Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

Higher education: reopening buildings and campuses

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Introduction

This guidance applies nationally but you should follow local public health guidance if restrictions are in place in your area.

The latest update includes:

- latest advice on social distancing
- taking account of the demographic profile of your staff and students
- reopening university libraries
- exemptions to regulations on social gatherings relevant to higher education
- advice on the performing arts
- additions to the section on student accommodation

The higher education system in the United Kingdom has a world class reputation. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, and with great agility, it has adapted to online teaching and learning, while universities have continued with some activities on campus, especially in their contribution to the fight against coronavirus (COVID-19) and the development of a vaccine.

This document is designed to help providers of higher education in England to understand how to minimise risk during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and provide services to students, keeping as many people as possible self-isolating and out of educational settings if they are symptomatic, practising good hand and respiratory hygiene and keeping 2 metres apart from those they do not live with wherever possible. Where 2 metres is not viable, reducing the distance down to a minimum of 1 metre can be used but only if appropriate mitigation is in place. You should consider and set out the mitigations you will introduce in your risk assessment.

We hope it gives you freedom within a practical framework to think about what you need to do to continue, or restart, operations during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. We understand how important it is that you can work as safely as possible and support the health and wellbeing of staff and students in the current public health emergency. This guidance is intended to help those in settings that are already operating, as well to help people think about how to prepare for the reopening or restarting of premises or activities. This will ensure that providers can demonstrate that campuses are once again 'open for business' for forthcoming academic years, while minimising the risk to staff and students.

In the same way that you are making plans for academic year 2020 to 2021, prospective and continuing students will be making important decisions about their academic future. In spite of ongoing uncertainty, it continues to be important that you provide students with the right information at the right time. This includes making prospective and current students aware of any potential for changes at the earliest opportunity. We expect providers to ensure that continuing and prospective students receive the clear, accurate and timely information needed to make informed decisions. It is important that obligations under consumer protection law continue to be met, including in relation to information provision, terms and conditions, and complaint handling.

We expect higher education providers to be open for academic year 2020 to 2021, although there may be some differences from previous years, reflecting the measures that you are putting in place to ensure that you are minimising the risks to students and staff, in accordance with public health guidelines. This guidance may therefore be updated in future, depending on the scientific advice at that time.

The Office for Students (OfS), the regulator in England, has committed to protecting the interests of students - both domestic and international - throughout the present crisis and has produced guidance on practical ways in which students can complete their studies whilst ensuring quality and standards are upheld. This Guidance for providers about quality and standards during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is clear that standards must be maintained. We are also working closely with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to ensure that students continue to leave university with qualifications that have real value, reflect their hard work and allow people to progress.

The key message of the government to the public is clear: we all must stay alert in order to control the virus and save lives. Guidance on how to protect yourself and others can be found at Coronavirus (COVID-19).

The government's strategy for recovering from coronavirus (COVID-19) is available at The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy. This strategy sets out a cautious roadmap to easing existing measures in a measured way that minimises the risk, subject to successfully controlling the virus and being able to monitor and react to its spread.

How to use this guidance

Higher education providers are autonomous institutions and we expect you to make your own judgements about your provision based on the latest public health guidance. This guidance is intended to help you make decisions about how you can make your facilities and other provision available in a way that minimises risks to all students - both domestic and international - and staff, in line with the government roadmap and guidance.

We set out below the range of advice and guidance we expect you to be taking into consideration when making decisions on when and how to reopen your campuses and buildings, as long as that can be done in line with public health advice at the time.

Each HE provider will need to translate this into the specific actions you need to take, depending on the demographic profile of your staff and student bodies, the nature of your institution, including the size and type of institution, and how the institution is organised and operated.

We expect all providers to set out clearly what provisions you have made to ensure that staff and students can return, confident that steps have been taken to reduce the risks in their working environment or to their university experience, in accordance with government guidance.

