online support from the NHS and mental health charity Mind www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/student-life/about-student-mental-health. The Government recently announced a £5m-grant for mental health, to be administered by Mind, to support those people, including students, who require this support.

In addition to support from your university, the UK emergency services are also here for you. They are here for you as much as they are for other UK residents. Our National Health Service can provide you with specific COVID-19 advice through a new COVID-19 online service www.111.nhs.uk/covid-19 or, if you cannot get online, by calling 111. The police are also here to keep you safe, with new public health regulations that will support officers in enforcing measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

I also want to underline that both the UK Government and the higher education sector are clear that you must feel welcome and safe here – on and off campus. There is no place in our society – including within higher education – for harassment, discrimination or racism. You have a right to access education and be in this country without fear of harassment and discrimination. We want to ensure that everyone with the talent and potential to succeed in higher education has the opportunity to do so, regardless of nationality, or ethnic or national origins, and we will not tolerate xenophobia of any kind.

I recognise that some of you will be concerned about your visa status. That is why the Government will be applying discretion under current circumstances to ensure you are not negatively impacted if you find yourself in a position where you cannot comply with certain visa rules. Full guidance for those affected by changes to UK immigration and borders due to COVID-19 can be found at www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-immigration-and-borders. This guidance includes the latest information for those of you who might have questions around visa expiry, switching visa category within the UK, distance learning and working-hour restrictions for student doctors and nurses. If you have concerns about your visa status you should email the Government's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Immigration Help Centre at CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk.

The latest Government advice is that you should only leave your home or accommodation in the UK for very limited purposes: www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance. If you live in university-owned, or privately-owned, university accommodation, universities will do all they can to ensure that you have access to support, food and other provisions. To protect yourself and others you should adhere to Government advice while in the UK. However, if you are considering returning to your home country, please seek advice from your country's embassy or consulate in the UK. You should not travel if you have

symptoms of COVID-19 yourself, or if you are self-isolating for 14 days because someone else in your household / shared accommodation has had COVID-19 symptoms. Symptoms of COVID-19 include a high temperature or a new, continuous cough.

Whether you have already travelled home, have decided to remain in the UK, or cannot travel home, I understand that you will be concerned about what you should do now. I have therefore included as an annex to this letter all the Government's latest guidance, as well as a list of resources and contacts available should you have questions or concerns.

Our world-leading universities, which thrive on being global institutions, will always be open to international students. Both Government and the higher education sector are working together to ensure existing rules and processes are as flexible as possible under the current unprecedented circumstances to ensure that those of you planning to study in the UK from Autumn 2020 can do so.

We will continue to work with the sector and with student representatives and do all we can to keep you safe.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Donelan'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

ANNEX A: INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

COVID-19 – UK Government Response

The national and global response to the spread of COVID-19 continues to develop quickly and our collective knowledge of the virus is growing. Government is adhering closely to scientific advice and guidance, which is available publicly online here: www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-covid-19-scientific-evidence-supporting-the-uk-government-response.

As this changes, our advice will change to match the level of the threat. In doing so our immediate priority remains the health and safety of all UK nationals and overseas nationals in the UK, including you (international higher education students).

What this means for you

Current health advice for both international and British students in the UK is the same. You should comply with the latest guidance on staying at home (or in student accommodation) and avoiding contact with others – see the following guidance for details: www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others

If you are displaying COVID-19 symptoms, you should follow Public Health England advice and isolate in your current accommodation for 7 days. You may need to isolate for longer if you live in shared accommodation – see the following guidance for details: www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection

If you do not have symptoms, you should only leave your home for one of four reasons:

- shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, which must be as infrequent as possible;
- one form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household;
- any medical need, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person;
- travelling to and from work, but only where this absolutely cannot be done from home.

Full guidance and frequently asked questions (FAQs) detailing what you can and cannot do is available online here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do.

Contacting 999 and the National Health Service NHS111 service

The National Health Service (NHS) website has information on the process to follow if you are showing symptoms: www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/.

A new online COVID-19 service www.111.nhs.uk/covid-19 went live on 26 February 2020 in order to reduce the number of COVID-19 related calls to the UK emergency number 999, the core NHS111 service, and the COVID-19 Response Service, with plans in place to increase this number over the coming weeks. As we have now transitioned to the delay phase, we are advising people to use the online coronavirus COVID-19

service if they feel that they cannot manage at home or if their symptoms are worsening, and to call NHS111 only if they are unable to get online.

NHS111 is increasing its call handling and clinical capability to respond to COVID-19. There are currently over 4,500 call handlers working across the country in the COVID-19 Response Service, with plans in place to increase this number over the coming weeks.

Overseas travel

The latest Government advice is that you should only leave your home in the UK for very limited purposes www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance.

