

## Independent SAGE Emergency Statement on Universities in the Context of Rising SARS-CoV-2 Cases in Late September 2020

### 1. Context and Recommendations

Independent SAGE has, since its first [consultation](#) on Universities (21<sup>st</sup> August 2020), expressed concern about the significant risk of COVID-19 outbreaks as the Autumn term starts across the UK. Our key recommendation has been to **start the term with as much online learning as possible** to allow room for MORE in-person teaching later in the term, depending on infections, rather than start with in-person and then move AWAY from it if there are cases, thus aiming to avoid the late Autumn outbreaks predicted by SAGE and maximise the effectiveness of residential bubbles.

Since then, and in the context of a **rapid increase in cases** across the UK population, new local lockdown and other measures (e.g., “Rule of Six”), the HE sector has already seen multiple and increasing [outbreaks across university campuses](#), starting with Scottish universities as their terms started, and across other cities in the UK. The media [reports](#) a rapidly deteriorating situation as universities attempt to manage the multiple crises of transmission, infections, and student welfare.

There is, therefore, **an urgent need, as of 28<sup>th</sup> September**, to act quickly and pragmatically to 1) ensure the needs, health, wellbeing, and safety of students and staff; 2) prevent further transmission across campuses to students and staff alike, and, 3) quite simply, enable the ‘liveability’ of student life on campus in the coming weeks. [Modelling shows](#) that transmission occurs in residential halls and through in-person teaching. Thus, Independent SAGE recommends that universities immediately implement these **five key recommendations**:

1. Transfer all teaching and learning online by default.
2. Make essential in-person teaching and learning (e.g., components of laboratory or practice-based courses) contingent on the regular testing of students and staff, with a ‘dashboard’ approach as [adopted by US Colleges](#), and with stringent adherence to face coverings, handwashing, physical distancing, and ventilation mitigations.
3. Offer students the choice whether to live on campus / in their university accommodation or at home elsewhere (e.g., with parents and caregivers) and review at the end of the calendar year (i.e., December), and avoid numerous journeys between home and university.
4. Ensure that students who choose to remain at university while learning online maintain the right to return home for the rest of the term at any point, with accommodation fees refunded, and with testing before doing so.
5. Ensure full and generous support to students both to self-isolate and to access online learning resources, including practical needs (e.g., food, laundry), learning (e.g., IT, connectivity), and social and emotional needs (e.g., buddy systems, regular wellbeing checks, online events).

We recognise that our recommendations have financial consequences for universities and for students and we call on the government to support the sector.

To accompany these recommendations, we set out a targeted approach for testing that focuses resources to support the recommendations.

### 2. Updated Independent SAGE recommendations for COVID-19 Testing in Universities

Our collective aim remains as in previous statements: to ensure that universities can start the new term and students benefit from their education, whilst minimising the risk of fueling spread of

infection within the staff and student body and to the wider community. With many hundred thousand students moving around the country at a time of widespread social distancing, local lockdowns and highest infection rates among 17-24-year-olds, **this risk of fueling transmission is very high.**

Key to rapid identification of new infections and limiting spread in universities which are a high-contact environment is an **extensive well-functioning testing programme, linked to public health-led contact tracing and support for those required to isolate.**

In the absence of clear guidance or a funding programme to support such testing, universities have taken different approaches to this challenge<sup>1</sup>. Some have initiated testing of all students and staff coming onto campus or only some subgroups of students, whereas others offer testing only to symptomatic individuals. Some have outsourced testing to the private sector, whereas others have developed partnerships with their local NHS laboratories, or even established their own testing infrastructure. Some use swab tests whereas others have implemented more acceptable saliva collection. There are even examples of local university apps being used to support contact tracing. Many universities have developed these systems in conjunction with local public health agencies, with data shared as such.

This array of approaches demonstrates that universities have little faith in NHS Test and Trace to protect their students and staff, and the communities in which they live. The innovative ways in which testing systems have been developed demonstrates what could be achieved if Test and Trace had made maximum use of existing health service and university structures.

We now urge all universities to ensure an adequate testing programme is in place alongside support for students needing to isolate, recognising that they cannot currently depend on NHS Test and Trace. The goals should be as follows:

1. Prevent COVID-19 entering the university staff and student population
  - test all staff and students at start of academic year, and before initiating in-person contact
2. Prevent spread of COVID-19 amongst staff and students
  - test all symptomatic cases, using a [wide spectrum of symptoms](#), with 24-hour result turnaround
  - testing of contacts asked to isolate, at beginning of isolation and at day 5, to limit the time required for isolation. This has been [modelled](#) with respect to quarantine of those entering the UK- similar modelling is urgently required for the university setting
3. Develop early warning systems to identify new outbreaks
  - initiate structured surveillance programmes for high risk settings such as residential halls of residence
  - this could include innovative approaches such as sewage testing, pooled sample testing, as well as random sampling
  - a clear plan to respond to a positive signal
4. Protect those staff and staff at higher risk of COVID-19 disease
  - individual risk assessments of all staff and students based on risk from contact (e.g., security staff, library, in-person teaching) as well as individual health risk
  - initiate more extensive testing of such individuals

In order to deliver this programme, we recommend the following:

1. *Testing infrastructure*

Universities should partner with local NHS/PHE laboratories, with the possibility of adding to capacity through their own laboratory facilities. Testing centres should be close to students and easily accessible (i.e., not requiring public transport).

2. *Contact tracing and support*

All cases and their contacts must be provided with adequate support for continuation of studies. Local public health systems must be engaged in guiding this process.

3. *Resource*

The current failure of NHS Test and Trace is requiring universities to respond with their own testing programmes, which in turn support local public health control of infection. These programmes are expensive, although we note that ‘Operation Moonshot’ showed that funding is available. We recommend funding directly from Government, as a contribution to strengthening the current NHS Test and Trace programme but led by local public health agencies in partnership with their universities. Such reassurance on funding will encourage a more consistent approach to testing, and avoid the inevitable inequity developing between the richer and poorer universities.

### 3. The future

Both Independent SAGE and SAGE advised that Universities’ response to COVID-19 should be a nationally coordinated one. We need to **plan now** for the next academic year, which, while COVID-19 may be under control, will doubtless involve managing the impacts of – for instance – the current A-level year group; long COVID, Brexit, financial stress across the sector, and so on. We need to learn from the situation we are witnessing now. We note that both the situation and the debate are different in countries where universities are state funded. We call on Vice-Chancellors and UUK to work collectively and press crucial [reset buttons for UK academia](#).

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<sup>i</sup>[https://www.imperial.ac.uk/about/covid-19/testing-scheme/](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/about/covid-19/testing-scheme/;);;  
[https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/homepage/title\\_814623\\_en.html](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/news/homepage/title_814623_en.html); <https://info.lse.ac.uk/coronavirus-response/get-tested-at-lse/>; <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/news/university-of-nottingham-to-develop-asymptomatic-testing-service-to-help-control-hidden-spread-of-covid-19>