The Independent SAGE Report 39

Independent SAGE Statement on Universities and Colleges Winter-Spring 2021 in the Context of SARS-CoV-2 and the UK Government 'Roadmap'

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in the Context of SARS-CoV-2 and the UK Government 'Roadmap'**

Independent SAGE has consistently recommended that UK **universities should keep open safely** during the pandemic by moving **teaching and learning online.** SAGE made the same recommendation in September 2020. Independent SAGE **recommends that, for most students, this continues until the end of the academic year**. Online learning is not solely about reducing staff/student or student/student transmission in classrooms: it is the hub around which **other mitigation and suppression strategies revolve and upon which they are dependent**.

Following on from [previous Universities reports](#), this statement covers

1. The COVID-19 context and current Department for Education guidance.
2. Why Independent SAGE recommends maximising online learning during the pandemic.
3. Issues around online learning and student mental health and wellbeing.
4. Working in collaboration with other education sectors.
5. Looking ahead to Autumn 2021 and funding and future of universities in the UK.

Specifically, we **recommend** the following:

1. Universities and colleges should *keep all teaching and learning online* until the end of the current academic year, except for essential practical elements, coordinated across the sector and following the lead already set by some institutions, to enable staff and students to 'Stay at home'. This includes keeping online as much of further education as possible, with funding to ensure all students and staff can engage in effective remote teaching and learning.
2. *Students and staff should not make (inter)national journeys* to avoid further geographical spread including of more transmissible new variants. Universities should urge international students not to undertake non-essential travel and enable online learning and registration, working with funding bodies (e.g., for PGR students) and Government to lift residency conditions including requirements for international students wishing to apply for post-study work visas.
3. *Increased funding to further education* (FE) should be prioritised, in a context of educational loss. FE has been an afterthought in much guidance yet supports routes into HE as well as crucial retraining and reskilling for the wider population. Universities, schools, colleges, and qualifications regulators should consult urgently to plan post-18 transitions into access programmes or 'catch up' foundation years.
4. Funding should be increased to provide *more capacity in counselling, mental health, and well-being services at universities*, to address longstanding pre-pandemic issues.
5. *A debate about the future of HE and its funding models* is urgently needed, planning ahead of Autumn 2021, alongside evaluating practices that have emerged during the pandemic that are beneficial for access, participation, and Net Zero.

1. The COVID-19 context and current Department for Education guidance

The UK is currently in its third lockdown, as new and more transmissible variants impact cases and deaths at the same time as the first-dose vaccine roll-out. To suppress transmission, the UK government's regulations – ahead of the rollout of the new 'roadmap' starting on March 8th 2021 – include strong messages to stay at home and not travel. Universities in the UK and around the world have demonstrated that, during a global pandemic, teaching and learning can be delivered online, with good outcomes. We recommend that, to reduce the geographical spread of the virus and help suppress transmission, students should not be displaced on further multiple occasions. Students should live at their non-term/home address and study remotely, unless they need to live in term-time accommodation (e.g., to use university IT facilities or workspaces) or are on courses with particular requirements.

The UK government's strategy to 'bring students back' to campus for in-person teaching in September 2020 required students to live in halls of residence and shared households. Thousands became infected – an outcome which was predicted by SAGE and went against both SAGE and Independent SAGE advice. In November 2020, universities were identified as "a major hub of community transmission" and thus urged to "move to online teaching where possible". More recent modelling found that "college campuses are at risk to develop an extreme incidence of COVID-19 and become superspreaders for neighboring communities". Quoted in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, SAGE SPI-M's modellers pointed out that "ministers should accept that campus life was likely to prove incompatible with the new variant of Covid-19, at least until a significant proportion of the population has been vaccinated" and that "all the staggering [of students' return to campuses] will do is spread out your infection throughout the term."

At the start of lockdown 3, the Department for Education's guidance stated that universities should maximise online learning "until at least mid-February". This was augmented by Michelle Donelan who wrote on 15.1.21 that "It's too soon to say when we will be able to get more students back." Independent SAGE welcomed the fact that, unlike September, the winter 2021 term *started* online rather than *started* blended, shifting online precipitously. We also welcomed the fact that, although somewhat after the fact, this guidance recognised the transmission risk of mass student movement, as previous SAGE and Independent SAGE statements both urged should be taken into account in Autumn 2020:

> "… the mass movement of students across the country poses a risk for the transmission of the virus - particularly because of the higher transmissibility of the new strain - between areas and addressing this risk is the focus of this revised guidance".

On February 22nd 2021, the UK government set out its 'roadmap' for easing out of lockdown 3, which included, regarding "English universities", returning "students on practical courses … from 8 March." For other courses, "the Government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of the return of these students", taking account of "the latest data". The new guidance continues to note that "it is necessary to limit the number of students who return to university at this stage to minimize travel and manage the risk of

transmission". It also states that "Providers should not ask students to return if their course can reasonably be continued online" and "Once students have returned to their term-time accommodation they must remain living there unless an exemption to the national restrictions on leaving home and gatherings applies. They must only travel home where they have a legally permitted reason to do so."

To reduce uncertainty and enable planning, **the most straightforward decision is to remain online until the end of the current academic year**. A number of universities have already announced they will remain online for the rest of the year. The rest of the sector should follow their lead. **We urge the sector to act together, in a coordinated manner, and work with Universities UK and government**.

2. Why Independent SAGE recommends maximising online learning during the pandemic

It is worth emphasizing that remote modalities have been used extensively and seemingly without government/student/employer tensions in countries in which the state still funds university education. It has long since been noted that "cultural and organisational factors are important to consider in explaining students' acceptance of e-learning environments."

Regarding in-person teaching, universities reduced the risk of lecturer/student and student/student transmission, through mitigations such as social distancing, limiting class sizes, and the mandatory use of face coverings. However, student/student transmission was accelerated by the government-imposed strategy of bringing students to campus in September 2020, coupled with refusing to support universities financially to make different decisions. Thus, the remote learning strategy has always been about more than mitigating transmission in class:

1. For students who need to live in term-time accommodation, it makes residential bubbles possible and increases their effectiveness for students who live on campus.
2. It gives students some control over where to live and learn in lockdown and do what is best for their mental health and well-being, with no detriments (financial or otherwise).
3. It reduces community transmission: "Universities have been a major hub of community transmission and should move to online teaching where possible"; "college campuses are at risk to develop an extreme incidence of COVID-19 and become superspreaders for neighboring communities".
4. It reduces actual COVID-19 cases and unknown Long COVID consequences. An ONS pilot study across four universities found that 17% of students reported having had COVID. The UCU dashboard reported 62,503 cases across UK HE and FE, staff, and students, by 23.2.21.
5. It prevents mass movement at the starts/ends of terms and enables phased travel.
6. It reduces the need for daily travel (including on public transport) for staff and students onto and around campus. SAGE urged, in September 2020, "Flexibility … to engage remotely if [staff and students] are unable or unwilling to travel due to restrictions, [without] actual or perceived pressure to continue to attend campus if this contravenes restrictions".

7. <u>It enables international students</u> to study remotely and not travel, so that they do not have to quarantine, or find accommodation and jobs (for many part-time work is essential but there are fewer jobs available).

It is worth noting that, during 2020 and into 2021, some **international students** were still being encouraged to travel to the UK to fulfil the requirements of a scholarship provided by their country's government or research funding organisation in their home country. In addition, some countries require their students to have completed at least part of their studies overseas (e.g., a postgraduate taught course, a scholarship) for the qualification to be recognised for future work opportunities in the home country. International students should not be travelling to the UK at this time, and this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. **We recommend** that UK Universities should support these students by clarifying for them, their funders, and local municipalities, that their course or degree (or supervision, for example for PhD students) is being delivered online. The teaching/supervision is already being accessed by the international student while they remain in their home country, with some reporting that they value online teaching because they can replay lectures at will. Students can be registered for their UK degree programme from their home country. The UK government also has a role to play in liaising with governments in other countries to emphasise that the UK degree qualification should still be recognised in full even if the student has been advised to complete the course entirely online. This will avoid unnecessary travel while still allowing the student to take up their degree programme.

8. <u>It increases the safety</u> of those at universities who cannot work or study remotely (by ensuring that there are fewer bodies to distance from).
9. <u>It increases stability, reduce uncertainty, and enable planning</u> for students and staff.

We refer readers to [previous statements on universities](#) and [Safe Workplaces](#) for recommendations about mitigations for any in-person teaching, including necessary laboratory work, and testing.

3. Online learning and student mental health and wellbeing

Michelle Donelan, Minister of State for Universities, in support of government strategy for universities to deliver in-person teaching, focused on it as a source of student wellbeing ("We do not want … a full transition to online learning" because it could put learning and wellbeing at risk"). This is disingenuous for several reasons.

First, students spend on average [12 hours in class](#) and the majority (pre-pandemic) were satisfied with contact time. The vast proportion of their time is *not spent in teaching sessions*. The [ONS report](#) mentioned earlier found that student compliance to COVID-19 regulations and guidance was higher than in the general population. This meant that 91% of students avoided having guests, 90% tried to maintain physical distancing, and were more likely to avoid going out than the general population. In other words, the great majority did all they could to stop infection spread.

Second, the relevant comparison is not between online and in-person but online versus socially distanced in-person encounters, with face coverings, and with no subsequent opportunities for socialising. As [pointed out in March 2020](#),

> "Well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster. Colleges and universities working to maintain instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic should understand those differences when evaluating this emergency remote teaching".

Since then, evidence has accumulated that [online and in-person](#) modalities are equally effective in supporting [student learning](#). It is also important to note that, before the pandemic, when the stakes were different and multimodal learning (e.g., recording lectures) was something to be offered (or resisted) for various reasons, [research](#) was nevertheless clear that students can be highly satisfied and engaged with online lectures.

Finally, before the pandemic, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Students published [a briefing paper](#) in January 2020 identifying "a student mental health crisis in higher education" and urged the sector to make "mental health a university-wide priority." At that time, "95% of higher education providers have reported an increase in demand of counselling services." Declining mental health among students has [been a trend](#) for some years across universities, (HE), Further Education (FE), and Sixth Form Colleges, and the problem of demand for services outstripping capacity has been [observed for many years](#).

A [survey of students during the pandemic](#) published in December 2020 by the Office for National Statistics found that over half of respondents reported worsened mental health and well-being. Disaggregating survey responses to other questions is important, however. For instance, 29$^{\%}$ were dissatisfied with their academic experience, but *53% were dissatisfied with their social experience*. This echoes findings of another [report](#) published by the Higher Education Policy Institute on the impact of COVID-19 which found "a decline in student mental health but *growing satisfaction with online learning*". The report also found that "[o]nly 16% of students are very or quite unsatisfied with the provision of mental health services".

Like other social and health problems, the pandemic has amplified the "student mental health crisis". It is therefore tendentious to say that in-person teaching is a solution. Moreover, [evidence](#) states that the increased problems are primarily to do with aspects of the pandemic like fears about infection, the trauma of loved ones and friends being infected, and uncertainty about the future. Being encouraged to live away from home with strangers (for first years), with vastly reduced opportunities to make new friends, with a high chance of becoming infected with COVID-19, with reduced opportunities to travel home, reduced opportunities for employment, and with increased debt from paying for unused accommodation (or being forced to live on campus for a small amount of in-person teaching) are all relevant factors. International students who have been trapped on campus require special consideration. Independent **SAGE recommends that universities, supported by government funding, urgently increase capacity to address what was already a "student mental health crisis".**

4. Working in collaboration with other education sectors and FE's distinct challenges

Independent SAGE has called for a joined-up strategy between universities across the HE sector and the pandemic has shone lights on the interconnections between education sectors that require tighter collaborations. FE has been an afterthought in much government guidance, so we raise five key points here.

First, in the immediate term, universities must work with schools, the FE sector, and related unions, to support each other regarding key strategic decisions around in-person teaching and all that goes with it (e.g., travel). One implication of the broadening of the category 'critical worker' and 'vulnerable' has been to create confusion and increase the numbers of children in school during the current lockdown, compared to the first. The university teaching sector, as one of relative privilege and where much can be delivered remotely compared to others, must play its part in dealing with COVID-19.

Second, the government guidance for FE has paid inadequate attention to the sector's distinct circumstances, including the wide age range of its students, course provision, qualifications, and modes of delivery. Guidance has mirrored schools too closely and fails to recognise that FE provides much more than GCSE and A level tuition including to the 16-19 age cohort.

Third, the critical/vulnerable categories have created particular challenges in FE. In FE, the 'vulnerable' category includes adult learners, and in areas of high deprivation many students are categorized as such. Large numbers are impossible to accommodate in-person without the extra resources that would be needed to accommodate more students, much in the same way as schools: hiring more staff, more space, and more equipment. On the other hand, enabling more students to work from home by providing the appropriate IT, and valuing high standards of online teaching, are also important. This includes in the new 'roadmap' where colleges have been instructed to open from March 8th 2021. Independent SAGE recommends that only essential practical teaching should be delivered in person, **requiring funding increases** to enable students to access learning online at college or other locations. But reports show that a significant number of adult (aged 19+) learners do not have the technology needed, including access to the internet – and that this has not changed nearly a year into the pandemic.

Fourth, the Augar Review (2019) of post-18 education in England recommended removing funding for 'Foundation' years. The removal of foundation years, coupled with a reduction in funding to FE, needs urgent attention. Funding to further education should be a priority, given the context of educational loss, skills shortages, and unemployment. There are over 1.5M students in FE, but government data shows significant drops in participation since last year ("Adult government-funded further education and skills participation decreased by 14%"; Adult education and training participation decreased by 11%", and "Community learning participation decreased by 48%"). These huge drops mean that much 'catching up' will be needed in a sector that has failed to attract headlines in the pandemic so far. FE provides a crucial route for some to get into university, as well as providing crucial reskilling and retraining for the wider population. This is especially urgent since educational loss will accelerate existing inequalities. A report on 1.2.21 from the *Institute for Fiscal Studies* stated

that, "By the time the pandemic is over, most children across the UK will have missed over half a year of normal, in person schooling. … We will all be less productive, poorer, have less money to spend on public services, and we may be less happy and healthy as a result. We will probably also be more unequal, with all the social ills that come with it."

Finally, the three sectors – schools, FE, and universities – should **work collaboratively with examination boards to plan** for how best to take account of educational loss, with government funding to support whatever 'catch up' strategies are needed. This is especially complicated in FE, where the wide range of vocational courses, including apprenticeships (themselves involving work at college and at employer premises), involve significant practical elements (e.g., construction and allied trades, motor mechanic/engineering, beauty, etc.).

In sum, **we recommend that funding to the further education sector is made a priority**. **We recommend the decision to remove funding from the foundation years is reversed and that a joined-up strategy is devised urgently**.

5. Looking ahead to Autumn 2021 and the funding and future of universities in the UK

The pandemic has exposed and amplified existing structural inequalities, physical and mental health deficits, and the chronic under-funding of many services and sectors. While the exit strategy for universities will, like other sectors, be linked to the suppression of the virus and the success of the vaccination strategy. Whether things will be 'normal' in September 2021 is unknown: planning is needed now.

Much of the HE COVID-19 strategy has been driven by the UK government's refusal to support universities financially, in the wider context of a marketized HE. In April 2020, an article in the *Financial Times* pointed out the obvious: that "large market-oriented university systems in the US, UK, Australia and Canada are particularly vulnerable" to the pandemic, in part since they are massively "underwritten by a belief in continued growth in the number of international students". Further, "universities are facing demands for fee reductions from students frustrated at the loss of face-to-face (sic) teaching since the outbreak of the pandemic" and are "losing revenue from accommodation, conferences and training programmes." Such revenues are likely to remain reduced in the midterm.

The issues of student fee refunds and the costs of student accommodation have been particularly acute:

> *a) Unused accommodation refunds:* In early January 2021, the Prime Minister referred to unused student accommodation costs as something previously unknown ("clearly there are going to be issues") and passed responsibility back to universities "see what arrangements they are making to deal with the reasonable concerns of students." A House of Commons Briefing Paper (25.1.21) reports on the issues of unused student accommodation, charting the timeline leading to students returning to campus in September 2020 and finding that "their living arrangements were restricted due to providers following Government guidance on Covid management. Furthermore,

outbreaks of Covid-19 in a number of universities put many students in self-isolation and *caused unexpected difficulties*" (emphasis added). **Many universities have already offered refunds on university-owned accommodation**.

b) Fee refunds: On 15.1.21, Michelle Donelan published a series of tweets about fee refunds, stating that "Universities are responsible for their own fees but the Government has been VERY clear if universities want to continue charging the full fees, they are expected to maintain the quality, quantity and accessibility of tuition", going on to recommend students "raise their concerns with their Uni via the complaints process. If unresolved, they can go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)".

The recent All Party Parliamentary Group on Students "Inquiry into student tuition and accommodation costs during Covid-19" recommends a range of measures, including rent refunds, emergency hardship funds to cover costs (including lost income and digital poverty). In also recommends "the introduction of means-tested maintenance grants to assist the 'Covid cohort' with the costs they face." In addition, it recommends a catch-up summer funded by a "Covid Student Learning Remediation Fund". The APPG states that, while "Universities and their staff have worked hard to provide the best possible blended learning, but it cannot match the educational experience available in normal times", "Refunds would also reduce universities' income and therefore their students' education." As pointed out elsewhere, however, "the sector's general position is that outside of highly specialist courses, everything's been successfully moved online."

The issue of fee reductions is complex. Many students and members of the public do not understand how universities are currently funded (in addition to the different approaches across the four nations), e.g., "Coronavirus lockdown: I'm not paying £9,250 for Zoom university." The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) called "for greater transparency on the use of students' tuition fees" in 2018, in a report that found "around 45% of tuition fee income is spent on teaching. Most of the rest goes on areas that also directly benefit students, like maintaining buildings, information technology and student support services, such as counselling." The report also found that "UK universities have varying levels of dependency on the income from tuition fees" (e.g., University of Cambridge, tuition fees comprise 15% of total income; Nottingham Trent, 81%).

With regards to the current fee situation, other possibilities have been suggested, such as "a further or higher education fee credit". Alternatively, **debt freezing** would make visible the financial system currently underpinning universities. The financial/market discourses have less traction in countries where university education is free and models are different (e.g., attending local universities, less all-student residences). In the UK, pandemic headlines create tension and frustration: lecturers report doing more (the online offer is more encompassing, interactive and time consuming than the in-person lecture and seminar model) while students feel as though they are getting less. Such statements echo multiple mixed messages across the media and public discourse that refer to schools, colleges, and universities as 'closed' or 'shut', while, in fact, universities remain open to the many students still living on campus, and schools / colleges remain open for critical worker and vulnerable students.

Independent SAGE **urges public discussion about the purpose of universities and their funding model** since, as unlikely as this might have seemed a year ago, the return to the 'old normal' in Autumn is looking less and less likely.

c) Autumn 2021 and the future of HE

It is important to plan now for the implications of variants and the vaccine for September, especially considering the age groups of students and staff across HE and FE. **Universities should plan to continue blended teaching and learning models for some time yet**, mapped to vaccination roll-out and, of course, cases.

The pandemic has rapidly changed the shape of university life. Open discussion is needed not only about enabling remote learning during the ongoing pandemic – since it requires **investment** in, for example, better online platforms, training, access, and digital equality – but what benefits may be kept in the future. Before the pandemic, [discussions](#) about e-learning, flipped classrooms, lecture recording, etc., were [well-established](#) and, since the stakes and interests and were different, less fraught [outside the emergency that the pandemic caused](#). For example, remote delivery can increase flexible working and scheduling; online large lectures can increase student participation, and online research practices (interviews, focus groups, including recording) and [online conferences](#) reduce costs, reduce carbon emissions from travel, increase access, and support Net Zero.

Students spend a relatively small proportion of their week in classes. Alongside independent learning, universities bring social, relational, cultural, and developmental experiences – all of which are currently in sharp focus because so much of everybody's life is under restriction. Therefore, **Independent SAGE urges new public discussion, and coordinated consultation between university staff, students, and government, about the purpose, values, and funding of university education in the UK**.

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