



**Michelle Donelan MP**  
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Dear Colleagues,

Thank you once again for the diligence and patience of you and your staff over the last few weeks and months. Your efforts continue to be essential to ensure that students can receive the support they need to progress in their education and to graduate as planned. I appreciate that you are facing unprecedented challenges and staff and student wellbeing continues to be my top priority.

### **Student returns**

As you know, on Monday the Prime Minister announced the roadmap to the reopening of education settings. While we are confident that in-person teaching and learning can be delivered 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 prevalence and rates of transmission of new variants. This is why we have made the difficult decision to restrict the number of students returning to campus in this period.

At the beginning of term, we prioritised the return to in-person teaching for students on courses which support the pipeline of future critical key workers. We are now advising you to invite those on practical and creative courses who need access to specialist equipment and facilities (including creative arts subjects) back to in-person teaching and learning from 8 March. For remaining students, the Government will review the options for the timing of their return by the end of the Easter holidays. This review will take account of the latest data and will be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. We will give you at least a week's notice ahead of any further reopening.

While we are keen to get students back to in-person teaching, we must all do everything we can to minimise the risk of transmission across the country. This includes minimising travel wherever we can, so please consider whether students need to return before the Easter holiday. It is vital that they return in a way that

minimises the need for large numbers of students to travel between households at the same time, so it may be useful to explore staggering returns by subject. We have outlined these measures in more detail in our [latest guidance](#).

We know that you share our commitment to ensuring that students and staff feel safe on campus and welcome all the work you are doing to ensure this. As employers, you will be aware of your legal responsibility to protect workers and others from risks to their health and safety, including from COVID-19. We want staff to understand how their campus has been made COVID-19 secure. I recognise that the approach being taken at a sector-level to support a safe return to campus, working with trade unions, is also being reflected at an institutional level to reassure staff. Our guidance makes clear that you should complete a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks of COVID-19 in the workplace and identify control measures to manage that risk. You should regularly review and update your risk assessments, taking into account new advice and guidance with implications for health and safety. As you know, you also have a duty to consult your employees on health and safety matters. This may be through consulting with any recognised trade union health and safety representatives, or, if you do not have any, with a representative chosen by workers. I know that many of you are going above and beyond in doing this and I am extremely grateful.

While we remain in a period of national restrictions, I appreciate that particular groups of students may need more support and ask you to ensure that appropriate provision is in place for those who fall into the following groups:

- International students who have remained in the UK and those who have arrived and do not have alternative accommodation.
- Those requiring additional support, including for mental health.
- Anyone without access to appropriate study spaces or facilities in their vacation accommodation. This also applies to commuter students who (if not able to return to in-person teaching) should only access university resources if they have inadequate study spaces or require additional support, such as mental health provision.
- Students who have remained in term time accommodation, but we have asked that they only utilise campus resources when they have to, in order to reduce footfall on campus.

I recognise the difficulties and disruption that this delay will cause to remaining students and their families who have endured a difficult and uncertain time for the last 11 months of their studies. This financial year, we have provided an additional £70m of hardship funding in England for you to support students with the cost of accommodation and other costs associated with remote learning. This is available to all students, regardless of whether they are now returning to face-to-face teaching, including international students. I hope this support has been beneficial for your students and I assure you that we are doing all we can to facilitate their return as soon as it is safe to do so.

Testing is absolutely key to the return of this additional tranche of students and we

encourage students to utilise community testing and get tested before their return to university. It is vital that on return all students take part in your testing programme to help to break the chain of transmission and identify asymptomatic infections. Students should be tested twice in their first week of return – immediately upon arrival and then again three days later. Thereafter, they should get tested twice weekly unless there is a valid reason not to e.g., students who attend campus only once a week. If you have concerns regarding the facilitation of this testing regime it is imperative that you email [HE.COVIDPLANNING@education.gov.uk](mailto:HE.COVIDPLANNING@education.gov.uk) so that we can work swiftly with you to explore partnership options and community testing. We are aware that some of you may have alternative PCR testing regimes in place and welcome any questions on this approach as well. We will work with all HE providers to implement practical solutions, so please contact us so we can help.

