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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 49

Statement on Universities and Colleges Autumn 2021 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 Universities and Colleges Autumn 2021 in the Context of SARS-CoV-2

Universities are large workplaces and organizations with a public mission. Their impact on the size and composition of their local communities and populations means that they have a duty of care not only to their employees and students but to those who live in their towns and cities. Furthermore, as the engine-rooms of COVID-19 science and policy advice, universities can lead the way for other workplaces and educational settings as models of good practice, including leading change where it is needed.

Since Autumn 2020, Independent SAGE has made a series of statementsⁱ and recommendations regarding how UK universities could keep open safely during the pandemic. Much of the science and recommendations [overlapped with SAGE](#) as well as with [scientists internationally](#). In Autumn 2021, many recommendations remain current. The transmission risks for universities (e.g., independent adult population; mass (inter)national travel; creating new households; ‘fresher’, sports and social events), [are as high if not higher than last year](#) since case numbers are higher in the UK than at this point last year.

In guidance updated on 17th August 2021, the UK government lifted “[restrictions on the approach to teaching and learning in higher education \(HE\) providers as a result of COVID-19. There is no requirement for social distancing or other measures within in person teaching. Providers are therefore able to shape their courses without restrictions to face-to-face provision](#)”, while also stating that universities “[should continue to make efforts to reduce the risk of transmission where possible.](#)” [Universities UK](#) has stated that universities are “preparing to maximise opportunities for in-person teaching, support and social activities for a much fuller experience this year” but also that “the public health situation remains unpredictable.”

In this statement, we set out A) key changes since last year; B) recommendations for September 2021 where processes and policies are not already in place, and C) principles for a good university environment.

A. Context: What has changed, relevant to universities?

- The UK is currently experiencing a new wave of cases fuelled by the highly transmissible [Delta Variant](#). In Scotland, cases are [doubling weekly](#). We know that the more cases that occur, the more likely it is that Delta will further mutate and result in [vaccine escape](#).
- A year on from Autumn 2020, higher numbers of [younger adults](#) are infected and hospitalized and therefore more likely to acquire **Long Covid**. The Office for National Statistics currently reports “[that over 106,000 under-25s are living with long Covid in the UK](#)”
- **Testing** is now widespread, including on campuses, although the [limitations of lateral flow rapid tests are well-established and communication about what constitutes covid symptoms, especially for the Delta variant, is poor](#).
- The [vaccine roll-out](#) has been hugely successful in the UK, with uptake rates generally high, although lower in younger adults ([current PHE data reports](#) “41.3% of 18- to 24-year-olds and 46.5% of 25- to 29-year-olds in England have received a second dose. In contrast, more than [91% of over-60s](#) in England had had their second jab at a comparable stage”) and with variation across the four nations and regions. Universities comprise international communities and students attend from around the globe, where rates vary. Modelling [suggests 90%](#) of a university population should be vaccinated for a ‘safe’ campus. Mandatory vaccination has

been [mooted and dropped](#) and mooted again and practice is already [varying across international university campuses](#).

- Our previous Universities statements documented the need for increased funding for student **mental health** services before the pandemic. In January 2020, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Students published [a briefing paper](#) identifying “a student mental health crisis in higher education” and urged the sector to make “mental health a university-wide priority.” Currently, NHS providers estimate that [eight million people](#) in the general England population cannot get specialist help.
- We also documented several areas of **inequalities** (e.g., access to IT and space to study; reduced income from part-time jobs, etc.). New [research from the Student Futures Commission](#) reported that “it is clear that those from poorer backgrounds, and non-traditional students more generally, have been most affected by the pandemic - whether through digital inequality, financial poverty, or lack of wider community support.”
- The **‘attainment gap’** at A-level between state and privately educated students [“almost doubled”](#) during the pandemic. Many students entering their first year will have been assessed not through, say, formal/timed examinations but through other methods, and may be less prepared for university assessment than previously.
- The **‘remote’ modality of teaching, learning, studying and working** has enabled positive change for some particularly regarding work-life balance and childcare; [accessibility](#) for disabled staff and students; [participation and inclusivity](#) in teaching, learning and [meetings](#); and reduced carbon footprints from travel connected to core university activities. Crucially, [“students have a clear desire](#) to continue using the aspects of remote learning that they found useful.” The [Student Futures Commission](#) report also notes that new online and ‘blended’ modalities has been “accelerated rather than initiated by the circumstances of the pandemic” and “only 15% [of students] don’t want any online delivery next year.” This is despite “the negative framing of digitally enhanced learning in the public domain.”
- However, the Student Futures Commission also reports that participation in extra-curricular activities has “declined significantly” and that “85% of students surveyed had found it more difficult to make friends at university.”

