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Coronavirus: HE/FE return to campus in England 2021

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Summary

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Summary

On 4 January 2021, the Government announced a third national lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Prior to the lockdown, students were expected to return to Further Education (FE) colleges on 18 January and Higher Education (HE) students were planning for a staggered return to campuses from 25 January 2021.

The lockdown rules prevented the majority of students from returning to campuses. Only HE students taking specific courses relating to key health areas, and FE students who were vulnerable, the children of critical workers, or taking vocational courses that were about to be completed where assessments could not be done remotely were allowed to return for teaching. The remainder of courses reverted to online delivery.

On 28 January 2021, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced that colleges and universities would return from 8 March at the earliest.

On 22 February 2021, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a roadmap for ending lockdown restrictions in England. The roadmap set out that from 8 March all schools and colleges would be able to fully open, while students on HE courses requiring practical teaching and specialist facilities would also be able to return to campus.

Updated guidance was issued for FE and HE providers in March. The guidance widened the groups of HE students who could return to campus, and stated that the return of other students would be considered over the Easter break.

On 13 April 2021, the Universities Minister Michelle Donelan announced that remaining HE students would be able to return to in-person teaching from 17 May at the earliest.

On 6 July 2021 Gavin Williamson announced the ending of all restrictions in schools, colleges and universities from 19 July.

This briefing paper discusses announcements affecting the FE and HE sectors in England from January 2021 and was correct at the time of writing.

Details of earlier Covid-related restrictions for the sectors and their impact are given in the following briefing papers:

- CBP 8859, [Coronavirus Bill: childcare and education settings](#), 20 March 2020

- CBP 8893, [Coronavirus implications for the further and higher education sectors in England](#), 11 April 2020
- CBP 8908, [Coronavirus: Update implications for the further and higher education sectors](#), 21 May 2020
- CBP, 8932, [Coronavirus: Easing lockdown restrictions in FE and HE in England](#), 2 September 2020
- CBP 9030, [Coronavirus: Higher and further education back to campus in England in 2020/21?](#) 6 January 2021
- CBP 8989, [A level results in England and the impact on university admissions in 2020-21](#), 2 September 2020
- CBP 9122, [Coronavirus: Student accommodation issues](#), 25 January 2021
- CBP 8954, [Financial impact on higher education](#), 15 January 2021

1 2021 spring return delayed

On 4 January 2021, the Government announced a third national lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. Prior to the lockdown, students were expected to return to FE colleges on 18 January 2021 and most HE students were planning for a staggered return to campuses from 25 January 2021. The lockdown rules prevented the majority of students from returning to campuses; only students taking specific courses relating to key health areas were allowed to return for teaching. The remainder of courses reverted to online delivery.

On 28 January 2021, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced that colleges would return from 8 March at the earliest:

Education is a national priority and we want schools, colleges and universities fully open as soon as the public health situation allows.

As confirmed by the PM we hope to get pupils & students back from 8 March.¹

Mr Williamson said that the 8 March was chosen as the return date because by this date the Government hoped that everyone in the top four vaccination priority groups would have developed immunity from the virus.

1.1 Covid-19 roadmap announcement, 22 February 2021

On 22 February 2021, the Prime Minister [announced](#) his roadmap for ending lockdown in England (the devolved nations set out their own arrangements);² the details of the plan are set out in the guidance [COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021](#).³

The roadmap outlines four steps for easing restrictions. Before proceeding to the next step, the Government will examine the data to assess the impact of the previous step.

¹ Department for Education blog, [Prime Minister announces that schools and colleges will return from 8 March at the earliest](#), 28 January 2021

² [HC Deb \[Covid-19: Road Map\] 22 February 2021](#)

³ HM Government, [COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021](#), February 2021 CP 398

Step One will start on March 8. In this phase pupils and students in all schools and FE settings will return to face-to-face education. HE students on courses requiring practical teaching, specialist facilities, or on-site assessments were to return to campus from 8 March. Arrangements for all other students were to be reviewed by the end of the Easter holidays. Students and institutions will be given a week's notice ahead of any reopening:

Students on practical Higher Education courses at English universities who would be unable to complete their courses if they did not return to take part in practical teaching, access specialist facilities, or complete assessments will also return from 8 March. Research labs and libraries can be kept open if needed.

For those Higher Education students that do not need to take part in practical teaching, and do not require access to specialist facilities or equipment as part of their studies, the Government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of the return of these students. This will take account of the latest data and will then be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. Students and institutions will be given a week's notice ahead of any reopening. The Government recognises the difficulties and disruption that this may cause for many students and their families where they remain unable to return to Higher Education settings, but it is necessary to limit the number of students who return to university at this stage to minimise travel and manage the risk of transmission.⁴

1.2 March 2021 update

In March 2021, the DfE issued updated guidance for Higher Education Providers (HEPs) that confirmed that from 8 March they would be able to resume in-person teaching and learning for students who were studying practical or practice-based (including creative arts) subjects requiring specialist equipment and facilities.

