



Q&A with Michelle Donelan MP, Universities Minister

Tuesday 15th December; 10am-11am

Online event - Zoom

The APPG for Students held a Q&A session with Michelle Donelan MP, the Universities Minister, to give students the chance to ask questions directly of the Minister about the government's response to the pandemic and their plans for this academic year.

To open the Minister recognised that it has been a very difficult year for all and especially students.

Christmas break and January return

A question was asked as to why there had been a delay in guidance issued. The Minister claimed that there had been several iterations of guidance going to universities, and these have been updated several times according to scientific advice. Recently guidance was published regarding the winter break and January return to give students clarity about this. The Minister appreciated that this guidance was not published as far out as some would have wished, but stated that the government had to find a balance between giving notice to universities and students, and not publishing it too far out that it would be necessary to change it nearer the time.

Similarly, a question was asked about guidance for international students and commuting students for January return. Michelle Donelan stated that every student would be able to get a test on return in January. She recognised that some international students would have booked flights before the guidance was issued, and in these cases they can still take their flights as long as they inform their institutions that they plan to do so and get tested once here. It was a similar situation for commuter students and all facilities, such as mental health services, should remain open for them.

The Minister stated that the government's aim for next term is to prevent outbreaks happening and this strategy focuses on testing. She stated that at every opportunity she had tried to flag how difficult this term has been for students and how the vast majority of students do abide by the rules. She also recognised that students' unions have played a big role, and she fully appreciates the impact they have had.

Accommodation

On the question of rent reductions for students this year, the Minister explained that rents are set by universities or private landlords who are autonomous organisations or businesses and responsible for these services. She encouraged students to check their contracts to see what they are entitled to. Some policies have changed during the pandemic, as some providers gave rent reductions or offered no-penalty tenancy release during the first lockdown but have not since. She pointed students in the direction of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), who have guidance on this, and the Citizens Advice Bureau who can help further. For those in financial difficulty they should talk to their university, who should have a hardship fund which has recently been bolstered by announcement of £20mil in support. The government are keen to make sure that this funding is reserved for students most in need.

A follow-up question was asked on this in reference to the wave of students going on rent strikes across the UK. The Minister stated that hardship funding provided by the government is not going to reimburse all students for accommodation, but it is a significant figure for student hardship. The government will not enforce rent rebates on



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universities as they are autonomous organisation with revenue streams to make decisions for themselves.

One attendee raised the case of students not being given food suitable for their dietary requirements during periods in isolation. The Minister declared that for any examples she has seen in the media she has spoken to the university about this and received assurances that this will not happen again. It is important that food is provided for free or at a reasonable costs and the government want to make it as easy as possible for students to comply with isolation rules.

Teaching and learning

In response to questions around tuition fee refunds, Michelle Donelan stated that she can understand why some students feel that it is not fair, as we have seen students 'yo-yoing' in and out of isolation and they have not have the normal student experience that many others had. However, she explained that the government only set the maximum level of tuition fees and universities can charge lower than this. They have been clear throughout that if universities want to continue to charge the maximum level they must ensure that teaching is accessible and of a good quality. If any students have concerns the Minister encouraged them to talk to their university and submit a complaint to the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) if they are not satisfied with the response. The Minister stated that she had seen some amazing examples of innovate online provision but accepts that not all students will have been getting a good deal. The Office for Students (OfS) are actively monitoring the quality of online learning and are asking for evidence where students do not believe this is up to acceptable standards.

A follow-up question was asked on how refunds would affect university finances, and the Minister explained that a large proportion of funding for universities is provided by the public, through student loans that are not repaid. The government keep this under constant review. However, the Minister pointed to recent data published by OfS which showed that the financial position of universities during this period was better than expected. Nevertheless, the government had introduced a number of support measures, including the restructuring regime which no university has applied for yet.

Where universities have broken promises and changed course delivery the Minister stated that the CMA have been very clear that universities need to be upfront about what is on offer. While there are caveats to this, where government guidance to universities changed, she said that the government had not changed the advice. If students feel that what they were offered is very different to what they have received they should reference this in complaints made to the OIA.

