



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

**12<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

## **To: Rent Justice Edinburgh**

We recognise that our students' experience this year will have been very different from previous years, given the impact of the pandemic. That is of course not what we would have wished for. We acknowledge that there have been many issues, the majority of which have origins outside the University's control: our staff have been working tirelessly since the start of Semester to improve matters, and indeed they continue to do so. This includes access to WiFi and broadband, where significant steps have already been taken, and we continue to work to improve access further. We are unable, however, to accede to your request for rent reduction, for several reasons: first, we are providing accommodation and, where relevant, catering services in accordance with our agreements with you; second, our costs in supporting students this semester have increased, partly as a consequence of supporting isolating and quarantining students with food packages; and third – and most importantly – the revenue we generate from our accommodation is deployed in education and in many student services, including much-needed wellbeing services, which would be compromised for all students if our income were to be reduced.

Our motivation for welcoming students to campus at the start of Semester was to offer, as much as we possibly could, the start at university that they have been working towards for years. We did not feel that this opportunity should be cancelled or delayed because of the changed circumstances that the pandemic has brought, particularly as the changes are likely to be extant for years to come.

The University appreciates that any restrictions on students are unwelcome: however, like all organisations, we also have a duty to try to reduce the transmission of the covid-19 virus and the restrictions that all of the citizens of Edinburgh, including students, are facing are an important feature in achieving that.

Throughout the pandemic, we have been working closely with Public Health Scotland and taking advice from the Scottish Government to ensure that all appropriate measures are in place to safeguard our students, including those in our student accommodation. We continue to believe it is important for our students to be in Edinburgh to receive some in-person teaching, make use of our world-class library and resources, meet and make friends with fellow students and enjoy our beautiful, safe, historic city.

In-person teaching has been taking place on campus, and many of our lecturers have been providing synchronous teaching. Of the more than 95,000 hours of teaching scheduled this semester, more than 35,000 hours are scheduled to be in person. More than 12,000 synchronous sessions were launched in the first week of teaching, which is an increase of 881 per cent on the same period last year and represents over 90,000 attendees.

However, we recognise that there is variation in the balance of synchronous and asynchronous activity, and variation in the level of in-person teaching across Schools. We have urgently asked Schools to prioritise, for the rest of this semester and for the next semester, their activity in this regard and to focus on where they can increase the engagement that can bring classmates together for teaching, for intellectual interaction and debate. We anticipate that some form of hybrid learning will continue for months or years to come, with large-scale lectures in crowded lecture theatres unlikely to be possible any time soon.

If a student feels they want to leave University accommodation, we are being flexible and are not holding them to their 28 day notice period: rental agreements will otherwise remain

unaltered. We are actively engaging with your elected representatives in EUSA and with various wider groupings of students to continue to help us to understand the issues and adapt accordingly. Of course, the students whose experience has been impacted by the pandemic and its consequences are not limited to those of you in University accommodation.

We reiterate our acknowledgement of the fact that the beginning of 2020/21 has been very challenging for you, as for all of our students and staff and the wider community. We will continue to do our best to provide as much improvement in the student experience as is possible in these unprecedented circumstances.

Peter Mathieson and the Senior Leadership Team