

Michelle Donelan MP  
Minister of State for Universities  
Department for Education  
London  
SW1A 2AA  
Friday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Dear Minister,

**Thank you for meeting with the National Union of Students**

We are writing to thank you for taking the time to meet with us earlier this month and to update us on your priorities whilst in office. We felt that this meeting was very productive and hope to be able to continue this cooperative relationship with you and your department going forwards. Unfortunately, since our meeting events surrounding the COVID-19 epidemic have unveiled rapidly, and the situation facing students and the HE and FE sectors around the UK has changed significantly. We have been glad to work with your department so far to respond to this crisis and very much appreciate your support in ensuring that we are involved in the sector working groups managing the coronavirus response. We would be very grateful for your support on a number of areas of our work to support students at this time.

Campuses have closed as the country has been put into lockdown and this presents new challenges for students. One of the major issues that now needs addressing is in relation to accommodation for students. Many students have been told to leave campuses, and therefore their accommodation, and will not be returning for a third term. In this situation we believe that it is unfair for students to be charged rent for a third term if they will not be taking up this accommodation and are asking for all universities, private sector Purpose-Built Student Accommodation providers and Private Rented Sector landlords to offer a no-penalty early release from tenancy contracts for the current and next academic year. By contrast, some students, particularly international students, care leavers and estranged students, will be forced to remain in their student accommodation, in some cases beyond the current length of their initial tenancy contracts. It is important that all students have safe accommodation that they are able to self-isolate in at this time and so we are calling for an end to all evictions, for all renters, for the duration of the crisis. Despite very welcome news that student finance payments will continue to be made for the third academic term, many students will still be under significant financial pressure and worried about affording rent as a result of not having opportunities for employment currently. We are therefore asking for all renters who are impacted financially by the Coronavirus pandemic must have their rents subsidised, significantly reduced or waived entirely for 6 months and for the suspension of all rent increases for the next 12 months. We would appreciate your support in these aims and hope that your government will bring forward legislation, where possible, to achieve this.

Students in higher education are also worried about the impact that the epidemic will have on their examinations and progression through courses. There are varying situations in different universities, but we are aware that in England the OfS and sector bodies are keen to see universities act with 'business continuity' in mind. We think that, given the extraordinary situation we are currently in, this approach does not put students' best interests first. It places undue pressure on many at a time when they are more concerned about their own health and their loved ones. The approaches that universities are taking to examinations and assessments, namely through digital tests, will also disadvantage certain groups, particularly disabled students who may not have the specialist equipment and support to engage fully in learning away from campuses, and students from poorer backgrounds who will not have the resources necessary to excel in these assessments. We are instead calling for the cancellation of all exams scheduled to take place this academic year, and are glad to see that some institutions

have already taken this decision. In addition, we would like to see greater flexibility shown to final-year and postgraduate students, including an automatic six-month extension to their submission deadlines at no cost to the students. We hope that you will agree that this is the best approach for all students, and provide guidance to all institutions that they should follow this advice.

Furthermore, many students are concerned about a loss of income during this period and how this will impact on them financially. As the Augar Review estimated, over half of current students earn some form of income to add to the support that they receive from student finance. Many of these students work part-time or in the gig economy and have therefore had to give up work as a result of the epidemic. We were very glad to see measures introduced by the Chancellor yesterday **too**. We hope that this financial support will reach all students who need it.

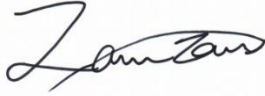
While the COVID-19 epidemic has made these issues much more pressing for students we hope to be able to continue to work with you on the other areas of relevance to the student population that we discussed during the meeting once the situation eases. It was very reassuring to hear that you are looking to address some of the issues that we see in student accommodation and your assessment that the regulations in this area are out of date was very accurate. We would be delighted to help you to identify the issues that students are seeing with housing and some of the possible solutions to these problems. As you stated, this will require cross-departmental working and we would like to assist you with this as much as we can do. You were also right to identify that the information provided to students before and when starting university needs to improve. You expressed an interest in the work UCAS is doing in this area by developing a search portal for purpose-built student accommodation, but although this could be a helpful intervention we need to find further ways to help students make the choices right for them, especially as rents continue to increase above inflation. . We hope your department will look in to this and ultimately would like your government to launch an independent review of the entirety of the student accommodation sector.

On free speech, we understand your assessment that the current status quo is not working. It is clear that you are considering various options for an intervention to change this and it was reassuring to know that you will consider any unintended consequences that might arise from this. We would very much like to work with you on this, especially in helping to assess some of these unintended consequences. You also expressed a willingness to attend a roundtable with students' union representatives on this topic to help provide you with more of an insight in to the issues they currently face with inviting speakers on to campus. We would be delighted to arrange this, once the situation allows, and look forward to keeping in touch with your office regarding this. It was also made clear to us that Iain Mansfield will be directing much of this work from a departmental level and so we would be grateful for the opportunity to meet with him to discuss this further when appropriate to do so.

We very briefly spoke about our new campaign on future student mobility and the need for the UK to retain full membership of the Erasmus+ programme. We understand the current position of your government that you consider options for participation in elements of Erasmus+ on a time limited basis, provided the terms are in the UK's interests. However we feel that it is undoubtedly in the UK's interest to negotiate full membership given that even accounting for the money necessary to pay in to the scheme the UK is estimated to make a net profit of £243 million a year from our participation. Plus the benefits that the scheme brings to students are immeasurable and can be completely transformative. We do hope that your government will reconsider this and negotiate full membership of the Erasmus+ scheme for the entirety of the next programme.

I look forward to keeping in touch with your department on the current epidemic and appreciate the collaborative work that we have currently been conducting. I hope to be able to stay in touch in future and would appreciate if you could update us on any developments, as we will also do.

Yours sincerely,



**Zamzam Ibrahim**  
President,  
National Union of Students



**Claire Sosienski Smith**  
Vice President for Higher Education,  
National Union of Students