



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

2nd October 2020

Professor Colm Harmon
BA MA PhD
Vice Principal Students
Professor of Applied Economics
The University of Edinburgh
Old College
South Bridge
Edinburgh, EH8 9YL
Tel: +44 (0) 131 650 6443
Email: Colm.Harmon@ed.ac.uk
www.ed.ac.uk

Dear University of Edinburgh Students,

I thank you for this letter, with harsh but constructive criticism and commentary on current challenges, and a clear set of requests which you feel will improve matters. I am writing on behalf of the Senior Leadership who received your letter.

I think it useful to give some framing of things before I return to your specific requests.

Firstly, the entire premise driving our plans for this academic year has been a safe and managed return to campus, in a hybrid model, precisely because we are committed to maintaining the value of your degree. We are determined that you are not seen as a COVID generation - whether new students or returning students, whether undergraduate, postgraduate or PhD. We always recognised that this would be an unconventional academic year, but our focus has been to make it as effective as possible for you.

Secondly, in shaping this model we did not, as some institutions have, insist on some minimum level of synchronous activity. We worked with our Schools, and ensured that they were in charge with shaping the curriculum for the semester and indeed, in due course, for the academic year. This is, without doubt, the best way to ensure learning outcomes are achieved, and that will ensure that the value of your degree is maintained. We undoubtedly faced additional shocks - the campus has a capacity of about 20% of normal due to social distancing and this position did not improve over the summer months, and we also had the impact of the A-Level/Scottish Highers which brought additional undergraduate students to particular programmes. While I am sure you would support our decision to ensure no student was left disadvantaged, this did increase pressure and moreover has knock-on impact on estate allocation and teaching allocations.

Thirdly it has been important for the University to recognise that some students are not in Edinburgh for very good reasons - constraints in international air travel being one. Synchronous activity may seem ideal - indeed 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 (which may be local) who are constrained by access to communications technology. 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. This does not imply that this asynchronous activity is of lesser quality, or limiting in terms of learning outcomes.

What that has resulted in, however, might be a little at odds with your characterisation of what has been delivered. Some 95000 hours of teaching has been timetabled this semester, and 35000 hours

of this is synchronous and 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. This means that content was played around 290,000 times. So, by any measure, the University is in full delivery of our commitments.

What is true, however, 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. We have trusted 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 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.

What is also true, and articulated very well, is that the quality bar of an institution like the University of Edinburgh may not be met in some courses and this is something we will pursue. To take up one of your points, the use of 'recycled' material of itself is not something I am concerned by - however delivered, lecture material may not change from year to year and it would not make sense to simply re-do for the sake of re-doing. What is important is how this material is utilised, refreshed, embedded into new pedagogical approaches. If a course is the simple presentation of materials recorded previously, without other improvements, this is a concern. I am happy to engage with the Heads of School to request that they do ensure that there is a lens applied to current materials and potential for improvements identified.

I do want to turn to your specific requests, but would just make one observation. There is little value in directly comparing what one institution has or has not done to what we need to do. If a University does something, it will be at the expense of something else - the finances of any University and other practicalities make this true. We are considering our options, and genuinely accept some failings, but also want to ensure that we redirect resources to where we can most have impact on addressing the core issue of your letter - standards of delivery and student experience.

We expect the following to be addressed:

1. Students must be able to apply for a partial reimbursement or discount on their fees on a course-dependent basis, corresponding to the impact and disruption of their learning experience (i.e., what students were promised vs. what they received). Additionally, if our education quality does not increase by semester two, we expect that the second semester's tuition fees will also be reduced.

The University will not be reducing fees for programmes delivered. The cost of delivering our educational offering is no lower, and indeed considerable up-front investment of time and money has been required. We are also maintaining all of our core provision (Library, Sports, Student Services etc) as well as all appropriate measures to maintain staff and student safety and enhance social space provision.

2. Lectures and seminars, if online, should meet the same level of contact hours as advertised on the Degree Programme Table. Live sessions and the recordings of lectures and seminars should be made readily available for all students regardless of their location. We demand that these materials be organised on one accessible and technologically adequate platform.

For most students and courses our state of the art LEARN Virtual Learning Environment is where you can find the majority of your learning activities. The early technical failures were regrettable but were world-wide and not something the University could have prevented. We contributed actively to their rapid resolution. In some cases we store large material, such as Lecture Recordings, in our cloud based storage system. We have one of the most technical advanced, largest and most sophisticated Lecture recording and delivery systems in the UK. Recordings are held here due to the sheer size of the Lecture Recording repository and the key need to ensure recordings are provided through this high bandwidth provision platform. You will always be signposted to the recordings and they will always be easily accessible to all students on that course.

3. The deadline for fee payments should be delayed by 30 days, to allow current students to make an informed decision on whether they choose to continue their studies at the University of Edinburgh.

