



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Students back on campus in England and Christmas arrangements

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## Summary

In March 2020 university and college campuses were closed in response to the Coronavirus pandemic and teaching moved online.

In September 2020 guidance was published on arrangements for students moving back on to campuses for the autumn term. The Office for Students had told providers that they must provide students with clear information about what to expect when they returned to university. Most universities planned to offer students face-to-face teaching and a good student experience.

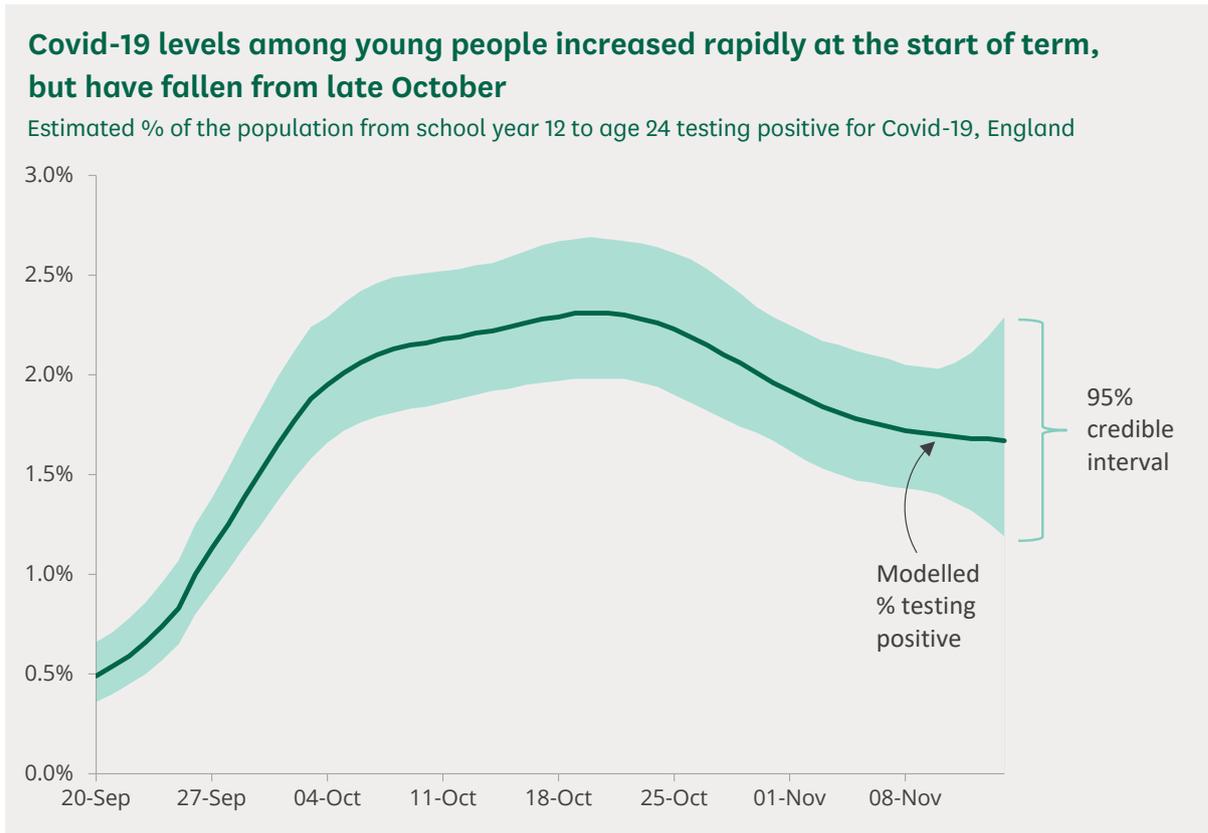
The mass movement of large numbers of university students back to campuses was highlighted as a cause for concern by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) who said that universities could become the “care homes of a second wave” and by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) who warned that Covid outbreaks were “very likely in universities” and that closing universities would lower transmission rates.

Students arriving on campus were arranged into ‘households’ to prevent the transmission of Covid-19, but following the start of term a number of outbreaks occurred in universities and residential students in these universities were put into self-isolation. Many students in this situation complained about the support that they received and the value for money of courses under these circumstances. Several universities reverted to online teaching and this along with the disruption to student life led to several of e-petitions calling for tuition fee refunds.

The Government does not currently publish data on outbreaks of Covid-19 at universities, but according to the Universities and Colleges Union a total of 47,528 cases among staff and students had been reported at UK universities since the start of term. Not all universities publish this data and hence this is an underestimate.

There was a rapid rise in cases of Covid-19 in the ‘student age bands’ soon after the start of the academic year. There is evidence that the number of new cases among these age groups started to fall in late October and early November. Cases in other age groups have either stabilised or continued to increase during this time.

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The increase in cases among students has not been uniform across universities or local areas. Analysis at a local level show *some* areas have lots of students and lots of Covid-19 cases, but others with lots of students have relatively low levels of Covid. There are also many places with few students, but high numbers of cases. **There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the return to campus has led to a rise in cases among students, particularly at some universities, but the link between this and the wider 'second wave' across the whole population is not at all clear.**

On 11 November the Government announced arrangements for students moving home for Christmas. The Office for Students has published a [series of FAQs](#) on end of term 2020 arrangements in England.

This briefing outlines issues around the return of higher education students to university in 2020-21 and sets out government guidance. It also gives a brief overview of the arrangements in further education settings. It is correct and up to date at the time of writing. For later information readers should consult the stakeholder websites included throughout the paper.

# 1. Introduction

In March 2020 university and college campuses were closed in response to the coronavirus pandemic – this had a significant impact on higher education providers and students as many students moved out of their student accommodation and returned home and institutions began delivering courses online.

The transfer of teaching online caused many students to question whether their courses were delivering good value for money and this combined with the earlier disruption in teaching caused by the lecturers strikes led to increased calls by students for refunds of tuition fees and accommodation costs.

Higher education providers were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on student numbers and the effect that this would have on their funding in 2020-21. It had been suggested that the detrimental effect of coronavirus restrictions on the student experience would lower applications in 2020-21 and make students more likely to defer starting courses until the pandemic was over.

A number of providers sought to reassure students that some face-to-face teaching could take place in the autumn term and institutions were told by the higher education regulator the Office for Students to provide new students starting in 2020-21 with clear information on what they could expect when they arrived at their university in the autumn term.

After the turmoil with exam results in the summer a record number of students accepted places on university courses in 2020-21 and relatively few students deferred their places, so the anticipated drop in student numbers did not occur.

The movement of large numbers of university students back to campuses around the UK in September/October was raised as a cause for concern by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). It was suggested that outbreaks of Covid-19 were “very likely in universities” and that the migration could spread the coronavirus and put at risk the safety of students and communities.

As students have returned to institutions there have been outbreaks of the coronavirus at several campuses and it has been suggested that all teaching should revert to online delivery.