If you live in university-owned, or privately-owned, university accommodation, universities will do all they can to ensure that you have access to support, food and other provisions, and that critical services – like heating, water, electricity and security – are maintained. You should contact your university to understand the support available to you. You will not be penalised by the Home Office if you need to stay in the UK and end up overstaying your visas – please see below for further visa-related information.

Please seek advice from your country's embassy or consulate in the UK if you are considering returning to your home country. You may currently find that means of travel are limited. If you are planning to travel you should first advise your higher education provider. You should also adhere to Government advice while in the UK to ensure you are travelling safely. You should not travel if you have symptoms of COVID-19 yourself, or if you live in shared accommodation with individuals who are self-isolating. Symptoms of COVID-19 include a high temperature or a new, continuous cough.

Accommodation and other services

Universities have an obligation to ensure that students in the UK who are unable to travel at present have continued accommodation and access to essential services in the UK for the duration of their stay.

Government has been working closely with the higher education sector to ensure it provides the additional support needed for those students who remain in the UK. In addition to continuing to provide accommodation for those who cannot travel home or have no alternative residence, providers will also offer a range of other services to students, including support for catering and cleaning, and support for mental health.

Mental Health

We understand that this is a time when many students will be feeling uncertain and anxious and it is vital that students can still access the mental health support that they need. Students who are struggling with their mental health at this time can access online resources from Public Health England, along with online support from the NHS and mental health charity Mind:

- www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing
- www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health
- www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/student-life/about-student-mental-health/

Higher Education providers are also bolstering their existing mental health services, and adapting delivery to means other than face-to-face, and these services are likely to be an important source of support for you during this period of isolation. My department is also talking with the HE sector to consider how we can offer additional mental health support.

The Government has also announced a £5 million grant for mental health. The fund, which will be administered by Mind, will be used by the charity sector to support people struggling with their mental health, including telephone and online support services.

Harassment and discrimination

There is absolutely no place for racism off or on campus. Government is working with universities to ensure they are doing all they can to stamp out racism, harassment and hatred. If you have experienced, or are currently experiencing, issues with xenophobia, discrimination or harassment on or off campus, we urge you to speak to your university. Reporting any incidents to them, and, where appropriate, to the police. Universities should ensure they support students reporting discrimination or harassment because of a protected characteristic such as race, whether the perpetrator is a student or staff member.

Other university- or course-related issues

The Office for Students (OfS) has committed to protecting students, by working with providers to develop practical ways to maintain teaching quality and standards throughout this difficult time and enable adequate exams and assessment.

The clear expectation is that providers should make all reasonable efforts to enable students to complete their studies, for achievement to be reliably assessed, for qualifications to be awarded securely, and to enable a fair and robust admissions process for 2020/21 entrants. Providers should inform students about how any changes to teaching and learning assessment processes are likely to impact on their study plans. Please contact your provider if you have any concerns.

We expect student complaints and appeals processes to be operated flexibly, accessibly, and sympathetically to resolve any concerns. If you are not satisfied with your provider's final response, you can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) to consider your complaint.

Prospective international students

We are proud that so many international students choose to study here, but understand that the COVID-19 outbreak will have a significant impact on the sector as a whole.

Our world-leading universities, which thrive on being global institutions, will always be open to international students. Both Government and the higher education sector are working together to ensure existing rules and processes are as flexible as possible under the current unprecedented circumstances to ensure that those planning to study in the UK from Autumn 2020 can do so.

ANNEX B: USEFUL RESOURCES

Gov.uk - The best place to find government services and information		
UK Government	Latest Public Health England advice relating to COVID-19	www.gov.uk/coronavirus
	National Health Service (NHS) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice for everyone • Advice for people at higher risk • Symptoms and what to do • Self-isolation if you or someone you live with has symptoms • More information relating to health and wellbeing 	www.nhs.uk Online Covid-19 service www.111.nhs.uk/covid-19
	Visa and immigration advice	www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-immigration-and-borders . If you have concerns about your visa status you should email the Government's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Immigration Help Centre at CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk
	Coronavirus Information Service on WhatsApp	www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-coronavirus-information-service-on-whatsapp
Other resources for international students		
British Council	COVID-19 information for international students	www.study-uk.britishcouncil.org/moving-uk/coronavirus
UKCISA	COVID-19 information for international students. Up-to-date information about Brexit, immigration, fees, student support, working and living in the UK for current and prospective international students.	www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Studying--living-in-the-UK/Coronavirus-Covid-19-info-for-international-students . www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice Student Advice Line: +4420 7788 9214 (Opening times available online here: www.ukcisa.org.uk/About-UKCISA/Contact-us)
Universities UK	COVID-19 information for universities	www.universitiesuk.ac.uk
Universities UK International	COVID-19 information on the international work of UK universities, their current international students, staff and prospective international students	www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/international