



**Michelle Donelan MP**

Minister of State for Universities

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Dear Colleagues,

As the year draws to a close, I just wanted to thank you for the dedication and hard work you have put into setting up testing facilities, facilitating the return for students who wished to travel home for Christmas and your ongoing support for those who have stayed in their university areas over the winter break. I also want to extend my thanks to everyone involved in the running of the test sites. We could not have delivered on our plans without their help. As we look ahead to the New Year, I wanted to take the opportunity to set our continued priorities for the new term.

Thank you for completing your online order for tests or request to partner. Testing has a strong role to play in helping to keep the virus under control and to reduce the risks of outbreaks and wide-spread self-isolation. When I last wrote to you on 2nd of December, I emphasised that testing is at the heart of our plans to return all students back in the new year. In December, our policy to support students to return home focused on travelling after the 4-week period of national restrictions during which students would have limited their contact, and testing was offered as an optional additional assurance. In January it is pivotal and there is a clear expectation that every student should be tested. I know you will be doing everything you can to encourage students to be tested on their return to campus and university accommodation, and to reiterate their shared responsibility in this matter for the safety of themselves, their university peers and staff, and their wider community. This will help prevent outbreaks and give them a better university experience next term.

We will continue to share best practice examples to help you to promote the benefits of getting a test to your student body. Our research shows that these messages are more powerful when coming from your own institution, staff members or student representatives – who students know and respect. That is why I am asking for your continued cooperation in setting a strong expectation for students to be tested on return. You will be best placed to determine the appropriate communications to your students, but we are here to help provide answers to any questions or concerns that you may have. We will of course run our own communications plan in tandem which will include paid advertising on social media and radio, as well as influencer and partnership activity with student platforms e.g. UniDAYS, media and stakeholder engagement. All activity will promote the staggered return and the importance of students getting tested on return to campuses.

I welcome the measures that I know some have already taken, for example writing to students with details of how they can book testing now for their return to university; and linking the booking of testing with the allocation of slots for students to register for the new term or return to university accommodation. In the interests of supporting the safety of students, staff and the wider community, we would ask you to consider proportionate initiatives to encourage students to take up the testing on offer. We are compiling a toolkit of the measures that universities have taken to increase the uptake of testing and would welcome any examples you can share about what you have put in place. I have asked my officials to follow up with some providers, based on their experience in December to better understand take up at an institution level and to ensure you have the tools to maximise take up in January.

We should all communicate that the government and universities expect every student to be tested unless they have had a positive test within 90 days. This should be seen as part of the normal routine of returning to university. We are reviewing options for additional measures that students may be required to take to minimise the risk of transmission if they do not take advantage of the testing on offer, which could include guidance to self-isolate on return. We would ask that you do all you can to encourage students to adhere to the guidance including behavioural contracts where these are used. However, I am clear that testing will be the easiest and least disruptive way of reducing risk.

As individual institutions you will know the best approach for your student body, but if a student refuses to be tested and has not had a positive test within 90 days then we strongly recommend that you should make clear to them that they should not access campus until they have self-isolated for 10 days.

We make this recommendation because as stressed testing is at the very heart of our plans to return all students in January and to help prevent outbreaks. We are asking all universities to ask their students to confirm which of these measures they have taken, as if we cannot demonstrate that appropriate action has been taken across the student population, this may undermine confidence that the measures to support the return to university are sufficient.

Students feel concerned that if they test positive, they will have to self-isolate so it is important to continue to make sure that students feel as supported as possible should they have to self-isolate. This robust package of support needs to include mental health and wellbeing support, daily communications and ensuring students have access to suitable free or affordable food. I have found it concerning to hear reports of students having a bad experience when isolating and therefore not wanting to get tested to avoid having to do it again. I have also heard some fantastic examples and my department and UUK will be only too happy to share these. The UUK [checklist](#) is most helpful.

We remain very grateful for your continuing reports to us, via the Office for Students (OfS), on your COVID outbreaks. As officials noted in the letter to you of 9 December 2020, the reports provide us with an overview of and insights into the prevalence of COVID across the higher education (HE) sector in England. I know the request for daily reporting can be a challenge, but we do need to know what is happening at the earliest opportunity so we can continue to develop the policies, support and guidance needed to respond to challenges where and when they arise.

To confirm, **I am strongly urging every institution to submit once a day the number of cases that they have and the number of students self-isolating to the OFS** including nil returns. As stressed, we do need this information to ensure we provide you with the

necessary support if needed and have an accurate picture of the situation so we can keep the opening of universities under review.

In January we will be continuing to receive information from Test and Trace on the number of tests undertaken. We will also be asking **institutions to use the OfS reporting tool to supplement this with information about the numbers of students who have reported that they have had a positive PCR in the last 90 days (and therefore do not require an LFD test or other approved tests); or who have instead undertaken alternative measures such as self-isolation in accordance with any new guidance.** Without these figures, there is a risk that low testing numbers may reduce confidence in the efficacy of measures to support the return of students at your university. I will be actively reviewing these figures and contacting institutions – My officials and I will be on hand to help offer support throughout.

In our letter of 9 December 2020, we confirmed there will be a pause in reporting via the OfS from 16 December 2020 until term starts in the New Year. During the reporting pause, however, if there is an outbreak at your institution amongst staff or students who have remained at their term-time address, please can you email us direct to [he.covidplanning@education.gov.uk](mailto:he.covidplanning@education.gov.uk), confirming the dates and number of positive cases.

Once again thank you for your continued support of students and please pass on my thanks to all your staff and student unions – together we have ensured that lives and academic journeys have not had to be put on hold. If you would like to discuss anything further, please do contact my office at [Universities.PS@education.gov.uk](mailto:Universities.PS@education.gov.uk).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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**Minister of State for Universities**