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30 April 2021

Dear <accountable officer>

Student hardship funding: monitoring and additional allocation

I am writing to you about two issues regarding student hardship funding allocations for your provider. These are:

- to seek assurance, **by 12 May 2021**, about how you have used student hardship funding allocations announced in December 2020 and February 2021
- to notify you of your provider's share of an additional £15 million of hardship funding made available by the Department for Education for the academic year 2020-21.

Assurance over student hardship funding allocations for the financial year 2020-21

In December 2020 and February 2021 the government made available a total of £70 million to support students facing hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ In our letters announcing this funding, dated 18 December 2020 and 5 February 2021, we said that we would 'monitor providers' use of this hardship funding through existing reporting mechanisms, including through providers' audited financial statements'. We still intend to do this, but we are required to provide earlier assurances to Parliament that the funding was spent in accordance with its terms and conditions. This letter sets out the limited information we require from you in order to do this.

We have prepared a template for this exercise; this can be downloaded from the '2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring' area of the OfS portal. Once completed, the monitoring template should be uploaded to the OfS portal **no later than 1700 on Wednesday 12 May 2021**. We appreciate that this is a very short timescale and apologise for the short notice.

¹ A first allocation of £20 million was announced in December 2020 (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/additional-funding-for-student-hardship-for-2020-21/), followed by a further £50 million in February 2021 (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/further-additional-funding-of-50-million-for-student-hardship-for-2020-21/).

On this template we have confirmed the total student hardship funding allocated to your provider by the OfS for the 2020-21 financial year, and we are asking you to:

- confirm the total OfS hardship funding distributed by your provider to higher education students by 31 March 2021 in line with the relevant terms and conditions
- confirm any OfS hardship funding not distributed by 31 March 2021 and therefore to be repaid to the OfS
- provide brief commentaries on: the reason for any unspent funding; and the processes that your provider has used to ensure that it has distributed the funding in accordance with our terms and conditions.

If you do not confirm that the funding has been spent in accordance with the terms and conditions, we will contact you separately to discuss this, as the funding will need to be repaid to the OfS.

April 2021 allocation of student hardship funding for the academic year 2020-21

The government has announced a further £15 million of student hardship funding for the academic year 2020-21. This is in addition to the £70 million previously announced for the financial year 2020-21. As with previous funding, the April 2021 allocation is intended to support students facing continuing financial impacts as a result of the pandemic, such as additional accommodation and living costs and the costs of accessing remote learning. This allocation follows confirmation that all remaining higher education students will be able to return to in-person teaching from 17 May at the earliest.²

The allocation for your provider is £<xxxxxx>. We will pay this allocation in full in May 2021. Further details of how funding is distributed is included in Annex B of this letter.

We will publish the allocations for all providers on our website after the elections on 6 May 2021. Providers must distribute their allocation by 31 July 2021 to students facing hardship.

Further information

If you have any questions about either of the issues raised in this letter, please email recurrentgrant@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Nolan Smith
Director of Resources and Finance

² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/remaining-university-students-to-return-to-campus-from-step-3-of-the-roadmap-no-earlier-than-17-may>.

Annex A: Terms and conditions and monitoring for the April 2021 allocation of student hardship funding

The April 2021 allocation of student hardship funding is subject to the general terms and conditions of grant for 2020-21.³ In addition, the funding must be distributed to students facing hardship from 1 April 2021 (to provide continuity of support with hardship funding previously announced for the financial year 2020-21) and within this academic year (i.e. by 31 July 2021). The purpose of this funding is to support higher education students who are facing hardship, particularly where it is needed to support their continuation of study and successful outcomes. As this funding is being provided to support students it should not be used to meet providers' own costs. As with our standard terms and conditions, we will recover any funding that is not used in the time available for the purposes intended.

Support for students facing rent-related hardship must not:

- give greater priority to students on the basis that they are renting the provider's own property rather than renting any other property
- be used to retrospectively subsidise rent rebates that have already been provided to students.

Providers should also ensure that hardship funds are available on an equal basis to students who are on courses that they subcontract out for teaching by other providers.

Although we have calculated an allocation for each provider based on our existing student premium method, providers also have flexibility in how they distribute the funding to students. This can be to a wider population of higher education students than those counted in our student premium funding methods including, for example, postgraduates (whether taught or research), overseas students and others who do not meet the definition of 'OfS-fundable'.⁴ Providers are asked to note that this funding:

- is being provided to support higher education students and should not be paid to individuals who are not studying at higher education level (Level 4 or above) or towards a higher education qualification
- can be paid to students studying on a foundation year that is an integrated part of a higher education course
- can be made available to help students who have previously applied for hardship funding but now need additional support.

