



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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2nd December 2020

Dear Colleague,

As always let me begin by thanking you for your continued commitment to the welfare, wellbeing and education of your students. This government's commitment to prioritise Higher Education has only been made possible by the staff in each and every higher education institution – so please do pass on this government's gratitude for the tireless work we have seen. As you will know, the government recently published guidance outlining plans for student movement at the end of the winter term. We do however recognise how important it is that students, staff and providers are aware of the arrangements that will be in place for the spring term, especially for those who are travelling home. The following letter details the plan and further information can be found [here](#). I am always available to talk so if you have any questions or concerns please contact my office or the Department for Education.

This government has prioritised education, including Higher Education, so we have worked to create a plan that helps ensure the safe return of all students and enables the resumption of blended learning. We remain committed to ensuring that in-person teaching and university life can continue as far as possible during these unprecedented times. We also recognise the huge amount of work that you and your teams have undertaken to set up Asymptomatic Test Sites, provide Covid-secure teaching and learning to all students and carefully manage any outbreaks that have occurred in your institutions, and we welcome the early successes of the Asymptomatic Testing programme.

That said, the large numbers of students planning to travel in the New Year has been identified as a possible risk factor for transmission of infection at a time when the NHS may be affected by normal winter pressures. While we are confident that the face-to-face teaching element of blended learning can be done in Covid-secure environments, the mass movement of students across the country poses greater risks for the transmission of infection between areas.

As you know the spring term start dates are naturally staggered but this staggering is much more compressed than at the start of the autumn term so we are asking you to plan for students to return over a longer, five-week period. This will enable universities and higher education providers to test every student upon return.

The return of students to campus should commence from 4th January and start with students on practical courses and placements. This has three primary purposes:

1. To provide more time and capacity for universities in partnership with NHS Test and Trace to continue their rapid work to roll out Asymptomatic Test Sites within university campuses;
2. To help manage the flow of students so that as many students and staff as possible can be tested immediately upon arrival at university; and
3. To help ensure that students who have practical/assessment elements to their learning in the early part of the term can physically return to campus.

We do not underestimate the work that will need to be done to accommodate this plan including moving exams or putting them online and creating more online materials and lessons. However public safety and the safety of students, staff and communities must always come first. This plan is the best way to ensure all students can return and blended learning can resume whilst reducing the risks of mass movement and also ensuring all students can be tested.

Further detail of the plan is set out below:

From 4th January

Institutions should start the return to campus with domestic and international students on practical courses and placements in line with their planned start dates. All students who fall into the categories listed below can start on their original start date, however, if your institution's testing capacity does not allow you to test all students upon return, you should consider further staggering students' return. You should make an assessment of these priority courses based on the requirements of the curriculum, and taking into account the following factors:

- Whether the course involves work, clinical or practical placements which cannot be rescheduled past January;
- Courses requiring practical teaching or learning;
- Courses requiring access to specialist or technical equipment; and
- Students with particular needs who may need to return earlier.

We expect this to cover the following types of courses:

- Nursing and allied health professions
- Scientific/technology subjects that require time in laboratories and/or use of expensive equipment (e.g. chemistry, physics, engineering)
- Medical degrees involving lab work, practical instruction and placement inside hospitals (e.g. medicine, dentistry and veterinary science)
- Initial Teacher Training
- Architecture and planning
- Art and design
- Geography and environmental studies

- Music, dance, drama and performing arts
- Courses that are delivered solely to commuter students (i.e. there are no residential students on the course)
- Courses which require an externally moderated/ invigilated assessment or exams from a professional body, which take place during these five weeks and cannot be rescheduled
- Courses where the student is on placement or in paid employment in January (e.g. degree apprenticeships and sandwich placements)
- Other courses with a clearly defined practical element

Students who have left their term-time accommodation for the winter break should be encouraged to remain at home wherever possible until their face-to-face provision resumes. We recognise that there will be students who have remained in their term-time accommodation throughout the winter break (such as international students or care leavers) or who commute and they should continue to be able to access to resources, study spaces, campus catering, specific support required by international students, and appropriate pastoral and study support in COVID-secure environments. Providers may accommodate some other students to return to campus earlier but only where there is a genuine need or extenuating circumstances, for example those who do not have study space and cannot find any appropriate alternatives for their mental health. These students should be able to access campus facilities but will not be able to commence in-person lessons until their course's face-to-face teaching formally restarts and should be offered testing on arrival.

Where students are on a joint honours programme where at least one part of their programme is listed above, they will be eligible for the first part of this phased return but the non-practical element of their course will recommence later.

From 25th January

All remaining courses should be offered online from the beginning of term (where your term starts before the 25th January) and providers should plan for students to return from 25th January, staggered over a two-week period. As with all advice, this will be kept under review particularly in light of any new scientific evidence and we will provide further advice if necessary.