## 2. Guidance on opening campuses

On 10 September the Department for Education (DfE) published guidance for higher education (HE) providers in England on re-opening campuses, this guidance has since been updated and the current version is [Higher education: reopening buildings and campuses, 13 November 2020](#). The guidance is designed to help providers understand how to **minimise risk during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic** whilst ensuring that **students have an enjoyable experience and stay as safe as possible** - it gives advice on student movement, self-isolation and infection control.

Each HE provider has discretion to “translate the guidance into specific actions that they need to take, depending on the demographic profile of their staff and student bodies, the nature of their institution, including the size and type of institution, and how the institution is organised and operated”.

### 2.1 Student accommodation

When students returned to university in the autumn many moved into university accommodation or shared housing. The DfE guidance offers HE providers advice on how to manage this situation and minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission in shared accommodation.

The guidance states that there is **no prohibition on students forming new households and moving into shared student accommodation and houses in multiple occupation**, however the guidance says that frequent temporary changes in household will increase the risk of Covid-19 transmission and that staying within the same household will facilitate track and trace.

#### Forming households

The guidance states that students in university accommodation should seek to identify **‘households’**, within which routine contact can be managed safely.

Within student accommodation, you should seek to identify ‘households’, within which routine contact can be managed safely. These households will also form the units by which you will manage any response to a suspected or confirmed positive case. Your approach to deciding what constitutes a household will depend on the physical layout of the accommodation, taking into account who shares a kitchen/bathroom. A household in halls of residence is normally considered to be those students living in the same flat, or on the same floor, who share a kitchen and/or bathroom, rather than an entire block. Accommodation providers should make clear which kitchen(s) and/or bathroom(s) are intended for each household’s use.

If a household within student accommodation is not obvious, providers may need to identify students as belonging to households (these households may be greater than 6 people). There should be an easily accessible record of who is in each of these provider-defined households, and students should

understand what constitutes their household for the purposes of guidance on interactions within and between households.

Students should stay within their households to limit social contact and to lower the risk of spreading the virus. Some universities may allow students to move households on a case by cases basis if it is necessary in exceptional circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 Student experience

HE providers should have communicated with students before they returned to university to make it clear what type of experience they could expect when they arrived on campus.

In June 2020 the OfS published a document, [Guidance for providers about student and consumer protection during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#), which set out requirements for HE providers around the provision of information to students:

providers will need to ensure that prospective students have information that is clear and timely (including any information about changes to the courses for which they have applied). Prospective students will need to understand what a provider is committing to deliver in the current circumstances and in different scenarios, how this will be achieved, and the changes that might need to be made in response to changing public health advice, so that they are able to make informed choices. Existing students also need clear information about any adjustments to their courses and assessment that may take place in the next academic year.<sup>2</sup>

In most cases university teaching will be an appropriate **mix of online and face-to-face content** and this may vary for each subject. The guidance contains information on delivering teaching where practical facilities such as laboratories and theatres are required. University libraries are permitted to open in a Covid-secure way.

The guidance also states that HE providers should where possible, **support their students to socialise in Covid-secure environments** (for example campus bars and Student Unions) and should identify safer social activities for students.

## 2.3 Universities responses to outbreaks of Covid-19

Since the return of students there have been several outbreaks of Covid-19 on university campuses. HE providers have responded to this situation in several different ways.

### Return to online teaching

A number of universities have **suspended face-to-face teaching and resumed online delivery of courses**. Universities in Manchester have

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<sup>1</sup> See information on the webpages of the [University of Exeter](#) and the [University of Gloucestershire](#)

<sup>2</sup> Office for Students, Guidance for providers about student and consumer protection during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic , 9 June 2020 p1 para 4

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experienced high numbers of Covid-19 cases and both the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University stopped face-to-face classes and seminars in October, except for a handful of specialist courses. Several other universities including the University of Sheffield also paused face-to-face teaching. This issue was discussed in an article in the *Guardian*, [Covid: three universities halt face-to-face teaching as UK strategy unravels](#), 6 October 2020.

### Refunds of accommodation costs

Many students have suggested that they should be refunded for their accommodation costs during lockdowns imposed by their university.

Information on student accommodation concerns during the coronavirus pandemic are discussed in library briefing paper, [Coronavirus: implications for the higher and further education sectors in England, 17 April 2020](#) p12-14. The briefing explains that **refunding accommodation costs is an issue between the accommodation provider (the university, or accommodation owner) and the student** – the Government has no role in the area of student accommodation. Students' liability for rent charges will be determined by contracts between the student and the accommodation provider.

At the start of the first lockdown many students left their accommodation and returned home before their tenancy agreements had expired. In this situation a number of privately run Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) providers allowed students to terminate their contracts early without any charges and some universities waived rent due on their own accommodation.

The University of Glasgow offered to refund one month's rent, to be reimbursed as compensation after a coronavirus outbreak led to new restrictions – this is discussed in an article in the *Guardian*, "[Covid: Glasgow University to refund students ordered to self-isolate](#)", 26 September 2020. Manchester Met also announced a two-week rent rebate.

### Commitment to student wellbeing

In October Universities UK gave a commitment to support student wellbeing and education "as students adjust to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and the necessarily different learning and student experience in the first semester of the academic year".<sup>3</sup>

## 2.4 Tuition fee refund debate 16 November 2020

One recurring issue during the pandemic has been the impact of online delivery on the quality of courses and on the student experience and many students have questioned the value for money of higher education in the current situation. This has led significant numbers of students to call for tuition fee refunds or discounts.

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<sup>3</sup> Universities UK, [A commitment by Universities UK to students' wellbeing](#), 6 October 2020

Several PQs have been asked on the issue of refunds of university fees such as: [[Universities: Coronavirus](#)] 12 May 2020, [[Students: Coronavirus](#)] 19 October 2020, and [[Students: Coronavirus](#)] 12 May 2020.

The Government's position on refunds during the pandemic is that **students should not expect refunds if good quality online learning has been provided by a university during the pandemic.**

The universities minister Michelle Donelan discussed the issue of tuition fee refunds when she appeared before the Education Committee on 6 October 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Several e-petitions were tabled on fee refunds - four petitions on the subject received in total over half a million signatures - e-petition [Reimburse all students of this year's fees due to strikes and COVID-19](#) received 353,129 signatures.

