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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

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## **The Independent SAGE Report 20**

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### **Independent SAGE Statement on University Winter Term 2020 and Winter-Spring Transitions in the Context of SARS-CoV-2**

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain  
& Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser,  
UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

## Independent SAGE Statement on University Winter Term 2020 and Winter-Spring Transitions in the Context of SARS-CoV-2

### 1. Executive summary

On 31<sup>st</sup> October 2020, Boris Johnson announced [new national restrictions](#) in England starting on 5<sup>th</sup> November. This includes the suggestion that universities “**should consider moving to increased levels of online learning where possible**” and that students should “**not move back and forward between their permanent home and student home during term time**”. The guidance on learning is imprecise and not aligned strongly enough to Independent SAGE and SAGE recommendations. The guidance on travel is likely to exacerbate between-community spread between areas of lower/higher infection by concentrating journeys in December as students return home.

Universities’ strategic responses to COVID-19 have been constrained by the requirements of the marketized nature of the sector imposed by UK government. Thus, in-person teaching has been maintained in part because of potential negative financial consequences. The issue of online delivery has become divisive (e.g., the University and College Union has argued consistently for online programme delivery) which has detracted from the **wider ramifications** of maintaining in-person contact which we outline below. There has been much [discussion](#) about ‘fee refunds’ for dissatisfied students in cases where institutions are not providing Competition and Markets Authority-protected obligations to in-person delivery promised in prospectuses. However, [Office for Students guidance](#) states that “During the exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic, we do not intend to take regulatory action ... where we consider that reasonable efforts have not been made to protect the interests of students” and “The approach we are taking during the pandemic does not reflect the approach we would normally take to compliance with our regulatory framework ... about providers not delivering courses as advertised.”

We urge UUK and Vice-Chancellors to work collaboratively to take the UK government’s recommendation to “move to increased levels of online learning” as a mandate to accept consistent scientific advice to move teaching online, with lab- and practice-based components exempt. This will unlock all other strategies, including enabling student choice for their own well-being. **The government must make financial provision for universities** to make decisions that are consistent with its own advice.

#### *Key recommendations*

1. Move immediately to online teaching and learning to minimise the number of staff and student journeys to and from campus and maximise the effectiveness of residential bubbles.
2. Permit students to return home within term-time at any point from now and continue learning at home to avoid large-scale movement in December. There should be no penalty in terms of accommodation costs.
3. Enable testing (or two weeks’ self-isolation, where testing capacity is not sufficient) for those going home and, ideally, when they reach home.
4. For students who choose to stay until the end of term, work collaboratively with other universities in the same town or region to assess numbers and spread out journeys.
5. Continue to provide support for all students on campus or residing elsewhere who need to stay in their term-time residence.
6. From January, students should be offered the choice of whether to live on campus, in their university accommodation, or at home elsewhere and to learn online from either location.
7. Ensure testing for students who wish to return in January, and permit a phased return (e.g., by keeping all teaching and examinations online).

## 2. The wider ramifications of maintaining in-person teaching and learning

Autumn 2020 has seen a second wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the UK and, as predicted by both SAGE and Independent SAGE, there have been many outbreaks across university campuses, infecting students and staff. As the end of the Autumn/Winter term 2020 approaches and the Winter/Spring 2021 begins, without careful planning we are likely to experience **two new outbreaks** as students [travel](#) between towns and cities in the UK and internationally, to return home for the Christmas vacation and return again in the new year. We need to plan for these **two upcoming mass movements** of students and staff and bringing large numbers of students together again.

