Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

Higher education: new national restrictions guidance

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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 campuses, 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 requiring everyone to stay at their current home, except for specific purposes. This means students should not leave their term-time address to return home between 5 November and 2 December. We are asking students to remain at university and not to travel home before Thursday 5 November, to allow all students who are able to, to benefit from face-to-face teaching and COVID-secure educational facilities, and to prevent the increased risk of spreading coronavirus (COVID-19). We all have a responsibility, and all our actions affect the lives of others. This is in keeping with the current restrictions on moving between their permanent home and student home during term time, on a

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permanent or temporary basis, subject to limited exemptions set out in law.

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 exercise and recreation outdoors, with your household, or on your own with one person from another household
- 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 for 4 weeks. We will publish further guidance shortly on how students can return home safely at the end of term.

A number of students commute from their family home to a HE provider. For some providers, “commuter students” represent a significant proportion of the student body. Such students can still travel to their HE provider for educational purposes but should make sure that they take account of all 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 while the national restrictions are in place. Universities have worked hard to put in place measures, following guidance on reopening buildings and campuses in higher education to ensure that teaching and learning is provided in COVID-secure environments, and we have not seen evidence of increased transmission within these environments.

Providers will wish to undertake new risk assessments for the remainder of the term to evaluate whether it is appropriate to move more learning online. However, the government recognises the central importance of face-to-face teaching, including for the mental health and wellbeing of students, and expects this to continue where it can be done safely.

Providers are autonomous institutions. They will make informed decisions (in consultation with their local public health team) on the right blend of face-to-face and online teaching that is suitable for each course, 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 will be for providers to judge whether extra mural studies, and placements, can take place now, or should be deferred until a later date. This decision will depend on the cooperation of businesses and other settings, and will require providers to liaise with them over the provision of a COVID-secure environment.

Existing guidance on reopening buildings and campuses in higher education required universities to complete a risk assessment before welcoming students and staff back to their sites. We encourage transparency by sharing the outcomes of these assessments with staff for discussion. We also expect these 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 report. Individuals with concerns should speak to providers 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 advised that face coverings should be worn as an additional risk mitigation measure by students, staff and visitors, where social distancing is difficult to maintain outside of teaching situations, such as in corridors and communal areas. Additionally, for the period of the national restrictions, we advise that face coverings should be used in all HE learning environments, providing the use of face covering does not impact teaching and learning. Some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings, and we expect staff and students to be sensitive to those 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 assessment of the public health risks, including to the mental health of students and the status of local outbreaks.

A great deal of work has been, and continues to be, undertaken by providers to ensure the learning environment is COVID-safe. We would expect face to face 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 maintain the quality of their tuition. If a provider decides to move to increased online learning, they must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards. This means ensuring that courses provide a high quality academic experience, students are supported, and achieve good outcomes, and standards are protected.

The HE regulator in England, the Office for Students (OfS) is taking very seriously the potential impacts on teaching and learning. On 9 October, the

OfS published a statement setting out measures it is taking to monitor digital teaching quality. It is actively monitoring those providers which have moved provision predominantly online due to local coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, to ensure they maintain the quality of their provision. The OfS will investigate if it has any concerns.

Socialising

Everyone, including students, must follow guidance for the New national restrictions from 5 November. To keep yourself, and those around you, safe, it is vital that we limit physical contact as much as possible. This means that you must not meet socially indoors with family or friends unless they are part of your household - meaning the people you live with, or in your support bubble.

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.

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 visit each other, stay overnight, and visit outdoor public places together. You should not invite anyone else from outside of your 'household' or support bubble into your halls 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 has no alternative place where they can eat or prepare food. All other catering outlets on campus would need to follow the takeaway only model, 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 higher education provider. If a student's financial situation has changed then they should contact the Student Loans Company as they may be eligible for a reassessment. Many universities and colleges also have 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 regular communication, and ensuring services are accessible from a distance. We encourage students to stay in touch with their provider's student support and welfare teams, as these services 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 no access to outside space. We understand social support is valuable for mental health and wellbeing during this challenging time. We encourage students to keep in touch with family and friends over the phone and on social media during this period of restriction. We would also strongly encourage them to engage with virtual activities arranged by their university and students' union.

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 coronavirus (COVID-19). Students struggling with their mental health at this time can access support via the NHS and online resources from Public Health England, along with support from mental health charity Mind. All students can also contact their institution for support, and we expect providers to make this process clear and simple for students.