HEPs with high numbers of returning students were asked to consider staggering their return. Where community testing facilities were available, students were encouraged to test themselves before they travelled back to university. Once students had returned to their term-time accommodation they were to remain living there, but they could return home for their Easter break.

The return of other students was to be considered over the Easter break.

⁴ HM Government, [COVID-19 response – spring 2021](#), February 2021 CP 398 paras 89-91.

1.3 April 2021 update

On 13 April 2021, the Universities Minister Michelle Donelan [announced that remaining HE students would be able to return](#) to in-person teaching from 17 May at the earliest, alongside Step 3 of the roadmap. The announcement also included an extra £15m for student hardship this academic year, and noted that the mental health support platform [Student Space](#), which is funded by the Office for Students (OfS), will be extended.⁵

The DfE guidance for HEPs was updated to reflect the announcement: [Students returning to, and starting, higher education during Spring and Summer 2021](#), April 2021. HEPs are encouraged to manage the return of students in a way that minimises transport pressures. Returning students and staff will be asked to take three Covid-19 tests, after which twice-weekly testing would be made available through home testing kits or university facilities.

1.4 Response to the delayed HE re-openings

The president of Universities UK (UUK), Julia Buckingham, [expressed her disappointment](#) at the confirmation that no further students can return for in-person activities in England until at least 17 May:

This is hugely disappointing news for all those students in England who have been learning online since December, and comes at a crucial time in the academic year when in-person support from tutors and friends is highly valued by students ahead of their end-of-year exams.

We know that many are desperate to return to use facilities and take part in covid-safe in-person teaching, learning and other activities – which the government has previously recognised as essential to their mental health and wellbeing.⁶

The general secretary of the University and College Union (UCU), Jo Grady, [highlighted the fact](#) that many students will have already sat their exams by the time universities are allowed to re-open fully in May:

The UK government has consistently disregarded the needs of university staff and students throughout this pandemic, treating them as an afterthought at best. So unfortunately, it is no surprise

⁵ [Higher Education Update, HCWS912](#), 13 April 2021.

⁶ UUK, [“Government decision on student returns in England ‘hugely disappointing for students’](#)”, 13 April 2021.

that it has only confirmed university learning will remain online the day after many students have already started their summer term.

Ministers now need to be honest with staff and students and confirm most courses will stay online until September, which is what UCU has been calling for. Restarting in-person activities in mid-May makes absolutely no sense, as many students' exams will already have finished.⁷

The return of students to higher education campuses [was debated in the House of Lords](#) on 15 April 2021.⁸

1.5 Ending of restrictions announced 6 July 2021

On 6 July 2021, Gavin Williamson [announced](#)⁹ that Covid restrictions in education settings would end from 19 July when step 4 of the government's road map would come into force.¹⁰ From that date there will be “no restrictions on in-person teaching and learning in universities, unless students are advised to isolate or are impacted by local outbreaks”. Also from 16 August, those under the age of 18 will no longer be required to self-isolate if they are contacted by NHS Test and Trace as a close contact of a positive covid-19 case. Furthermore face coverings will no longer be advised for pupils, students, staff and visitors either in classrooms or in communal areas and social distancing will no longer be necessary.

Mr Williamson said that the testing of students would however continue until at least September:

Testing programmes remain important as we move cautiously out of restrictions. With that in mind, secondary schools and colleges will be asked to provide two on-site tests to their students at the start of term, with regular home testing continuing until the end of September, when that will be reviewed. It is vital that secondary school and college students continue to test for the last few weeks of this term and throughout September.¹¹

⁷ UCU, [“UCU response to 17 May university return”](#), 13 April 2021.

⁸ [HL Deb 15 April 2021 c1443-1446](#).

⁹ [HC Deb, Covid-19: Education Settings, 6 July 2021](#)

¹⁰ Department for Education press release, [Covid restrictions in education settings to end at Step 4](#), 6 July 2021

¹¹ [HC Deb, Covid-19: Education Settings, 6 July 2021 c769](#)

2 Higher education

The DfE has published two guidance documents for HEPs on students returning to campuses in the spring: [Higher education: operational guidance](#) (updated 13 April 2021) and [Students returning to, and starting, higher education during Spring and Summer 2021. Guidance for higher education providers](#), (updated 13 April 2021).

The Office for Students (OfS) has also published guidance for providers, [Returning to university in 2021](#).

The [STUDENTCROWD](#) website contains a list of the latest plans for teaching delivery in each higher education institution.

2.1 Re-opening guidance

The “[students returning](#)” guidance published in early February added policing to the list of courses that were important for the supply of critical workers. Although teaching and learning were to be provided online wherever possible, students on such courses were allowed to return to campus:

Face-to-face teaching should be restricted to the following, and only where face to face teaching or placements are needed to deliver learning outcomes. Wherever possible, teaching and learning should still 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. Policing
7. By 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 the Spring term and which cannot be rescheduled.

The roadmap changes announced on 22 February allowed more students to return to in-person teaching on campus in England from 8 March. This was limited to students on practical and practice-based subjects, whose access to specialist facilities – laboratories, studios, workshops and performance spaces – was deemed essential. An [article](#) on the Wonkhe website highlighted the potential lack of clarity around exactly which students would be able to return:

That qualification around students “who would be unable to complete their courses” is problem number one. Courses or years? Basically, the road map reads like this is an exemption only for single and final year students. But neither the PM’s commons statement, nor the press conference, nor the DfE guidance details that particular bit of prioritisation.

One of the questions that many asked on hearing the PM was how universities are to make decisions about which students and courses can recommence with onsite, “in-person” attendance. Generally, this looks like it’s being left up to providers to determine – the guidance just says that providers should not ask students to return if their course can “reasonably be continued” online.

The lack of clarity may be an issue. Given time and access to facilities is tight, one provider with lots of students on practical courses may be keen to ration their facilities to final and single year students. Another may be keen to get everyone back for “something” face to face.¹²

The return of all students to campus from 17 May is subject to a review of the impact that the lifting of coronavirus restrictions will have had as the country entered Step 2 of the Roadmap. According to the updated [April 2021 guidance](#), HEPs are expected to ensure that students know when, and if, they should return to in-person teaching and learning. Facilities should also reopen in line with the [wider reopening guidance](#) and easing of restrictions with regards to organised sport, entertainment, or large events.

The guidance makes an allowance for some students to return before the 17 May date, particularly for health and wellbeing reasons:

Providers should support the return of students where necessary to support the continuation of their studies, for example, where students do not have access to appropriate alternative accommodation, facilities or study space, where students need to

¹² Wonkhe, [\(Some\) students on practical courses in England can return to campus in early March](#), 22 February 2021.

return for health or safety reasons or where there is concern for a student's mental health or wellbeing.¹³

The April 2021 updates to the guidance are covered in the Wonkhe article "[Fifteen things to note in today's DfE return to campus announcement](#)", 13 April 2021.

This was accompanied by published [guidance](#) which says that institutions "should not put in place measures which limit the teaching and learning outcome for students, or significantly limit the wider activities offered by the HE provider." It also includes guidance for international students depending on which country they are arriving from. Many universities had already confirmed that they would be keeping a level of online learning regardless of the restrictions.

2.2 Updated guidance 6 July 2021

On 6 July 2021 the Department for Education updated its guidance for HE providers, [Higher education COVID-19 operational guidance \(applies until Step 4\)](#).

The main change in the guidance is that from 19 July social distancing will no longer be mandatory and there will be no restrictions on the approach to teaching. Providers should consider appropriate provision to support access to university facilities for the purposes of learning, to safeguard students' wellbeing and to prevent isolation and mental ill health of students, this may include opening up libraries, study spaces and sports facilities.

However providers should continue to conduct risk assessments for their particular circumstances, implement "sensible and proportionate control measures" which reduce risk to the lowest reasonably practicable level, and have in place contingency plans to deal with any identified positive cases of Covid-19 or outbreaks.

The guidance also sets out requirements for returning international students.

The updated guidance is discussed in article on the Wonkhe website, [DfE issues revised guidance for higher education in England after Step 4, 6 July 2021](#).

The Russell Group made the following response to the changes:

"Russell Group universities are looking forward to welcoming all students back on to campus this autumn. However, as the Prime

¹³ DfE, [Students returning to, and starting, higher education during Spring and Summer 2021. Guidance for higher education providers](#), April 2021, p10.

Minister said, the pandemic is far from over. Given the need to minimise the risk of outbreaks at the start of the new term, our members have rightly been planning for a range of scenarios, as requested by the Department for Education.

"This means prioritising interactive, in-person teaching with most seminars, small group classes and lab work in-person. It also includes some scenarios where an element of online teaching continues – especially where this can be used to enhance learning, but also to provide the flexibility to respond to public health measures or local outbreaks while minimising disruption."¹⁴

2.3 Testing arrangements and face coverings

Students are encouraged to test themselves before returning to university, on arrival, and then twice a week while on campus. The guidance gives the following information on testing:

Students are encouraged to test before they travel back to university, either through their local community testing programme or by ordering a test online.

On returning to university, students should take three tests at an on-site testing facility (3- 4 days apart). They should then test twice a week, either using home test kits or at an onsite facility. Some students at smaller HE providers may use home test kits immediately rather than testing on site.

