Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Guidance
Further education: new national restrictions guidance

Updated 5 November 2020

Read this guidance to find out how the new national restrictions affect the Higher Education (HE) sector. It should be read in conjunction with Reopening buildings and workplaces, which sets out how HE providers can minimise risks during coronavirus (COVID-19).

Stay at home

Under the new national restrictions from 5 November, the government will be asking people to stay at home. The only reasons for which people in England in tier 3 areas should leave their homes are those listed in tier 3 areas, and those between 5 November and 2 December. We are asking students to remain at their term time address during this period, and should only return home if essential activities are also in tier 3 areas. Students should be able to continue to access educational facilities, and to present the increased risk of spreading coronavirus (COVID-19) from students returning home, and from students in tier 3 areas. This is consistent with the guidance that students should consider between their permanent home and student home during term time, or if they are staying in temporary accommodation, to return to their student home.

As is the case for the rest of the population, students may only leave home for specific reasons, including:

- for education
- for work, for example if you cannot work from home
- for vaccination and recreation outdoors, with your household, or on your own with one other household (maximum six people)
- for medical reasons or appointments
- to escape injury or harm (including mental health crises)
- to shop for food and essentials
- to provide care for vulnerable people, or as a volunteer

The national restrictions are in place for 4 weeks, and students further guidance shortly on how students can return home safely at the end of term.

A number of students returning home will be travelling by public transport. For some providers, "commute students" represent a significant proportion of the student population. Providers will need to make sure that students can travel home and return safely and that they have taken into account all of public health guidance on safer travel, so that they and their fellow passengers stay as safe as possible.

Student and staff safety

Student learning can continue as planned within the national restrictions and in line with government guidance. Providers should follow the latest HE guidance on reopening buildings and workplaces in higher education. It ensures that teaching and learning is provided in COVID-secure environments, and we have not seen evidence of transmission in these environments to be significant.

Providers will work to undertake risk assessments for the remainder of the academic year, and to implement the mitigations recommended in them. However, the government has made it clear that providers should prioritise face-to-face teaching, including for the mental health and wellbeing of students, and respects this to continue where it can be done safely.

Providers are autonomous institutions. They will make informed decisions (in consultation with their students and staff) about how to deliver teaching and how and where learning should take place in order to ensure, based on the latest public health guidance, taking account of the need to minimise risk to staff and students.

Practical learning will comprise a varying proportion of different courses, depending on the nature of the course. It is for providers to judge whether and to what extent, and where, practical learning can take place safely, in accordance with the latest guidance. This will include consideration of ventilation, hygiene, social distancing, and other measures, including how to adhere to other the provision of a COVID-secure environment.

Existing guidance on reopening buildings and workplaces in higher education requires providers to complete a risk assessment before welcoming students back to campus. This should be a comprehensive review covering the outcomes of risk assessments, the measures they have taken to ensure there to be kept under review and up to date.

Some people with particular characteristics may be at comparatively increased risk from coronavirus (COVID-19), as set out in the COVID-19: review of disparities in risks and outcomes. Providers should be encouraged and speak to people to discuss the measures the provider is putting in place to reduce the risks. Providers should try as far as practically possible to accommodate relevant additional measures.

Face coverings

We have previously confirmed that face coverings should be worn as an additional risk mitigation measure by students, staff and visitors, where social distancing is difficult to maintain or other COVID-secure measures are not in place or continued use. Additionally, for the period of the national restrictions, we have made it clear that we expect face coverings to be worn in communal areas, including the corridors and other shared spaces in student accommodation. Some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings, and we expect staff and students to be sensitive to these needs.

Online and in person tuition

Universities should continue to agree with their local public health teams on the appropriate balance of online and in person teaching, based on the overall risk assessment for their institution, taking into account the health of students and the duty of care they owe to them.

A great deal of work has been, and continues to be, undertaken by providers to ensure the learning environment is COVID-secure, and we have made it clear that teaching to continue under the new restrictions where providers are able to do so in a COVID-secure way.

The government has been clear throughout the pandemic that providers must continue the quality of their teaching, and that students should not be disadvantaged in their learning. Many students to comply with migration conditions, including those from outside the UK, will need to be in receipt of a sponsorship, a high quality academic programme, and to be supported, and achieve course outcomes, and standards are protected.