On 13 July 2020 the Petitions Committee published a report, [The impact of Covid-19 on university students \[HC 527\]](#), the report recommended **a new complaints process for refunds** and that the **Government should provide universities with funds to cover the cost of refunds.**

The e-petitions were debated on 16 November 2020 – the debate pack, [Debate on e-petitions 300528, 302855, 306494, 324762, and 552911, relating to tuition fees Thursday, 12 November, 2020](#) gives further detail on this issue. The debate is available online at: HC Deb [[Tuition Fees](#)], 16 November 2020. During the debate the minister for universities Michelle Donelan acknowledged the “significant impact that covid-19 has had on staff, students and higher education providers” and said that the Government got “how hard the ramifications of covid have been”. She said that universities must ensure the quality, quantity and accessibility of tuition but that there was a system in place if that was not the case:

The hon. Member for Islwyn and many other hon. Members have called for a blanket tuition fee refund, but it should be noted that the Government do not set the minimum level of tuition fees. We set the maximum, and we have been very clear that if higher education providers want to continue to charge the maximum, they must ensure that the quality, quantity and accessibility of tuition is maintained. We have been working closely with the Office for Students to ensure that, and we will continue to do so.

We have heard accounts of students who feel that the quality of their education has declined. My message to them is that there is a system in place that can help. First, a student should pursue the official complaints procedure at their university. If they remain unsatisfied, they should go to the OIA. That can lead to some form of tuition fee refund.<sup>5</sup>

However, the minister said that a system of blanket refunds would not necessarily work:

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<sup>4</sup> Education Committee Oral evidence: Accountability hearings, HC 262 Tuesday 6 October 2020

<sup>5</sup> HC Deb [[Tuition Fees](#)], 16 November 2020, c42

universities should have been clear before the start of the academic year about what students could expect in these extraordinary circumstances. If students feel they have not got what they expected, they should follow the process. As outlined by the CMA, each student has a contractual agreement, and that agreement will differ per institution, which is another reason why a blanket system of refunds would not necessarily work.<sup>6</sup>

On 5 November the Office for the Independent Adjudicator announced that it was launching a consultation on [draft rules for large group complaints](#) in response to the high number of complaints that they had been receiving on particular issues “including the impact of Covid-19 and the unprecedented disruption” it had caused.

### Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) report on refunds

On 16 November 2020 the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) published a report, [Who would benefit from reimbursing tuition fees?](#). The report said that the e-petitions **did not make it clear how a refund would work:**

who should pay whom, the general presumption seems to be that it would be universities paying back whoever paid them in the first place (so the Government-owned Student Loans Company in most cases).

The report also analysed the cost of refunding fees:

The **total cost to universities of refunding fees in this way for a whole year would be around £10 billion** if the policy applied only to full-time undergraduates domiciled in England. **Including all fee-paying students – which includes students from other home nations, international students, part-time students, and those studying for other degrees – would nearly double the amount to be reimbursed.** This compares to total university income of £41 billion in 2018/19. A less radical policy of reimbursing just the most-disrupted third term of the 2019/20 academic year would cost universities a third of those figures.

The report showed that **refunds would mainly benefit better off graduates and the Government:**

Among undergraduate students domiciled in England, this kind of reimbursement of tuition fees would primarily benefit the small minority of students who pay their tuition fees out-of-pocket, and those who go on to have high earnings after they have graduated. Only the roughly 10% of students (or their parents) who pay tuition fees directly would receive any immediate payout. All others will have taken out the full government-backed loan to cover their fees, so reimbursement would merely lower their student loan balance.

[...]

The corollary of this is that by far the largest direct beneficiary of any such reimbursement by universities would be the government. This is illustrated in Figure 2. Of the total amount reimbursed, more than two thirds would end up in the government’s coffers. The reason is that the lower student loan balances resulting from any reimbursement would reduce the amount of unrepaid student

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* c44

loans the government would need to write off. The share of reimbursements accruing to the government would be slightly higher if only a third of a year's fees were reimbursed, as even fewer student loan borrowers would be affected.

The report does not directly address the issue of who gets repaid in any successful refund and the Government has not made any statement on this. Refunds could i) go to the Government (via the Student Loans Company) and netted off a student's debt, or ii) they could go directly to the student. When thinking about the issue it can be useful to consider the different 'actors' involved:

- *Universities* who would pay the cost of the refunds
- *Students* who would be deemed to have suffered a loss (in any successful refund)
- *The Government* who directly pay fee loans and ultimately make a substantial contribution to the cost of loans
- *Graduates* who repay loans if they earn enough

**If a tuition fee refund were successful:**

- Under i) above universities pay the refund, but *students* do not benefit.<sup>7</sup> The benefit goes to the Government and higher earning *graduates*, as set out in the IFS report. The Government now has fewer/smaller loans to write off. It benefits despite not suffering any loss in the case involved in the refund. Higher earning graduates see the duration of their repayments reduced. Those graduates who do benefit would not see any change in repayments until towards the end of their repayment period, ie. when they are in their late 40s or early 50s. The large majority of graduates would see no benefit at all as they are not expected to repay their loans in full.
- Under ii) above universities pay the refund and students receive the benefit. Here the party who is deemed to have suffered a loss receives (all the) compensation for this loss. However, those students who go on to be the lowest earning graduates, and make no contribution to fees (through loan repayments), would still benefit from this fee refund.

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<sup>7</sup> Other than those who pay their fees upfront

### 3. Covid-19 cases on campus

In August 2020 the University and Colleges Union warned the Government about the impact that the autumn mass migration of students could have on students and communities, and said that this **could turn universities into the care home of the second wave:**

UCU said that the prospect of mass student migration was already challenging enough, but the A-levels fiasco and the removal of the cap on the number of students universities can recruit risked overwhelming some institutions and turning universities into the care homes of a second wave.

UCU said that demanding over a million young people move around the UK to attend university made no sense. The union highlighted there is no functioning track and trace system in place, nor any UK-wide plans to regularly test students or staff. UCU said the push to get students back on campus was being driven by a dangerous desire to get back to business as usual, before it was safe to do so.

UCU said that, rather than allowing universities to reopen precipitously, the government had to step in and underwrite any lost funding for the higher education sector. The union said universities that rely on tuition and accommodation fees feared lost income and the government had to make it clear now that they will not suffer financially for doing the right thing in terms of public health.

The union accepted that there would be challenges switching from blended learning to online, but that the move outweighed the health risks for students and the wider population. UCU added that it was highly likely that reopening campuses would result in local lockdowns and courses being moved online. The union said it was best to make that call now instead of a U-turn that would be too late even by this government's standards.<sup>8</sup>

Outbreaks are very likely in universities, given their size and the degree of close contact typical through shared living arrangements

SAGE, 21 September 2020

The DfE guidance on re-opening campuses acknowledges that the mass movement of students **added a degree of risk of transmitting the virus:**

We recognise that the mass movement of students, and the creation of new households, add a degree of risk, and we expect providers to take all reasonable actions with their students to minimise the risk of transmission.

On 21 September the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) warned that Covid **outbreaks were “very likely in universities”** and that **closing universities would lower transmission rates** – they **recommended that teaching should be online** “unless face-to-face teaching is absolutely essential”.

Outbreaks are very likely in universities, given their size and the degree of close contact typical through shared living arrangements and while socialising and during lectures and practicals. Universities associated with outbreaks of other diseases (e.g. mumps and meningitis) and clear evidence from the US of

<sup>8</sup> University and Colleges Union, [Universities must not become the care homes of a Covid second wave](#), 29 August 2020

transmission of COVID in this setting. Closing universities associated with a ~0.3 (0.2-0.5) reduction in the R number.

