

17 March 2020

Dear [name of Accountable Officer]

An update from the Office for Students on COVID-19

Given the pressures and uncertainties universities and colleges are facing in responding to Covid-19, we are keen to support your efforts to minimise its impact on your students and staff and to avoid placing any unnecessary burdens on you.

This letter shares our planned approach with you. It also provides important updates on reporting requirements and consultations.

Our approach in the coming weeks and months

As Nicola Dandridge explained in her email yesterday, we continue to liaise with the Department for Education, Public Health England and other government departments and agencies about providing information and collecting data.

We have also now set three key objectives for the coming months, which reflect how we will intend to respond to the impact of Covid-19. We will:

- support the Government's objectives by sharing information with providers and enabling them to respond effectively
- protect students by working with providers to develop practical ways to maintain teaching quality and standards, enable adequate exams and assessment, and support financial sustainability
- seek to minimise long-run disruption to the English higher education system – reducing permanent damage and laying the foundations for the sector to recover as quickly as possible once the pandemic is over.

We will do this by giving you clarity about our regulatory requirements during this time, minimising our requirements where possible, working closely with other stakeholders to avoid duplication, and minimising uncertainty through advice and clear communications.

Over the next week, we will provide more detail about what this means in practice.

Our approach to regulatory requirements

In this unprecedented environment it would not be appropriate for us to continue to operate the regulatory system as we would in normal times so we will adapt our approach to support providers as they seek to protect the interests of their students.

We are not setting out particular approaches that providers should adopt because we recognise that understanding the local context for these difficult decisions is essential. In practice, this means that we are unlikely to draw negative conclusions about the actions a provider has taken – or not taken – where it is clear to us that it has properly considered the needs of its students and has made a reasonable decision. For significant decisions, this could mean recording the reasons for the decision clearly.

Providers' governing bodies and leadership teams will need to make good judgements about the actions necessary to protect the interests of students and, in particular, to ensure that students have effective pastoral support. This is consistent with our routine approach to management and governance matters.

We expect to write again to accountable officers shortly with more detailed guidance about routine regulatory requirements, including a reduced requirement for reportable events. We intend to limit our requirements to the minimum necessary to ensure that students' interests are protected as far as is reasonably practicable in the current environment.

We will also change how we engage with individual providers to ensure that OfS staff are available to answer questions and provide information. We will provide more information about this over the next few days.

Information request in relation to Covid-19

We will need to revise the F3 Notice we issued on 9 March 2020 because the situation is now significantly different. While we do require information from you, this will not include the number of individuals in your institution with either suspected or confirmed symptoms of COVID-19. You should not, therefore, return the information requested in that Notice until you have heard further from us.

Consultations

In Nicola Dandridge's email, she announced that we would be pausing any new consultations or information requests. We have now also decided to pause all existing consultations until further notice. We have a page on our website with information on live consultations and updates: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultations/> and we will update that page when the situation changes with existing or new consultations.

Further information

We will continue to send regular updates by email to accountable officers, and we will update the Coronavirus page on our website with the latest information:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/coronavirus/>

We will also link to those updates from our Twitter account: @officestudents.

As you know, the Department for Education has launched a helpline to answer education questions about COVID-19 (Coronavirus). The helpline for higher education staff, students and parents is:

Phone: 0800 046 8687

Email: DfE.coronavirushelpline@education.gov.uk

Opening hours: 8am to 6pm (Monday to Friday) 10am to 4pm (Saturday to Sunday).

Next steps

If you have any questions about the issues raised in this letter, please email us at covid-19reports@officeforstudents.org.uk.

If you have any questions about the requirements relating to reportable events, or other regulatory matters, please email us at regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk. You can also call the regulation helpline 0117 931 7305 (9am to 5pm Monday to Friday).

Yours sincerely

Susan Lapworth
Director of Competition and Registration