

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister's Office
10 Downing Street
London
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Cc: Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer
Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Education

6 April 2021

Dear Prime Minister

We are writing on behalf of universities in England and the one million students who were eagerly awaiting your latest roadmap announcement in anticipation that they would be able to return to safe, socially-distanced in-person teaching and learning from 12 April 2021. Given the absence of any mention of university students during your press conference yesterday, we are asking for an explanation for this omission and seeking urgent clarification about your government's plans for student returns and what further steps will be taken to support their education and wellbeing.

The list of sectors which are allowed to operate in-person activities in England from 12 April is extensive – all shops, personal care businesses, gyms, spas, zoos, theme parks, public libraries, and community centres. Restrictions will also be lifted enabling people to travel anywhere in England for a self-catered holiday. It therefore seems illogical that students are not allowed to return to their self-catering accommodation and resume their studies in Covid-safe university facilities, particularly at this crucial time of the academic year. This is another blow for those students who have been studying online since early December 2020, and you will be aware of many studies highlighting the impact on students' mental health, wellbeing and development.

Universities are now being asked to explain this decision to students when we have been given no explanation whatsoever by the UK government and no information or guidance has been published.

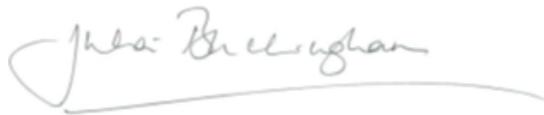
We are therefore asking, as a matter of urgency, for the UK government to respond to the following issues:

1. To confirm how and why the decision was taken to exclude higher education student returns from Step 2 of the roadmap, and to publish the government's risk assessment underpinning this decision.
2. To address the current communications vacuum as a matter of urgency and publicly explain the government's decision to students and parents, including information on when they expect students will be able to return.
3. To comment on the equality and fairness issues highlighted by this decision: for example, treating further education and higher education students differently, the difference in the student experience between those who returned in January and in March and those still studying remotely; and what consideration was given to the impact of this decision on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
4. To explain what measures the UK government will take to address the following areas:
 - a. to support student mental health (the ONS student insight survey revealed that almost two-thirds of students have experienced a decline in their mental health this academic year, and students' life

- satisfaction during the pandemic remains far below the national adult average)
- b. to support final-year students' employability, as many will miss out on in-person career development activities planned by their university for the summer term
 - c. to support student hardship arising from the pandemic
 - d. to provide support for progression for students from under-represented backgrounds
 - e. to support universities to maximise the wider student experience over the next 12 months.

As a sector we have been cooperative and done everything we have been asked by government: setting up asymptomatic testing sites often at significant cost, investing hundreds of millions of pounds in wide-ranging Covid-security measures and working with local public health experts to manage outbreaks and minimise transmission. More generally, the UK's universities have been instrumental in vaccine development and supporting wider community efforts throughout the pandemic. Our staff have worked incredibly hard to keep students learning and progressing over the past year and our students have behaved responsibly and shown resilience during a period of great uncertainty. The UK government owes them a clear explanation about why decisions have been taken and how students and universities will be supported.

Yours sincerely



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The voice of universities

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