The HE regulator, the Office for Students (OfS) is taking very seriously the potential impacts on teaching and learning. On 9 October, the OfS published its expectations of providers in relation to the quality of their teaching and learning. It is actively monitoring those providers which have raised provision predominantly online due to local coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, to ensure they are maintaining the quality of their provision. The OfS will investigate if it has any concerns.

Socialising

Everyone, including students, must follow guidance for the Rule of Six, including students living in shared accommodation. Students should be encouraged to adapt the rule and implement contact bubbles as much as possible. This means that you must meet socially indoors with family or friends unless they are part of your household: meaning the people you live with, or your support bubble.

A household in tails of residence is normally considered to be those students living in the same flat or in the same house, who share a kitchen and/or bathroom, rather than an entire block. Accommodation providers should make clear which households are in place, and students should be encouraged to adhere to rule.

A support bubble is a close support network between a household with only one adult in the home (known as a single-adult household), and one other household of any size. Households in that support bubble can still meet socially indoors, and can stay overnight in each other's homes. Students living in single-adult households can join a household of transient students to form a support bubble if tails of residence or private accommodation.

You can exercise, or visit outdoor public places, with the people you live with, your support bubble, or one person from another household.

Outdoor public places include:

- parks, beaches, countryside
- public gardens (whether or not you pay to enter them)
- allotments
- playgrounds

In line with national guidance you cannot meet in a private garden.

Catered halls

Catering services for catered halls can continue to provide that service, where there are no alternative facilities available to students; for example, where a student does not have access to a kitchen or cooking facilities. Providers offering catering outlets on campus would need to follow the relevant guidance, and you should take your food home to the place where you live to consume it.

Financial hardship

Students experiencing financial hardship as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19) should contact their student finance providers. Many student finance providers have changed their they should contact the Student Loans Company as they may be eligible for a crisis payment. Many universities or colleges are also specific funds, bursaries and scholarships available, including specifically for care leavers.

Wellbeing support for students and staff

Protecting students' mental health and wellbeing must remain a priority. We recognise that many students are facing additional mental health challenges and we expect providers to continue to support their students, including through counselling services, and to provide a comprehensive student offer that encourages students to take ownership of their provider's student support and wellbeing offer, and to ensure they are likely to continue to be an important source of support.

Staying at home for a prolonged period can be difficult, particularly if there is a lack of access to a garden or other outdoor space. Providers should encourage students to take ownership of their mental health and wellbeing, and to encourage students to keep in touch with family and friends over the phone and on social media. Students should be encouraged to take ownership of their wellbeing and to engage with other students and staff through the university and student union.

We recognise that many students and staff are facing additional mental health challenges and are expected to discharge their duty of care to students and staff. Universities should be encouraged to support students and staff in their mental health in the new lockdown, using the Student Minds mental health resources, Public Health England, along with the Student Minds mental health charity, Mind, and other mental health organisations. Universities are autonomous institutions, independent from government, and have responsibility to students when delivering services, including the provision of pastoral support, and taking steps to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of students.

Clinically extremely vulnerable students and staff

Those students whose doctors have confirmed they are clinically extremely vulnerable are advised to shield and to attend school and other educational settings are in place. Universities will need to make appropriate arrangements to enable students who are clinically extremely vulnerable to continue their studies. Students who live with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable, but who are not clinically extremely vulnerable themselves, should follow the guidance.

Staff

These individuals who are clinically extremely vulnerable are advised to work from home and not to go into work. Individuals in this group will have been contacted by the NHS and told to shield. If they have not been contacted, they are advised to shield in the light of their clinical vulnerability. If they do not believe they will be supported, including to work from home where possible, during the period of national restriction, they should contact their university or college immediately, including those living in a household with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable.

Clinically vulnerable people

People who are clinically vulnerable or have underlying health conditions, but not clinically extremely vulnerable, may continue to attend education and childcare settings in line with current guidance.

Support for students with symptoms or self-isolating

Students should contact their student support services if they are required to self-isolate, coronavirus and be able to provide pastoral and mental health support to ensure that students are properly cared for. Both universities and accommodation providers have a duty of care to students, and it is in their interests to agree the best course of action for the benefit of all students.

