



Department
for Education

Students returning to, and starting higher education, in spring term 2021

Guidance for higher education providers

January 2021

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Introduction

Over the winter break we expect the majority of students will have returned to their family home, although we recognise that some needed or have chosen to remain at their term time address. Students have been 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 the wider community remains 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 the government recognises that virus transmission in COVID-secure teaching environments has not been identified.

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 risk for the transmission of the virus - particularly because of the higher transmissibility of the new strain - between areas and addressing this risk is the focus of this revised guidance.

Due to the additional national lockdown measures now in place, we must take further steps to reduce transmission, including by significantly reducing the number of students returning to university from their winter break accommodation, and limiting the number of people travelling to and from university facilities. We are now prioritising the return to face-to-face teaching for courses which are most important to be delivered in-person in order to support the pipeline of future key workers. All other courses should be delivered online until at least mid-February. Our aim is to minimise the number of students who return to university to access university facilities.

As always, when local or national conditions change, HE providers should check, revise and update their risk assessments. Providers should ensure they follow [guidance on shielding and protecting clinically extremely vulnerable people](#).

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

We will continue to work with providers to put in place asymptomatic testing arrangements for all students on return to/arrival at university, and for those students who have stayed on campus over the winter break, to reduce and better manage outbreaks of coronavirus (COVID-19).

When students can return to campus

During the period of national lockdown, we are asking HE providers to restrict significantly the number of students returning to face-to-face teaching from January 2021, and to reduce the numbers needing to access university facilities wherever possible. We are now prioritising the return to face-to-face teaching only for courses which are most important to be delivered in-person in order to support the pipeline of future key workers.

On this basis, face-to-face teaching should be restricted to those reading subjects in these areas, and only where face to face teaching or placements are needed to deliver learning outcomes. Wherever possible, teaching and learning should be provided online:

1. Medicine & dentistry
2. Subjects allied to medicine/Health
3. Veterinary science
4. Education (initial teacher training)
5. Social studies (social work)
6. exception only, a very limited number of courses which require Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) assessments and /or other PRSB mandatory activity which is scheduled for January and which cannot be rescheduled (although the presumption is that in the majority of cases, these will be rescheduled outside the period of national restrictions).

Annex 1 lists the courses within the [Higher Education Classification of Subjects \(HECoS\)](#) Labels for which HE providers could consider resuming face-to-face teaching, but there should be no presumption that all courses within these categorisations should return to in-person teaching. In keeping with the objective to limit the number of students who return to campus and to facilities, HE providers should seek to limit the courses that return to face-to-face teaching as far as possible. For courses falling within categories 1-3 above, the focus should primarily be on clinical courses.

For those courses which have Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) assessments, we expect that the majority of assessments, placements and other mandatory elements of these courses should be rescheduled until the wider return of students. In the small number of cases where students may not be able to qualify with professional accreditation if on-site learning or exams/assessments are not held in January and cannot be rescheduled, these students can return as planned. This should be considered on a case-by-case basis and should be the exception.

We appreciate that many providers have already had to compress practical elements of teaching in the autumn term (in part to enable students to return home safely for the

holidays), and we are acutely aware of the challenges that this poses to both providers and students. However, in these very challenging times, we must continue to adapt and put in place enhanced measures to reduce transmission rates across the country, while maintaining our commitment to education.

Staff who are required to deliver or to support delivery of teaching or research and the provision of appropriate university facilities (including catering, cleaning and provision of study spaces including laboratories and libraries) are considered [critical workers](#) for the purposes of access to education and travelling to work counts as a reasonable excuse for travel, notwithstanding wider travel restrictions in place. Parents and carers who are critical workers should keep their children home if they can.

Return of remaining students

All remaining courses should continue to be offered online from the beginning of term. Given the rising infection rates, the return/arrival of all other students **should be paused** until at least mid-February. Providers should not offer in-person teaching before then, or later if further guidance to this effect is issued, and should encourage students to remain at their vacation accommodation until the resumption of their in-person teaching, wherever possible. We expect providers to help ensure students know when they should return, and, in the case of those students not returning in the first tranche, that their return dates will be confirmed in advance of the anticipated mid-February return. Some other students may also need to return before the resumption of their face-to-face learning, set out below.

