



Department  
for Education



Public Health  
England

# HEI Covid outbreak planning: Practical advice from universities that have experienced outbreaks recently

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# Where are the outbreaks occurring?

Large outbreaks have been linked to student accommodation not to teaching and learning activities.

Outbreaks seem mainly among first year undergraduates from the data available.

Understanding which students are becoming covid-19 positive in your institution (e.g. UG vs PG, first years vs other UG years, students in university halls vs commuter students etc) is likely to be useful in evolving your outbreak response plan and targeting activities and interventions at areas of most risk.

# Outbreak response planning



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Outbreak response planning should have a strong focus on the accommodation/social aspects of student life as well as teaching and learning. Accommodation and student wellbeing issues have posed greater challenges to institutions than teaching and learning adjustments thus far.

In terms of scenario planning for moving between the DfE Tiers, it is worth considering in advance (i) which subjects might be considered essential for face-to-face teaching, (ii) which subjects will be harder to move online at speed and (iii) whether some courses will need to be moved online in stages to enable elements of the course to be completed face-to-face. One university moved from students doing two or three modules simultaneously to one module at a time at the start of this year because it made a rapid switch to online learning/Tier 3 easier.

# Outbreak response planning

Consider the pros and cons of closing buildings for a limited period (e.g. if shifting to a higher DfE Tier). Some universities report that mothballing buildings for a limited period was time consuming and impractical and it was easier to keep them open. For example, this meant they did not need to flush all the water systems to eliminate the risk of legionnaires disease and also enabled all buildings to be functional when exiting the higher DfE Tier once an outbreak was under control.

Save PHE Health Protection Teams' and Local Authority Public Health Teams' contacts to the phones of key personnel. Be aware of health team rotas so you know who to call if there is an incident out of hours.

# Supporting students in self-isolation



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Support for students to self-isolate was significant and the numbers requiring support can increase rapidly. Contingency plans need to be in place for ensuring adequate food supplies e.g. avoid reliance on a single on-campus supermarket and ensure multiple suppliers can be mobilised rapidly. Have clear processes in place on how food parcels can be packed and delivered and at scale, one university was procuring a private catering company as a contingency. Students that are isolating order a lot of parcels from Amazon etc. so make arrangements for dealing with that influx if lots of students are isolating in one building.

The welfare and pastoral support offers were a good incentive for students to report their positive tests/isolation into the university, which meant there was strong confidence in the reporting overall. Some challenges related to PRSBs though. In some cases, students informed the PRSB and not the university that they had tested positive thinking it was part of the university administration.

Student unions had been helpful in putting on film nights, guest lectures etc to keep students occupied during isolation. One university operated a peer assisted learning buddy system among its second and third year students to support first years.

(See also DfE/PHE Exercise During Isolation document)

# Tracing contacts

Some universities had applied very specific QR codes. Instead of just having a QR code for a building or a room, they had them per desk so that they could be more targeted in who they asked to self-isolate. They found they needed to ask fewer students to isolate as a result.

One university operating a swipe card system, reduced the number of students in tutorial/study groups. This also meant that they could reduce the number of fellow students that had to isolate if someone in their group tested positive.

There were different local approaches on tracing agreed with local PHE Health Protection Teams. Some universities undertook tracing, others handed relevant information to PHTs to enable tracing. One university which undertook some tracing found response rates were improved by texting students first, so they were expecting a phone call.

# Student behaviour

Universities have been fining, and in a few cases, suspending students for bad behaviour. One institution created a behaviour management course for 'first offences' to help encourage behaviour change.

In some circumstances, universities have sponsored extra Police Support Officers to patrol student areas.

An approach which avoided recriminations for 'first offences' was found to help engage with students who have been at parties etc and obtain the information required on close contacts they have had.

Keeping study spaces, libraries, sports etc open can encourage students to stay on campus even if the teaching has moved online. It was also perceived to help look after students' mental health and avoid them being stuck in their room too much. Universities that have moved to Tier 3 have not yet seen a mass exodus of students going home.

One university talked about their student ambassador and graduate ambassador schemes (670 employed last year) providing a pool of trained and responsible students in the student body to help manage behaviour.

Consistency has been critical. It helps to have clear sign-off to avoid important messages falling through the gaps.

It may be worth putting systems in place to deal with high volumes of complaints from the public and enquiries from worried parents prompted by media reports e.g. by creating a web form for complaints and proactive updates on social media. Attending local community forums may also help avoid town vs gown antagonism.

Communicating messages to staff first was found to have advantages. One, course leaders/heads of department passing on certain messages to students achieved greater engagement because it was more personal and relevant. Two, students tend to ask their course leaders/heads of department questions when they received important messages, so it seemed to work better for one university when they briefed staff first.

Consider engaging students in drafting of messages.

# Public health response

Each outbreak has required an individual response working with local PHE Health Protection Teams and Local Authority Public Health Teams as the detail and context has differed between institutions even those geographically close to each other.