Mitigations short of closure should include strong steer towards online learning for all but essential practical activities.<sup>9</sup>

The SAGE advice was discussed in an article in the *Times Higher Education*:

Andrew Hayward, director of the UCL Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, who has attended Sage, told *Times Higher Education* that in towns and cities “which have a high number of students per head of population the impact [of universities] on case numbers could be quite marked and contribute to the need to move the area into local restrictions”.

He added: “There is an argument that if a sector-wide decision had been made before term started to not deliver face-to-face teaching, students could have opted to stay at home and would not be facing the high level of restrictions they are currently facing.”

But with students on campuses, university closures that would require students to return home are no longer a viable option, Professor Hayward said.

“Now that students have returned and there are high levels of transmission, asking students to return home would lead to transmission to their older and more at-risk family members and seed transmission around the country,” he continued.

A Department for Education spokeswoman said: “A number of universities have increased their online teaching in response to local outbreaks. This is in line with government guidance which sets out four tiers of restrictions for education settings, in line with Sage advice.

“We understand this has been a very difficult time for students, which is why we prioritised their education and well-being so young people’s lives are not put on hold.”<sup>10</sup>

### 3.1 What Covid data does the Government collect?

At the start of the academic year universities reported the number of positive cases among their students to the Department for Education and the number self-isolating. This was for cumulative outbreaks of 25 or more students with Covid-19 in order to “...balance the need for accurate information with reducing data burdens on universities.”<sup>11</sup> The system was modified from 19 October.

From the week commencing 19 October 2020, the Office for Students will be gathering data on COVID-19 outbreaks, and we will consider how best to report that information in line with data-sharing protocols.

So far neither the Department for Education nor the Office for Students has published any of this data. Michelle, Donelan, the minister for

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<sup>9</sup> SAGE, [Non-pharmaceutical interventions \(NPIs\) table](#), 21 September 2020

<sup>10</sup> “[UK government was warned campus Covid outbreaks ‘very likely’](#)”, *Times Higher Education*, 13 October 2020

<sup>11</sup> PQ [102702](#) [On Students: Coronavirus] 19 October 2020

universities, quoted some figures on university outbreaks in oral questions on 12 October. She said:<sup>12</sup>

Around 9,000 students currently have covid. This is the data that has been sent to us by universities. It is the cumulative number of cases over the past seven days and is based on a student population of about 2 million. Public Health England informs us that 68 universities have outbreaks. We will go back to those universities to ascertain that data and, as of next week, working with the Office for Students, there will be a new data regime, which will be much more transparent.

### Other sources of data on outbreaks at universities

The Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) maintains a [Covid-19 case dashboard](#) which lists reported cases at universities and colleges across the UK. As of 24 November **49,833 cases had been reported among staff and students** since the beginning of term; **47,528 of which were in higher education institutions**. These figures only include institutions which report/publish information on cases so will be an underestimate of the true level. The dashboard lists institutions which do not publish figures. The site also gives a timeline of reported cases for each institution.

Among those universities reporting data **the highest number of cases** (as reported on the website by 24 November) **were Newcastle University with 2,441, Bristol (2,232), Nottingham (2,198), Manchester (2,165) and Durham (1,864)**. Comparisons between universities should only be made with caution as they can vary greatly by size, where their students live compared to the institution itself and each other, when their latest statistics are for and their testing regime (ie. do they test asymptomatic students). Durham had the highest case rate (cumulative cases as a percentage of students and staff) at 8.0% followed by Newcastle at 7.3%.

[UniCovid UK](#) is a website which reports Covid-19 outbreaks at UK universities. As of 23 November their [downloadable spreadsheet](#) reported **43,609 positive cases among students since the start of term and 1,703 among staff**. Again the data do not include all universities. The spreadsheet also includes links to individual university Covid dashboards. The authors have also [modelled estimates of Covid-positive students at each university](#) before the start of term, on arrival at university and a current cumulative total. These results are subject to a large degree of uncertainty (put at +/- 40-50%). The central estimates are around **10,700** before the start of term, **13,100** on arrival and **54,700** on 10 November.

These figures give an indication of the total number of cases and how reported cases vary between universities. They are incomplete and, as has been stated earlier, a reflection of university testing regimes and other institution-specific factors as well as the underlying real levels of Covid-19. Proxy measures of 'students' can help give a wider perspective on the number of infected students and how this has changed since the return to campus. The next section looks at age of

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<sup>12</sup> [Online learning: Universities and Covid-19](#) 12 October 2020

people with Covid-19 in some detail and gives some links to resources which look at location of cases.