Returns should prioritise those courses where in-person teaching and learning is judged necessary to fulfil learning outcomes, such as for subjects which require clinical, practical or a vocational/professional learning element; the delivery of critical and time-sensitive learning, assessments and work placements.

HE providers should set a clear expectation that all students should access coronavirus (COVID-19) testing on their return to university, including those returning to face-to-face teaching in January and those returning later. Those who are returning to placements should follow the testing guidance for their placement setting and undertake a test through their placement provider where offered, or through their university if advised by the placement provider.

HE providers should ask those who choose not to get tested on return, to self-isolate for ten days.

To minimise the risk to themselves and others on their return, students should act responsibly before they travel and follow [National lockdown: Stay at Home - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk) on social contact. Where available, and where they fit with locally defined priorities, students should access local community testing programmes to get a lateral flow device (LFD) test before they travel to university.

In the case of students travelling from overseas, international students are required to complete a passenger locator form on arrival in the UK, and passengers travelling from a country, territory or region not on the exemption (Travel Corridor) list will need to self-isolate in their accommodation for ten days from when they were last in a location not on the Travel Corridor list. There is the choice to opt in to Test to Release for International Travel where students could take a COVID-19 test from a private testing provider (at the student's own expense) after they have self-isolated for five full days since they were last in a location not on the Travel Corridor list. A negative result releases them from the need to continue to self-isolate.

Guidance is available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-test-to-release-for-international-travel>. A list of providers of tests for Test to Release is on gov.uk.

Students who have chosen to self-isolate for ten days instead of taking a private PCR test to release do not need to take a further LFD test at the end of their self-isolation period in order to return to campus.

Other students who may need to return to university facilities

Wherever possible, students should remain at their vacation accommodation and should not travel to access their university facilities until the resumption of their face-to-face teaching.

Students should avoid returning to university to collect any of their belongings which they may have left at their university accommodation over the winter break. However, students can travel back to collect any medical equipment or items required for online learning if it essential.

However, HE providers should consider supporting the return of students in exceptional circumstances, for example, where students do not have access to appropriate alternative accommodation, facilities or study space, or who need to return for health or safety reasons. There may also be some students who have remained in their university/term-time accommodation over the winter break, or have already returned, including many international students, but are not expected to return to in-person learning until mid-February. These students should remain at their current university accommodation. They should be asked to only utilise campus resources when they have to, in order to reduce footfall on campus, but they should be offered testing alongside the first expected returners.

HE providers should consider appropriate provision to support access to university facilities to support online learning (e.g. library services or study spaces) and to prevent isolation and mental health issues of students. However, students should not return to face to face teaching unless they study one of the practical courses identified above and at Annex 1. These students should be tested as soon as they start accessing university facilities:

- international students who have remained in the UK and those who have arrived and do not have alternative accommodation
- those who have remained in their university accommodation over the winter break
- those who have returned to university accommodation in exceptional circumstances, for example because they are without access to appropriate study spaces or facilities in their vacation accommodation
- those requiring additional support, including those with mental health and wellbeing issues
- commuter students, on an exceptional basis where they are not in the first tranche of returners, who require access to university facilities to access online learning (for example because they do not have access to appropriate study spaces or facilities in their usual accommodation)

- researchers and research students who require access to specialist facilities for their work. If research students can work from home, they are encouraged to do so

Opening of Facilities

Providers should consider opening facilities to support the teaching and learning of those who fall into the categories above, but these should be maintained for essential use only wherever possible. Providers should make their own judgement on the facilities that need to be made available, and should complete appropriate risk- assessments to do so, and take any additional measures as required, including limiting access, or numbers accessing facilities as required. Facilities that providers can consider opening include:

- libraries and specialist collections, for both studying and borrowing materials, on an essential access only basis
- study spaces and practice areas. Practice areas have been included because students who have remained on campus – or who have already returned – may not have access to an instrument or suitable space to practice in their university accommodation, where this is a key part of their ongoing studies. However, this does not mean that all performance students should return to university – each of us must play our part to reduce the transmission of the virus. If students have already travelled back to university, they should remain on campus and not return home
- facilities required for research activities, including those undertaken by postgraduate research students, if the research cannot be reasonably conducted from home, including laboratories, suites and associated offices and specialist collections. Providers should also adhere to the guidance [on working safely in labs and research facilities during coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- catering facilities and 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 students should take their food home to the place where they live to consume it wherever possible, but providers can provide appropriate space for students to consume food where students are on site for timetabled learning
- whilst any on site gym and leisure facilities should be closed in line with the wider government guidance for gyms and leisure facilities, providers may want to designate specific outdoor areas to allow those students who live in halls, access to space for exercise

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 original planned return date, setting out what steps they should take to safely return to university when the isolation period ends and how to access learning and teaching while self-isolating.

Testing plans for asymptomatic students

All HE providers should:

- offer asymptomatic rapid testing to all students on their return to university, and set an expectation that students should take up the testing on offer
- set out that students should self-isolate for ten days if they do not get tested when requested. Students with a valid reason for why they cannot take a test – e.g. if they've had a positive PCR in the previous 90 days
- inform students of how they can access asymptomatic testing either before or when they arrive on campus
- work with their local authority to consider how local rapid asymptomatic testing might help their students

If a student has had a positive coronavirus (COVID-19) 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 within that time period if they are asymptomatic.

If students are on a placement and not attending university facilities, they should follow and participate in any testing regime in place at their placement. It is not necessary to travel to university to be tested before travelling to a placement, unless this is advised by the placement provider.

Testing staff

The government has also worked closely with providers to support those offering LFD testing to staff in parallel to students. It is up to each university to determine whether a programme of testing staff is appropriate and how this should be conducted.

Testing students using lateral flow devices (LFDs)

The government is working closely with providers to support the roll-out of testing via LFDs 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, students should be tested twice – immediately upon their return and then again three days later. While they await their result (typically it takes one hour), the student should not interact with other students to avoid virus transmission.

Negative result

If the first LFD test result is negative, the student will not need to self-isolate for ten days but they should limit their social contact and interaction with other students until they receive a second negative LFD test result. Students should continue to be encouraged to undertake two LFD tests.

Positive test result

Your students should:

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

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

Supporting students who need to self-isolate

For those students who do need to self-isolate at university, HE providers are responsible for ensuring their students are safe and well looked after during their self-isolation period. Existing guidance is available at [isolation for residential educational settings](#).

Universities UK have also produced [bespoke guidance](#) 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

Travel guidance for students arriving from within the UK

Where students are resuming face to face teaching, or where the exemptions outlined above apply, travel to return to university counts as a “reasonable excuse” for travel, including to and from the devolved administrations, subject to any local rules in place within the devolved administrations. This includes family or others within the household who travel with the student to transport them back to their term time address. Students can travel by private vehicle or public transport but, to minimise the risk of transmission to others when they travel, they should 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

They should advise students who cannot access private vehicles and need to use public transport that they should:

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

If students have already booked rail tickets to travel back to university, they can now re-book wherever they bought the ticket without paying administration fees.

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

HE providers should continue to work with local transport providers and ensure that they are aware of providers’ 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 HE providers are looking forward to welcoming both returning and new international students planning to study at UK providers this year.

Students are able to study online until in-person learning resumes. Our advice for international students travelling from overseas for the Spring term is to consider whether they in fact need to travel to the UK at this time, particularly if their course does not require them to be on campus from 4 January. Those students should consider delaying if travel arrangements can be rearranged without undue costs

Before making travel plans, students intending to come to the UK to study should:

- check additional entry requirements and restrictions that have been introduced due to COVID-19 before travelling to the UK
- 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. This is especially the case if students have already booked travel before this guidance was issued and they are unable to rearrange via their travel operator, or the cost of rearranging would be prohibitively high.

