

As Universities Minister, I wanted to write to students in higher education to explain the latest developments in the battle against COVID-19.

I want to reassure you that we are doing all we can to keep you safe and to mitigate the worst effects of the virus on you and your education. The Government is working closely with the HE sector on a wide range of issues, and student wellbeing is at the heart of those discussions.

Students in residence halls in England

While many students will already have travelled home, I know that those of you who have not, or cannot, will be concerned about what you should do now.

The Government's advice is that **students remaining at university in England should now stay where they are and not attempt to travel**. If you are living in student halls, or private rented accommodation, you should remain there and stay indoors while current restrictions are in force. As the Prime Minister said, staying put and remaining indoors is a crucial step now to slow the rate of transmission of COVID-19, to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, and save the lives of fellow citizens. The government published advice on staying at home here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others>

Should you or any of your friends fall ill while in your student residence, there is guidance on self-isolating here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-isolation-for-residential-educational-settings/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-isolation-for-residential-educational-settings>

I have been discussing with HE providers the additional support that they can give to students. That includes continuing to provide accommodation for those who cannot travel home or have no alternative residence. Providers will also offer a range of other support services to students, including catering and cleaning, and also student health and welfare. We know that providers are bolstering their existing mental health services, and adapting delivery to means other than face-to-face, and these services are likely to be an important source of support for you during this period of isolation. My department is also talking with HE providers to consider how we can offer additional mental health support.

Finals

I am very aware that many of you will be worried about what this means for final exams.

The Office for Students will produce guidance shortly on practical ways by which you can complete your studies whilst ensuring quality and standards are maintained. This will cover teaching, continued learning and assessment during this difficult time.

It is important that providers support you and enable you to leave with qualifications that have real value and that reflect your hard work and allow you to progress. I can assure you that we are working closely with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to ensure this happens.

Visas

On Tuesday 24 March, the Home Office updated their visa guidance to provide greater certainty for international higher education students and staff in the UK currently unable to return home due to COVID-19. This covers three main issues: visa extensions, in-country visa switching and distance learning.

Visa extensions

No individual who is in the UK legally, but whose visa is due to expire, or has already expired, and who cannot leave because of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, will be regarded as an overstayer, or suffer any detriment in the future.

Anyone whose leave expired after the 24 January and who cannot leave the country because of travel restrictions or self-isolation will have their visas extended to 31 May 2020. **Individuals must contact the Coronavirus Immigration Team email to advise of their situation – please see contact details further down.**

In-country visa switching

Individuals (students or staff) who cannot leave the UK due to travel restrictions or self-isolation and wish to stay in the UK in the long-term would ordinarily need to apply for a visa from their home country. Where individuals would normally be required to return to their country of residence to apply for a visa in a different category, they'll now be able to apply from the UK to switch.

Distance learning

Tier 4 students are not normally permitted to undertake distance learning courses. However, due to the current exceptional circumstances, the Home Office will not consider it a breach of sponsor duties to offer distance learning to existing Tier 4 students in the UK or who have chosen to return overseas but wish to continue their current studies. Sponsors do not need to withdraw sponsorship in these circumstances.

New international students who have been issued a Tier 4 visa but have been unable to travel to the UK are permitted to undertake distance learning and sponsorship does not need to be withdrawn.

New international students who have not yet applied for a visa but wish to commence a course by distance learning do not need to travel to the UK to do so and therefore do not require sponsorship under Tier 4.

Further information from the Home Office

Full details covering the above visa issues above can be found at the following link: www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-uk-visa-applicants-and-temporary-uk-residents

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The Home Office's Coronavirus Immigration Helpline remains open: 0800 678 1767 (open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm – calls are free of charge if made from within the UK). The Home Office asks that customers check gov.uk first as that is the central source of information, but if individuals remain concerned about their immigration status they can contact: CIH@homeoffice.gov.uk.

Call for Volunteers

Universities are in the front line in the immediate challenge of the COVID-19 virus. There are many ways that universities will be able to contribute to the fight against the virus, including making their facilities and expertise available.

You may already know people with medical or healthcare knowledge who are involved in fighting COVID-19 and there will be opportunities for more people to do so. The Health Minister this week launched a call for volunteers to support vulnerable people to stay safe and well at home.

If you would like to get involved, you can sign up as a NHS volunteer here: <https://www.goodsamapp.org/NHS>

Finances

I would like to assure you that the Student Loans Company (SLC) is planning to make Term 3 tuition fee payments as scheduled and that you will continue to receive maintenance payments on the scheduled dates, whether or not campuses are closed or learning has moved online. We expect that providers will communicate clearly with residential students on rents for this period and administer accommodation provision in a fair manner.

I am also aware that some students are facing financial difficulties as a result of the current COVID-19 outbreak. The Government is working closely with the HE sector on a wide range of issues, and student wellbeing is at the heart of those discussions. It will be a matter for universities themselves to deal with individual students' situations. We understand that most universities maintain hardship funds, which can be deployed where necessary. You should also be aware that if you are on a PAYE contract (e.g. part time student work), you may still get 80% of normal income. The guidance is here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/covid-19-support-for-businesses>

I hope that you find this helpful and informative. We will continue to work with the sector and with student representatives (Student Unions and the NUS). If you think that there is more that we can do, please contact the department.