To help you decide which actions to take, you should carry out an appropriate coronavirus (COVID-19) risk assessment, just as you would for other health and safety related hazards. The Health and Safety Executive provides a helpful risk assessment template and examples.

Principles for higher education provision

Although some buildings and parts of campuses have physically closed in response to the outbreak, education has been ongoing. In considering action to reopen buildings and campuses, we recognise that a great deal of work is currently being undertaken by providers on planning for reopening the higher education estate to staff and students. We encourage all providers to share practice in order that there is a consistent approach to reopening that puts the health and safety of all students and staff at its heart and also recognises the importance of providing access to the high-quality provision that typifies our HE providers.

We expect that HE providers will consider:

- students or staff who may be shielding or are more likely to be at risk. The guidance on shielding (clinically extremely vulnerable) is about to be relaxed and providers should take account of the latest advice
- the Public Health England review of the disparities in the risk and outcomes from coronavirus (COVID-19) and its report of the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on BAME communities
- accommodation for all students who need to be on site should be recommended to minimise any coronavirus (COVID-19) risk
- students in residential settings (halls of residence or houses of multiple occupation): this guidance on isolation for residential educational settings may be helpful
- international students who may have returned home: when reopening settings you should pay particular attention to those international students who have returned home and have been unable to return to the UK. You should ensure that they receive adequate teaching provision, exams and other core elements of the learning experience
- all students who may have been released from accommodation contracts and would have nowhere to stay if needed on campus

Higher education provision

Reopening laboratories

We are aware that universities are keen to resume research work quickly. We published guidance on Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19), including in laboratories and research facilities. The same considerations might apply to laboratory science teaching as well, if it can be done in a way that reduces risks to those using the facilities.

This guidance includes advice on carrying out a risk assessment to assess the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) and the need to protect people who are at a higher risk. It points out that the Health and Safety Executive may take action to improve control of workplace risks if needed, for example through the issue of enforcement notices to help secure improvements.

Reopening other buildings

It is the responsibility of HE providers to assess the risk of opening other buildings and to implement suitable precautions. It may be appropriate to consider reopening low-density buildings first as a phased way of extending access to the campus while safeguarding the needs of staff and students. These may differ between providers but may include, for example, managed informal learning spaces. Depending on the nature of facilities, the guidance on Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) provides examples relevant to the HE sector.

Library service providers have been required to cease their business during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, apart from servicing orders made online or by telephone, text or post. Libraries can now open in a COVID-secure way. Libraries Connected has drawn up guidance for public libraries to support reopening that will also be relevant for university libraries.

Social distancing on campus

In order to determine what level of attendance is appropriate in HE settings and in conducting open days, outreach activity, and the assessment of prospective students on campus, particularly in the forthcoming academic year, you should conduct risk assessments in order to understand:

- the number of students and staff likely to be included in a learning space and how they can be accommodated as safely as possible
- the availability of staff, including contingency plans should individuals be shielding (until 1 August, but refer to public health guidance for updates) or self-isolating
- supporting services required in increasing the number of individuals on-site (for example, catering) and how they can be provided as safely as possible

- what measures in addition to those that have already been undertaken during the current outbreak will need to be in place to accommodate additional numbers (including additional cleaning required of spaces and equipment following use)

Providers should implement a range of protective measures including increased cleaning, reducing 'pinch points' (such as at the start and end of day), and utilising outdoor space. You may find the general guidance for safe workplaces, particularly managing entrance to, exit from and movement around buildings, as well as signage, a useful resource. Any additional costs would be funded from existing budgets.

Anyone who displays symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) can and should get a test. Tests can be booked online on GOV.UK at Coronavirus (COVID-19): getting tested, or ordered by telephone via NHS 119 for those without access to the internet. Essential workers, which includes anyone involved in education or childcare, have priority access to testing. New workplace guidance on the test and trace programme will be relevant to providers. Providers should ensure that they understand the NHS Test and Trace process and how to contact their local Public Health England health protection team.

