Department for Education

Guidance

Students returning to higher education for spring term

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Introduction

After 2 December, we expect that the majority of students, other than those who need or choose to remain, will return to their family home during the 'student travel window' between 3 and 9 December 2020. Students will be able to temporarily join another household for the winter break as outlined in Student movement and plans for the end of term.

The welfare and wellbeing of students, staff and wider communities is the government's priority for the return of students following the winter break. Universities and other higher education (HE) providers have worked very hard to provide COVID-secure teaching and learning to all students, and we continue to be confident that the measures in place, in line with the government guidance, will help to provide a secure and positive learning environment for students and staff.

The government is committed to prioritising education and wants to enable all students, including those who have travelled home for the winter break, to return to university and resume blended learning. While we are confident that the face-to-face teaching element of blended learning can be done in COVID-secure environments, the mass movement of students across the country poses a greater risk for the transmission of infection between areas.

It is important that measures are taken to manage the return to university carefully, to protect students, staff and local communities, while reducing disruption to education. This guidance sets out how we will support HE providers to enable students to return as safely as possible following the winter break, by staggering this process and to facilitate testing for all.

The Department for Education (DfE) is grateful for the HE sector's support in making these plans work and understand a great deal of flexibility will be required, including on assessment and exams.

There are new rapid turnaround tests that allow us to identify and isolate people who are asymptomatic but may be unintentionally spreading the virus. These tests are being deployed to help HE providers to function, to reduce outbreaks of coronavirus (COVID-19) and enable a fuller experience for both students and staff.

Students who cannot return to university because they are self-isolating

HE providers should provide guidance to students if they are self-isolating at their home address and are not returning to campus on their planned return date, setting out what steps they should take to safely return to university when the isolation period ends.

When students can return to campus

HE providers are advised that:

- the return of students should be staggered over 5 weeks - this is to minimise transmission risks from the mass movement of students
- practical and placement students returning first
- all students should be offered testing on return to university
- students who returned home over the winter break should not be encouraged to return to their term-time accommodation until their face-to-face teaching is scheduled to resume

To minimise the risk to themselves and others on their return to university, before travelling, students should:

- act responsibly
- follow local restriction tier guidance on social contact
- use local community testing programme and take a test before travelling if they have spent the winter break in a local restriction tier 3 very high area where this fits with locally-targeted programmes led by the Director of Public Health

If a student tests positive for coronavirus (COVID-19), they are required to self-isolate for a period of 10 days before travelling and to assist NHS Test and Trace with contact tracing. Their household will need to follow the appropriate guidance.

The next 2 sections set out how HE providers should stagger the return of students.

From 4 January to week commencing 18 January 2021

HE providers should allow those students on practical courses to return to campus in line with their planned start dates.

HE providers will need to make an assessment of the courses and students that should be allowed to return first, based on the requirements of the curriculum and taking into account the following factors:

- work, clinical or practical placements
- courses requiring practical teaching or learning
- courses requiring access to specialist or technical equipment

Example course list

While this is not an exhaustive list, we expect this will cover the following types of courses:

- nursing, midwifery and allied health professions
- scientific or technology subjects that require time in laboratories or use of expensive equipment (for example, chemistry, physics, bio-sciences, engineering)
- medical degrees involving lab work, practical instruction and placement inside hospitals (for example, medicine, dentistry and veterinary science)
- initial teacher training (ITT)
- architecture and planning
- art and design
- geography and environmental studies
- music, dance, drama and performing arts
- courses that are delivered solely to commuter students (where there are no residential students on the course)
- courses which require an externally moderated or invigilated assessment, or exams from a professional body which take place during these 5 weeks and cannot be rescheduled
- other courses with clearly defined practical elements
- other courses where the student is on placement or in paid employment in January (for example, degree apprenticeships and sandwich placements)

HE providers do not have to allow all courses that fall within this list to return during this time and should consider whether any courses may be better delivered online at the beginning of term. For courses that meet these criteria, but that providers deem not to have practical elements, the return of students should take place from 25 January 2021 - see specific information for weeks commencing 25 January and 1 February.

HE providers should also consider allowing the return of students who may need to return earlier for other reasons, for example, students who do not have access to appropriate alternative accommodation, facilities, studying space, or that need to return for health reasons. In these circumstances, HE providers can make plans to welcome these students back on campus from their original start date but their courses should not resume face-to-face teaching, unless they study one of the practical courses defined above.

As part of these plans, providers can consider what provision they can make available to such students, along with those students who remain on site over the winter break, including international students and those who commute in on a daily basis. This includes access to resources, study spaces, campus catering, specific support required by international students, and appropriate pastoral and study support in COVID-secure environments. These students should be tested as soon as they start accessing university facilities.

From weeks commencing 25 January and 1 February

The remaining courses should be offered online from the beginning of term so that students can continue their studies from home. HE providers should plan for students to return gradually from 25 January, over a 2-week period.