Staff are also encouraged to test twice a week, either at an on-site testing facility or at home as appropriate.¹⁵

Face coverings are also recommended when social distancing is not possible for those who are not exempt, and providers should also seek to ensure that there is good ventilation when spaces are in use:

Where social distancing is difficult to maintain or good ventilation is difficult to provide, including in workshops, laboratories, offices, libraries, teaching rooms and lecture halls, we recommend that providers should adopt the use of face coverings as part of their wider COVID-secure measures, in addition to hand hygiene facilities and reduced access.¹⁶

¹⁴ Russell Group, [Russell Group response to lifting of Covid restrictions in education settings](#), 6 July 2021

¹⁵ DfE, [Students returning to, and starting, higher education during Spring and Summer 2021. Guidance for higher education providers](#), April 2021, p16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp12-14.

2.4

Children's Task and Finish Group: Paper on HE settings

A [report](#) for the Department for Education (DfE) was published in February 2021, and it provided an update on evidence related to COVID-19 in HE settings. The paper contained the following findings on the transmission of Covid among HE students and the impact on student wellbeing:

- Multiple data sources (including ONS, PHE and COG-UK) show that the rates of COVID-19 infection rose among many HE student populations in October 2020 (moderate evidence, moderate data), with rates of infection subsequently reducing in November
- Evidence from ONS outbreak investigations, PHE surveillance data, genomic and antibody studies in a number of HE settings suggest a higher risk of transmission in residential settings, and particularly in some halls of residence (medium confidence). ONS outbreak analyses from Exeter and Loughborough found greater transmission spikes in halls of residence than private accommodation.
- Evidence from genomic studies in a limited number of universities suggests that mitigation measures were successful in minimising transmission.
- Limited, anecdotal evidence from 10 universities presented by ONS suggests that when face-to-face learning was happening, minimal cases of transmission were attributed to face-to-face learning environments.
- There is strong evidence that the majority of HE students (those aged 18-24 years), because of their age, are less susceptible to severe clinical disease than older people (high confidence).
- Survey evidence related to COVID-19 indicates disruption to research and learning, lower wellbeing, and increased mental distress in HE students.
-

3

Student accommodation issues

This section focuses on accommodation issues linked to the third national lockdown and the return to campus in 2021. The briefing paper [Coronavirus: Student accommodation issues](#) gives further background and looks at this issue during the whole of the pandemic.

3.1

Where did students spend the winter break and where are they living now?

A survey of 2,700 students carried out between 8 and 18 January 2021 by the Office of National Statistics found that:¹⁷

- 33% of respondents travelled to stay with family or friends over the winter break and 30% were already living at home or with friends. 37% remained at their usual term time address
- 40% of those who moved out to stay with family or friends¹⁸ over the winter break had returned to their term time address by early January.
- In early January 8% were in university/private student halls of residence, 42% were in private rented accommodation and 49% were at home or with friends.

The Save the Student [National Student Accommodation Survey 2021](#) received responses from 1,300 students. It found that at the start of the spring term 52% of students were living in the same accommodation as before Christmas. 35% had moved home to live with parents or guardians. Only 42% of students had been able to spend the whole of the 2020/21 in their rented accommodation.

A [survey](#) by Unite, a student accommodation provider, has found that 77% of students have struggled with mental health and wellbeing because of the pandemic and 84% said that engaging in university life had been positive for their mental health. A large majority of the students surveyed (86%) wanted to return to their universities and term-time accommodation:

Demand for returning to university remains overwhelmingly high:
86% students are keen to get onto university campus once it is safe

¹⁷ [Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 8 January to 18 January 2021](#), ONS

¹⁸ Or their usual non-term time address

to do so. Meanwhile, 79% of students said they wanted to receive some face-to-face teaching in the third term, if restrictions are eased.

In addition, almost two in three students (62%) are likely to return to their student accommodation for their third term if lockdown restrictions are eased, with (almost half) 47% of those say they're very likely to do so.¹⁹

3.2 Rent reductions

The Save the Student [National Student Accommodation Survey 2021](#) found that around 40% of students who paid rent had asked for a refund. Those in university accommodation were much more likely to have asked for a refund. Overall 32% were offered a rent refund; 9% full and 23% partial. The average discount was £75 per week.

An earlier survey of accommodation which asked about refunds in summer term 2020 found that:

- 72% of first year students (mostly in student halls) had stopped paying rent and 13% were paying reduced rent.
- 71% of second or later year students (mostly in private rented accommodation) were paying full rent, 11% were paying reduced rent and 19% were not paying any rent.

3.3 Difficulty paying rent and hardship funding

According to the Save the Student [National Student Accommodation Survey 2021](#), 50% of students struggle to keep up with paying their rent and 10% said this was a 'constant struggle'. 60% said that their health had suffered due to rent costs, particularly their mental health. 45% said their academic work had suffered for the same reason. 47% had to borrow money to pay rent, the most common sources were parents and overdrafts/loans. The report estimated that nearly £1 billion across the UK had been spent on student accommodation that has not been used.