### **Exams and HE admissions**

I am very grateful for the input HE stakeholders have provided over the past few weeks to shape this year's alternative arrangements to exams. I believe we have reached a place where this year's arrangements for assessment, work in the best interests of students and also work for the HE sector. I would like to pick up in more detail a few of the key areas that have been raised by the sector.

Results days will be brought forward and held in the same week. This means that students receive their results for GCSE, AS and A levels on the 10th and 12th of August, respectively. Results for relevant VTQs that are linked to progression to Further or Higher Education should also be issued to students on or before these dates. The process for releasing results to Universities will be the same as a normal year allowing providers to make confirmation decisions before results are published. This approach is critical in order to maximise the time available for robust assessment and quality assurance processes, but also to allow more time to manage the post results appeals processes.

I also heard from the sector that the appeals process needs to work for both students and providers. Every student who believes their grade does not reflect their performance or has not been properly determined should have a clear route to appeal this year. Appeals for those students whose higher education places are dependent on the outcome of an appeal should, as far as possible, be concluded in early September.

There may be some students taking VTQs or other general qualifications who are unhappy with the results that they receive through the alternative arrangements. These students will have access to a right of appeal on the same basis as those set out for GCSEs, AS and A levels, but the exact nature of the processes might differ to recognise the different nature of the qualifications. I encourage you to be flexible and honour all offers across all courses to students who meet their conditions this coming year, wherever possible.

We believe that in the absence of exams, teachers are best placed to determine grades. Teachers have a good understanding of their students' performance and how they compare to other students within their overall subject departments or

individual subjects this year, and in previous years.

Teachers will be able to draw evidence from across the duration of the student's course, to determine their grade. Teachers will have flexibility to use a range of evidence from across the course of study, including complete and partially completed coursework (non-examined assessments), mock exams, in-class assessments.

Teachers are able to use optional additional assessment materials developed and provided by the exam boards which will include sets of questions organised to help teachers quickly find questions in the topics they have taught. There will be a combination of published and unpublished questions, with a proportion of unpublished questions in all subjects. The questions will be accompanied by mark schemes, example responses and, where available, data on past performance to support teachers in making their judgements.

Exam boards will provide a package of training and support materials in March on how to make judgements fairly. The guidance will also provide schools and colleges with support and training on how to minimise the risk of bias and malpractice. Exam boards will also provide grade descriptors to help teachers to make accurate and fair judgements.

Grades will reflect what a student knows, understands, and can do. Teachers will not be asked to judge the grade a student might have achieved had the pandemic not occurred or to measure potential. We know there has been differential learning loss, as some students have suffered more disruption to their learning than others. Because of this, students will only be assessed on the content they have been taught.

We must ensure there is as much fairness as possible for VTQ students including where relevant with their GCSE, AS and A level peers. For VTQs most similar to GCSE, AS and A levels that are used for progression to further or higher education. Exams for these VTQs will not go ahead, and results will instead be awarded using similar arrangements to GCSEs and AS or A levels. Furthermore, in order to achieve fairness for students, other general qualifications that are not GCSEs, AS or A levels such as the International Baccalaureate, Pre-U, Core Maths should not be subject to exams and will be awarded in a similar way to GCSE, AS and A levels.

Many universities have told me that they are taking a more cautious approach to offer making this year, which I believe is a sensible approach. I am confident that you will continue to put students' interests at the heart of your decision-making and do all you can to ensure a fair and consistent approach across the board.

I hope this information provides some relief for you and your staff and I am grateful for your continued support of students in these unprecedented times. As always, I really value your direct input, particularly through our regular taskforce meetings

and individual calls. If there is any more we can do to support you, please get in touch with me or my team.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and a long, sweeping underline.

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**Minister of State for Universities**