

Return of university students for the spring term

The government has issued guidance on how University students will return and resume blended learning after the Christmas break - what does this mean for HE providers?

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The government has issued its guidance on how University students will be able to return to university and resume blended learning after the Christmas break.

At the forefront of the government's plan to assist higher education (HE) providers to protect its staff, students and the local community is the new rapid turnaround testing. This will allow those who are asymptomatic to self-isolate and avoid unintentionally spreading the virus. HE providers will be expected to work with local authorities, smaller HE institutions and students to ensure mass testing can be achieved for the student population.

It remains important for HE providers to advise and communicate to students the importance of rigorously following travel guidance, social distancing, the wearing face coverings and good hygiene practices.

The government has also issued the following guidance to HE providers:

- The return of students should be staggered over 5 weeks,
- Practical and placement students should return first,
- All students should be offered testing on return to university,
- Students should not be encouraged to return to their term-time accommodation until their face-to-face teaching is scheduled to resume.

Universities will be expected to evaluate courses and determine those which have practical elements such as health professions, teaching, music, dance, drama and performing arts. Students on those types of courses should return first.

Clearly the government envisages that a return to face-to-face teaching, placements and practical instruction will be available to students for the Spring term. This will require HE providers to ensure that teaching spaces are Covid-secure, namely that appropriate measures are in place such as hand sanitisers, cleaning regimes, distancing etc.

HE providers will also have to continue to provide on-line learning and ensure that the quality of teaching remains high. Regular communication and feedback from students will be essential to HE providers in being able to demonstrate high standards and ultimately value for money.

For larger HE institutions the pressure will be on to provide facilities for mass testing and to put in place procedures to manage how students will access the site, how it will be staffed and how this will all be communicated to students.

Perhaps however the biggest challenge that HE providers will face in the Spring is the temptation for students to gather, socialise and return to a 'normal' pre-pandemic student life in the wake of

the vaccination programme. HE providers will therefore need to continue to encourage students to co-operate with Covid-secure measures and to follow government guidance. For students deliberately flouting the guidance then HE providers will need to carefully consider what steps can be taken, in line with disciplinary policies, to discourage such behaviour and set examples where necessary.

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