



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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13th April 2021

Dear Colleagues,

As always, I would like to thank you for your continuing resilience and hard work to ensure the best for your students in this tough time. I appreciate how challenging this year has been and the wellbeing of you and your staff continues to be a key priority for me.

Last term, we advised that students on certain practical and creative courses could go back to in-person teaching and committed to reviewing further returns by the end of the Easter holidays. We have recently announced that remaining students will 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. This will take place no earlier than 17 May, following a further review of the data against the four tests. A return alongside Step 3 would give many students time to receive some in-person teaching before the end of term, as well as engage with cocurricular activities and enjoy the benefits of on-campus activity, in accordance with Government advice.

The government and I have always been keen for students to return to in-person teaching as soon as possible and this decision has not been taken lightly. It was made to keep students and the wider community as safe as possible. We recognise the difficulties and disruption that this may cause for many staff, students, and their families. However, the government roadmap is designed to maintain a cautious approach to the easing of restrictions, to ensure that we can maintain progress towards full reopening. By Step 3, more of the population will be vaccinated, and there is also more time to increase testing to reduce risk further. The 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. As a result, we will continue to minimise the number of students who return to their place of study and in-person teaching for now. The existing exemptions still apply for students with inadequate study space and/or mental health and wellbeing issues that would warrant a return to their term time address despite their teaching still being online. Please do also consider appropriate provision to support access to university facilities for all students for the purposes of online learning, to safeguard students' wellbeing and to prevent isolation and mental ill health. In line with wider coronavirus restrictions, this may include supporting access to organised sport and entertainment.

We have worked closely throughout this period and so I realise that this comes as disappointing news for many of you who had hoped to welcome more students

back in April. I do not discount the difficulty that this further delay will create for students. With this in mind, I can announce that the government is making available a further £15 million for providers to address student hardship this academic year. This is in addition to the £70m already distributed to providers via the OfS this academic year.

The Mental Health in Education Action Group, which I convene with Minister Ford, will continue to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of students, as will the HE Taskforce Mental Health and Wellbeing subgroup. We have worked with the Office for Students to launch the online mental health platform Student Space, worth up to £3 million, in addition to the £15 million we have asked them to consult on to allocate to student mental health initiatives in the coming academic year. Please do continue to prioritise student mental health and be assured that we will support wherever we can. As part of this, I want to stress the need for providers to ensure students have opportunities to engage in the wider university experience they have missed out on when they return to campus.

I also appreciate how vital it is that we support graduates and new students, as they transition into their next stage. We are working in parallel with Universities UK, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, the Institute of Student Employers, the Office for Students, and the wider sector to understand what more we can do to support and co-ordinate these transitions though we know that providers are best placed to lead on this. I know that many of you are already making plans to support incoming students and it is vital that all providers do the same. This is a joint endeavour, and we are keen to work with the sector to signpost students to useful resources, share good practice and co-ordinate communication with schools/colleges. I welcome your thoughts and ideas on this and look forward to working with you and across the sector to identify the best ways to maximise these efforts.

More broadly, the Government is doing all it can to help people who are at the start of their career journey. The Department for Work and Pensions has successfully recruited over 13,500 new work coaches as of the end of March 2021. This will ensure that high quality work search support is available to those who need it. We are also investing additional funding in the National Careers Service up to March 2022. This investment will support delivery of individual careers advice for those whose jobs/learning have been affected by the pandemic (by end of FY21/22). We have also added additional courses to the Skills Toolkit to develop 'work readiness' skills that employers report they value in their new recruits.

We are hearing from many universities that a significant number of students are already back in their term time accommodation, even if they are not yet in in-person teaching. As I wrote to you before, we are very keen that as many of these students as possible currently residing in university halls of residence or other term-time accommodation take part in your testing programme to help to break the chain of transmission and identify asymptomatic infections, even if they are not yet back to in-person teaching.

I am grateful for your efforts in establishing asymptomatic testing programmes for your students and staff. This is playing an important role in identifying positive cases of the virus and breaking chains of transmission. In May 2021, we will be making home test kits available to universities to supply to their staff and students as appropriate, and we will be sending you further details of how you can order these shortly. In addition, staff and students can make use of the universal testing offer by ordering home tests online. As is the expectation across most educational settings, wherever possible, students returning to university should undertake three supervised tests at an on-site test facility before moving to home testing. As well as offering home test kits to staff and students, I would strongly encourage you 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.

Please do all you can to ensure that all students residing in term time accommodation and staff get tested regularly and report their result when testing at home. Please also encourage students to take a test before they travel back to term time accommodation.

Please be assured that I will continue to work with you to address the difficulties that the sector is facing. I hugely appreciate your direct input to this work, particularly through our regular taskforce meetings and individual calls. If there is anything 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 fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Michelle' written in a larger, more prominent script than the surname 'Donelan'.

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