We recognise that, for many courses, online teaching and learning is working effectively and has a high degree of learner engagement (while it will also benefit those who are not able to physically attend, for example those with family members who are shielding (until 1 August, but refer to public health guidance for updates). You should identify the appropriate mix of online and face-to-face content for each subject, reflecting what will maximise learning as well as supporting staff or students who cannot attend campus, and enabling the provider as a whole to minimise transmission risk.

Some providers will have programmes designed for 'elite' athletes (for example, who are on elite development pathways). In such cases, the guidance on returning to training for elite sport will be of relevance.

In considering allowing people back onto campus, you should take account of public health guidance on staying safe outside one's home and in public spaces. The public health guidance is to reduce social contact, maintain social distance, adopt good hand and respiratory hygiene measures and to self-isolate and get tested if you have symptoms.

Providers will find relevant guidance at:

- Staying safe outside your home
- Staying alert and safe (social distancing)

There are exemptions to the general rules for restricting gatherings that are relevant to higher education settings. Paragraph (2)(d)(i) of regulation 7 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 permits gatherings of 2 or more people indoors, or more than 6 people outdoors, that are reasonably necessary for work purposes; while paragraph (2)(f) permits such gatherings taking place at an educational facility which are reasonably necessary for the purposes of education. The legislation may be further amended as government guidance changes.

Performing arts

Certain types of course, for example in the performing arts, have involved a degree of practical face-to-face teaching and assessment. Some providers have found alternative methods during the outbreak. You might consider how to encourage new ways of delivering in-person teaching and assessment that adhere to guidelines on social distancing, so that all students can receive a high-quality educational experience in a way that protects both students and staff.

Venues should not permit live performances, including drama, comedy and music, to take place in front of a live audience. This is important to mitigate the risks of droplets and aerosol transmission - from either the performer(s) or their audience. There will be further guidance setting out how performing arts activity can be managed safely in other settings, for instance rehearsing or broadcast without an audience.

The current risk assessment is that both singing and playing wind or brass instruments may carry a potential higher risk of transmission such that participation in these activities requires particular attention to the risk involved, and therefore should await further guidance. Recommendations for addressing these risks include but are not limited to: keeping to the smallest number of singers or wind and brass players in one space, enhancing social distancing, and careful use of fixed teams where appropriate. You are expected to implement the specific guidance relative to particular activities which form part of the overall performing arts delivery, for example hair dressing for costume, and so on.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has published guidance on the performing arts. This may help providers understand the restrictions on professional performance, including aspects of music, dance and performing arts provision that may require specific safety measures. You might also find DCMS's list of guidance published by partner organisations useful.

Risk assessments

As part of the process of opening up buildings and campuses to staff and students, you should produce risk assessments for both working and communal environments, which will vary significantly based on the needs and circumstances of individual providers and the demographic profile of your staff and student bodies. We encourage HE providers to share examples of best practice.

Some people with particular characteristics may be at comparatively increased risk from coronavirus (COVID-19), as set out in theCOVID-19: review of disparities in risks and outcomes report. If people with significant risk factors are concerned, we recommend that providers discuss their concerns and explain the measures the provider is putting in place to reduce risks. You should try as far as practically possible to accommodate relevant additional measures.

Transport

Transport will be important for students, and for many staff, who need to travel to the campus. Providers may also arrange transport. You will therefore want to have regard to the guidance for passengers and operators. The current advice is to avoid using public transport, and aim to walk, cycle or drive instead. If using public transport is necessary, wearing a face covering is mandatory, unless you are exempt for health, disability or other reasons:

- Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer travel guidance for passengers
- Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer transport guidance for operators

Information for students and staff planning to travel in the UK or overseas, and for those who are already overseas, is also available at travel guidance for educational settings.

International students and self-isolation

Providers and students will need to have regard to guidance on travelling to the UK. To keep the rate of transmission in the UK as low as possible, all international arrivals will be required to complete a passenger locator form on arrival in the UK and passengers travelling from countries not on our exemption list will need to self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days.

