



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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Dear Ellen and colleagues

Thank you for this constructive, considered and more importantly critical letter. We welcome this engagement, and in acknowledging that, would also thank you and the sabbatical team for the ongoing efforts of EUSA towards the student experience.

However, I do have to express disappointment, and disagreement, with some of the premises that shape your letter.

In the presentation you offer a perspective that is based on the narrative that we, in some way, misled students. There was no lack of transparency as you suggest, and indeed we welcomed you and members of the sabbatical team into the key planning committees for the academic year planning, including as a member of the University Executive. I doubt you could have any clearer vantage point from which to observe the extraordinary efforts of the University community to deliver. I am disappointed that we have not been able to do more. I am disappointed that we are falling short of my expectations in some areas. I also know the constraints as you do. I am also proud of what the University set out to achieve, in good faith and with clarity of purpose. We can deal with the shortcomings, but I cannot accept any sense that we acted in anything other than in the best interest of our students, and as you have heard myself and Peter say many times, it is important that we are not engaged in an exercise of apportioning blame. For that reason, I thank you sincerely for your warm words of support and thanks for the academic and professional staff efforts, which we share, and we will move forward with that attitude as we work together over this extraordinary year.

Moreover, it is presented, however intended, that this sense of disappointment or of not meeting expectation is a view held by all. I would counter this by saying that for many students the amount of in-person tuition that will be available will exceed anything that you will see in any other university in Scottish or indeed the wider UK. That is because we decided very early that the best people to decide on teaching design and on meeting your learning outcomes are those who teach - in our Schools and Deaneries. That decision, by design, was always going to produce some heterogeneous outcomes, and as we also faced uncertainty about student demand and then a late surge due to the A-Level and SQF situation, we also had to adapt. While I am sure you would support our decision to ensure no student was left disadvantaged, this did increase pressure and moreover has had a knock-on impact on estate allocation and teaching allocations. As you note very importantly - 'in line with Scottish Government guidance' - we work to that guidance and wish it had been more flexible. It wasn't, but in a timetable of over 95000 hours of teaching, something in excess of 35000 hours of that is in-person. Over 12,000 synchronous sessions were launched in the

first week of teaching, that's an increase of 881% on the same period last year and represents over 90,000 attendees. Over 3 million minutes of content was viewed in the first five days of teaching alone.

What is true is that there is a significant variation in the balance of synchronous and asynchronous activity, and variation also in the level of in-person (within classroom) teaching across Schools. I trust our Schools to make those decisions in ways that continue to deliver the learning outcomes for the programmes, but I do also recognise that some programmes have ended up with very little, if any, synchronous activity. I also believe that it was not clear (certainly to me as Vice Principal) the consequential impact of the guidelines on household interaction in amplifying the negative impact of this. The mental health well-being impacts of the constrained household rules mixed with the inability to form natural peer/cohort groups as classmates makes the lack of synchronous, ideally in person, activity a particularly impactful issue.

For this reason, I am urgently asking Schools to prioritise, for the rest of this Semester and for the next Semester, their activity in this regard, to focus on where they can increase the engagement that can bring classmates together for teaching, for intellectual interaction and debate. We are now actively working with the Schools and Deaneries in a number of dimensions, and my colleagues (including Tina Harrison, the Heads of College and Schools, and senior professional colleagues) are mapping where things currently sit, and examining ways in which some of the unevenness in the provision of synchronous in-person teaching can be facilitated. We are, as has been outlined in recent Town Hall meetings, still seeing some potential for flex in the timetable, and we are going to request Schools to do everything possible to do more. We need to think of ways in which we can increase the amount of live interaction with students that can be implemented straight away and doesn't require a complicated timetable scheduling. I would just add a note of caution however - synchronous activity may seem ideal - because it may seem the closest to what might be seen as a "normal" - but asynchronous is optimal for students in different time zones, for example, or students who are constrained by access to Information Technology or study space. I can say with conviction that some colleagues who avoided synchronous did so because they really care about student inclusion and did not want to offer something that some students could not do due to bandwidth or time zones.

We did encourage students to come to Edinburgh, and we are seeing significant early challenges. We do believe that for many students the semester will be all that was expected and more. The value of being in Edinburgh will also not be just defined by the teaching but in the efforts, helped immeasurably by your support, in the areas of study space provision, of social space provision, in the tireless work of the Sports Union and the wider society network. It is important to remember that these first few weeks of the semester are just one part of the academic year, and one fraction of the learning experience of Edinburgh for students who will be with us for several years. We are a community and we make no apology for wanting to bring students to that community. This is not to ignore issues or the very important points you raise. The amplification of issues caused by the early challenges of the pandemic, the issues in Halls, and the shifting sands of advice makes getting that point through very difficult. However, it underpins our commitment to our students and our belief in the University. Where it went wrong, and where it was our fault, we will make amends, but we fully stand by our core belief in students being here for the Semester. As, I note, so does the Scottish Government and indeed the Westminster Government.

The Curriculum Resilience and Delivery strand of the Adaptation and Renewal Student work led by Tracey Slaven will be the place to discuss these concerns and the actions to take. You are represented on this of course, and on the overall Adaptation and Renewal Student work stream. I will also ask Tina Harrison to give particular attention (extending her work on student belonging) to this issue, and to liaise with you as an extension of your ongoing discussions with myself and Peter on student well-being, in and out of the classroom.

Our shared objective is to do more and better, against extraordinary constraints. We will address immediate challenges, but also ensure we can give a greater emphasis on clarity of direction for Semester 2 to our students. I hope you will continue to work with us to help us address these challenges but also provide the anchor to students as we progress through the year. These early issues will be replaced by others, I have no doubt. We need to continue to work together even more, and I know you know that we are as open as possible to your input. This is a shared challenge.

With every good wish

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colm Harmon', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

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**Vice Principal Students, University of Edinburgh**

Peter, Dorothy, Moira, Dave, Lee, Catherine, Gavin, Sarah and Jonathan (Senior Leadership Team)