We note this request and will reflect on this as an approach in the coming days.

4. On-site COVID-19 testing (with appropriately short delays in results delivery within 48 hours to make it meaningful to the purpose of epidemic containment) must be made readily available with adequate capacity for all University staff and students. This should be delivered within two weeks (Tuesday, October 13th) of receiving this letter.

This is frankly impracticable as a request and not in line with the most up-to-date public health advice. The apparent structures for things like testing on campus in other institutions, for example, are often nowhere near as comprehensive as they may seem, and may run the risk of confusing and getting in the way of the immediacy of the national systems of public health management. Being blunt, would you prefer we were testing, reporting onwards to another agency, managing tracing mechanisms and do all of that in a confidential and secure manner, or would you prefer to, as a citizen, be tested and advised of outcomes that we can then use to manage your safe recovery and preserve access to your teaching environment while the other agencies manage the contact tracing etc. We cannot exist outside of the national agencies.

The University is fully engaged with the local authorities (NHS Lothian, Public Health Scotland) and with the national Trace and Protect system. All students can access testing facilities provided by the authorities, including the walk in testing centre recently opened at the Usher Hall, at no cost when they are presenting with symptoms. The processes to follow where someone is recognising symptoms, and indeed where they test positive, have been carefully planned and communicated to students, to staff in support roles and to academics including personal tutors. The provision of on-site testing, as is seen in some other institutions in the UK, is both prohibitively expensive and not as effective in terms of delivering scale of results on time as we will achieve working within the national system as now. The testing regime should be detached from the issue of containment - once more, the close working partnership with the NHS and others means that through an incident management process the University is able to make decisions on actions with support of the authorities. This maximises the opportunity for us to care for students who are impacted by the pandemic and isolated, and minimises the chances of full lockdowns across campus and residential buildings.

5. No more automated reply emails. If offices do not plan on following up with answers within a 24 hour period, the University needs to hire additional staff able to answer emails and provide timely support to students. This is especially of concern for student finance offices.

We believe that this is a fair and appropriate comment and reflects - in parts of the University - a failing of systems to recognise the anxiety of students and the need for more of a 'good service' mindset. We will improve this aspect of our engagement as a priority. We have to note that for many staff Scottish Government guidance does not encourage their presence on campus, and we have prioritised the return of staff to campus who are in student-facing roles whilst managing rosters of staff to maintain a safe working environment for all. This will inevitably mean we cannot be as responsive as we might be in a conventional academic year. This does not take from our intention to improve this.

6. All students and faculty staying in University accommodations must be given free access to the existing higher bandwidth, which is currently behind a paywall. This is a prerequisite to follow online lectures and seminars and enable students to adequately engage with study materials.

We have spoken to the vendor who provides internet access in our residences. They would be amenable to do this upgrade, however they believe - and Information Services concur – that this will do little or nothing for any student in terms of performance or availability. The bandwidth increase takes an individual student cap from 150mbs to 200 mbs. However we cannot see any students actually achieving 150mbs. So this is an unnecessary exercise. Also the vendor is worried that this might actually destabilize the network in some Halls. I concur with them and suggest that this is a risk we should not take.

The actions we have taken to improve internet access in the Halls of Residence are noted below and we do believe that they are having an impact.

We want to ensure that it is as easy as possible for you to remain connected – in particular, if you are self-isolating. As things stand we have dealt with, or are currently dealing with, around 60 cases of problematic internet access. We are taking immediate action to improve Wi-Fi and Network connectivity for students in university accommodation:

7. Typically the wired connection in your bedroom will provide better performance than the WiFi connection. We have ordered 3,000 cables and adapters and these will be provided free to students at all Halls over the next three days. Any student who is self-isolating will have free cables and adapters delivered directly to their household.

8. Detailed investigations into network issues are continuing with our Halls network provider PCCW, and it is important that if you are experiencing issues with the network or WiFi in your student accommodation that you raise a support call. You can do this at: care@optifyyourworld.com or by phoning 0333 308 0000. We recommend that you register your device(s) and use the Optify portal to track progress of your service issues. You can do both at :<https://myaccount.keysurf.net/>

- *We have distributed updated communication to ensure students understand their support options, thus speeding up the support process and resolving individual student issues.*
- *We have increased our IT support presence at the Halls to swiftly investigate problems and assist students. We will also be able to provide alternative internet access to those students unable to connect their device to the Halls network.*

- You can find additional guidance on student IT and Wifi here: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/help-consultancy/students-it-requirements-guidance-and-support>

We look forward to working together to find solutions that will benefit the University of Edinburgh community as a whole, and to uphold this institution's reputation as one of the best universities in the world.

Yours sincerely

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

Professor Colm Harmon BA MA PhD

Vice Principal Students, University of Edinburgh

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