



UNISON Centre  
130 Euston Road  
London NW1 2AY

Tel: 0800 0 857 857

Fax: 020 7121 5101

Text tel: 0800 0 967 968

[unison.org.uk](http://unison.org.uk)

23 September 2020

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

By email: [michelle.donelan.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:michelle.donelan.mp@parliament.uk)

Dear Minister,

We are writing with our concerns about the urgent situation facing large numbers of university staff.

During lockdown, most universities made use of the job retention scheme so they could continue to employ staff unable to work during the pandemic. A significant proportion remain on furlough with the scheme due to end in a matter of weeks.

With universities unable to offer full face-to-face learning that has been the hallmark of UK higher education to date, there are far fewer people on campus. With infection rates increasing sharply, it's clear universities will have to continue to offer more virtual teaching for many months to come.

This has clear implications for staff. There are thousands of catering, events, student union, technicians and reception staff, deeply concerned as to whether they will have jobs to return to after furlough ends. Some staff have already been served notification of redundancies.

Urgent government intervention on behalf of the higher education sector is desperately needed. Universities are proud to be some of the largest employers in their communities, with staff equally proud to work for their local university. The government must do all it can to safeguard the jobs and livelihoods of these individuals.

Employees who have been recruited, trained and built up years of experience working in higher education face imminent redundancy - affecting them, their families and their communities. The sector needs an extension to the job retention scheme for those employees

unable to return to campus and who cannot work from home. This will ensure that the sector is fit for growth in the future.

If those staff are lost, not only will that leave those individuals and their families worse off, but will have serious implications for the benefits system too. If it's not possible to continue the job retention scheme, then ministers must consider other ways of supporting the sector as a matter of urgency.

With the end of the Brexit transition period only months away, it's important too that the government ensures that EU research funding received by UK universities is fully maintained through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

EU research funding is a significant income source for UK universities. In 2016 Universities UK (UUK) found that EU research funding constituted 14% of overall research income, and the UK wins 22% of EU research grants – the highest number awarded to any EU member state. With UUK stating that “EU research funding generate[s] over 19,000 full-time-equivalent jobs across the UK”, any reduction in this funding would have a serious impact on employment in higher education.

University research is not only central to understanding the impact and effects of Covid-19, but also to finding a safe vaccine and treatments. Research is also central to innovation and the government's industrial strategy, and therefore to the immediate and long-term future of our knowledge driven economy, business innovation and economic growth. Without proper support for the higher education sector post-Brexit, much more is at stake.

The higher education unions remain concerned about the state of the test, trace and protect systems across the UK. Without these systems operating effectively, we're concerned about the risk to staff, students and the wider population. All universities should have ready access to testing to keep campuses as safe as possible. Additional support should be made available so that universities can effectively manage these risks and continue to provide the vital education upon which the country depends, and for which students are paying (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Prompt testing enables staff to come back to work as soon as possible and universities to continue their vital work with the minimum of disruption.

To support effective infection management and compliance with the government's rules on self-isolation, full pay must be provided for all who need to isolate. All university and private company employers (e.g. cleaning, catering, security contractors), must pay their staff in full so they are able to self-isolate if required – this would reduce the risk to all students and staff. The minimum rate of pay for anyone working on campus should be the real living wage set by the Living Wage Foundation.

The importance of these measures cannot be overstated. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that care homes providing full contractual sick pay carried a [lower risk of infection](#) to their residents. If staff contract COVID-19, and are moved onto statutory sick pay, they may be placed in the unenviable position of having to decide whether to stay at home and suffer financial hardship, or return to work when ill, and potentially contagious, to pay the bills. The pandemic underlines how important access to full sick pay is from day one, to protect the nation's health.

With further local, national or UK-wide lockdown measures coming into effect, the provision of an ongoing, funded, furlough/wage support scheme; an effective test and trace system; and full sick pay (or normal wages) during self-isolation are all vital components in ensuring campuses are safe places for everyone to work and study.

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Finally, the unions are keen for tripartite discussions with the government and the national higher education employers to discuss these items as a matter of urgency. Early and regular dialogue on these matters will be of benefit to all and enable the best possible decisions to be made for this important sector.

Yours sincerely,

*Ruth Levin*  
UNISON

*Paul Bridge*  
UCU

*Siobhan Endean*  
Unite

*Deborah Shepherd*  
EIS

*Stuart Fegan*  
GMB

CC:

Richard Lochhead MSP, Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science

Kirsty Williams MS, Minister for Education