We have written to universities asking them to ensure that self-isolating students have a range of services available to them, and that they are essential supplies. This includes providing food to those who need it and ensuring students who are self-isolating have access to leave the accommodation where they are able to do so safely.

HE providers are responsible for ensuring their students are safe and well looked after during their self-isolation. Universities should consider their isolation for residential educational settings.

Universities UK has also published a checklist to guide universities supporting students who are self-isolating. This builds on previous, for universities to consider how they can provide support to students who are self-isolating, including the active management of their academic, pastoral, financial, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

Institutions and student providers 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. This is especially important for disabled students.

Libraries and study spaces

Libraries and study spaces on campus should remain open to students and staff, for educational purposes, and must continue to maintain COVID-secure arrangements.

Staff and students must maintain social distancing, wear a face covering, and adhere to the increased hygiene measures, such as hand washing, and using hand sanitiser and disinfecting surfaces and equipment. Students should not meet out the study spaces independently and should not congregate in study spaces, unless as part of an in-person, scheduled seminar or tutorial.

Research

Researchers and research students will be able to continue in-person research in the laboratory or research work cannot reasonably be conducted from home.

However, where it is possible, research should be carried out at home, or without gathering with others, and where it is necessary to attend in-person research activity requiring gathering with others should be paused for the duration of the national restrictions. Research students should be encouraged and the participation is maintained, but it is not mandatory. It is also recommended that work with research participants is rescheduled until after the period of national restrictions.

Tuition fee refunds

Whether or not an individual student is entitled to a refund of fees will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between the provider and student.

We expect providers to ensure that they continue to deliver courses which students have paid for, and students should not be charged for courses or internships which to change maximum fees, we expect the quality, quantity and accessibility of provision to be maintained.

If students have concerns, they should first raise their concerns with their university. If their concerns remain unresolved, students of providers in England can contact the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education to consider their complaint.

International students

If an international student chooses to return home, ultimately it is for them to make a decision based on their circumstances. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advice is that UK is unsafe for non-essential travel. Students should not travel if they have symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) or are part of a household group with a self-isolating.

International students should be mindful that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advice against non-essential travel and overseas travel. Students should be aware that travel restrictions and requirements vary by country they are travelling to, and that they may need to quarantine for a period of self-isolation in their country.

International students from countries not on the exemption travel corridor list will need to self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days.

Universities UK has also produced guidance for HE providers on how to prepare for and care for students who are required to self-isolate on arrival in the UK. It includes information on how to provide pastoral and practical support to support their international and other students arriving from overseas.

Sports facilities

Where providers have their own gym and leisure facilities these should be kept open with the same COVID-secure measures in place as other facilities.

If sporting activity is part of an education course, students will be able to continue this activity, if COVID-secure, and should continue to be scheduled in person learning hours. This may include access to a sports performance facility, including a gym, if it is in that context, provided it is COVID-secure. Elite sport and sports equipment theory-based between such use by different groups of students.

Students on programmes designed for elite sports (for example, athletes on elite development pathways) will still be able to continue their sporting activities. Providers should refer to the guidance on returning to training for elite sport.

Performing arts

We recognise that providers are already doing a lot of work to ensure that performing arts provision can be delivered safely. Performing arts courses, in normal circumstances, may involve a considerable amount of practical face-to-face teaching and assessment.

Some providers have found alternative methods that have been undertaken. Has been undertaken by providers, including the use of socially distanced rehearsals that adhere to guidance on social distancing, but still allow students to receive high-quality academic experience in a way that protects both students and staff.

Activities can be undertaken in line with this and other guidance, in particular guidance for the performing arts industry, including for amateur and professionals and non-professionals on the Office for safety during coronavirus (COVID-19) performing arts. DCMS commissioned further scientific studies to inform the government's understanding of the risks and to inform the recommendation of these additional mitigations. However, these studies have also indicated that it is the consultation serious transmission from both those performing in, and attending events that take place in, venues (ie. DCMS is continuing to develop a more detailed understanding of how to mitigate this transmission risk, and will, in that context, consider whether the current guidance set out here.

If face to face teaching or group sessions are required, particular effort should be made to maintain social distancing (2 metres) as far as is practicable. If this is not possible, provided steps are taken to otherwise mitigate the potential for transmission).