

# Government support package for universities and students

New measures to protect students and universities, including temporary student number controls, have been announced by the Education Secretary today (4 May), answering sector calls on the Covid-19 response.

Gavin Williamson has announced the [package of measures](#), drawing on proposals from the universities sector, to stabilise university admissions this autumn and to help the universities and students are safeguarded at a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

Through the plans, English higher education providers will be able to recruit full-time undergraduate UK and EU students for 2020/21 up to a temporary set level, which is based on their forecasts for the next academic year, plus an additional 5%. The Government will control these numbers through the student finance system.

The Government will also have the discretion to allocate an additional 10,000 places, with 5,000 ring-fenced for nursing, midwifery or allied health courses to support the country's vital public services.

The measures aim to allow students, who want to go to university and meet their entry requirements, to access higher education while avoiding competition among providers taking a form which would go against the interests of students and the sector.

Through the proposals from Government and the sector, students will benefit from a new proactive and personalised [UCAS Clearing process](#) this summer, which will help to broaden their horizons, and funding to support those in financial hardship.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway has also announced that £100m of public funding will be brought forward to this academic year to help protect vital university research activities. On top of that, an estimated £2.6bn of tuition fee payments will be brought forward to help universities better manage financial risks over the autumn, including taking steps to improve efficiencies and manage their finances in order to avoid cash flow problems further ahead.

The Government has also confirmed that providers are eligible to apply for its support packages, including business loan support schemes, which the Office for Students (OfS) the regulator in England, estimates could be worth at least £700m to the sector, depending on eligibility and take up. The Government has also published further guidance about how providers should access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to safeguard staff jobs, in particular stating that any grant from the scheme should not duplicate other sources of public funding where these are being maintained, such as UK home student tuition fees.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

We are committed to supporting our world class universities and students through this unprecedented challenging time. So we are putting measures in place to help protect students and staff from the impact of coronavirus.

I know this is an unsettling time for all involved, and we are working tirelessly with the sector to do everything we can to stabilise admissions and protect a vital part of our country's economy and society.

I am very grateful to universities for their innovation and dedication in their frontline response at this time.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said:

I know this is a very difficult and anxious time for students, universities and higher education staff, and we are working determinedly with the sector and my counterparts across the UK, to support them during this time.

Universities have an integral part to play in our economy, society and culture, which is highlighted now more than ever through their important role in the fight against the virus.

That is why we are introducing a package of measures to boost support for students, stabilise the admissions system and ease pressures on universities' finances.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

The UK is home to some of the world's leading scientists and researchers. From the study of disease to vaccine development, their work has already proved itself to be invaluable to our response to coronavirus.

This £100 million we are bringing forward will provide immediate help to ensure the excellent research taking place in our universities continues throughout this period of uncertainty.

The full range of measures, bringing together collective action from the Government and sector organisations to help mitigate the impact of coronavirus, include:

- Stabilising admissions – Temporary measures mean providers will be able to recruit full-time, domestic students up to 5% above their forecasts in the next academic year, which is in line with proposals originating

from the sector, to help reduce volatility and ensure a fair and orderly admissions. The Government will also have the discretion to allocate an additional 10,000 places, with 5,000 ring-fenced for nursing, midwifery or allied health courses to support the country's vital public services.

- Preventing exploitative admissions practices – The OfS will consult on a [new temporary registration condition](#) so it can intervene if providers take actions that are harmful to the sector and students.
- Enhanced Clearing process – UCAS is developing a new, personalised Clearing system for students this summer. This includes Clearing Plus, a new service which matches students to universities or other opportunities based on their achievements and course interests. If students' calculated grades exceed their predicted ones, it can suggest alternative courses with higher entry requirements.
- University research funding – The Government is bringing forward £100m of [Quality-related research funding](#) (QR) for providers in England into this current academic year as immediate help to ensure research activities can continue during the crisis.
- Research sustainability taskforce – DfE and BEIS Ministers will set up an advisory sector working group with the Devolved Administrations to consider how best to respond to the challenges universities face on research as a result of Covid-19, and so university research can continue to support the UK's economic recovery following the crisis.
- Government business support – The Government has confirmed that universities are eligible to apply for the Government support schemes, including business loan support, which the OfS estimates could be worth at least £700m, depending upon eligibility and take-up. Providers can also access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to safeguard staff jobs, including for those with short-term contracts.
- Changes to tuition fee loan payments – The Student Loans Company will bring forward tuition fee payments of students in the in the 2020/21 academic year to providers, expected to be worth £2.6bn, to help cash flow. This will not affect the loan liability, amount of interest charged to students or the timing of their maintenance loan payments.
- Financial opportunities – As part of existing programmes and using established procedures, the DfE will consider purchasing assets, such as land and buildings, where they can be used for new or expanding schools and colleges. This financial year the DfE has budgeted for up to £100m to acquire sites for planned projects across purchases from suitable vendors, including higher education providers among others.
- Financial help for students – The Government has worked with the OfS to help clarify that providers can use existing funds, totalling £46m across April and May, to boost their hardship funds for students in financial difficulty. This can include help for IT equipment and internet access.
- Supporting international students – The UK continues to welcome overseas students, and Ministers are working across Government as a priority to ensure universities can continue to attract international students. DfE and DIT Ministers will also chair a group, including key sector representatives, to consider how the International Education Strategy can be updated to respond to the impact of the coronavirus outbreak. The student number controls will only apply to domestic and EU domiciled

full-time undergraduate students in the 2020/21 academic year.

The OfS is proposing a new temporary condition for registered higher education providers in England, allowing it to intervene if universities and colleges act in ways which puts at risk students' interests, or the stability or integrity of the sector. This could include making unconditional offers or pressuring students to accept places that would not be in their best interest through incentives, such as free laptops.

The Government continues to work closely with the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, to mitigate the challenges the entire UK sector faces as a result of coronavirus.

It also continues to support the recruitment of critical workers, such as nurses and doctors, during this important time and aims to use this summer's enhanced Clearing to help this.

In January the Education Secretary wrote to the OfS asking it to prioritise funding through the teaching grant to STEM and specialist subjects. This move will be of more importance in responding to coronavirus.

The research funding plans follow the announcement by Government earlier this month that UKRI-funded PhD students whose studies have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic will receive further support, including additional grants of up to six months.

The Government's key focus will be on ensuring the country's world-class higher education system delivers for all students and the wider economy. As part of this, it expects all providers and their creditors to behave responsibly.

The Government expects access to the business support schemes, reprofiling of public funding and student number controls should be sufficient to help stabilise most providers' finances, and that should certainly be the first port of calls for providers. Should that not be sufficient, such that a higher education provider finds themselves at risk of closure, the Government will only intervene further where we find there is a case to do so, and only where it believes intervention is possible and appropriate, and as a last resort. In such instances, the DfE will be working with HMT and other Government departments to develop a restructuring regime, through which we will review providers' circumstances and assess the need for restructuring. Where action is required, this will come with attached conditions. The Government will work with the Devolved Administrations on this approach.