

Dear Vice Chancellors,

I am writing to update you on the mass testing programme for Higher Education.

Firstly, I would like to extend my warmest thanks and gratitude to you, your staff, and those who have been working and volunteering at ATS sites in Higher Education Institutions. This pandemic has been incredibly hard for HE Providers, and I am full of the deepest respect for how you, your students and your lecturers, researchers, and support staff have risen to its challenges.

I can now confirm that staff of Higher Education Institutions, and students currently eligible to attend these institutions, (see annex A), will be eligible for twice weekly testing.

Having spoken to a number of you and having heard your eagerness to roll out regular mass testing, I anticipate that many of you will want to move quickly to deliver this, using the excess test capacity and existing Asymptomatic Testing Site infrastructure you have on site.

There will be no need to agree to a revised legal agreement as the existing agreement runs to the end of February, but the SOP will be updated to reflect the updated approach. Whilst we are working at pace to do this, I would encourage you to commence testing eligible students and staff as soon as possible and ideally from week commencing 25 January under the current cost recovery model, with the SOP and detailed guidance following imminently. We expect this arrangement to run until the 15 February. We will also be setting out our plans for the broader return of students in the coming weeks and how testing will fit into that picture.

Twice weekly testing will help to break chains of transmission, identify asymptomatic infections and help further ensure safety on campus to help enable a return to face-to-face teaching as soon as is possible.

All eligible students and staff should have access to two LFD tests per week as part of the programme. The requirement for a confirmatory PCR tests after a positive LFD test will be temporarily removed from next week to help ease the pressure on PCR laboratory capacity and you will be updated when these changes take place.

It is our expectation that the current arrangements for testing and partnering will remain in place for this first phase of the rollout of weekly testing out to the 15th February. Officials will also be available to discuss any challenges you have to delivery weekly testing to enable your students to safely continue their studies. Please contact he.covidplanning@education.gov.uk

It is vital as many institutions engage with the testing programme as is possible to reduce spread of Covid-19 and to get more students back for face to face learning this term. If your institution cannot accommodate this and partnership is not an option, then we will work with you to find solutions so please do let us know your concerns and challenges. I appreciate there will also be additional questions and concerns regarding how twice weekly testing can be done for the larger student body upon return – we appreciate the importance of this issue and I must stress this ask is only until mid-February and we will keep working with you regarding future plans.

I am committed to working in collaboration with you to deliver weekly mass testing for the HE sector and recognise that you may have a number of operational questions. Therefore, officials will be continuing the regular drop in webinars and will continue to use the Egress portal to share key documents with you.

On a related note, I am aware that providers find it a challenge to report daily through the Office for Students (OfS) on staff and student Covid cases and numbers of students returning and booking tests I remain very grateful for providers' continuing engagement with the OfS reporting tool: this provides invaluable information on the scale and potential impact of Covid across the sector. In response to these challenges and my commitment to you to reduce bureaucracy, I propose that from 25 January providers need only report Covid cases twice a week, and need only report the number of students who have returned once a week. This will be confirmed on the submissions page of the OfS reporting portal. However, if there are significant changes or critical issues or outbreaks that emerge, we expect providers to be able to submit updates and information more quickly as required to manage and monitor the situation.

Thank you once again for your support in delivering this important mass testing initiative, which is a crucial tool for minimising transmission and keeping universities safe.

Annex

Excerpt from Guidance for higher education providers, issued January 2021¹

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).

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.

Additionally, any students who have returned to campus because they do not have access to appropriate alternative accommodation, facilities or study space, or who need to have returned for health and safety reasons, or who have remained on campus over Christmas should be offered testing as well.

¹ [Higher education providers: coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/higher-education-providers-coronavirus-covid-19)