Students will also need to have regard to transport guidance to ensure that they are safely travelling from their entry port to their accommodation (see 'Transport' for further advice on using transport safely). While it is for providers to decide how they support international students, we believe it is important that you make every effort to welcome them to the UK and your responsibilities should start as soon as a student lands, if not before.

Noting the advice provided for students (both domestic and international) who self-isolated during lockdown, you are responsible for ensuring students are safe and well looked after during the 14 day self-isolation period. Existing guidance is available at isolation for residential educational settings.

You should also consider the needs of students, including international students, who may be suffering hardship or be without the ability to travel as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Guidance for Tier 4 students and sponsors affected by changes to UK immigration and borders due to coronavirus can be found at Tier 4 sponsors, migrants and short-term students.

International students and their sponsors can email the Government's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Immigration Help Centre at: CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk if they have any further questions about their visas.

Accommodation

In advance of the next academic year, you will want to prepare accommodation for students. Some of this accommodation has been used for housing students who were not able to go to family homes during lockdown. Where students have contracted coronavirus (COVID-19) while in student accommodation, rooms and other facilities will need to be cleaned if the infection is recent, following guidance on cleaning non-healthcare settings. Accommodation that has been vacant for over 72 hours will need standard, but thorough, household cleaning.

DfE has issued guidance for students and providers about how students may safely collect belongings left in student accommodation in a safe and managed way.

There is no prohibition on moving home and anyone in England who wishes to move home can do so, including forming new permanent or semi-permanent households by moving into shared student accommodation and houses in multiple occupation. Guidance for landlords and tenants on renting and coronavirus (COVID-19) is available. It will be important to apply those public health measures necessary to protect the wellbeing of students living together and those staff assisting them.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by coronavirus (COVID-19). This sets out the CMA's view on how the law operates to help consumers understand their rights and help businesses treat their customers fairly. Students may be entitled to refunds from accommodation providers depending on the terms of their contract and their particular circumstances. If students need help, organisations such as Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support.

Staff and student wellbeing

We recognise that many students and staff are facing additional mental health challenges due to the disruption to study and working practices and uncertainty caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Student mental health and suicide prevention are priorities for this government. The Minister of State for Universities, Michelle Donelan, wrote to the OfS and HE providers in March to highlight a need to focus on mental health and wellbeing across HE.

We continue to work closely with the HE sector to promote good practice and support students and providers during the outbreak. HE providers are autonomous bodies, independent from government and have a responsibility to support students with mental health conditions. It is for you to determine what welfare and counselling services you need to provide to your students to offer that support. You are experts on your own student population and, therefore, best placed to identify the needs of your student body.

We have worked closely with the OfS to help clarify that providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by coronavirus (COVID-19). You are able to use the funding, worth around £23 million per month for June and July, towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of IT equipment, and mental health support, as well as to support your access and participation plans.

We have also worked with the OfS on the recently announced Student Space platform, which seeks to bridge gaps in mental health support for students arising from this unprecedented situation. Funded with up to £3 million by the OfS and led by Student Minds, it is designed to work alongside existing mental health services offered by providers. This is a new online resource and will enable your students to access a variety of mental health and wellbeing support.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak will also put increased strain on the health and wellbeing of staff. The guidance on safer workplaces acknowledges the responsibilities that employers have for their staff. We welcome the agreement between trade unions working in higher education and the Universities & Colleges Employers Association, published as Appendix A to Universities UK's principles and considerations for emerging from lockdown that will help ensure campuses are as safe as possible and protect the health and wellbeing of staff, students and visitors to campus.

There may be a need for continuing support as campuses start to reopen and the protective measures to keep people safe while away from home take on even greater importance. There is guidance on mental health and wellbeing at COVID-19: guidance for the public on mental health and wellbeing.

Legal responsibilities of providers in taking steps to reopen

Providers already have duties of care towards staff, students and visitors, including under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Equality Act 2010. Providers will need to continue to comply with those obligations.

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