To: Secretary of State for Education
The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP

To: Cc
The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities
Dame Melanie Dawes, CEO Ofcom

15 January 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

On behalf of all UK universities and their students, we request that the Government takes urgent action to support the thousands of higher education students who are still unable to access their education online due to digital and data poverty.

It is critical that the 1.8 million university students who are having to learn remotely have equal access to data and devices.

Universities have been providing laptops, SIM cards, dongles and wireless hotspots, and redirecting hardship funding to support students struggling with connectivity. They have also contacted digitally disadvantaged students to understand their needs and provide access to study space where possible and within guidelines. Additional government support to alleviate hardship to date has been welcome, but for many providers, the demand for hardship funding has doubled, putting significant strain on resources and leading to concerns about their ability to meet support needs.

The following evidence provides a snapshot of the current problem, which shows that around half of HE learners are at a digital disadvantage:

OFS report (Sept 2020)
- cites 52% of students’ learning impacted by slow/poor Wi-Fi; 18% lack access to a laptop/computer/tablet.

From Jisc’s Learning and Teaching Reimagined initiative:
- 54% of learners surveyed feel disadvantaged to some extent in their learning as a result of insufficient access to digital equipment, software or connectivity/broadband (20% said yes and 34% partially disadvantaged).
- 60% of leaders surveyed estimated up to a quarter of current learners at their organisation are disadvantaged because of insufficient access to digital equipment, software or connectivity.

Jisc, the Association of Colleges, ucisa and UUK wrote to Government in April last year to seek your help in working with telecoms providers to support higher (and further) education students who are incurring unaffordable costs and difficulties in accessing their education online. While we welcome Government’s action to support college learners through the Get Help With Technology scheme, there has been little or nothing to support higher education students in the same way. Not only is this unfair, but it causes learners distress, harms their wellbeing, and creates inequalities, in particular for disadvantaged students.

The use of Free School Meals data to identify those in most need is not always an effective means of identifying and supporting those who live in digital poverty beyond primary education. In
universities, many students cannot access their education due to the cost of data, living in shared accommodation (whether at home or in halls), or in rural areas where connectivity is weak. Similarly, many parents of students who are above the poverty line are now borderline due to the pandemic and, while they can support their children to remain in education, they cannot afford the additional cost of subsidising their child’s connectivity - especially for those also paying the bill for broadband bills in unused student housing.

Jisc, with the UUK, has undertaken a sector-wide initiative, ‘Learning and Teaching Reimagined’ (LTR) since the first lockdown, which captured the main challenges faced by universities in delivering online learning. It found that digital and data poverty is the paramount issue that prevents delivering effective online learning and it also negatively impacts the student experience. Digital poverty has also been cited as a significant risk to student access to learning by Sir Michael Barber in his review of online teaching and learning.

Jisc has undertaken several discussions with telecommunications companies which do not seem to see the value in supporting university students. It is also disappointing that the Government’s recent announcement to make free data available to school and college learners excludes higher education students, who face the same barriers of cost and connectivity.

Universities have moved mountains to provide learning and teaching online since the first lockdown and are now much better equipped to deliver a quality curriculum online. However, without urgent action to ensure students can study online affordably, the Government is risking creating an even deeper and more long-term digital divide in education.

We urge you to take action now on behalf of all higher education students experiencing digital poverty, or risk creating a lost generation of young people who are missing out on their education.

We request an urgent meeting with you and the telecoms providers to discuss what can be done collectively to support university students.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Paul Feldman, CEO Jisc

Alistair Jarvis, CEO Universities UK

Deborah Green, CEO ucisa

Gordon McKenzie, CEO GuildHE