



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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Dear Colleagues,

I want to take this opportunity to thank you again for all your hard work and the dedication and commitment you have shown to your students in these difficult times. I understand that the pandemic has caused many disruptions to your usual ways of working, and your creative and innovative solutions to these hurdles have not gone unnoticed. I am particularly grateful for the extensive preparation work that has clearly gone into ensuring that universities are safe places for students to be.

As you are aware, in April the Government announced that all students on non-practical courses would be able to return to in-person teaching alongside Step 3 of the Roadmap, when restrictions on social contact will be eased further and the majority of indoor settings can reopen. Following the latest review of the data against the Government's four tests, I am delighted to confirm that from 17th May there will no longer be any restrictions on the in-person teaching of students on non-practical courses. Whilst I understand that many universities have now entered periods of assessment and that opportunities for timetabled in-person teaching may be limited for the rest of this academic year, I hope that this easing of restrictions will provide a chance for students to get involved in cocurricular and other on-campus activities before the end of term and enable them to have the option of engaging with their academic tutors in-person. This could include in-person career support, society events as well as other social student experiences that have had to remain remote up until now.

While this is good news, I recognise that the disruptions continue to impact students and their families. When I wrote to you last month, I advised that we are making a further £15m in hardship funding available to Approved (fee cap) providers through the Office for Students that can be used to support students with the cost of accommodation and other costs that may be associated with remote learning. I am sure it goes without saying that we ask you to continue to encourage your students to come forward if they require support and I know you have been doing this throughout and will continue to do so. As you are aware, student and staff mental health and wellbeing is at the forefront of my agenda. I am continuing to work with you, and with colleagues on the Mental Health in Education Action Group, to ensure we have robust, on-going support in place, and I am so grateful for the support you provide for your students.

I am aware that a number of courses will have finished their teaching element before 17th May so I am grateful for the plans you have been making to ensure that students can access the experiences they have missed out on so far this year as much as possible, especially on the social side.

As you know, the Government is working with HE providers to offer twice weekly asymptomatic testing to all students residing in their term-time accommodation, or accessing university facilities, and to all staff. Thank you for all your work to date on this programme. One in three people with COVID-19 do not experience any symptoms and may be spreading the virus without knowing; regular testing for everyone is crucial to combat this and help prevent outbreaks. We want to ensure the return to university is as positive as possible and avoid new outbreaks that require the self-isolation of students.

Students are encouraged to test before they travel back to university, either through their local community testing programme or by [ordering a home test online](#) via the Universal Rapid Testing Offer. On arrival at university, wherever possible students should undertake three supervised tests (3-4 days apart) at an on-site testing facility, where this is available. This is to reduce the risk of transmission following the movement of students across the country. Some students at smaller HE providers, where onsite testing facilities are not available, may begin to use home test kits immediately. Students should then test twice a week, either using home test kits or at an on-site testing facility. Home testing, introduced from May, will help offer further flexibility for students and staff to fit testing around their routine. For students or staff where it is not convenient to access tests through their provider, they can order a box of tests online through the Universal Rapid Testing Offer, which will be delivered to their home.

As well as offering home test kits to staff and students, you are strongly encouraged to retain asymptomatic test sites near university facilities (libraries, lecture halls, large halls of residence etc) to make it as easy as possible for students to access regular tests. The COVID –19 vaccination programme is on track to offer the vaccine to all adults over the age of 18 by 31 July. We are keen to encourage a high take up of the vaccine amongst students. We are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and Public Health England on ensuring that students can access Covid vaccinations, including ensuring tailored messaging to this population and we are keen to work with you on this. Alongside the rollout of the vaccine and ensuring everyone continues to follow the national restrictions in place, regular testing is going to be an essential part of the easing of restrictions as it will help us quickly suppress the spread of variants.

You should continue to strongly encourage all students and staff to participate in the testing programme and, when testing at home, to report their results, whether positive, negative, or void. If you have set up an LFD collection point at your university, staff and students will be able to ascribe their results to your university when reporting their home test results online. Testing results reported in this way will be made available to you at an aggregate level. Recording all results helps us get a better understanding of the spread of the virus across the country. If we only record positive results, the level of COVID-19 cases will look worse than they really are.

At my recent roundtable with Sir Kevan Collins and university leaders, I was impressed by the sector's energy in planning transition support for incoming students. It is vital that all institutions make effective plans to support this year's new cohort, particularly students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups whose education has been disproportionately impacted this year. I am grateful for the plans already being made and I strongly encourage you to reach out to your incoming students as early as possible to let them know about the support you will be offering them over the summer and when they are on course. To support these efforts, we are working with schools/colleges to encourage them to support transition activities after the May half term and we will be collaborating with partners such as UCAS to signpost new students to useful resources to support them in their transition. I hope that by working together we can help provide these students with the confidence they need to thrive in their future studies.

We will continue to work with the sector by providing clear guidance to support full return and I am pleased to see that the sector is also producing its own materials. The [College and University Business Officers](#) and the [Universities Safety and Health Association](#) have jointly issued a checklist for students living in shared accommodation to help minimise the risk of coronavirus transmission. I also understand that UNITE Students has completed a report on managing outbreaks in the accommodation that it operates in many towns and cities. I know that providers in the sector are already considering the learning and best practice in these reports and guidance and building it into their management and outbreak plans, as a way of minimising the risk of transmission in student accommodation.

We are aware that 2021 graduates will have had fewer opportunities to gain work experience (fewer internships, placements, part time jobs), and participate in extra-curricular activities, experiences that traditionally help students develop employability skills. My Department has worked with Universities UK, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the Institute of Student Employers, the OfS and across the sector to understand what more we can do to support graduates who are looking to enter the labour market or continue their studies at this challenging time. As a result, we have developed the [Graduate Employment and Skills Guide](#), which signposts graduates to public, private and voluntary sector opportunities, to help them build employability skills and gain work experience or enter the labour market. The Guide also links to further study options and resources on graduate mental health and wellbeing.

My Department is also working closely with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), professional bodies and the OfS to ensure students continue to leave university with qualifications that have real value, reflect their hard work and allow people to progress. Our message to employers and the Higher Education Sector is that standards have been maintained and that the qualifications awarded will be of the same academic standard as in previous years. This student cohort has responded to the pandemic with formidable resilience and motivation and has shown a clear ability to adapt and learn at pace. As a result of online learning and teaching, this cohort has also developed excellent digital and remote working skills and will be well equipped for future ways of working.

Furthermore, my Department has also engaged with providers to produce a collection of [Graduate Employability Case Studies](#). Published on the OfS website, these case studies showcase the breadth of innovative work and range of new measures university and college careers services have introduced to support final year students and recent graduates as they transition from university to graduate life.

I understand that planning is well underway in institutions for the next academic year, and we are keen to work with the sector to issue new guidance on the return to campus in September. This guidance will support providers to respond in an agile way to any public health issues that we might encounter. We are looking into sharing some scenarios that might stimulate ideas for contingency planning and we will continue to keep mission groups informed of our plans.

I hope this information is useful and I would like to thank you and your staff for your efforts in what has been a uniquely trying academic year. I am grateful for your understanding and ongoing support for students. As always, I value your direct input through our regular engagements. If there is any more we can do to support you, or you have any concerns, [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 long horizontal flourish at the end.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities