



Rt. Hon. Michelle Donelan MP

Minister of State for Higher and Further Education

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

29th October 2021

Dear Colleagues,

Firstly, I am delighted to have retained my responsibility for universities in England, alongside expanding my portfolio to include further education, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to support our world class HE sector and to deliver an outstanding student experience. I would also like to congratulate you on having a successful start to the term and I am encouraged by your efforts to keep HE settings as safe as possible.

Our expectation is that students returning to university can now expect to benefit from in-person teaching, learning and student support – as well as the extracurricular activities that enrich university life. As you know, the Government has now lifted the restrictions on in-person teaching so HE providers should not be limiting face-to-face learning, or other activities, based on COVID-19 restrictions. As a Government, we have been clear in our view that where blended learning is used, it should enhance students' academic experience by making learning more accessible for students, including those who cannot yet attend face-to-face lectures, and freeing up in-person teaching for higher-quality, interactive sessions.

I recognise the pandemic has accelerated digital learning plans and that HE providers decide what emphasis to put on remote teaching independently, after listening to and prioritising the needs of their student body. However, students rightly expect that our world class universities deliver a full and dynamic teaching and learning experience. This applies equally to other activities of importance to students, including measures such as welfare support and careers fairs. I would like to emphasise the importance of in-person provision across the whole of university life, whether that is through facilitating peer-to-peer learning or building social and cultural capital. Where this is absent it is most often disadvantaged students, who may lack pre-existing networks and sources of support, who will suffer the most.

I know that many of you have already implemented a significant return to in-person teaching, and I would like to thank all those who have done so. Nevertheless, I continue to hear too many concerns from students who feel that too much activity remains online, and that they are not getting the high quality, in-person experience that they were promised – and that they deserve. The Government believes you are best placed to know what your student body wants, and that may well include a blended offer. However, to be clear, online learning should not be used to cut costs and should not reduce the quality of your offer. If employed, online learning should enhance the teaching experience and should never be contrary to the programme pledged to students – who after all are consumers, with consumer rights.

The return to campus has been facilitated by the high rate of student vaccinations and I want to thank you for all your work to promote student vaccine take up. As a result, students are a highly vaccinated group. In the latest Student Covid Insight Survey from the Office for National Statistics on [Coronavirus and higher education students](#), the majority (90%) of students said they had already been vaccinated against COVID-19 at least once; significantly more students reported having had two vaccine doses (78%) than reported having one dose (12%). This is one of the key reasons why cases have remained low in HE settings for students and staff, and why students have been able to continue to take advantage of the rich and varied experiences available at university. As one way to maintain this, please encourage all students to take up their second dose of the vaccine and all staff to take up the offer of a booster vaccination when they become eligible, unless they are exempt. This will be increasingly important for keeping students, staff, their families, and the local community as safe as possible as we approach the Christmas holidays.

I know many of you have hosted pop-up centres with your local public health teams. If you are finding this challenging to organise, please [get in touch with us](#) so that we can support you. Please also continue to use our communications toolkit for HE providers with information and key messages on vaccination, testing and international students. It also has links to helpful FAQs and communications resources. We are keenly aware of outstanding concerns related to the recognition of international students' vaccine status. This is a key priority for me and we continue to work closely with DHSC and NHS England with a view to resolving these issues as soon as possible.

In addition, regular asymptomatic testing will continue to play an important role in identifying potential outbreaks and breaking chains of transmission, and we are making it as easy as possible for you to distribute test kits. I ask that you continue to do all you can to encourage your students to participate in regular testing. As you are aware, regular testing is available and students should continue to test twice a week (3-4 days apart).

As always, I value your direct input through our regular engagements. If there is any more we can do to support you, or you have any concerns or questions, I will be happy to meet to discuss these, so [please get in touch with me or my team](#).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michelle Donelan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

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