Hardship funding distributed by the OfS is intended to support students who are actively studying. However, by exception, providers may also support students who have been forced to temporarily suspend their studies. Examples of such exceptions might include students who:

³ As set out in 'Terms and conditions of funding for 2020-21' (OfS 2020.22), available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/terms-and-conditions-of-funding-for-2020-21/.

⁴ As defined in Annex F of the Higher Education Students Early Statistics survey 2020-21 (HESES20) (OfS 2020.42), available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/heses20/.

- are recovering from COVID-19
- have been forced to self-isolate
- have caring responsibilities
- have been forced to suspend their studies based on a decision by the provider.

In all cases, any funding distributed must be informed by a student-specific assessment of hardship, and there should be a clear expectation of the provider that the student will continue with their course.

We have taken the view that providers are best placed to assess student hardship locally. However, given the purposes for which the government has provided this funding, we expect providers, in distributing this funding to students, to have regard to the exceptional circumstances this year arising from the pandemic. Providers should alert students to the availability of hardship funding and ensure that their application processes have sufficient rigour to prioritise funding to those in greatest need, while avoiding bureaucracy that might deter applicants.

We will monitor providers' use of the April hardship funding allocations through existing reporting mechanisms as set out in the accounts direction⁵. We do not anticipate having to run a separate monitoring exercise. This approach will minimise the regulatory burden associated with monitoring the use of these funds, while still providing assurance that the funding was used for the purposes intended by 31 July 2021. In the meantime, providers are asked to maintain all records of payments made to students with this additional funding, so that they are able to provide this assurance at the year end that the terms and conditions of funding have been met and that the money has been fully committed by 31 July 2021 to higher education students facing hardship.

⁵ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-9-accounts-direction-accounting-periods-beginning-on-or-after-1-august-2019/.

Annex B: Distribution of funding

As with our previous allocations of student hardship funding, our statutory guidance letter from government⁶ asks that we use the existing student premium funding mechanism to distribute this further funding, taking into account the following priorities:

- a. That funding is targeted towards those providers that recruit and support high numbers of disadvantaged students, reflecting where this funding is needed most to enable students to continue with their courses and achieve successful outcomes.
- b. That full-time and part-time students will both be at risk of experiencing hardship resulting from the pandemic, but full-time students may be particularly affected, e.g. due to changes in their location of study.

Having regard for the guidance from government and our legal duties we have therefore decided to allocate the funding as follows:

- £11.2 million (74.5 per cent) pro rata to our allocations through the 2020-21 full-time student premium
- £1.5 million (10 per cent) pro rata to our allocations through the 2020-21 part-time student premium
- £2.3 million (15.5 per cent) pro rata to our allocations through the 2020-21 disabled students premium.

Our view is that all students, irrespective of their mode of study, may have been impacted by the pandemic. We are therefore splitting funding between the full-time and part-time student premiums to reflect the proportion of headcount student numbers that each mode represents of the students counted towards those premiums for 2020-21. The 15.5 per cent allocated pro rata to the disabled students premium is the same proportion that this premium represents of the total funding distributed through the existing student premiums for 2020-21.

Specific terms and conditions of funding apply to the use of this funding allocation; these are described in Annex A. If you believe that your provider will not be able to use the full sum shown above for the purposes intended by 31 July 2021, please notify us as quickly as possible and **no later than 18 June 2021**. In these circumstances we will recover funding from the provider and look to reallocate it to others, so that it can still be used to address student hardship within the academic year.

⁶ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/guidance-from-government/.

Annex C: Downloading and submitting the monitoring form

This annex gives guidance on how to access the Office for Students (OfS) portal to download your monitoring form and how you should submit the completed return. Some common issues are also listed.

Assigning yourself to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring portal survey area

To access your student hardship funding monitoring form, you will need to download it from the OfS portal: <https://extranet.officeforstudents.org.uk/Data/>.

You will need to be a registered user of the OfS portal to be assigned to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area, from which you will download your monitoring form.

If you have not registered on the OfS portal before, you will need to ask the nominated OfS portal user administrator at your provider to create an account for you. Each person who requires access to the student hardship funding monitoring form will need to be registered with their own account.

You will need to be assigned to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area by the nominated OfS portal user administrator at your provider. The user administrator can find guidance on how to add portal users to portal areas on the main portal login page. If you are the user administrator, you will still need to assign yourself to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area.