In answer to a follow-up question on this issue, the Minister stated that regulations have changed in regards to rules for socialising and shops opening, but not significantly for teaching, for which regulations have only been tweaked. When the government talk about universities being clear in their offers this is about being upfront about number of hours of teaching provided and whether this would be online.

On the government's response to the Augar review, the Minister spoke of this being about HE and FE and wanting to open up opportunities for all ages, rather than focusing solely on HE. The government will be responding in due course, and had planned to at the Spending Review, but as this was reduced to a one-year spending round and this is a longer-term project, will be waiting for a more appropriate opportunity.

For students on clinical courses, Michelle Donelan explained that universities have been working with professional bodies to ensure that degrees do lead to professional



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qualifications. She stated that the government were conscious of this when setting policies, such as allowing certain students back first in January for their qualifications.

In answer to a question on the lifetime skills guarantee, the Minister clarified that the government have already made maintenance loans available to part-time students but not to distance learners on part-time courses, as the nature of these courses means they will often have jobs to support their incomes. The government will be reviewing this and taking feedback.

For students on practical courses, the Minister stated that it is clear they have not been getting what they normally would, but online learning does not have to be inferior. If a student is not happy with the provision they have received they were advised to go through the complaints procedure, and it was claimed that this was not a bureaucratic process as it puts the onus on universities to provide evidence.

When questioned about the safety of students returning to in-person teaching due to universities needing to attract more students for their income streams, the Minister explained that the government have been clear that HE is not the only option for students. But she claimed that the learning environment in universities is a safe one, and they do not have any evidence that teaching in universities is increasing rates of transmission. Michelle Donelan was keen to state that the vast majority of students have abided by the rules and the government are not blaming students for increasing rates of transmission. She believed that students will continue to act responsibly.

Finance

When asked about support for mature students, the Minister recognised that the pandemic has affected all ages, but will have affected some students more than others, such as those with dependants. For these students should would point them towards the hardship funds on offer for students of all ages.

In response to a question on the eligibility criteria for hardship funds the Minister stated that these should be made as easy as possible, and if there are any examples where this is not the case these she will send these on the OfS and raise with universities.

The Minister wanted to clarify that she did believe it was helpful to think of the £20mil figure as £13 per students, as it is not a fund for all students, but for those who most need it.

On students who had suspended their studies for a period of time, Michelle Donelan explained that they should be able to access Universal Credit but this was dependant on their individual circumstances. If they wanted any advice they should speak to their university.

Mental health

On the impact of the pandemic on student mental health, the Minister stated that mental health is a priority of hers in normal times and the impact of Covid-19 is only going to increase anxiety and mental health conditions. The Minister has been very vocal throughout pandemic on the need for bolstering mental health support. She stated that students can access the rest of support the govt have announced, including £9mil in funding for mental health services.

Michelle Donelan also described how the government have been clear about the need to support students in isolation. She stated that students should have regular



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communication from universities, at least on a daily basis, and universities need to ensure that welfare support and food is available. The Minister has spoke out about universities charging excessive amounts for food during isolation.

On mental health support for international students currently studying abroad, the Minister stated that it is important that universities are flexible and that universities offer them other options. Support services should be available to all students even if they have to be provided online.

Brexit

In regards to Erasmus, Michelle Donelan illustrated that negotiations are ongoing are the government are looking to secure access, but key commitment is around international exchanges and ensuring there is no gap. The Department for Education have been preparing a domestic alternative to Erasmus, if needed, which would be international in scope and prioritise social mobility.

Postgraduate students

The Minister was unable to answer specific questions on postgraduate research students, as responsibility for these students sits with Amanda Solloway as the Minister for Science. However she does have regular catch-ups with colleagues in BEIS and they are currently looking at how to encourage more care leavers into university.

***For further information, please contact the Secretariat, Taidgh Pledger,
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