You will be best placed to organise the return of students from 25th January. You may wish to consider prioritising:

- Post-graduate taught students
- Students in later stages of study (second year onwards)
- International students
- New starters

During this period of online teaching, we advise that students who returned home over the winter break do not travel back to their term-time accommodation, with the exception of those who may not have alternative accommodation from 4th January, such as international students, students who have inadequate study spaces, or those need to return for health reasons. Providers should also consider appropriate flexibility for international students travelling to the UK from overseas where there may be limited travel options, especially in the case of travel booked prior to the publication of spring return advice.

As I set out in my letter to you on 2 November, the government's clear and stated expectation is that, whether providers are delivering face-to-face, online or blended provision, they must continue delivering a high-quality academic experience. The Office for Students (OfS) has made it clear that higher education (HE) providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards, which set out requirements to ensure that courses are high-quality, that students are supported and achieve good outcomes and that standards are protected. At all times of this five-week window the government and OfS expect the quality of learning to be maintained, the quantity of hours of taught education not to drop and for providers to ensure that learning is accessible for all.

Impact on staff and students

We realise that this year has been incredibly difficult for students. It remains as important as ever that students continue to access the mental health support they need. The Department for Health and Social Care has provided over £9 million to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need, as well as working closely with the OfS to provide up to £3 million to fund Student Space, a mental health support platform which has now been extended to the end of academic year 2020/21.

We also recognise that in these exceptional circumstances some students may face financial hardship. As you will be aware, my Department has worked with the OfS to clarify that providers are able to use existing funds, worth around £23 million per month for April to July this year and £256 million for academic year 2020/21, towards hardship support. Today I announced that will be making available up to £20m on a one-off basis to support those that need it most, particularly disadvantaged students. Further detail will be set out in due course, and we will work with the OfS to do this.

The Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Taskforce that I convene has also created a resources document, collating the guidance, tools and services available to support students' mental health. This information is now being spread through the networks of taskforce members, such as university and student representatives, so you can raise awareness of the support available and empower individuals to seek help. You should also continue to take steps to help ensure staff safety and wellbeing and take account the particular needs and views of staff.

Students who are undertaking HE courses in other settings (e.g. FE colleges) should continue to be treated in line with guidance for those education settings.

Students residing in one of the Devolved Administrations but attending higher education in England should be treated in line with guidance for English higher education providers, while taking account of any local travel restrictions.

Testing on arrival and during term

In recent months there have been developments on testing, which we plan to utilise to facilitate the safe return of all students. The return that we have outlined above will help to manage the throughput for asymptomatic testing sites using lateral flow devices.

Results of the PHE and Oxford University lateral flow test evaluation show it has an overall analytical sensitivity of 76.8% for all PCR-positive individuals but detects over 90% of individuals with high viral loads, and minimal difference between the ability of the test to pick up viral antigens in symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals. In field evaluations, such as Liverpool, these tests still perform effectively and detect at least 50% of all PCR positive individuals and more than 70% of individuals with higher viral loads in both symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals.

We will work with you to put in place asymptomatic testing arrangements for all students, as well as staff, on arrival to university. Individual providers may choose to offer tests utilising different testing technologies (e.g. PCR) or partner with neighbouring providers. DfE will look to broker partnerships where they are not forthcoming and full details will be outlined in a letter from my officials shortly.

We expect students to be offered a test on arrival and for students to minimise social contact until two negative tests have been received. To minimise the risk to themselves and others on their return to university, before travelling, students should act responsibly and follow local restriction tier guidance on social contact. Students who have spent the winter break in areas in local restriction tier 3: very high, should make use of the local community testing programme and take a test before travelling where this fits with locally targeted programmes led by the Director of Public Health.

I would like to thank you again for all your hard work in ensuring that your institution is a safe environment for students and staff. The Government will support institutions undertaking mass testing. We have noted the concerns regarding testing at very small providers and we will work with you to make it possible or partner you with another institution to provide the testing. Please do not hesitate to contact my officials via our mailbox, he.covidplanning@education.gov.uk if there is anything we can do to support you.

In the case of students travelling from overseas, international arrivals are required to complete a passenger locator form on arrival in the UK, and passengers travelling from a country not on the exemption (travel corridor) list will need to self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days. From 15 December, there will be the option to take a COVID-19 test from a private testing provider (at students' own

cost) after 5 days of self-isolation, with a negative result releasing you from the need to isolate. Guidance is available here. Providers should be ready to advise students of appropriate local testing facilities.

In order to get timely feedback on how the phasing and testing is being administered, questions may be added covering these topics in the daily OfS data reporting tool. We will write to all providers about any changes to the data tool in December 2020.

Finally, I would like to place on record once again my thanks for your tireless dedication in helping to provide safe environments for students and staff and continued quality of learning. We continue to be confident that the measures in place, in line with the government guidance, will provide a secure and positive learning environment for students and staff.

We continue to support the blended learning model that universities have been using and still consider you, in collaboration with local public health teams, to be best-placed in determining the proportion of online/in-person teaching working that works for your setting. However, where it is deemed safe to do so, we would encourage as much face-to-face learning as possible, recognising the benefits this brings to student experience.

We look forward to working with you to ensure the safe return of all students as soon as we can. As always, if there is anything we can do to support you further, please do not hesitate to contact me or my team.

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.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities