

Return of students to universities statement

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding the return of students to universities.

Throughout this pandemic, our priority has always been to keep young people as safe as possible while they continued to learn.

It is this commitment to learning and skills that has led the Prime Minister to announce today that, through our Lifetime Skills Guarantee, we will upgrade Further Education colleges across the country with huge capital investment; we'll expand the apprenticeship offer; we will fund valuable free technical courses for adults equivalent to A level, and extend our digital bootcamps.

We'll expand and transform the funding system so it's as easy for a student to get a loan for a higher technical course as for a university degree. The government will give everyone a flexible lifelong loan entitlement to four years of post-18 education – so adults will be able to retrain with high level technical courses, instead of being trapped in unemployment.

At the beginning of September we saw the successful reopening of our schools and colleges. Universities have been working just as hard to make campuses as safe as possible, including through enhanced cleaning measures, social distancing on campus and changes to timetables to stagger and manage attendance on site.

We have now seen the new intake of first-year students who are beginning a new chapter in their lives at university, together with those who are returning to carry on their studies.

I know this will not be the start that any of them would have wanted or expected and I would just like to say that I am pleased to see both Universities and students have followed the guidance in a responsible way, putting themselves, friends and the local community in a safe place and out of harms' way.

Students, as well as the wider community, accept when we are living in a global pandemic we have to operate in a society with restrictions but I do not believe that we should look to inflict stricter measures on students or expect higher standards of behaviour from them than we would from any other section of society.

The decision to keep universities open and all of our students learning has been a result of an enormous team effort throughout the higher education sector.

We have drawn on the expertise of the HE taskforce that we set up, and we have been providing robust public health advice and regular updates to the

sector to help them to plan carefully to keep students and staff as safe as possible.

As with all our education settings, we will continue monitoring the situation closely and will follow the latest scientific advice, adapting policies as the situation changes.

I know there has been some anxiety about the impact safety measures will have on the Christmas holidays. Students are important members of the communities that they chose to study in.

We expect them to follow the same guidance as their local communities. We are going to work with universities to make sure that all students are supported to return home safely and spend Christmas with their loved ones, if they choose to do so. In this context, it is essential we put in place measures to ensure this can happen while minimising the risk of transmission.

Where there are specific circumstances that warrant it there may be a requirement for some students to self-isolate at the end of term, and we will be working with the sector to ensure this will be possible, including ending in-person learning early if that is deemed to be necessary. My department will publish this guidance shortly so that every student will be able to spend Christmas with their family.

Where students choose to stay in their university accommodation over Christmas, universities should continue making sure they are safe and well looked-after.

Of course it is inevitable there will be cases of Covid occurring in universities, just as there are in our wider communities and the constituencies that we represent. But Mr Speaker, we believe that universities are very well prepared to handle any outbreaks as they arise, and we have been working with the sector and Public Health England to make sure that they have every support and assistance they need should this happen.

I have been impressed by the steps that our universities have been taking, working hand in glove with local authorities and local public health teams to safeguard students and staff. All our universities have local outbreak plans, and all of these have been discussed with local Directors of Public Health.

It is essential that we continue to allow our students to have face-to-face teaching wherever possible, as part of a blended learning approach. I have heard the Opposition call for all learning to move online. While online learning is a highly effective part of the learning experience, there are many courses – including medicine and dentistry, as well as the creative arts – which require a face-to-face element.

That's why our guidance, published on the 11th of September, set out a tiered approach in Higher Education.

Tiers enable a balance of face-to-face and online learning within the context of the COVID risk, and will operate alongside local restrictions that are

placed on the wider community in the area the university is in.

I would now like to mention the latest position regarding testing for students. We have been working with DHSC to make sure that the testing capacity is sufficient and appropriate for universities and I am sure you will be aware that DHSC has now launched the NHS Covid-19 app.

The Department for Health and Social Care continues to make more testing available and the vast majority of people can get a test locally. DHSC is also increasing the number of local testing sites and laboratories, adding new Lighthouse laboratories in Newport and Charnwood to the national lab network as well as additional walk-in centres being planned.

Mr Speaker, while we know that testing capacity is the highest it has ever been, we are still seeing a significant demand for tests. So like any other member of society, it is vitally important that staff and students at universities only get a test if they develop coronavirus symptoms or if advised to do so by a clinician or public health official.

I'm aware that going to university can be a stressful time for some students – many of whom will be living away from their family and friends for the first time in their lives. This year there will undoubtedly see added pressures because of the disruption and uncertainty caused by the pandemic and we must be mindful of how this will affect mental health and wellbeing of students.

Many universities have bolstered existing mental health services, and offer alternatives to face-to-face consultations. Once again I would like to thank staff at universities and colleges who have responded so quickly and creatively to the need to transform these essential services.

We have asked universities to provide additional help and practical support to students as well. And I am pleased to say Mr Speaker that universities are making sure students that are isolating are properly cared for and can access food, medical and cleaning supplies if needed. Student accommodation and support services will be a vital resource if any student has to isolate, and for students generally during this difficult period.

As well as providing support for those in halls of residence, we will make sure students who live in houses of multiple occupation away from campus, will still have access to advice and support if they need it. Universities are also able to call on £256 million provided by the government for hardship funding for students who have to isolate.

Mr Speaker, this Government has taken a conscious decision to prioritise education. We know how fundamental a good education is to opportunity, to aspiration and to social mobility.

That is why we opened schools, and why over 99.8% of schools are now open, delivering education to our children. Delivering education and the opportunity to go to university is equally important for those youngsters who have left college or left school as well.

We cannot eliminate all risk, but we will not condemn a generation of young people by asking them to put their lives on hold for months or years ahead.

We believe that universities are very well prepared to handle any outbreaks as they arise and I commend this statement to the House.