Example course list

HE providers are best placed to organise the return of students from 25 January 2021 but may wish to consider prioritising:

- post-graduate taught students
- students in later stages of study (second year onwards)
- international students
- new starters

This guidance will be kept under review, and updated as necessary, supported by the latest evidence and science.

Testing plans for asymptomatic students

All HE providers should:

- offer asymptomatic mass testing to all students on their return in January
- inform students of how they can access asymptomatic testing either before or when they arrive on campus
- inform students of the importance of restricting social contact while awaiting test results and what to do when they receive the results of their test
- work with their local authority to consider how the local mass asymptomatic testing might help their students

If a student has had a positive coronavirus (COVID-19) polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test in the last 90 days through NHS Test and Trace and been recorded as a positive case on the national system, they do not need to be tested again.

Mass testing is now available in some areas that are in local restriction tier 3 very high.

Testing using lateral flow devices (LFD)

The government is also working closely with providers to support the roll-out of testing via lateral flow devices for all students on their return. DfE will support smaller HE providers in partnering with neighbouring providers if they cannot provide their own asymptomatic test site. Individual HE providers may choose to test students on their return, using different testing technologies.

How students should be tested

If providers are using LFDs then students should be tested twice. Immediately upon their return and then tested again 3 days later. While they await their result (typically one hour), the student should not interact with other students to avoid virus transmission.

Negative result

If the first lateral flow test is negative, the student should limit their social contact and interaction with other students until they receive a second negative LFD test.

Positive test result

Your students should:

- self-isolate after a positive LFD test
- arrange for a confirmatory PCR test

If the PCR test is positive the student would be legally required to self-isolate for 10 days after they first develop symptoms or, if asymptomatic, after the date of their LFD test. This is a legal requirement for all, from the point of notification from NHS Test and Trace.

Travel guidance for students arriving from within the UK

Students can travel by private vehicle or public transport, however, to minimise the risk of transmission to others when they travel, they should preferably use private transport wherever possible and only use public transport if they have no other option.

HE providers should advise students using private vehicles to:

- avoid car sharing with anyone outside their household or support bubble
- rigorously follow the safer travel guidance for passengers to reduce the risk of transmission to others where this is not possible

Advise students who cannot access private vehicles, and use public transport, that they should:

- book their travel in advance
- rigorously follow the Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer travel guidance for passengers

HE providers should also communicate travel guidance to all students, including how to help reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) by:

- wearing a face covering unless exempt
- keeping their distance from people from other households when they travel, where possible
- washing or sanitising their hands regularly
- avoiding the busiest routes, as well as busy times like the rush hour
- downloading the NHS COVID-19 app before they travel, if possible and checking in where they see official NHS COVID-19 QR code posters

Further actions

Continue to work with local transport providers and ensure that they are aware of your plans. DfE will continue to work closely with the Department for Transport to support HE providers

New international students and students returning from overseas

Our borders are open for both returning and new international students wishing to study in the UK, and our HE providers are looking forward to welcoming them to campuses in the new year.

Students should:

- check with their HE provider in advance to confirm when face-to-face teaching begins
- check with their HE provider when they intend to arrive on campus so that they can be appropriately supported
- inform their provider if they have already booked travel for dates outside of their specified cohort date

HE providers should try to be as flexible as possible with international students travelling to the UK from overseas, especially if they have already booked travel before this guidance was issued.

Students will need to:

- complete a passenger locator form on arrival in the UK
- self-isolate in their accommodation for 10 days if arriving from a country which is not on the exemption (travel corridor) list

If self-isolating, students will need to:

- only use public transport if they have no other option
- follow safer travel guidance for passengers
- only leave their accommodation in limited circumstances and should follow guidance on how to self-isolate they travel to the UK (England only).

From 15 December 2020, there will be the option to take an accredited coronavirus (COVID-19) test from a private testing provider after 5 days of self-isolation, with a negative result releasing students from the need to isolate from day 6. More information on the Test to Release scheme is available. HE providers should be ready to advise students of appropriate local testing facilities.

Further guidance on self-isolation for international students

We are working with the higher education sector to ensure that all students are welcomed to the UK and are supported on arrival by their chosen university. Universities UK has developed a checklist for providers to support students who are required to self-isolate to use as a guide in developing that support. This will be updated following the January return measures. Further guidance is available on entering the UK.

Visas

International students considering study in the UK should be aware that visa concessions allow for the ongoing provision of online learning for the duration of the academic year 2020 to 2021. Many HE providers are starting courses online.

Students will not be penalised for being unable to collect their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) while coronavirus (COVID-19) measures are in place.

Students studying in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland

DfE has been working closely with the devolved administrations. Students at HE institutions in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland should follow any guidance issued by their HE institution and the relevant government.

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