If you do not know who your user administrator is, you can view the user administrators at your provider by logging onto the OfS portal. Select 'My account' towards the right hand side of the yellow banner, and then click 'Activate an access key'. The names and contact details of the user administrators at your provider will be at the top of the page. If you are not registered and do not know who your user administrator is, please contact portal@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Common issues with accessing the portal

I cannot log in to the OfS portal

If you receive an error message while trying to log in, you may be entering the wrong email address or password, or your account may be locked. Ensure that the email address you are using is correct, and then request a new password. You will be sent a new password, which you will be asked to change when you log in. You can also ask your user administrator to reset your password.

If this new password does not grant you access, it is likely that your account is locked. Contact your user administrator, who can unlock your account for you. It is advisable that you also request a password change at the same time. If you or your user administrator have any problems, please contact portal@officeforstudents.org.uk.

The 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area has not appeared on my login page even after I have been assigned to it

Once you have been assigned to a survey, you may need to log out and then log back into the portal for the survey to appear under 'Home'.

Downloading your student hardship funding monitoring form

Once you have been assigned to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area, log in to the OfS portal and you will see a link for the student hardship funding monitoring form under the 'Home' section. This link will take you to the monitoring form.

To download the form, click on the 'Download' button. You will receive a zipped file, which will contain your monitoring form. You may need to unzip the file before accessing the workbook. You may also need to click on 'Enable editing' on the yellow banner if it appears on your screen when you open your workbook. You can download this empty workbook as many times as required.

Save the workbook to a memorable location on your computer. If there are any issues with downloading your workbook, please contact us at portal@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Completing your monitoring form

The monitoring form is provided as an Excel workbook with the file extension '.xlsx'. You should not attempt to alter the format of the worksheets by adding or deleting columns or rows. Only cells where data is required should be edited. The workbook is protected to ensure that the data submitted is accurate and is only entered into the relevant cells. Worksheets contain information critical to accurate loading of the data; it is essential that this is preserved. We will refuse to accept any workbooks that have been unprotected or tampered with.

We recommend that you do not copy and paste data into your workbook, as this can cause formatting issues. If you wish to copy and paste data, ensure that you use the 'Paste values' option instead. This will not copy the formatting of the data you are pasting and will preserve the formatting of the workbook.

Uploading your monitoring form

Once you have completed the monitoring form (note that the workbook has two sheets), you will need to submit the workbook to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area on the OfS portal. You should ensure that:

- your workbook has not been saved so that zero values are displayed as blanks
- links to other spreadsheets are removed
- only one worksheet is selected when the completed workbook is uploaded
- the workbook is **not** zipped.

Otherwise the workbook may not upload successfully.

Submit the workbook as follows:

- a. Navigate to the 2020-21 student hardship funding monitoring survey area on the OfS portal.
- b. Click on the 'Upload' button.
- c. Browse for your monitoring form which is saved in your memorable location.
- d. Click 'Upload'.
- e. The workbook may take some time to upload if the portal is busy. The page will automatically refresh to show if your file is waiting to be processed, being processed or has completed successfully.
- f. Check below the status bar for the log of your submission. The 'Outcome' will display as a 'Success' if there are no issues with the uploaded workbook.
- g. Check the 'Comments' to see if your workbook is valid and has successfully uploaded. See below for a description of some of the messages that may appear.

Once you have successfully submitted your workbook, check the results package by clicking on the 'Results' button. The results package contains the workbook that you have submitted, which has now been processed.

Completed workbooks can be uploaded any number of times until the deadline for submissions, when we will take the latest uploaded version as the final version for submission.

Common issues while uploading the monitoring form

My workbook contains validation errors

The monitoring form includes a number of validation checks. Please check your form carefully and complete the sign-off fields on the 'Sign-off' sheet before uploading it. You will still be able to upload your workbook if it is invalid, but we will **not** accept it as a submission.

The 'Comments' section of the portal shows errors and no results package is generated

Your workbook has failed to process. There can be many reasons for the workbook not processing correctly. One common error is that the file has been zipped. Before uploading, please ensure that the file is not zipped as this will make it more likely to process successfully. A second common error is a change in the file extension of the workbook; it must end with '.xlsx'. If you have unprotected the workbook in any way, this may also cause the upload to fail.

My colleague has uploaded a monitoring form but I cannot view the results package

The results package can only be downloaded and viewed from the same OfS portal account that uploaded that particular workbook. In order to view the results package for a specific workbook you will need to upload the same workbook using your own portal account. Note that this will increase the submission number.