Students must:

- check additional entry requirements and restrictions that have been introduced due to COVID-19 before travelling to the UK
- complete a passenger locator form on arrival in the UK
- self-isolate in their accommodation for ten days if arriving from a country which is not on the exemption ([Travel Corridor](#)) list

If self-isolating, students should:

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

There is the option to take a coronavirus (COVID-19) test from a private testing provider five days from when they were last in a location not on the Travel Corridor list. A negative result releases them from the need to continue to self-isolate. Read the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Test to Release for international travel](#) guidance. Look at [A list of providers of tests for Test to Release](#).

Further guidance on self-isolation for international students

We are working with the HE 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 2020/21. Many HE courses are starting online.

Government has confirmed that students who need to commence their studies via distance learning prior to entering the UK will be eligible for the new, internationally competitive [graduate route](#). Students who are completing their course in summer 2021, including those who commenced a one-year Masters programme in September 2020, will benefit from this route if they enter the UK on or before 6 April 2021 and complete the final semester of their studies in the UK. Students who commence a one-year Masters programme in January 2021 will benefit from this route if they enter the UK before 27 September 2021 and complete the final semester of their studies in the UK.

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. There is no restriction within England on students travelling to or from the devolved administrations for the purposes of attending HE institutions where their in person teaching has resumed or they fall into one of the exemption outlined above.

Annex 1: Subjects within the [Higher Education Classification of Subjects](#) (HECoS) which could consider resuming face to face teaching.

NB: there should be no presumption that all courses within these categorisations should return to in person teaching. In keeping with the objective to limit the number of students who return to campus and to facilities, HE Providers should seek to limit the courses that return to face to face teaching as far as possible. For courses falling within categories 1-3, below, the focus should be on clinical courses, and for all subjects, teaching should be done online wherever possible.

1. Medicine & dentistry
2. Subjects allied to medicine/Health
3. Veterinary science
4. Education (initial teacher training)
5. Social work

Dentistry	gastroenterology	health sciences	anatomy
Medicine	obstetrics & gynaecology	healthcare sciences	physiology
Allergy	Orthopaedics	medical sciences	clinical physiology
Endocrinology	Paediatrics	natural sciences	cellular pathology
Epidemiology	Ultrasound	(those courses allied with medical/ health only, i.e. with clinical elements)	pathobiology
Oncology	clinical dentistry		neurological rehabilitation
pre-clinical medicine	alternative medicines & therapies		physiotherapy
pre-clinical dentistry	complementary medicines & therapies	nursing (all HECoS Labels)	rehabilitation studies
Anaesthesia		human biology	podiatry
clinical medicine			
Dermatology			

pharmacology	rehabilitation	veterinary	secondary
pharmacy	studies	dentistry	teaching
toxicology	dental	veterinary	adult education
osteopathy	technology	epidemiology	teaching
chiropractic	art	veterinary	specialist
nutrition	psychotherapy	nursing	teaching
dietetics	music therapy	animal science	special needs
ophthalmic	orthopaedics	veterinary	teaching
dispensing	paediatrics	pharmacy	work-based
ophthalmology	occupational	applied social	learning
optometry	health	science	policing
orthoptics	occupational	childhood	physician
audiology	therapy	studies	associate
speech and	paramedic	social care	studies
language	science	social work	operating
therapy	diabetes	education	department
midwifery	health and social	studies	practice
bioengineering	care	early years	prosthetics &
biomaterials	health studies	teaching	orthotics
biomedical	medical genetics	higher education	diagnostic
engineering	genetics	teaching	imaging
cardiology	molecular	post compulsory	therapeutic
radiology	genetics	education and	imaging
diagnostic	medical	training	
imaging	biochemistry	primary teaching	
biomechanics	veterinary	professional	
	medicine	practice in	
		education	



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