



Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

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3rd December, 2020

Dear International Students,

As the Universities Minister for England, I want to thank the international student community for your patience and understanding with many of the provisions introduced in recent months to tackle the spread of COVID-19. I also want to emphasise just how much international students are valued for their positive contribution to higher education in England. We are delighted that you have chosen to study with us and look forward to welcoming many more of you to our world-class universities in future years.

I understand that international students may have additional questions as we approach the end of the 2020/21 autumn academic term. Whether you are currently at your chosen university, are studying remotely from your home country, or plan to study here in the future, I am writing to you directly to provide you with support and guidance at this challenging time.

Teaching and learning

We as a government recognise the importance of face-to-face teaching. Most universities are currently operating a blended model of provision, which is a mix of online and in-person learning, to reduce contact in line with COVID-19 health measures.

- Universities have worked hard to make sure teaching and learning are COVID-secure, and I am grateful to our higher education providers for implementing processes to ensure students and staff members feel safe. If you have any concerns, please do speak to your university who will be able to share more information about how they are working to ensure university environments reduce the potential for transmission.
- Universities continue to deliver a high-quality academic experience, and I have been clear in my expectation that, whether they are delivering face-to-face, online, or blended provision, higher education providers must continue to deliver a high-quality academic experience that helps all students achieve qualifications that they and employers, at home and abroad, value. This has been reiterated by the English higher education regulator, the Office for Students, (OfS) in a recent [statement](#).
- The OfS is taking very seriously the potential impacts of the pandemic on teaching and learning. It is actively engaging with all of the providers on its register of higher education providers, and actively monitoring those providers which have moved provision predominantly online due to coronavirus restrictions to ensure they maintain the quality and quantity of their provision, that it is accessible for all and that they have been clear in their communications with students about how

arrangements for teaching and learning may change throughout the year. If the OfS has any concerns, it will investigate further.

Winter break – travel

For a number of reasons (including to avoid self-isolation periods and potential challenges with in- or outbound travel, inability to access course materials, etc) you may need or choose to remain in your university accommodation over the winter break. Where this is the case, it is Government's expectation that HE providers should help to ensure you are well looked after.

However, if international students need or choose to return to your home country at the end of the winter term (following the period of national restrictions), you are advised to speak to your higher education provider as well as your travel insurer before you travel. You should also check the COVID-19 entry requirements for your destination country, and consider whether you will need to self-isolate upon your return.

Students should be aware that travel advice may change while they are overseas and are advised to regularly check all relevant GOV.UK guidance pages for updates before travelling.

Resuming or commencing courses in January 2021

Our borders are open for both returning and new international students wishing to study in the UK and our universities are looking forward to welcoming you to campuses in the new year.

We are committed to prioritising education and want to enable all students – domestic and international, current and prospective – that they can return to, or start new courses at our universities and will be able to engage in blended learning as soon as possible.

While we are confident that face-to-face teaching as an element of blended learning can be done in COVID-secure environments, the mass movement of students into and across the country has been identified as a possible transmission risk by public health experts.

In order to balance this risk, whilst reducing disruption to our world-leading education, we advise that all students (including international) return to university during a period staggered over five weeks. Students on practical courses should return first, staggered over two weeks from their normal start of term date (from 4 January). Students on all remaining courses should be offered online learning from the beginning of term so they can continue their studies at home, and should be asked to return to their university over a two week period from 25 January.

I have asked HE providers to build in appropriate flexibility for international students travelling to the UK from overseas, especially where travel was booked prior to the publication of England's [students returning to higher education for spring term guidance](#). To ensure you have the best, and safest, experience possible:

- Returning or new students planning to travel to the UK from overseas in January are advised to check with their HE provider in advance to confirm when face-to-face teaching begins and they should arrive on campus.

- You are advised to make your HE provider aware in advance of your intended arrival date, so that you can be appropriately supported upon arrival. If you have already pre-booked travel for dates outside of your HE provider's specified cohort arrival date, you should inform your provider to make them aware.
- All international arrivals are required to complete a passenger locator form on arrival in the UK, and passengers travelling from a country not on the [exemption \(travel corridor\) list](#) will need to self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days.

We have also announced a positive update to our self-isolation guidance: From 15 December, there will be the option to take an accredited COVID-19 test from a private testing provider after 5 days of self-isolation, with a negative result releasing students from the need to isolate from day 6. More information on the Test to Release scheme can be found [here](#).

