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Michelle Donelan MP
Minister for Higher Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

Dear Minister

COVID-19, Higher Education and University Support staff

We're writing to you on behalf of the staff working in the UK universities as represented by the five higher education trade unions.

Concerns are mounting about the future of our sector. We are aware that the impact of COVID-19 is likely to be extensive and, at this point in time, the full extent of the impact is unknown. The higher education sector is vital in addressing this current crisis. University research is central in developing tests for the illness and antibody tests, in tracking COVID-19, in developing vaccines and carrying out medical research. University research is also crucial to the development of a robust understanding of the societal, psychological, and economic impacts of the pandemic, necessary for evidence-based policy formation. A stable and well resourced higher education sector will be vital in getting through this crisis.

In terms of rebuilding our economy in the wake of COVID-19, higher education must have a central role. The university sector is one of the most productive and important parts of the UK economy with international students alone bringing in £7.3 billion per annum (UUK) and the sector as a whole generating £73 billion per annum. In addition, the sector directly provides employment to approximately half a million staff, which rises to three-quarters of a million in total when including those employed by contractors and subsidiary companies.

In many towns and cities universities are the single biggest employers and are central not only to providing excellent education but also to contributing to the local economy and civic society. The role of universities, once we are past the worst of COVID-19 and particularly in a

post-Brexit UK, will be more important than ever. Universities will be central to retraining and reskilling our workforce and the workforce of the future. Universities will be vital to establishing new enterprise and business for the growth of the economy in the future and in helping the UK to redefine its place in the world.

Despite its crucial role, the necessary stability and resourcing of the higher education sector is in huge doubt. Since the Higher Education and Research Act was passed into law the financial safeguards that previously had underwritten universities are no longer in place. The status of universities is threatened and with it one of the building blocks of our society is at risk. We are aware that the Office for Students has recently written to universities with details of the changes to the reporting requirements due to COVID-19, but the fundamental assurances that the sector needs have not been provided to date.

The joint unions are calling on the government to urgently provide assurances, and the appropriate legislation, to ensure that universities will not be allowed to 'go out of business'. Universities, and all the staff who work in them and for them, as well as current and future students, need to know that higher education is valued by this government and will be protected by this government.

We are also calling on you to ensure that universities are safeguarding jobs. We are already getting many reports of universities serving notifications of redundancies, and of contractors in universities sending staff home without pay or asking them to use their annual leave. It is no overstatement to say that such a response from universities will be disastrous for the individuals concerned and their families as well as for the future of the higher education sector – one of the most important industries in the UK.

Universities and all of their staff need to know that they will be underwritten by the government, and have the full support of the government, throughout this period of uncharted economic instability.

Yours sincerely,

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