In addition to support from the NHS, and support from universities and colleges, the OfS-funded Student Space platform bridges gaps in support for students arising from this unprecedented situation and is designed to work alongside these existing services. Further sources of information and support are Every Mind Matters for adults, and Young Minds for young people.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) 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 also continue to work closely with the HE sector to promote good practice and support students, staff and providers during the pandemic. The universities minister has convened a working group of representatives from the higher education and health sectors to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the pandemic. HE providers are autonomous institutions, independent from government, and have a 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

Students

Those students whose doctors have confirmed they are still clinically extremely vulnerable are advised not to attend education whilst the national restrictions are in place. Universities will need to make appropriate arrangements to enable them to continue their education at home, if not already provided online. Students who live with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable, but who are not clinically extremely vulnerable themselves, should still attend education.

Staff

Those 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 identified through a letter from the NHS or from their GP, and may have been advised to shield in the past. Staff should talk to their employers about how they will be supported, including to work from home where possible, during the period of national restrictions. All other staff should continue to attend work, 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. Universities will be able to provide additional help and practical support to ensure that students are properly cared for. Both universities and private accommodation providers have worked closely with local health teams to agree the best course of action in the event of an outbreak.

We have written to universities asking them to ensure that self-isolating students have a range of choices available for access to food and other essential supplies. This includes providing food to those who need it and facilitating deliveries that will not require students to leave the accommodation where they are self-isolating.

HE providers are responsible for ensuring their students are safe and well looked after during their self-isolation period. Existing guidance is available on isolation for residential educational settings.

Universities UK has also published a checklist to guide universities supporting students who are self-isolating. This builds on principles for universities to consider as they prepared for the new term and previous guidance clarifying the actions universities should consider to best support students' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

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. 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 measures.

Staff and students must maintain social distancing, wear a face covering, and adhere to the increased hygiene measures, such as hand washing, and using your own surface wipes (or those provided) to clean the work area. Students must use the study spaces independently and must not gather 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 activities if the 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 can reasonably be done, in-person research activity requiring gathering with others should be paused for the period of national restrictions. If the research participants are not being paid, and the participant's involvement is not crucial within this period, we recommend 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 can continue to deliver courses which are fit for purpose and help students progress their qualifications. Where universities wish to charge 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 at providers in England or Wales can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education to consider their complaint.

International students

Students planning to return home at the end of the period of national restrictions (after 2 December) for the winter break should adhere to Public Health England advice while in England to ensure they are travelling safely. Students should not travel if they have symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) or are part of a household group which is self-isolating.

If students do travel overseas, they should consider the restrictions on entry to the country in question, such as whether they would need to undertake a period of self-isolation in that country, and whether they would need to self-isolate when they return.

International students should also consider their ability to access course materials overseas if they choose to travel home – for example, confirming arrangements for online learning with their higher education provider before they travel, if needed.

Students should be aware that travel advice may change while they are overseas, and are advised to regularly check all relevant GOV.UK guidance pages for updates.

Students travelling to the EU should also consult relevant guidance regarding the UK and EU transition.

You can read the guidance on student movement and plans for the end of term during the period of national restrictions (5 November to 2 December 2020) for more information.

Universities UK has also produced guidance on Self-isolation for students arriving in the UK for HE providers on how to prepare for and care for students who are required to self-isolate on arrival in the UK. We encourage providers to review this guidance when considering how best to support their international and other students arriving from overseas.

Sports facilities

Where providers have their own gym and leisure facilities these should be closed, in line with the wider government guidance for gyms and leisure facilities.

If sporting activity is part of an education course, students will be able to continue this activity in a COVID-secure manner during the scheduled in-person learning hours. This may include access to a sports performance exercise laboratory, for example. Students should be kept in consistent groups and sports equipment thoroughly cleaned between each use by different individual groups.

Students on programmes designed for 'elite' athletes (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 carried out 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 during the pandemic. You should consider 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 academic experience in a way that protects both students and staff.

Activities can be undertaken in line with this and other guidance, in particular Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) guidance for professionals and non-professionals on Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19): performing arts. DCMS commissioned further scientific studies to develop the scientific evidence on these activities, which has allowed for the reconsideration of these additional mitigations. However, these studies have also indicated that it is the cumulative aerosol transmission from both those performing in, and attending, events that is likely to create risk. DCMS is continuing to develop a more detailed understanding of how to mitigate this potential aggregate risk but, in that context, organisations should follow the 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, or one metre where this is not possible, provided steps are taken to otherwise mitigate the potential for transmission).

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