## Proxy measures for the student population

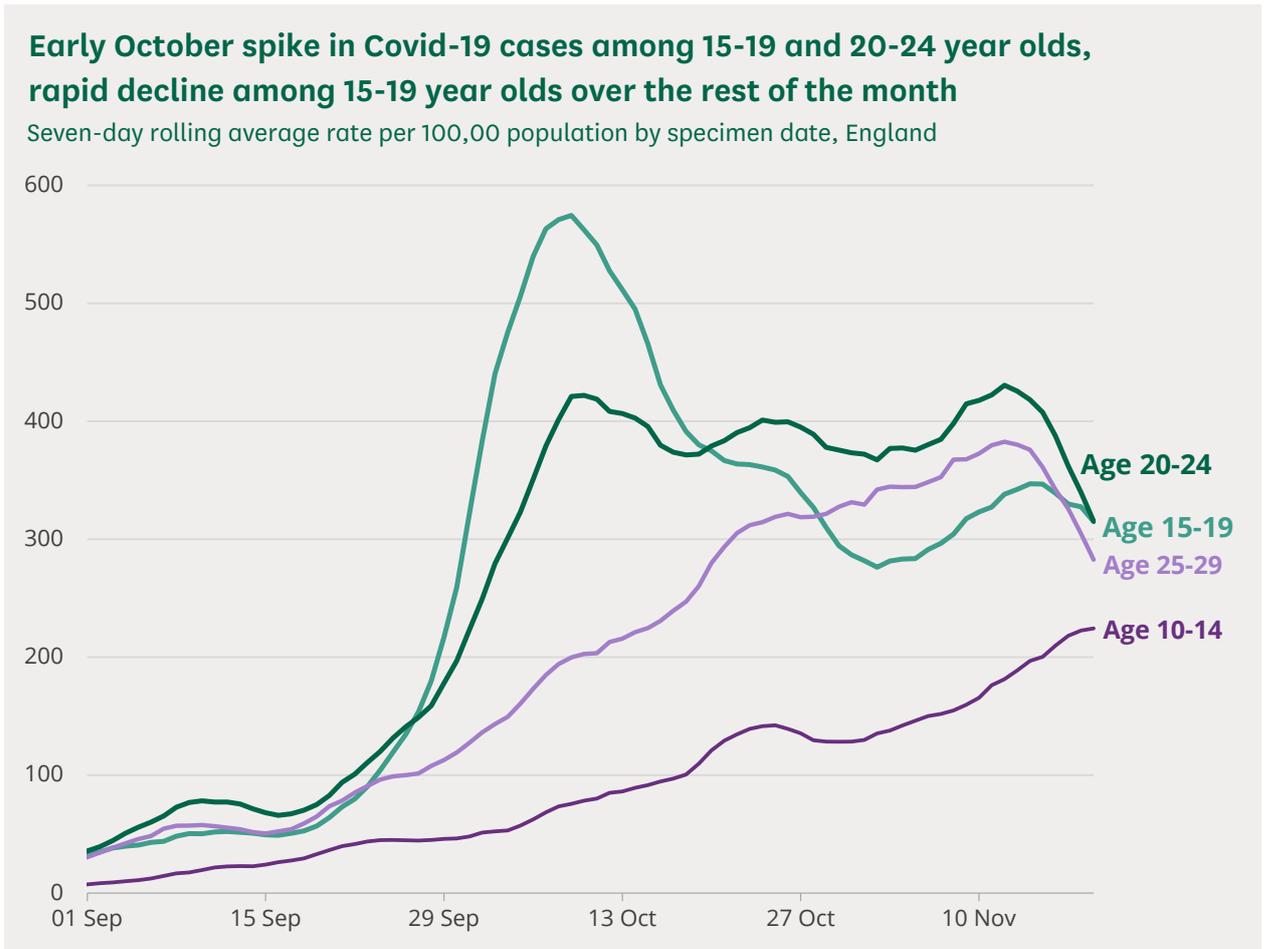
### Age

Public Health England (PHE) publishes daily numbers on [new Covid-19 cases by five-year age bands](#). The most relevant age groups for university students are 15-19 and 20-24 years. Clearly these 'student age bands' include all young people not just (higher education) students. This means any patterns will also reflect influences other than the return to campus. Age bands for those aged over 25 will also include substantial number of students, but as around 60% of all university students are aged under 25<sup>13</sup> the younger 'student age bands' looked at here (15-19 and 20-24) have a higher concentration of students, especially those who live away from home.

The following chart looks at trends in new cases for the student age groups and those either side for comparison. The rate of new cases was below 100 per 100,000 for both the 15-19 and 20-24 year old groups in mid-September. It increased rapidly soon after the start of the academic year in England. **The rate in the 15-19 group peaked at 575 per 100,000 in early/mid October before falling back to below 300 per 100,000 by the end of the month.** It has since started to increase again. **The rate for the 20-24 age group peaked at the same point in October at almost 430 per 100,000.** However, it has not fallen consistently since then and has remained around the 400 per 100,000 level.

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<sup>13</sup> [Who's studying in HE? -Personal characteristics](#), HESA



The pattern in both the 10-14 and 25-29 age groups was different. Numbers increased much more gradually during September, October and early November. **This supports the argument that cases among students increased rapidly after the return to campus.** However, if this was the case it could be affected by several different factors including higher levels of testing by universities, particularly of people without symptoms, as well as underlying increases due to mixing with a wide range of other people on campus and in student accommodation.

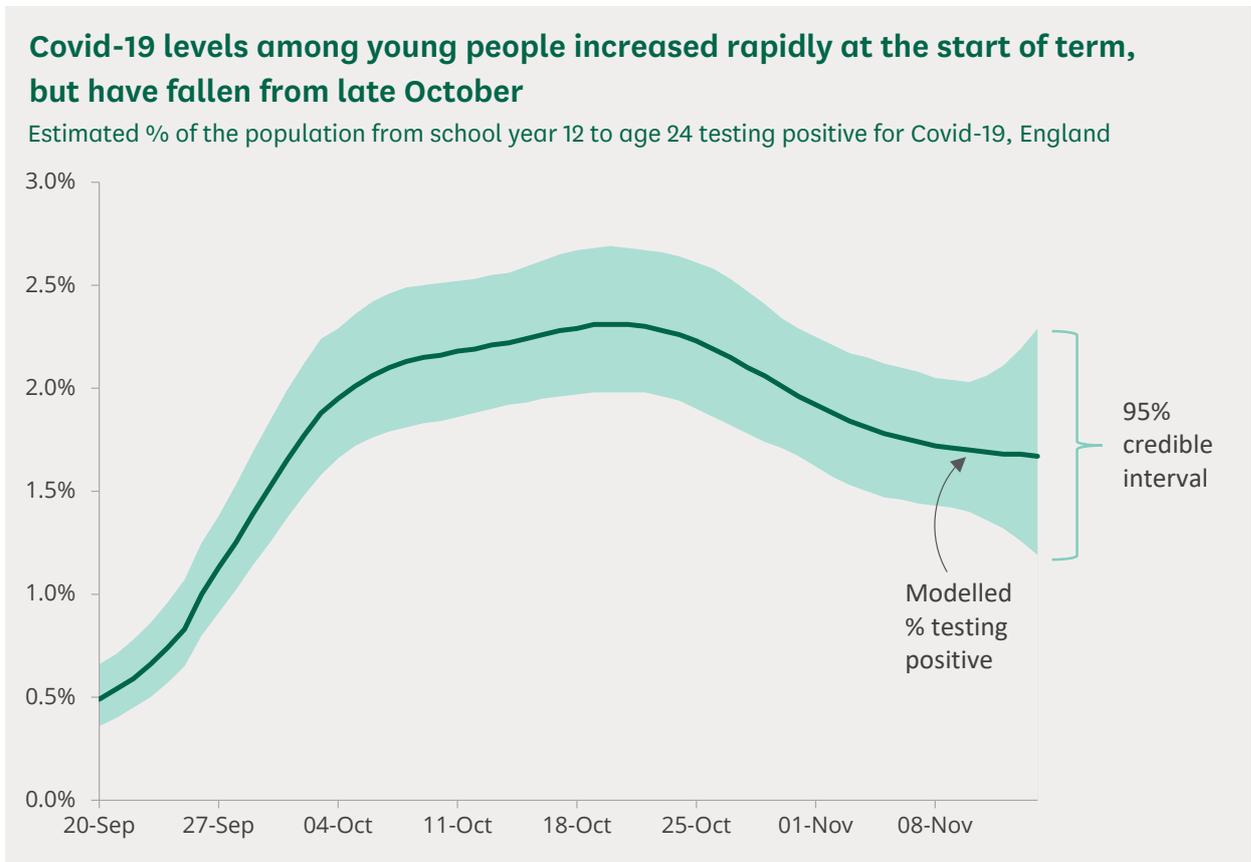
The Office for National Statistics publishes results of its [infection survey](#) every week. This survey covers the whole of the UK and survey participants have a test for Covid-19 every fortnight to estimate the overall levels of infection. The advantage of this survey is that it is not dependent on people having symptoms and being able to get a test. Participants are tested every two weeks whether they have symptoms or not. Testing of asymptomatic individuals is particularly important for younger age groups. The survey current involves around 15,000 swab tests a day and includes almost 200,000 individuals who have had a first swab and agreed to continue.

The age groups used to present the results are different from the case data presented earlier. Young people are categorised under broad education phases:

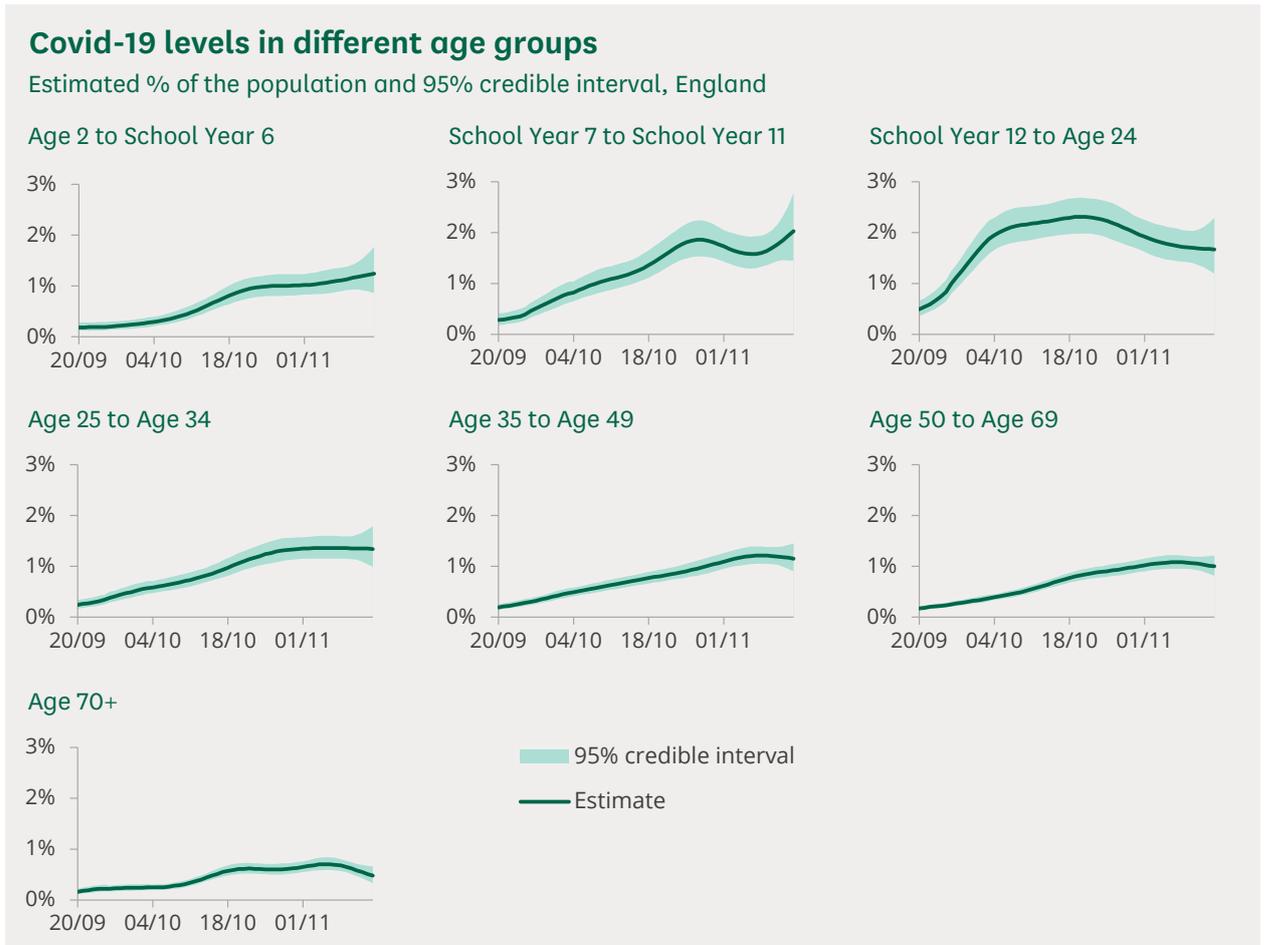
- Age 2 to school year 6 (early years and primary school age)
- School years 7 to 11 (secondary school age)
- School year 12 to age 24 (those of sixth form age and young adults who may be in further or higher education)

It is a sample survey of the overall population and results are subject to a degree of uncertainty. This is quantified in the '95% credible interval' -the range within which there is a 95% probability that the true value lies. This interval is wider for more recent days as the sample size is smaller.

The chart below gives estimated Covid-19 levels for the school year 12 to age 24 group from mid-September to mid- November. As with the PHE data on '**student age bands**' it shows a **rapid increase up to early/mid-October. After then it continues to increase, but at a much slower rate before reaching about 2.3% in late October.** At the time this was around **double the rate for the population as a whole**. Since then the rate among those in this age group has fallen to around 1.7% (credible interval 1.2-2.3%).



Most other age groups have either seen rates increasing or levelling off at best. Where rates have fallen in other age groups this was after the fall started for the school year 12 to age 24 group. The central estimate for the 'student age group' is **still above that for the population as a whole** (1.25%).



### Location

An alternative way of analysing the link between students and Covid-19 is to look at geographical data on (very small) areas. Comparing the concentration of students in these areas with Covid-19 rates can help understand the link better and particularly highlight those areas where it is particularly strong.

The table on the following page shows small areas (Middle Level Super Output Areas: MSOAs) in England where more than 20% of the population was students at the time of the 2011 Census. The sixty of these 'student MSOAs' with the highest number of positive tests for Covid-19 in the eight weeks between 8<sup>th</sup> September and 3<sup>rd</sup> November are ranked in the table.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in the UK](#), Public Health England

## COVID-19 positive tests in student MSOAs between 9th September and 3rd November, England

Data for areas where at least 20% of the population were students at the 2011 census. Data is suppressed in weeks where there are fewer than 3 positive tests in an MSOA, meaning that the true number for each area may be slightly higher

Local authority	MSOA name	Minimum number of cases	Local authority	MSOA name	Minimum number of cases
County Durham	Durham City	2,091	Leeds	Headingley	607
Newcastle upon Tyne	Shieldfield & Heaton Park	1,859	Sheffield	Broomhall	593
Manchester	Fallowfield Central	1,686	Birmingham	Edgbaston South & University	593
Nottingham	Arboretum, Forest & Trent University	1,572	Liverpool	Edge Hill	589
Newcastle upon Tyne	City Centre & Arthur's Hill	1,571	Birmingham	North Central & Dartmouth Circus	572
Leeds	Hyde Park Corner & Woodhouse Cliff	1,523	Newcastle upon Tyne	Nunsmoor	568
Nottingham	Lenton & Dunkirk	1,189	Bradford	Shearbridge & University	560
Birmingham	Selly Oak	1,140	Manchester	Piccadilly & Ancoats	556
Nottingham	University Park, Lenton Abbey & Jubilee Campus	1,130	Manchester	Victoria Park	556
Manchester	Ladybarn	1,125	Sheffield	Sharrow	555
Liverpool	Central & Islington	1,073	Manchester	Ardwick	535
Nottingham	The Park & Castle	1,063	Portsmouth	Fratton West & Portsea	534
Leeds	Hyde Park	1,015	Charnwood	Loughborough - University	529
Nottingham	Radford	999	Sheffield	Broomhill & Lower Crookesmoor	529
Nottingham	St Ann's West	921	Nottingham	City Centre & Trent Bridge	509
Leeds	University & Little Woodhouse	915	West Lancashire	Ormskirk Town & East	506
Bristol	Bristol City Centre	914	Bath & North East Somerset	Widcombe, Bathwick Hill & Claverton Down	503
Manchester	Hulme & University	870	Coventry	Cannon Park & University	499
Manchester	Rusholme East	847	Manchester	Rusholme West & Moss Side East	487
Newcastle upon Tyne	North Jesmond	779	Liverpool	Wavertree Penny Lane	483
Charnwood	Loughborough Storer & Queen's Park	760	Exeter	Pennsylvania & University	481
Manchester	University North & Whitworth Street	735	Brighton and Hove	Coldean & Moulsecoomb North	472
Salford	Salford Central & University	728	South Gloucestershire	Frenchay & Great Stoke	472
Newcastle upon Tyne	South Jesmond & Sandyford	721	Bristol	Stoke Bishop	464
York	Fulford, Heslington & University	712	Lancaster	University, Galgate & Dolphinholme	449
Liverpool	Wavertree South	702	Sheffield	Devonshire Quarter	426
Leeds	Leeds City Centre	687	Manchester	Withington North & Old Moat	386
Sheffield	Highfield & Lowfield	677	Leeds	Far Headingley & Weetwood	375
Leeds	Woodhouse & Little London	662	Bristol	Cotham	365
Sheffield	Endcliffe & Ranmoor	638	Sheffield	Springvale & Steel Bank	356

Data for small areas is not broken down by age group, but data for local authorities is. Over the period between 8<sup>th</sup> September and 3<sup>rd</sup> November there were **153,784 positive Covid-19 tests among people aged 15-24** in England – just under one quarter of all cases in England in this eight week period. **This amounts to 2,338 cases per 100,000 population compared with 997 cases per 100,000 in the rest of the population.**

There were nine local authorities where the infection rate among age 15-24 over this period was **over five times higher than in the rest of the population**: Exeter, Bath and North East Somerset, Portsmouth, Nottingham, Brighton and Hove, Newcastle upon Tyne, Oxford, Chichester and York. There were a further nine areas where the 15-24 rate was over four times higher than the rest of the population, including other university areas such as Lincoln, Warwick, Cambridge, Charnwood and Norwich.

By contrast, some local authorities with high rates among ages 15-24 also had high rates among the general population during this period – e.g. Liverpool, Manchester, and Leeds. While these areas still had proportionally more infections among ages 15-24 than the rest of the population, the ratios were lower than in the areas mentioned above.<sup>15</sup>

It's important to remember that the number of positive tests may vary based on the testing regimes in place at different universities, and not just the underlying infection rate.

Wonkhe publish a regularly updated [Covid-19 data dashboard](#) which looks at Middle Level Super Output Area (MSOA) data on Covid-19 test results and the number of students. MSOAs have an average population of just over 7,000 people. The analysis compares Covid-19 rates and the number of students who had a term time address in the area in 2018-19. Results are presented for MSOAs within individual local authorities and nationally.

The results show a mixed picture at a national level. In the most recent analysis<sup>16</sup> there are **many areas with large numbers of students and high numbers of new cases**. These include Durham City, Bristol City Centre, Loughborough University, Selly Oak and Central & West Cambridge. There are also MSOAs **with lots of students but relatively few new cases**, including Oxford Central, Liverpool -Central & Islington, Coventry Cannon Park & University, Norwich -University & Avenues and some of the Newcastle MSOAs. Similarly, some areas have very few students and high numbers of Covid-19 cases. This type of analysis is probably more useful for identifying new cases and outbreaks for particular areas rather than giving a national picture.

On 16 November Public Health England changed the way they record the location of people testing positive for Covid-19 to prioritise the address given at the point of testing, rather than the address registered

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<sup>15</sup> [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in the UK](#), Public Health England

<sup>16</sup> Updated 19 November 2020

with their current GP.<sup>17</sup> This change would have particularly affected students who do not always register with a GP at university.

While there is plenty of evidence that cases of Covid-19 among students saw a rapid increase soon after the start of term, there is also evidence that cases have fallen from the end of October. Whether, and to what extent, this increase contributed to the second wave of Covid-19 across the population is unclear. Cases increased faster in the 'student age bands' and are still at higher levels than average. However, there are many different factors other than the return to campus which could have contributed to the increase in this age group and across the wider population. [A recent article on the Wonkhe website](#) looked at the complexities around the issue. It suggested that **students were not to blame for the second wave of Covid-19 and suggested that "...the early student peaks offered an early warning of the wider second wave."**

### 3.2 Students and Covid-19 testing

Some HE providers such as the University of Cambridge are routinely testing students for Covid-19:

The University of Cambridge will offer weekly coronavirus tests to students, even if they have no symptoms.

Routine screening will be provided for about 16,000 people who live in college-owned accommodation, when term begins on 8 October.

It said the voluntary testing programme would help stop the spread of Covid-19 by people unaware they were infected.

Vice-Chancellor Prof Stephen Toope hoped an "overwhelming majority" of students would want to take part.

The university said it was focussing on those in shared accommodation, where the density of students was higher.<sup>18</sup>

Other universities, including: Leicester, University of East Anglia and UCL are also offering coronavirus testing to students.

The government aims to establish mass testing of as many students as possible before they travel home for Christmas.

On 7 November the universities minister sent a letter to vice chancellors saying that there would be a **pre-end-of-term mass testing** period **for students running between 30 November and 6 December**.<sup>19</sup>

An article on the *BBC News* website, [Two Covid tests for students in England before quick Christmas exit](#), 23 November said that the government would urge all students to take **two Covid tests three days apart** to cut the risk of spreading infection when they travelled home for Christmas:

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<sup>17</sup> [Geographical allocation of positive COVID-19 cases](#), Public Health England 16 November 2020

<sup>18</sup> ["Cambridge University to offer weekly Covid tests to students"](#), *BBC News*, 9 September 2020

<sup>19</sup> ["Mass Covid testing imminent at English universities"](#), *Research Professional News*, 10 November 2020

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These are lateral flow tests with rapid results - with those testing negative expected to leave university within the following 24 hours, according to the latest guidelines seen by the BBC.

The pre-Christmas testing will start in many universities early next week.

But testing will remain voluntary - and not all universities will offer tests.

The National Union of Students said there should be capacity for all students who wanted a test to get one before Christmas.

The letter, from the Minister promised a fast turnaround for tests and "results within an hour". Students who test positive will have to take another test and, if found to be infectious, will have to stay in isolation.

### 3.3 Students and self isolation

The DfE has published guidance for providers on students self-isolating in educational settings, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance on isolation for residential educational settings](#), 9 November 2020. The guidance states that students who living in halls of residence or houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) who develop symptoms of coronavirus should **self-isolate in their current accommodation** and universities and colleges should facilitate this.

The Office for Students and Universities UK have also published guidance:

- [OfS student panel outlines priority areas for supporting students in self-isolation](#)
- [Universities UK publishes advice on students self-isolating](#)

Students in an area with local coronavirus restrictions must comply with those restrictions and this could include **requiring students to remain in their accommodation and not to return to their family home:**

#### **Support for students self isolating**

The DfE guidance for providers on self-isolating states that institutions should "ensure that self-isolating students have food and medicines that they need".

Institutions and building managers of private halls will need to design procedures with their staff to ensure that self-isolating students can receive the food and medicines they need for the duration of their isolation.

## 4. Students returning home at Christmas

On 11 November the Government published guidance for students on travelling home at the end of term - [Student movement and plans for the end of term Updated 11 November 2020](#). A press release, [guidance for students to travel home at the end of the term while controlling Covid-19 transmission risk](#) gave an overview of the guidance's proposals which included a **travel window** and **moving to online learning by 9 December**:

In order to travel home safely, students in England will be required to follow the current national restrictions in place until 2 December, completing this four-week period in their term-time accommodation.

**From 3 December to 9 December**, which will be known as the '**student travel window**', students will be allowed to travel home on **staggered departure dates set by universities**, who will work with other institutions in the region to manage pressure on transport infrastructure.

The student travel window will mean students can travel having just completed the four-week period of national restrictions, reducing the risk of transmission to family and friends at home.

**Universities should move learning online by 9 December** so students can continue their education while also having the option to return home to study from there.

As announced by the Prime Minister this week, the Government will also work closely with universities to **establish mass testing capacity**. Tests will be offered to as many students as possible before they travel home for Christmas, with universities in areas of high prevalence prioritised. This will provide further reassurance that where students test negative, they can return home safely and minimise the risk of passing coronavirus on to their loved ones.

If a student tests positive before their departure they will need to remain in self-isolation for the required period of ten days. Moving all learning online by 9 December gives enough time for students to complete the isolation period and return home for Christmas.

The guidance delivers on the Government's pledge to ensure students can be with their families at Christmas while limiting transmission of the virus.

[Universities UK made the following response](#) to the guidance:

"University students and staff will appreciate confirmation of the government's end-of-term plans for English universities, given the prolonged uncertainty they have faced this year.

"With universities being asked to end in-person learning by 9 December, some students will now miss out on timetabled placements, practical classes and other in-person teaching near the end of term. Universities will need to work with students and government to manage the challenges this creates.

"The government must now urgently turn its attention to working with the sector on plans to ensure students can safely resume

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their studies in person in January, supported by enhanced testing capability."

The University and College Union, said it was not yet clear whether all universities would take part in the testing programme or how many students would be included and said that "there are huge hurdles to overcome to manage this process,"<sup>20</sup>

On 24 November the [guidance](#) was updated to include information for healthcare students and others on placements. It said:

In line with face-to-face teaching provision moving online by 9 December, providers should reschedule and rearrange placements or simulation work due to take place between 9 December and the end of term, to ensure that students who wish to return home during the travel window are able to do so.

We recognise there are limited circumstances in which some placements may need to continue beyond 9 December, see the [exemptions](#) section for more information.

However, all students should be able to return home during the student travel window between 3 and 9 December, if they choose to do so (as long as they are not required to self-isolate). This includes all students on placements (including those listed in the [exemptions](#) section), in these circumstances, providers should work with these students to rearrange the placements where possible.

The exemptions for critical workers includes those on operationally essential healthcare placements and initial teacher training.

The Office for Students has published a [series of FAQs](#) on end of term 2020 arrangements for England.

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<sup>20</sup> "[Student Covid tests for Christmas holiday from 30 November.](#)" *BBC News*, 10 November 2020

## 5. Further education

Further education providers fully opened to all students in September 2020 – this included all young people with special educational needs (SEND), with or without education, health and care (EHC) plans. Some face-to-face teaching had been delivered to some student groups in the summer term but not to adult learners.

The Department for Education has published guidance for further education and skills providers in England on access to education in a document, [Further education \(FE\) operational guidance, Updated 12 November 2020](#).

This guidance sets out what providers in England need to know so that students of all ages can benefit from their education and training in full; it states that it is **important that students attend courses**:

### What we expect of FE providers

We expect you to continue delivery so that students of all ages can benefit from their education and training in full. This means we expect you to:

- fully deliver planned hours for students of all ages from your normal term start date in autumn 2020, including those with SEND (with or without an EHC plan)
- ensure that on-site delivery continues, unless further restrictions are implemented in your area, recognising that this may be supplemented by high quality remote delivery where that is effective existing practice
- assess the gaps in students' knowledge and skills early in the autumn term and focus on addressing the significant gaps to help them to catch up
- put in place additional support for vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, including identifying whether they need support to access any remote delivery
- identify and put in place plans to manage any safeguarding concerns

The guidance states that the majority of learning hours for all 16 to 19-year olds **should be delivered on-site** unless there are exceptional circumstances. Vulnerable learners should also attend unless the following circumstances apply:

You should remind students that they must attend unless they:

- are ill
- are self-isolating, including if self-isolating due to a household member having a suspected or confirmed case
- have been advised not to attend by their local health protection team or NHS Test and Trace

It remains very important for children and young people to attend, to support their wellbeing and education. Nationally education settings have been prioritised to remain open for on-site provision ahead of other parts of the economy. This reflects the importance of young people's education

DfE guidance,  
November 2020

## Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) guidance

The [SAGE guidance](#) in September 2020 stated that opening further education providers presented a moderate risk of transmitting Covid-19 to some vulnerable groups:

**Moderate impact** (moderate confidence). Less data than from schools, though students are older and thus more likely to be infectious. Cryptic transmission from asymptomatic individuals likely.

FE is highly networked linking households, FE setting and workplaces, but this tends to be local.

### **Direct impact on COVID deaths and severe disease**

Impact primarily through reduction in transmission. However, FE workforce somewhat older and more high risk, and a greater fraction of students are BAME and live at home. Therefore there is the potential for transmission in FE to lead to infection of higher risk individuals.

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