The Government has responded to concerns about the financial pressures placed on students by the pandemic by giving universities flexibility about how they spend existing funding for disadvantaged students and with additional hardship funding. The £256 million of 'student premium' funding was intended to help disadvantaged and disabled student access and

¹⁹ Unite, [Students' mental health hit by Covid-19 - 17 February 2021](#)

progress through higher education. The flexibility given to universities means they can divert this to other areas such as student hardship funding and mental health services.²⁰

In December 2020, the Government [announced](#) £20 million in financial year 2020/21 for students facing financial hardship. On 2 February 2021 the Government [increased this one-off funding](#) with a further £50 million for universities to distribute to students facing financial hardship.

The total additional funding of £70 million in England has been [compared unfavourably](#) with extra hardship funding announced in Wales and Scotland which are substantially higher on a per student basis. In early February the [Northern Ireland Economy Minister announced](#) a one-off 'Covid disruption payment' of £500 for every full-time higher education student in Northern Ireland. This was part of a wider package which included additional funding for student hardship and to compensate universities who have lost income through rent reductions and early ends to rental contracts.

3.4 Refunds for fees and accommodation

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students published the report of its [Inquiry into tuition and accommodations costs during Covid-19: The Case for Compensation](#) on 28 January 2021. The inquiry was launched in response to growing demands for rent and fee refunds following the disruption to university education as a result of the national lockdown announced on 4th January 2021.

The report made three recommendations with regard to rent:

- the Government should substantially increase hardship funding to address rental costs for student properties they cannot access, lost income, digital poverty and other unexpected costs.
- the Government should consider the introduction of means-tested maintenance grants to assist the 'Covid cohort' with the costs they face
- the Government should work with landlords to introduce measures to temporarily increase flexibility for student accommodation to allow students to leave contracts they aren't using more easily, and to reduce pressure on landlords.

With regard to tuition fee refunds, the report recommended:

- The Government should establish a 'Covid Student Learning Remediation Fund', to allow lost learning to be addressed through

²⁰ See, for instance, Support for vulnerable students' in the Office for Students [Provider guidance for coronavirus](#)

provision of educational opportunities not available through the pandemic.

- The Government should work with Universities to ensure that there is a national 'safety net' to maintain academic integrity across institutions and ensure that students can progress in a way that takes account of the practical, social and emotional challenges they have had to face as a result of the pandemic.
- The Prime Minister referred to compensation for students during the roadmap debate on 22 February 2021:

Cat Smith

University students, many of whom were not eligible for furlough for their part-time jobs, were already struggling financially. Today's road map suggests that the vast majority of those students will not be able to return to their university accommodation until after Easter at best. They are legally being prevented from returning to accommodation for which they are obliged to pay. Does the Prime Minister think that that is fair? If he does not think that it is fair, what will he do about it?

The Prime Minister

I sympathise deeply with students who have had a time at university that no other generation has put up with. I sympathise deeply with their sense of unfairness, with the experiences they have had. They have been heroic, by the way, in the in which they have been able to bring the disease down in some university towns by obeying the guidance. We will do whatever we can to support them, working with the university sector, to make up for the experiences they have been through and to make sure, insofar as we can, that we help them to get compensation.²¹

The government's position on student accommodation costs was given in a [PQ on 26 March 2021](#):

Students: Coronavirus

Claudia Webbe

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the November 2020 study by the National Union of Students that found that three in four students were anxious about paying their rent; and what financial support he is providing to students in relation to rents during the covid-19 outbreak.

²¹ [HC Deb \[Covid-19: Road Map\] 22 February 2021](#) c656

Michelle Donelan

26 March 2021

This has been a very difficult time for students, and we urge universities and private landlords to review their accommodation policies to ensure that they are fair, clear and have the interests of students at heart.

We recognise that in these exceptional circumstances, some students may face financial hardship. The department has worked with the Office for Students to clarify that higher education (HE) providers are able to use existing funds, worth around £256 million for the 2020/21 academic year, towards hardship support. We have also made an additional £70 million of student hardship funding available to HE providers this financial year (2020/21).

HE providers have flexibility in how they distribute the funding to students, in a way that best prioritises those in greatest need. Support might include help for students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location. The funding can be distributed to a wide population of students, including postgraduates (whether taught or research) and international students. We will continue to monitor the situation to look at what impact this funding is having.

There is further information for tenants and landlords in the context of COVID-19, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-and-renting-guidance-for-landlords-tenants-and-local-authorities>.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by COVID-19: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cma-to-investigate-concerns-about-cancellation-policies-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-consumer-contracts-cancellation-and-refunds>. This guidance sets out the CMA's view on how the law operates to help consumers understand their rights and help businesses treat their customers fairly.

