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Dear Lizzy and colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank you for writing to me and raising such important issues. Student voice is a key value that we seek to promote at GuildHE and we are the only representative body to have a student representative on our executive board. As well as our Students' Union Network, we regularly interact with the National Union of Students and we are always extremely interested to hear feedback from our students.

Our next Students' Union Network meeting is set for **Tuesday, 16 February at 1:00 – 2:00pm**. Please get in touch with my colleague Dom Trendall (dominic.trendall@guildhe.ac.uk) if you have not yet received a formal invitation and he will share the details with you. While I will do my best to address the points you have raised in writing below, I would welcome the opportunity to talk to you directly about your concerns and thank you for your efforts over the past number of months. It has not been an easy time to be a Students' Union Officer and we are extremely grateful for the work that you have been doing in representing your student bodies.

We understand that this has been an exceptionally difficult period for students. We absolutely recognise that students have not had access to services and facilities in the way that they normally would and that this is frustrating for students and staff alike as universities seek to continue to provide an excellent student experience.

I understand the particular concerns relating to access to specialist facilities that many students studying at GuildHE institutions have. As well as our regular meetings with the HE minister and DfE, we have recently written to the Government on the specific issues our member institutions face in relation to needing to enable students access to specialist facilities and resources, and the impact the current restrictions have on students on practical courses. We believe that it is especially important that students who need specialist facilities and resources return to campus as soon and as safely as possible.

Below, I will seek to respond to all the specific points that you have raised.

1. We are keenly aware that GuildHE member institutions have invested heavily in ensuring that campuses are as COVID-secure as possible. We have discussed COVID-19 related communications with members and I know that our universities have continuously sought to keep students up to date with the latest guidance and developments. As you rightly point out in your letter, constantly changing government guidelines has sometimes made this difficult and we recognise the frustration that students feel in the context of the current national lockdown. Our member institutions are doing all they can to provide students with the high quality education that they deserve, whilst remaining in line with the national Covid rules and guidelines.
2. To this end GuildHE has been arguing that students studying for practical based degrees, particularly in certain areas, should be prioritised in any phased return to university campuses. In the meantime, I know that institutions are taking all the steps that they can to ensure that students receive a high quality education.
3. I am keenly aware of the challenges facing students in regard to mental health and am extremely cognisant of the points you raise in relation to first years and international students. I know that staff across our institutions have been working hard to provide as much support as they can for students that are struggling, including over the Christmas break. Furthermore, the Research Offices at our members have been providing support to postgraduate research students through providing extensions and study breaks as and when are needed. We have been working with Student Minds on

their Covid support offer to students, as well as liaising with the HE minister and the Department of Health to increase the capacity of university mental health services, and NHS clinical provision. This week the Secretary of State announced a further £15 million to support university mental health provision over the next year.

I also recognise the point you raise relating to financial wellbeing. As such, we have called on the Government to take the following steps:

- The Government should reintroduce maintenance grants to support students from the lowest socio-economic groups in their costs of living.
- The Government should financially support universities in refunding accommodation costs, particularly where the costs of doing so would significantly destabilise an institution's cashflow and the accommodation costs are above the student loan rate.
- The Government should lobby private rented accommodation providers to offer refunds.
- Steps need to be taken immediately to address the issue of digital poverty, the impact of which is particularly acute at the present time, especially for those in rural, coastal and poorer regions of the country.
- More central Government funding should be allocated to university financial hardship funds, and universities should be allowed to be more flexible with how their access and participation funding is spent to support current students to remain in HE.
- Funding should be provided through smaller universities' research offices to support postgraduate research students who are not funded by UKRI's Research Councils' grants. .

As I mentioned before, I would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of these points with you further. Thank you again for getting in touch and I hope we can keep this dialogue going as GuildHE institutions work hard to adapt to the ongoing challenges that you highlight.

With kind regards

Gordon McKenzie
Chief Executive Officer, GuildHE