

All students offered testing on return to university

Students will be asked to stagger their return to universities after Christmas to help protect those around them and reduce transmission of Covid-19, the Government has announced today (Wednesday 2 December).

New [guidance](#) published by the Department for Education will set out how higher education providers should manage student returns over a five-week period according to the following:

- From 4 – 18 January, medical students, those on placements or practical courses with a need for in-person teaching should return in line with their planned start dates;
- The remaining courses should be offered online from the beginning of term so students can continue their studies from home; and
- From 25 January, all other students should start to return gradually over a two-week period, and by 7 February all students are expected to have returned.

All students should be offered Covid tests when they return to university to help identify and isolate those who are asymptomatic but could spread the virus. All universities will be offered testing facilities to give students two lateral flow tests, three days apart, with results turned around within an hour to help control the spread of the virus.

These measures will be crucial to manage returns carefully and protect students, staff and local communities while reducing disruption to education.

The Government has also announced a one-off fund of up to £20 million to help students most in need of support in these exceptional circumstances.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said:

The health and wellbeing of students, staff and local communities is always our primary concern and this plan will enable a safer return for all students. But we must do this in a way which minimises the risk of transmission.

I know students have had to make sacrifices this year and have faced a number of challenges, but this staggered return will help to protect students, staff and communities.

It is so important students have the support they need to continue their education, which is why we are providing up to £20 million funding for those facing hardship in these exceptional times.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

We must use every tool at our disposal to stop the spread of the virus and help reduce the risks around students travelling back home this Christmas. Using new technology and the additional capacity we have built, we are now able to extend our testing offer to help manage this risk, by identifying those showing no symptoms who can infect people unknowingly and stop them from passing the virus on to others as they move around the country.

I encourage all students to play their part in bringing this virus under control by getting tested twice, and by following the restrictions in place when travelling to and from university this term.

Universities should tailor plans to best suit the needs of their own student population. They should also consider prioritising those who may need to return to campus earlier for other reasons such as students who do not have access to appropriate accommodation or study space.

The Government expects universities to maintain the quality, quantity and accessibility of their tuition. The Office for Students will be monitoring universities to ensure this happens.

The plans for the spring term follow those enabling students to return home for the Christmas break, with 126 universities offering mass testing for students before they leave in the 'travel window' between 3 – 9 December.

Mass testing will help break transmission among students especially when they may be asymptomatic. Students should restrict contact in the three days between their tests and if they receive a positive test they will have to self-isolate in their accommodation.

Universities should continue to provide additional support to students who are isolating to ensure they can access food and medical supplies if needed, along with mental health support.

Where available, students who have spent the winter break in Tier 3 areas where mass community testing is on offer should take a test before travelling back to university if possible.

Along with developments in mass testing using new rapid 'lateral flow' tests and other advances in medical technologies and protective measures, this should allow for a more normal spring term and a better experience for students and staff.