Students may be entitled to refunds from certain accommodation providers, depending on the terms of their contract and their particular circumstances. Organisations such as Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support.

If a student thinks their accommodation provider is treating them unfairly, they can raise a complaint under the accommodation

codes of practice as long as the provider is a code member. The codes can be found at: <https://www.thesac.org.uk>, <https://www.unipol.org.uk/the-code/how-to-complain> and <https://www.rla.org.uk/about/nrla-code-of-practice.shtml>.

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education can consider complaints about student accommodation in England and Wales, but only where an HE provider is involved in the provision of that accommodation. The OIA cannot consider complaints where students may have concerns about accommodation in the private rented sector.

The issue of compensation for lost teaching and rent during the pandemic was debated in the House of Commons on Thursday 15 April, following an [urgent question on the subject](#) by Daisy Cooper:

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make a statement on the return date given to university students and his Department's plans to provide financial compensation to university students for lost teaching and rent during the coronavirus pandemic.²²

²² [HC Deb 15 April 2021 c481-494](#).

4 Other student issues

4.1 Fines for house parties

The updated DfE guidance [Students returning to, and starting, higher education during Spring and Summer 2021. Guidance for higher education providers](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/959017/HE_guidance_spring_term_guidance_update_050221_v2.pdf), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/959017/HE_guidance_spring_term_guidance_update_050221_v2.pdf April 2021 reiterated that there are fines of £800 for students attending house parties:

House parties

The government has introduced an £800 fine for those attending house parties, including in halls of residence, which will double for each repeat offence to a maximum level of £6,400. These fines will apply to those who attend illegal gatherings of more than 15 people from more than one household/support bubble. Providers should ensure that students are aware of what constitutes their designated “household”, particularly if they live within large scale student accommodation.²³

4.2 Maintenance loans for students still at home

Student maintenance loans vary depending on where a student is living and students living away from home are eligible for higher loans than those living at home. Under normal circumstances students should inform Student Finance England if their living arrangements change and their loan may be re-assessed and possibly reduced as a consequence. The lockdown has prevented many students from returning to their term time accommodation and has forced them to stay at home - the guidance states that student support does not need to be re-assessed if students are still “incurring accommodation costs away from home”:

Because of the changing position relating to face to face teaching and occupation of accommodation, students’ loan entitlements for the current term will not be reassessed if they are still incurring accommodation costs away from home, meaning that students in

²³ DfE, [Students returning to, and starting, higher education during Spring and Summer 2021. Guidance for higher education providers](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/959017/HE_guidance_spring_term_guidance_update_050221_v2.pdf), April 2021, p8.

receipt of the ‘living away from home’ loan will retain the maintenance loans paid at the start of term, which will be repaid in the usual way. This should help to ensure students have the financial support they need during these exceptional circumstances. Students who are no longer incurring accommodation costs away from home (e.g. because they have exited their contracts, or moved home permanently), or who no longer wish to receive the higher rate of loan, should continue to request reassessment.

This policy was criticised on the Wonkhe website for reducing student’s loan funding at a time when students faced a loss of income from reduced work opportunities:

So the official position is that all students need to keep SLC up to date with where they’re living – that’s a legal and contractual obligation and means students who were planning on spending the term away from home now must tell SLC that they’re not. But it’s OK – they then tick a box to say “I’m still paying rent out there” and they keep the higher rate.

As part of that process, students who have somehow managed to escape their ongoing rental contract have to tell SLC where they are and fess up that they’re out of contract – so their loan gets reassessed down. That’s a harsh blow to students who will already be facing down the barrel of lost part time work and increased costs, but in some sort of way makes sense.

The question comes – what if you don’t know whether you’ll be facing any costs this term because your university has been rebating the rent, but might stop doing so on or after March 8th but before the end of term? And this is the actual, unbelievable, rub-your-eyes in disbelief answer:

A student who studies away from home who right now has followed the guidance on staying away and for the time being is getting full rent relief from their university should tell SLC, who will then reassess the student’s loan down. If their university then reopens campus the week before Easter and they have to pay rent for that week, the student has to get in touch and SLC will reassess their loan back up to the higher rate”

The Student Loans Company has produced a FAQs document for students, [Guidance for students who have moved back home in the January term](#), 11 February 2021, to help with student support questions. The guidance states that any student who is assessed as being overpaid will have the overpayment added to their student loan balance and this will be repaid after they finish their course:

Usually, in this situation you would be reassessed for the January term to the lower ‘living at home’ rate of Maintenance Loan. If

you've already been paid for that term at the higher 'living away from home' rate, it would mean you'd have been overpaid for that term. We would normally then reduce your future Maintenance Loan payments to recover the money that was overpaid.

However, the UK Government has decided that in this situation the overpayment will just be added to your overall loan balance. This will be repaid as normal once you have finished or left your course.