- Minimising in-person teaching removes the risk that **breaching residential bubbles** brings since there is little overlap between courses and accommodation.
- It hugely **reduces the number of daily journeys** including on public transport, both within and between campuses, and within and between towns and cities, where students and staff live, and thus aligns to national restrictions alongside other adults.
- Maintaining in-person teaching until the end of term **removes students' ability and choice** to return home before the end of term, **forcing mass movement** in December.
- Concentrating travel in December may make it unaffordable for international students and, as seen across the pandemic, flights may be cancelled. This will also create **inequities and isolation** since domestic students are likely to be able to travel home more readily.
- Much is said about students' wellbeing, including in [Michelle Donelan MP's recent letters](#) yet some students may prefer to reduce isolation and protect their well-being by returning home to live with family and learn from there. Current travel guidance **removes student choice**.
- We agree with the government's general instruction to "not move back and forward between their permanent home and student home during term time", but this sends **mixed messages** to students and staff who are making thousands of trips to and from in-person teaching.
- Universities have demonstrated their ability to deliver high-quality online teaching since March. There is [evidence](#) that online formats are [successful](#). Online learning has been the norm in [other countries](#) and [will be adopted](#) in many countries during the second wave [and beyond](#). The same amount of 'contact time' is delivered, with informal reports of far more contact than normal.
- [Some](#) universities, including those that were already in the 'Tier 3' restrictions, taught online throughout the Autumn term. Inequities and inconsistencies were created across the sector (e.g. north/south divide).
- Many students returned to university in September, despite an uncertain situation, for many reasons, including being in lockdown with friends rather than family. [Social connections](#) are important at university and it is harder to initiate friendships while living at home.
- Students' social networks are [created largely via who they live with](#) rather than who they are taught with.
- Online teaching increases the safety of all those at universities that cannot work from home.
- In-person contact is – because universities are not schools – a relatively small proportion of the week for many students. The public discourse about fees, and what they cover, has, reflecting wider public discourse (notably absent in state-funded countries), has led to a public health versus economy stand-off.

## 3. Recommendations in detail

### 3a. Teaching during the rest of the Autumn term

1. In August 2020, Independent SAGE recommended that universities minimise in-person teaching, and SAGE minutes published on 21.9.2020 recommended the same strategy. Our

recommendation remains that teaching **should be online** except for some lab- or practice based courses / components.

2. Media reports of poor provision for students who are self-isolating have generated bad publicity for universities. Universities should **continue with full and generous support to students on and off campus** 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).
3. Universities should also **support staff who are self-isolating** (e.g., for those with childcare responsibilities as school outbreaks continue, and in a range of other circumstances, including shielding); support those whose jobs are tied to campus, and provide resources (especially sufficient IT) to enable staff to deliver online learning.

### *3b. Travel home for the Christmas vacation and returning afterwards*

We need a **national approach** to the Christmas vacation. Piecemeal plans will leave students, lecturers, and parents uncertain. The government has said it will publish plans, but none are yet forthcoming. We recommend phased travel and a blended approach of self-isolation and testing depending on availability and individual circumstances:

4. Previous suggestions to allow ‘two weeks isolation’ up to 22<sup>nd</sup> December to permit safe travel home are impractical because a) students and their parents are likely to take decisions unilaterally; b) travelling on public transport, within or beyond the UK, **breaks any period of isolation**, and c) it will concentrate journeys on and around 22<sup>nd</sup> December.
5. Although new government guidance states that students should “not move back and forward between their permanent home and student home during term time”, we recommend that they should be permitted to **return and learn from home at any point from now onwards**, with accommodation fees refunded and without educational penalty.
6. For students who want to remain in their university home until the end of term, mass movements must still be reduced. To achieve this, and to distribute the requirements for and availability of testing over a longer period, universities should plan for **phased travel**, enabled by online learning.
7. If possible, students should **self-isolate and/or be tested** (ideally, two negative tests in succession) before returning home, as well as when home, and testing capacity must be increased to enable this to happen. Both staff and students who need to travel at the end of term should be able to isolate / get tested ahead of the vacation in order to be able to see family, rather than spend the vacation weeks in isolation.
8. Both upcoming mass movements should be **managed collaboratively across the sector** rather than each university staggering its own travel timeline without reference to others, because many cities have several Higher Education Institutions.
9. **Accommodation should, however, be kept open** (as it has been since March, as many students – particularly overseas students – could not travel home over summer) for students who cannot travel or prefer to live on campus.

### *3c. Teaching in the Spring term*

10. Students should **continue learning online** for the start of the new term in January 2021, with review points, pivoting later to in-person teaching.
11. From January, **students should be offered the choice** of whether to live on campus, in their university accommodation, or at home elsewhere, and to learn online from either location.
12. Students and staff should be tested according to the strategy set out in our [late September Universities Statement](#).

**indie\_SAGE**

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**Following the science**