



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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13th April 2021

Dear Students,

I continue to be deeply impressed by the dedication and commitment you have shown to your education under these difficult circumstances. Over the last year, I have worked closely with your providers to try and reduce the impact COVID-19 has had on you and to make sure that the quality of your education remains consistent.

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 of you 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 you to return to in-person teaching as soon as possible and this decision has not been taken lightly. It was made to keep you and the wider community as safe as possible. We recognise the difficulties and disruption that this may cause for many students and their families. However, the government roadmap is designed to maintain a cautious approach to the easing of restrictions in the light of public health considerations, 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 advise that the number of students who return to their place of study and in-person teaching should be limited for now. Our advice remains that some students, such as those with inadequate study space and/or mental health and wellbeing issues, may need to return to their term time address despite their teaching still being online. In addition, we have asked providers to consider appropriate provision to support access to university facilities for all students for the purposes of online learning, to safeguard your 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.

I have spoken to many of you during our student panels, so I am aware this comes as disappointing news for those who had hoped to resume in-person teaching in April. I understand the difficulty that this further delay will create for you and your families. 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 £70 million already distributed to providers via the OfS this academic year.

I will continue to work to prioritise your mental health and wellbeing, including via the Mental Health in Education Action Group, convened by Minister Ford and me. 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. I will continue to ask providers to prioritise mental health support - please do reach out to their support services if you need them. More generally, we appreciate that your experience this year is not what you had expected and so we have discussed with providers the need to ensure you have opportunities to engage in the wider university experience when you have returned to campus.

Alongside this, we are working with the sector to support those of you who are graduating in the summer and those who are entering HE in the autumn to ensure you feel supported in your transition. 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 we can do to complement their planned support. This will include signposting you to useful resources and opportunities.

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

Asymptomatic COVID-19 testing is key to keeping the higher education environment as safe as possible. If you are currently residing in university halls of residence or other term-time accommodation, it is essential that you participate in your provider's asymptomatic COVID testing programme. This will help to identify asymptomatic infections and break chains of transmission, helping to keep you and your friends safe, even if you are not currently participating in in-person teaching and learning. As is the expectation across most educational settings, please take two tests every week and, if testing at home, report your

results whether negative, positive or void. You should familiarise yourself with testing by doing 3 tests at an asymptomatic testing centre before using home test kits while at university. If you are travelling back to university accommodation you should also get tested beforehand at a community testing centre or by ordering a test kit online.

Whilst I have been incredibly humbled to see the resilience you have shown, I am acutely aware of the impact that this disruption may have had on you. As ever, I remain committed to your education, mental health and wellbeing and again would urge you to continue to, where required, use the mental health and pastoral support that your institution provides.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michelle Donelan".

**Michelle Donelan MP
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