5 Further education

In January 2021, the DfE issued guidance for FE providers on the lockdown rules for colleges, which set out which students were allowed to attend on site as well as providing information on exams:

During the period of national lockdown further education providers will remain open to vulnerable students and the children of critical workers.

All other students will continue to learn remotely until 8 March at the earliest.

A small number of FE students and apprentices who would otherwise be completing their courses or apprenticeships in January, February or March are able to attend where it is not possible for their training or assessment to be completed remotely. This includes:

- those who are due to do a licence to practise, or other occupational competence assessment, including end point assessments in January, February or March.
- those training for some critical worker roles, for example: engineering, health & social care, manufacturing technologies, nursing & subjects & vocations allied to medicine, transportation operations & maintenance, agriculture, education and training and building & construction (where this is connected to utilities and communications) that are due to complete in the next 3 months.

We know that receiving face-to-face education is best for young people's mental health and for their educational achievement. The earliest that further students will return to face to face education is 8 March. We will set out more detail and ensure we give at least 2 weeks' notice to allow students, staff and parents to prepare.

5.1 Covid Road Map guidance for colleges 22 February 2021

On 22 February 2021, the Government published new guidance for colleges on the roadmap implications, which included the fact that from 8 March, all students would be able to return to on-site education:

During the period of national lockdown further education providers have remained open to vulnerable students and the children of critical workers.

Continuing to attend are a small number of students who would otherwise be completing their courses or apprenticeships in February or March and who cannot complete them remotely. This includes those due to complete:

- a licence to practise or other occupational competence assessment, including end point assessments
- training for some critical worker roles, for example
 - engineering
 - health and social care
 - manufacturing technologies
 - nursing & subjects & vocations allied to medicine
 - transportation operations and maintenance
 - agriculture
 - education and training
 - building and construction, where this is connected to utilities and communications

All other students will continue to learn remotely until 8 March.

From 8 March we expect that every 16 to 19 student (or 19 to 25 with an EHCP) will attend their FE provider in person, and will undertake the majority of their planned hours on site.

Adult learners may also return on site. As was the case prior to coronavirus (COVID-19), you should continue to judge the right balance between on-site and remote delivery for adult students in order to provide high quality education and training.

Special post-16 institutions should continue to allow students to attend as per their usual timetable.

Colleges and special post-16 institutions will be able to test students on return, initially on site and then moving towards home testing. For Independent Training Providers (ITPs) and Adult Community

Learning providers (ACLPs) home testing will be available for staff and students from the end of March.

We will keep this guidance under review and update as necessary.

Under the roadmap provisions, there will also be twice-weekly testing of secondary school and college pupils, initially with on-site testing and then home testing.

The Association of Colleges made the following comment on the road map changes which flagged up the “logistical challenge” of the mass testing of students:

Disruption to learning due to lockdowns has been challenging for students’ education and wellbeing, so it’s good to hear the Prime Minister announce that many college students will be returning to face to face learning from next month. Colleges typically have thousands of students across varying ages, and they face a complex task now to prioritise who starts back first and how that will best meet the needs of students.

We look forward to seeing the scientific evidence which sits behind the announcement. That will be important in reassuring staff and students of the low risks involved, with the right controls in place. The requirement for mass testing will be a logistical challenge, but colleges have used lockdown to prepare their sites and it will be a crucial element of keeping students and staff safe, alongside face coverings, social distancing, ventilation, phasing and rotas.

Colleges can be trusted to make the best decisions for their students, staff and communities, as they have done since the start of the pandemic. Their focus will be on safely supporting every student to succeed at the end of their year, whether they want to progress into work, an apprenticeship, further learning in college or higher education. This roadmap gives a glimpse of the new normal, but we look forward to a long-term plan for overcoming lost learning which will be a major concern for the whole education system for the next couple of years. The return of students to colleges is positive, but it is not enough to avert a lost generation.”²⁴

The Association of Colleges have published a [briefing paper](#) on the changes for a parliamentary debate on the roadmap arrangements on 25 February.²⁵ The briefing highlights the importance of “addressing the issue of lost learning and ensuring there is adequate catch-up support in place is of

²⁴ Association of Colleges, [Government publishes roadmap out of lockdown - AoC responds](#), 22 February 2021

²⁵ Association of Colleges, [Backbench Business Debate briefing Proposal for a national education route map for schools and colleges in response to the COVID-19 outbreak](#) Thursday 25 February

critical importance and must be prioritised by the Government as we return to full attendance in the months ahead.”

