

Michelle Donelan MP
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Open Letter to Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities

Dear Minister,

Concerns about Universities and Students in the COVID-19 Pandemic

I am writing this open letter to you, as General Secretary of the Free Churches Group, because of our concern for the welfare of universities and their students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Free Churches Group is an ecumenical body of 24 denominations and church groups that work together to promote faithful witness, based on the Free Churches' tradition, in the public square. As Christians we have always been supportive of our universities because we believe it is God's will that we should all reach our full potential, to which higher education can make an important contribution. We know that you share our concern that universities should be key agents for social mobility, helping to overcome barriers to opportunity arising from social class, ethnicity, location or disability.

We are concerned that the Office for Budget Responsibility identified universities as the sector most likely to suffer financially from the impact of the pandemic because of the loss of income from international student fees. We would urge the Government to do what it can to help universities in working safely during the coronavirus pandemic and thereby encourage international students to come to the UK. We hope that visa processing centres and language testing centres can be open fully as soon as possible. We welcome the flexibility shown in allowing some students to start their studies remotely and would join in calls for the extension of the post study work visa scheme. Our churches have been especially welcoming of international students and we pledge to extend that welcome yet further.

We are particularly anxious for the current student body and the class of 2020. While applauding the heroic performance of universities in moving much of learning on-line, we recognise that some skills cannot be taught or assessed remotely as many students are social learners and that the graduate formation process depends on many social interactions. Where possible, we think it is imperative that potential students are encouraged to proceed to the university best suited to them this autumn. There is evidence that the situation is affecting the mental wellbeing of students and we welcome the initiative that you have recently announced on student mental health.

Our churches help to support many chaplains across the sector and we know that they play a vital role in promoting student mental wellbeing. University managers testified to that in the recent research report 'Chaplains on Campus': https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/chaplains_on_campus_full_report_final_pdf_.pdf

Moderator: Revd Dr Hugh Osgood
General Secretary: Revd Paul Rochester

Acting Convenor: Revd James Breslin

Assemblies of God - Baptist Union of Great Britain - Baptist Union of Wales - Churches in Communities International - Church of God of Prophecy - Church of the Nazarene - Congregational Federation - Council of African & Caribbean Churches UK - Christ Apostolic Church - Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion - Fellowship of Churches of Christ - Free Church of England - Free Methodist Church - Independent Methodist Churches - Methodist Church - Moravian Church - New Testament Assembly - New Testament Church of God - Old Baptist Union - Presbyterian Church of Wales - Salvation Army - Union of Welsh Independents - United Reformed Church - Wesleyan Reform Union

The pandemic crisis has further highlighted the disparity of educational opportunity in our country. Not only is there a digital divide in terms of access to devices and broadband but also in study spaces and advice and guidance. Our churches can be valuable sources of mentors and educational guidance for disadvantaged students and many are anxious to offer space in their buildings as study space. We do hope that the latter can be considered.

In respect of BAME students, we are concerned about the evidence that teachers under-predict the grades for ethnic minority and disadvantaged students, which suggests that such students could face discrimination by using the 'A' Level grading scheme. The allocation of additional university places based on continuation rates and graduate first salaries could be also discriminatory as evidence shows the BAME students are less likely to complete courses, and to be employed at higher salary levels. The use of graduate salaries as a measure will be a problem for our theological colleges. We are also mindful that the pandemic has shown the importance of jobs with comparatively low salaries, in the health sector for example, which raises significant questions about treating graduate salaries as a proxy for quality. We hope the Department will review these measures and the impact assessment on equality and diversity.

The graduates currently entering the employment market face the most difficult conditions for many years. Evidence from previous recessions shows that the effects of graduating in a recession can persist in a career for 20 years. We would encourage the Government to consider increasing loans and grants so that a postgraduate course of 1 to 3 years is a possibility for all graduates. In addition, there is now the opportunity to recruit highly able graduates into public service and we urge the Government to create a national talent fund for this purpose.

Our churches have seen a significant upsurge in interest in recent weeks as the pandemic has reminded people of the spiritual dimension of life. Our ministers and pastors have sought to meet the increased spiritual needs and address the higher levels of distress experienced as a result of COVID-19. We hope to be able to train more ministers and pastors in our theological colleges, however, they tend to struggle financially to meet the demands of the Office for Students and to fund the infrastructure necessary for remote learning. It would be helpful to see this recognised in Government policy.

Our churches stand ready to play their part in the national recovery which must follow the containment of the coronavirus. There are other areas in relation to education policy where we believe churches could play a significant role. We would welcome a conversation with you or your officials on these matters.

Yours sincerely,



Paul Rochester

General Secretary

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