Physical health, mental health and wellbeing

I am proud of our National Health Service (NHS), which has taken care of people from around the world during this global pandemic and will be available to you should you require it. In addition to support from your universities, NHS services are available to both domestic and international students. Importantly:

- No charges apply to testing for COVID-19, even if the result is negative, or to any treatment provided in relation to COVID-19 if the result is positive or up to the point that it is negatively diagnosed.
- The NHS can also provide you with specific COVID-19 advice through the COVID-19 online service www.111.nhs.uk/covid-19 or by calling 111 in the UK.
- International students will always be able to access treatment that clinicians consider is immediately necessary or urgent at no upfront cost.

Wherever you are currently studying (in England or in your home country) or plan to study, I would encourage you to stay in close communication with your current or prospective university's student support and welfare team. Universities are required to provide mental health and pastoral support and these services are likely to be an important source of support during this period of social distancing. Additional information that may be useful:

- The [Student Space](#) has been funded up to £3 million by the OfS and led by Student Minds. This resource is designed to work alongside existing mental health services and has now been extended to cover the 2020-21 academic year.
- Many universities have hardship funds available to support students in times of need, including in emergency situations. My expectation is that where any student impacted by Covid-19 requires additional help, support will be made available to them by their university. I would encourage international students in need of assistance to contact your university as soon as possible.

COVID-19 immigration concessions and post-study work offer

International students play a vital role in our universities and society, and I am proud so many of you choose our world-renowned universities as a place to study. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Government has implemented a number of concessions to

assist UK visa-holders who have been impacted by global travel and health restrictions, to ensure you can travel when you need to. This has included offering extensions of visas for those who leave expired between 24 January and 31 July 2020 and relaxing the rules on switching in the UK. To remind and reassure you:

- If you're here on a Student visa (or Tier 4) that you will not be penalised for distance learning at this time. Government visa concessions allow for the ongoing provision of online learning for the duration of the academic year 2020/21. This concession applies whether you are studying in the UK or in your home country due to COVID-19. Many universities are also commencing courses online until in-person learning is possible. If you have further questions about the study options available to you, you should contact your current or chosen HE provider to find out how they are adapting, so that you can make the right choice for you.
- Government is keeping visa concessions under regular review, to ensure that no international student will have a negative outcome through the immigration system due to circumstances beyond your control. If you have any questions about changes to UK immigration and borders due to COVID-19, information can be found at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-immigration-and-borders, or you can email the Government's (COVID-19) Immigration Help Centre at CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk.
- The new, streamlined [Student immigration route](#) is now open, and that we remain committed to introducing the new, internationally competitive [Graduate immigration route](#) for international students in Summer 2021, allowing eligible students who have successfully completed undergraduate or master's degrees to stay in the UK for two years after study – rising to three years for those who complete a PhD. International students present in the UK before 6 April 2021 will be eligible for the Graduate route if they meet the other requirements of the route, even if they have needed to undertake some of their learning remotely due to COVID-19.

I want to thank those of you who have already made the decision to study at our excellent universities, and I look forward to welcoming those who plan to study at an English HE provider in the future. If you are currently studying at, or are considering studying in [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and/or [Northern Ireland](#), please ensure that you check relevant guidance in each respective country and follow the guidance from your institution.

Our world-leading universities, which thrive on being global institutions, will always be open to international students. I remain committed to ensuring you have the fullest experience possible whilst studying at one of our brilliant universities and that you remain as safe as possible during this unprecedented and challenging time.

Yours faithfully,

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.

Michelle Donelan MP
Minister of State for Universities

ANNEX A: USEFUL RESOURCES

<u>Gov.uk</u> - The best place to find government services and information		
UK Government	Latest Public Health England advice relating to COVID-19	www.gov.uk/coronavirus www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses/students-returning-to-higher-education-from-spring-term http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses
	National Health Service (NHS)	www.nhs.uk Online Covid-19 service www.111.nhs.uk/covid-19
	Entering the UK	www.gov.uk/uk-border-control
	Visa and immigration advice	www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-immigration-and-borders . If you have concerns about your visa status you should email the Government's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Immigration Help Centre at CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk
Other resources for international students at English universities		
Student Minds	Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity	www.studentminds.org.uk Student Space platform www.studentspace.org.uk
British Council	COVID-19 information for international students	www.study-uk.britishcouncil.org/moving-uk/coronavirus
UKCISA	COVID-19 information for international students. Up-to-date information about Brexit, immigration, fees, student support, working and living in the UK for current and prospective international students.	www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Studying--living-in-the-UK/Coronavirus-Covid-19-info-for-international-students . www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice Student Advice Line: +4420 7788 9214 (Opening times available online here: www.ukcisa.org.uk/About-UKCISA/Contact-us)
Universities UK	COVID-19 information for universities	www.universitiesuk.ac.uk
Universities UK International	COVID-19 information on the international work of UK universities, their current international students, staff and prospective international students	www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/international