5.2 Updated guidance March 2021

In March 2021, the DfE issued updated guidance for providers. The guidance focused on priorities for the summer term as restrictions are eased and set out a road map for FE in line with government guidance:

Step 1 - from 29 March

As part of step 1:

- outdoor sports and leisure facilities such as tennis courts and open-air swimming pools can reopen
- all students regardless of age can participate in formally organised outdoor sports
- wraparound provision for any reason can take place outdoors for students aged under 18
- the position on face coverings in classrooms and workshops to be reviewed
- clinically extremely vulnerable staff and students can return to work and their education setting from 1 April

Step 2 - not before 12 April

As part of step 2:

- students can return to industry placements, where working from home is not reasonably possible, and commercial activity within colleges can reopen as the corresponding businesses begin to open in wider society, for example, personal care and retail
- indoor leisure facilities including gyms can reopen to the public for individual or household use
- on-site hospitality facilities can reopen to the public for table service if they can serve outside

Step 3 - not before 17 May

As part of step 3:

- indoor adult group sport can return, meaning recreational group sport is permitted on FE premises
- indoor hospitality on-site can reopen to the public

- outside of college more students will be returning to part-time work alongside others outside of their college

Step 4 - not before 21 June

As part of step 4 open days can be planned.

5.3 Updated guidance April 2021

Following the return of fact-to-face teaching on 8 March 2021, the [Further education coronavirus \(COVID-19\) operational guidance](#) was updated on 6 April 2021 to highlight the priorities for the summer term as restrictions are eased. The guidance for FE providers says:

Alongside the return to face-to-face teaching, the planned easing of restrictions, guided at all stages by data, will allow you to fully reintroduce:

- face-to-face extra-curricular activity
- work placements
- education visits
- reopening of commercial training facilities on-site such as hairdressing salons, gyms and restaurants

By the end of the summer term, we hope providers will be able to open their doors to prospective students for familiarisation events ahead of starting their post-16 study in September.

5.4 Updated guidance 6 July 2021

On 6 July 2021 the Department for Education issued updated guidance for FE providers, [Further education COVID-19 operational guidance](#). The guidance sets out a number of changes that will occur when step 4 of the government's road map comes into effect on 19 July:

- From 19 July, bubbles and contact tracing will no longer take place except in local control situations. This will be reviewed at the end of September and DfE's guidance says that colleges may need to reintroduce bubbles as a temporary measure if there are local outbreaks.
- From 16 August, young people under the age of 18 years old will no longer be required to self-isolate if they are contacted by NHS Test and Trace as a close contact of a positive COVID-19 case. Instead they

will be advised to take a PCR test. Young people who reach the age of 18 will be given 4 months to get vaccinated.

- DfE will no longer recommend face coverings in communal areas or dedicated education transport.
- Colleges are advised to follow updated workplace guidance for specialist areas, for example healthcare settings or commercial training environments.
- DfE continues to strongly emphasise the need for in-person teaching for 16 to 19 study programmes but the guidance says that the precise rules will be spelled out in a forthcoming update to the 2021-22 funding guidance.
- Returning students in September will be expected to do two on-site lateral flow device tests, three-to-five days apart, on their return in the autumn term. Staff should continue to take two tests a week at home up until the end of September at which point changes may be made.
- Colleges should retain their capacity to provide online education.
- International visits can restart once autumn term starts but obviously care will be needed over destinations, insurance etc
- Colleges, like all organisations, will need to update their risk assessments. DfE cites updated advice from the HSE on ventilation and cleaning.

The Association of Colleges made the following comment on the updated guidance:

“Colleges have done a tremendous job in keeping staff and students safe whilst keeping learning happening over the last year and will do everything possible to continue that during the next academic year. It is clear the next academic year may feel very different from this one, and there are still lots of uncertainties, but it is crucial that testing will be a central plank in living with the virus. College leaders will need assurance that the costs of increased testing will be fully covered and that communications will be timely on any changes to guidance. The full guidance will be carefully considered by college leaders as they make their plans for September and as they try to assure staff and students that they will be safe.”²⁶

²⁶ Association of Colleges, [Education restrictions lifted after 19 July - AoC responds](#), 7 July 2021

5.5

Examinations in summer 2021

On 6 January 2021, the government confirmed that in summer 2021, students taking GCSE, AS and A levels regulated by Ofqual, will be awarded grades based on an assessment by their teachers. Following this announcement a two week consultation was held on the method to be used to award grades and in February Ofqual published a [consultation decisions](#) document setting out how grades would be awarded. The Ofqual document sets out how grades will be assessed and evidence to be used, the use of supporting materials, quality assurance and information on appeals and results.

On 25 February 2021, the DfE published guidance on [Awarding qualifications in summer 2021](#). This year's 2021 exams approach requires teachers to submit grades by 18 June 2021. Students will receive their results for A/AS levels on the 10 August and GCSEs on the 12 August. Results for relevant VTQs that are linked to progression to further or higher education, including some BTECs, will also be issued to students on or before these dates.

Following the release of results, there will be a window for students who believe their grade is wrong to raise an appeal.

Vocational Qualifications

Information on the assessment of VTQs was set out in a document, [Alternative arrangements for the award of VTQs and other general qualifications in 2021](#).

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