



Lord Lucas
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

29 May 2020

Dear Ralph,

Thank you for contacting me and my colleague Baroness Berridge in regard to offering reassurances to current and prospective students in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing restrictions. I am providing a joint response as our two departments are working closely on the issues you raise to support all international students.

As you can appreciate, Covid-19 represents an unprecedented challenge for our nation. We are working tirelessly to mitigate the risks Covid-19 poses to our economy and to the education sector. The situation is rapidly changing, and the approach we are taking is being adapted regularly, based on evolving circumstances.

As the level of infection in the UK reduces below that in some other countries, it will be important to manage the risk of transmissions being reintroduced from abroad to avoid a second wave. This is why the Government has announced that, in line with many other countries, we will introduce a series of measures and restrictions at the UK border, including requiring all those entering the UK, who are not on an approved list of exemptions, to self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days from arrival into the UK. These measures are due to be brought in on 8 June and will be subject to review every three weeks to ensure they are in line with the latest scientific evidence and support the UK's roadmap to recovery.

I do appreciate that these changes will have implications for providers of higher education and boarding schools when it comes to international students. It will be for the institutions concerned to determine whether they can make arrangements which comply with Government guidelines, taking account of any communal sleeping, cooking, dining and washing facilities and we expect them to do so wherever possible. If an institution is unable to accommodate an arriving migrant in a way consistent with the Government guidelines, the Border Force officer must be informed and arrangements can be made for the migrant to be accommodated for 14 days (at the migrant's expense).

Whilst our priority is to ensure the safety of all individuals in the UK, significant work is underway to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 on the education sector and to individuals studying within the UK.

Covid-19 and the Education Sector

Earlier this month we announced our plans for the gradual return of children to our early years, school and further education settings from the beginning of June. Whilst we are clear that we will only do this if we are sure that the five key tests we set out in our recovery strategy are satisfied, this is an important first step in getting our education settings up and running.

Our plan for schools means that from 1 June a limited number of pupils, primarily in year 6, will be able to return to our boarding schools. These will be in addition to those pupils who are vulnerable children or from the families of key workers who are already in these schools. Our aim then is to continue to work closely with our partners across the education sector over the coming weeks to support the wider opening of schools, colleges and childcare settings. This will include working closely with our partners in the boarding school sector.

Higher education providers are autonomous institutions, but we are working with the HE sector to identify guidance and best practice. This will help higher education providers make informed decisions about their provision and both when and how they can make their buildings and campuses accessible again for staff and students, with minimal risk and in line with public health advice.

Welcoming international students to the UK

Our world-leading universities will always be open to international students and we are working directly with other countries to retain our universities world-class reputation and will continue to engage with stakeholders, both overseas and in the UK. Government departments, with support of the sector are working together to reassure prospective students that the UK higher education is 'open for business', remains world class and is looking forward to welcoming them in the future. This includes support for the sector led #WeAreTogether campaign and communications that will directly target prospective international students, making clear the UK offer.

We are also working to ensure applicable rules and regulations are as flexible as possible for international students under the circumstances. These measures include permitting Tier 4 students to undertake distance learning while social distancing restrictions are in place. This measure has been introduced to enable students to continue their studies while they are unable to physically attend their institutions. Students can commence a course of study via distance learning, either within the UK or abroad regardless of the level of study undertaken.

Students whose leave has expired since 24 January, can also apply in country for further courses of study. Usually only students at certain types of institution would be able to extend their leave from within the UK and the new course would be required to commence within 28 days of the expiry of their current period of leave. Both requirements have been temporarily relaxed under the Covid-19 concessions, to allow all students to apply for further leave under the Tier 4 route. Students will be able to apply for courses which commence prior to 1 October.

We have been clear that sponsoring institutions are not required to withdraw sponsorship of any student who fails to attend or defers their studies due to Covid-19. Alongside this, students who are unable to complete their studies within the initial period of leave, can apply for further leave from within the UK to complete their studies. These students will be

exempt from demonstrating academic progression, as would usually be required to undertake a further period of study.

Due to the current uncertainty regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, we are unable to provide guarantees at this time that the visa system will be operating fully across the globe by September. Presently all Visa Application Centers (VAC) and Secure English Language Testing (SELT) centers across the globe are closed, when the centers will be able to re-open, will be dependent on local restrictions applicable in different territories. It is also important to note that the local restrictions are not the only factor which will play a part in when students will be able to apply and travel, restrictions on travel and flight availability will also factor. The overseas operations will re-open as part of a phased approach, only when it is safe to do so, and social distancing measures are able to be observed adequately.

International students are able to apply up to three months in advance of their intended course start date. The three-month period should provide some flexibility for students wishing to ensure they are able to obtain a visa prior to the start of their course. Visas are granted with a period of up to a month prior to the start of the course, integrated into the visa, this period will enable students to arrive prior to their courses and observe the required quarantine periods, without missing any of their studies.

I can reassure you that our two departments will work together to ensure that as soon as we are able to provide more details about how boarding schools and universities should accommodate international students during the 14 day self-isolation period we will communicate this to those sectors and to the international community.

Thank you for writing on this important matter

I am copying this letter to Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System and placing a copy of this letter in the House of Lords library.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan', is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Baroness Williams of Trafford

