
December 04, 2020

The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 27

Independent SAGE Winter-Spring Universities Transitions in the Context of SARS-CoV-2

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain
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1. Context

The Department for Education ‘student travel window’ [guidance](#) published on 11th November 2020 is currently being enacted, between 3rd and 9th December. The guidance was [leaked online](#), contains key omissions (e.g., nothing about January’s return; nothing stated about travel or testing for staff, very little on international students) as well as key messaging inconsistencies (e.g., it says nothing about the risk of contracting the virus while travelling after ending a period of self-isolation, except “only use public transport” if there is “no other option” while at the same time [promotes train travel](#) online). The published guidance also came too late and fell far short of the stated aim to reduce the risk of student travel in December. Yet Michelle Donelan, Minister of State for Universities, said on BBC Radio 4 11.11.20, “SAGE warned in their advice to us on Higher Education *months ago* of the fact that the mass movement of students back for Christmas was a consideration.”

The DfE guidance recommended testing to “support” the return home of students but this has already proved highly variable in terms of approach (e.g., from use of inhouse facilities and lighthouse labs to private outsourcing). The efficacy of the tests being widely has been subject to [much concern](#) regarding the percentage false negative results which undermines the reassurance they are designed to give ahead of travelling home. We [do not know](#) how many universities are actually offering testing; how many students can access testing if wanted; how many students are taking up the offer of testing, or [“how they will react to positive or negative results, among many other things.”](#) Finally, the logistics of testing thousands of people [“in such a small timeframe – while following social distancing rules” is “extremely challenging”](#).

While a Covid-19 vaccine is closer to being realised, it is highly unlikely that university staff and students will be vaccinated before Easter. We do not know what the impact will be of the ‘student travel window’ and the Christmas break on numbers of infections in January. Thus, Independent SAGE maintains its position to **keep universities open safely by maximising remote learning** except practice-based courses – in addition to reducing the risks of transmission in enclosed indoor spaces – until Easter 2021. We set out the reasons below and **consider January in more detail in Section 3**.

2. Ten benefits of remote learning for ‘Covid-Secure’ Universities January-Easter 2021

1. It makes residential bubbles possible. In-person teaching breaches residential bubbles.
2. It reduces the risks of simply not knowing what the rates of transmission in ‘Covid-Secure’ classrooms might be because we do not know how many asymptomatic students pass the infection to each other (if not staff).
3. It enables students to choose where to live and learn in lockdown, and how they want to reduce isolation and protect their well-being (e.g., at their term-time address, return home)
 - a. We know that developing good friendships is [important to students’ wellbeing and adjustment to university](#), but also that [course friendships and relationships with personal tutors are less significant](#) than friends made through accommodation. We also have evidence that [online and in-person](#) modalities are equally effective in supporting [student learning](#). A [Higher Education Policy Institute poll](#) published on 3.12.20 found “a decline in student mental health but growing satisfaction with online learning”.
 - b. Universities in countries with (far) fewer cases but no fees are fully online or can choose how to teach and study.

- c. There are numerous accounts ([before](#) and [during](#) the pandemic) of students choosing to learn remotely (e.g., watching a live stream or a recording) even when in-person classes are offered and when students are living at their term-time address.
4. It removes mixed messages that students should “not travel home” or “move between their permanent home and student home” but should make thousands of daily journeys for in-person teaching.
5. It aligns with SAGE advice on 3.9.20 relevant to tiers, lockdowns, and travel mitigations: “Students or staff may live in a different geographic region to their university, which may have different restrictions depending on prevalence. Flexibility will be required ... to engage remotely if they are unable or unwilling to travel due to restrictions, [without] actual or perceived pressure to continue to attend campus if this contravenes restrictions.”
 - a. It removes mixed messages about working from home “if you can.”
6. It prevents concentrated periods of mass movement at the start/end of term and enables phased travel, as recommended by Independent SAGE across all of our Universities statements.
 - a. It removes concentrated windows of travel that can be prohibitive for 0.5M international students, alongside the issue of [students being able to afford COVID tests](#).
7. It reduces community transmission: [“Universities have been a major hub of community transmission and should move to online teaching where possible”](#).
8. It increases the safety of those at universities who cannot work or study remotely (fewer bodies to distance from).
9. It reduces the uncertainty, last minute reorganization, inefficiencies of blended/dual and enables *planning* (e.g., to Easter).
10. It reduces actual student cases and unknown long COVID consequences. [An ONS pilot study across four universities found 17% student reporting having had COVID](#).

3. January

On December 2nd the [Government published advice](#) on students returning to higher education in the spring term. The key elements of this were that (a) the return should be staggered over five weeks to minimise risks from mass movement; (b) practical and placement students should return first; (c) students should not be encouraged to return to term-time accommodation until in-person teaching resumes; (d) all students should be offered testing on their return, and (e) that all HE providers should work with their local authority in order to consider how mass asymptomatic testing will help students.

Independent SAGE endorses a policy of staggering the return to University. However, if students are asked to delay their return, they should be **compensated by the government** for any accommodation charges in the period before they return to campus. Additionally, enabled by our policy of maximising remote learning, Independent SAGE [recommends](#) that, 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, with no detriments (financial or otherwise). This policy needs to be announced without delay, particularly in order to save overseas students the costs of booking (and then cancelling) return travel. The Government guidance remains weak regarding this group of students e.g., it states that students requiring self-isolation should use public transport as a last resort. We recommend that universities organise transport for returning students who need to self-isolate and more generally **offer safe transport** to all their students.

Finally, while in principle we agree with a policy of mass testing of students on their return to campus, and that this testing should be carried out in conjunction with local NHS and public health structures, Independent SAGE calls for UUK to provide and publish a comprehensive evaluation of the pre-break testing process in order to inform a clearer, more consistent and maximally effective testing program for January and beyond.

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