



**Michelle Donelan MP**  
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Dear colleagues,

I hope you managed to have a break of some sort over the festive period. I know many of you have been working tirelessly to support students who have stayed in their university areas and, as always, I am extremely grateful for your dedication and the dedication of your staff.

Following rising cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) across parts of England, early and concerning evidence on a new variant and the extension of Tier 4 restrictions to a number of regions of the country, we must consider whether there is a need to take further steps to reduce transmission in education settings. We will shortly be updating the Spring 2021 guidance to reflect the decisions set out below.

As a result of the new developments, we are unfortunately having to ask you **to restrict the number of practical students returning from 4 January to those who are reading subjects in the following subject areas:**

- Medicine & dentistry
- Subjects allied to medicine/health (see detailed list below)
- Veterinary science
- Education (initial teacher training)
- Social work
- **Courses which require Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) assessments and or mandatory activity which is scheduled for January and which cannot be rescheduled**

In addition, you are encouraged to ensure that those students who have remained at university or who have compelling reasons to return are given appropriate support and access to study space. This could include:

- International students, including those who have remained in the UK and those who have arrived and do not have alternative accommodation
- Students without access to appropriate study spaces or facilities in their vacation accommodation
- Students who have remained in their university accommodation over the winter break
- Those requiring additional support, including those with mental health issues
- Students on placements where the placement provider has COVID-secure measures in place, is permitted to open based on the relevant local restrictions and is content for placements to continue.

Commuter students should only access campus facilities if they fall in the above exemptions. For the avoidance of doubt, researchers and research students should be treated on the same basis as employees. Where they are able to work from home, they should do so, but those who require access to specialist facilities for their work should be able to do so.

This is not a decision we have taken lightly but it is a necessary step given the rates of transmission across England. We consider that it is proportionate to the other restrictions we have placed on all sectors to curb the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives. We appreciate that many providers have already had to compress practical elements of teaching in the autumn term (in part because of the 'student travel window' in December), and we are acutely aware of the challenges that this poses to both providers and students. However, in these challenging times we must continue to adapt to put in place strengthened measures to reduce transmission rates across the country, whilst maintaining our commitment to education.

We know you will be concerned about students on courses which require Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) approval. Wherever possible, we expect that assessments, placements and other mandatory elements of these courses should be rescheduled until the wider return of students. I encourage you to speak to the relevant PSRBs to explore options to do so. I will also work with Universities UK to convene a discussion with the PSRBs about how to mitigate the impact of these restrictions so that students

– and in particular finalists – do not miss out on qualifying. However, I know there will be a small number of cases where students may not be able to qualify with professional accreditation if on-site learning or exams/assessments are not held in January and cannot be rescheduled. In these limited cases, these students can return as planned.

#### Return of remaining students

All remaining courses should continue to be offered online from the beginning of term. Given the rising infection rates, **the return of all other students should be paused until at least the week commencing 25 January**. The government will review this decision and provide further communication to providers in the week commencing 18 January. On the basis of this review, we will ask providers to plan for the staggered return of further students, prioritising those who will most benefit from in-person provision. We will work with the Office for Students and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to discuss the impact of these measures.

#### Testing on arrival and during term

As I set out in my letter to you on 18 December, asymptomatic testing arrangements should be in place for all students, as well as staff, on arrival at university and we have been working with you to ensure testing is available. Some providers have been offering individual testing schemes or piloting different technologies (e.g., pooled PCR) or partnering with community testing schemes, and we continue to support these initiatives.

We expect **students who will be arriving on campus from 4 January to be tested on arrival and to minimise social contact until a negative test result has been confirmed**. Testing should also be provided to students who have stayed **on campus over the winter break if they have had social contact with others within the previous 10 days**. To minimise the risk to themselves and others on their return to university, students should act responsibly before they travel and follow local restriction tier guidance on social contact. Students who are living in an area which is offering the use of local community testing programmes should seek to get tested before their return, where this fits in with locally targeted programmes led by the Director of Public Health.

Our **advice for international students travelling from overseas for the Spring term is to consider whether they in fact need to travel to the UK at this time, particularly if their course does not require them to be on campus from 4 January**. Those students **should consider delaying if travel arrangements can be rearranged without undue costs**. International arrivals must complete a

passenger locator form on arrival in the UK, and passengers travelling from a country not on the exemption (travel corridor) list will need to self-isolate in their accommodation for 10 days. There is now the option to take a COVID-19 test from a private testing provider (at the student's own cost) after 5 days of self-isolation, with a negative result releasing the student from the need to continue to self-isolate. Guidance is available here. Providers should be ready to advise students of appropriate local testing facilities.

All students should be encouraged to remain in their vacation accommodation until the resumption of their face-to-face teaching, wherever possible, to minimise travel over the next few crucial weeks. International students are also encouraged to remain in the UK where possible. Where students have stayed in their term-time accommodation (private accommodation or university halls) over the winter break, and for those who have to return to access appropriate study facilities, providers should continue to make sure they are well looked after and supported. This could include keeping facilities such as libraries, and study and performance rooms, open for students to use in a COVID-secure way. Staff required to operate these essential campus services are considered essential workers, vital to the continuation of education, and will be able to travel to work.

We continue to ask that providers pay particular regard to the specific needs of certain groups during this period, including care leavers, estranged students and international students, who will require access to welfare and mental health support and essential services. This has been a particularly difficult period for students and we ask that specific plans are drawn up to cater for students who stay on campus or are living alone in university areas.

I appreciate that these changes will cause disruption to your student return preparations. However, given the unprecedented times we are living in and the rising transmission rates across parts of England caused by the new variant, it is paramount that we act swiftly to limit the spread of the virus.

Once again, thank you for your continued support of students and please pass on my thanks to all your staff and students' unions who have ensured that students are being supported over the winter break.

If you would like to discuss anything further, please do contact my office at [Universities.PS@education.gov.uk](mailto:Universities.PS@education.gov.uk).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

**Michelle Donelan MP**  
**Minister of State for Universities**

## **List of subjects allied to medicine/health and social care courses**

As critical workers who have played a key part in the phenomenal NHS response during the pandemic, health and social care students may return to university in January.

Only students participating in higher education courses (undergraduate, postgraduate, degree apprenticeship courses, diploma and level 5 courses) in these professions meet these criteria:

- nursing (all branches)
- midwifery
- allied health professions, which includes:
  - chiropodists and podiatrists
  - dietitians
  - occupational therapists
  - operating department practitioners
  - orthoptists
  - paramedics
  - physiotherapists
  - prosthetists and orthotists
  - radiographers
  - speech and language therapists
- dental hygiene, dental therapy, dental nursing and dental technology
- physician associates (including other related physician associate professions)
- social work
- pharmacy
- optometry
- healthcare science practitioner training programme