B. Recommendations for Autumn 2021 at universities

[A new article](#) in the *British Medical Journal* reflects on the experiences of USA and UK universities and makes five recommendations for ‘safe re-opening’:

1. Maximum vaccination uptake (90% is the modelled percentage)
2. A phased return, to avoid mass migration
3. Adequate ventilation
4. “Effective contact tracing, combined with effective on-campus testing, isolation, and support”
5. The use of face coverings

All of these factors (barring vaccinations, which were not yet developed in Autumn 2020) were repeatedly presented in previous [Independent SAGE statements](#) on universities but also for [schools](#) and [workplaces](#). We endorse these recommendations and expand on them below. The recommendations draw on underpinning behavioural science for public health behaviours and safety. We also incorporate the findings presented in the [Student Futures Commission](#) report which further augments our recommendations and provides an evidence base for them.

6. Make it as easy as possible for students and staff to get vaccines and tests that are free, accessible, and accompanied by clear information and subsequent support (e.g., through public and visible sites on campus, strongly promoted at the start of Autumn term and throughout ‘freshers’ week). Some universities are already making vaccinations available on-site.
 - a. The UK is not (currently) mandating vaccinations and universities are not mandating vaccination to access education. There are precedents for mandatory vaccination for some courses (e.g., medicine) and, across the sector internationally, some mandates are already in place (e.g., [in the USA](#)). It is difficult to balance, on the one hand, keeping vaccination voluntary (for different reasons, from medical to religious grounds) while, on the other, also protecting the health and wellbeing concerns of staff and students who do not want to mix in spaces where they do not know who has (not) been vaccinated. There will always be a minority of people who are not vaccinated, which makes other mitigations (spacing, masks, and ventilation) important. Mandatory vaccinations can give a false sense of security. Overall, it will be important to review the unfolding situation nationally and internationally and support vaccination (and testing) by making it a collective norm and easy to access.
7. Have a policy to support students and staff with Long Covid. This will require flexible and empathic work and study practices and policies.
8. Maintain a rigorous find, test, trace, isolate, and support system on campus.
9. Promote strongly the use of face coverings, physical distancing, and hand and respiratory hygiene (including discouraging in-person attendance if symptomatic).
 - a. The UK government has stated that “Face coverings are no longer advised for students, staff and visitors either in teaching rooms or in communal areas.” Yet, a few lines later, it also states that “The government has removed the requirement to wear face coverings in law but expects and recommends that they are worn in enclosed and crowded spaces where people may come into contact with people they don’t normally meet.”
 - i. Universities currently vary in the clarity, framing, and strength of their messaging about face coverings and other messages. For example,
 - “[Whilst](#) government guidelines mean that the wearing of face coverings is no longer mandatory, the government expects and recommends that you wear face coverings in crowded and enclosed spaces.”
 - “[We](#) still expect everyone to wear a face covering indoors. This still applies to most indoor settings on campus, with some local exceptions and unless you are exempt.”
 - “[Strong](#) encouragement for staff and students to continue to wear face coverings inside and in crowded areas.”
 - b. We urge universities to go beyond current government recommendations (which contain much [mixed messaging](#)) and, for instance, require face coverings in all multi-occupancy indoors teaching and learning spaces and shared work spaces rather than leave it to individual choice.
 - c. Avoid ‘hygiene theatre’ (e.g., use of small plastic screens, face shields or hand sanitizer but no masks).
 - d. Make it easy for everyone to adhere to the rules (including the provision of face-coverages and clear signage) which is especially important given the extent of government [mixed messaging](#).

- e. While [some universities](#) are producing contracts for their students which include fines for covid rule-breaking (e.g., not wearing masks), [research shows](#) that support and promotion is better for adherence and equalities.
 - f. Take a proactive approach to protect all on campus through strong messages and clear collective expectations, rather than conveying that covid-safe behaviours are a matter of individual choice.
10. Ensure adequate ventilation in indoor spaces, including shared offices, meeting rooms, teaching and learning spaces, and food and other social spaces, and communicate clearly about what each space does and does not provide.
11. Pay close attention to case rates locally, regionally, and nationally and plan for maximizing online teaching and learning in a timely rather than last-minute way.
- a. Since students spend a relatively small proportion of their time in class, and since many university employees have no contact with students, the narrative around 'in person teaching and learning' as a panacea is not evidence-based.
 - i. Nevertheless, when appropriate and safe to do so, deliver tutorials, supervision, laboratory work, and other small-group teaching in person, with mitigations where appropriate, to help students meet, build and maintain learning and social relationships with each other and staff.
 - b. Online learning (during the pandemic) has never solely been 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.
 - i. We know that transmission risk is not highest in regulated learning spaces but in student domestic and social spaces; during travel; in unventilated indoor offices and spaces.
 - c. Deliver lectures online and record them, maximizing the benefits they bring (e.g., repeat viewings, multichannel participation, students' expressed preferences).
 - i. This removes the risks from queueing for lectures and lack of ventilation.
 - d. Always ensure online options are available for vulnerable or shielding students and staff or for those with caring responsibilities who need to support or protect others.
12. Ensure equal access to learning and teaching technology (including for staff working from home) such as through the provision of laptops, internet access, and other necessary technology.
13. Support students who may not have done exams recently or who have lost periods of school education during the pandemic. The [Student Futures Commission](#) report found, in their survey of 2147 students, the need to "quickly establish any curriculum gaps" and support students in this regard, noting that "students will not have experienced disruption to learning in a uniform way" and will vary in terms of "these "preparedness gaps" in study skills, academic confidence and readiness for higher level learning."
- a. Like previous Independent SAGE universities statements, the [Student Futures Commission](#) report also states that "Universities will need to build on and improve their student engagement to ensure the needs of different types of students are met, particularly for students with disabilities, commuter students, mature students, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and especially black and minority ethnic groups."
14. Ensure plans for outbreaks and self-isolating students, including new arrivals from overseas, includes material support, social support, and flexible learning support.
15. Ensure that rent refunds are possible for periods when accommodation cannot be used for covid-related reasons.

16. Support staff and students to have (paid) time off to get vaccinated, tested, self-isolate, or otherwise when they are unwell, including hourly-paid staff and PhD students.
17. Be prepared for an increase in demand for mental health and wellbeing support. The [Student Futures Commission](#) report states that “engagement in extracurricular opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging in the university community, are both well-evidenced ways to improve mental wellbeing, but also for student outcomes more broadly (engagement, academic outcomes and labour market outcomes).”

C. Principles for a good university environment during the coronavirus pandemic and beyond

1. **Generate a culture of strong collective social norms of care and inclusion.** There should be a strongly reinforced norm to not attend work or study on campus with symptoms and clear communication about what the symptoms are (including of the Delta variant). This relates to a broader point about creating a workplace culture of shared responsibility for those who are clinically vulnerable and minimizing their chances of becoming infected with COVID as well as protecting everyone from infection leading to Long Covid. It should also be easy for staff and students to voice concerns without the risk of being stigmatized.
2. **Support staff and students to make choices** that keep them [physically and psychologically well](#).
 - a. Clinically vulnerable (‘CEV’) staff and students may not wish to reveal that they are vulnerable. Some may not be clinically vulnerable themselves, but they might be living with people who are - and they may not wish to let people know about this. Identifying flexible ways of working should be reality, not just rhetoric, at a time when student and staff mental health problems are at a peak.
 - b. A new form of [presenteeism](#) at universities and other workplaces means that some staff may be mandated to work (including in shared offices) doing tasks they can do (and have been doing) at home and without account or explanation. Universities (and within them departments and schools) already vary enormously in this regard, and some broad principles should be adopted across the sector.
 - c. Social contact [survey data](#) shows that people attending workplaces have twice as many contacts as those working from home (or not at work).
 - d. Research shows that giving people agency and choice is ultimately more productive and a better management strategy than attempting to enforce unnecessary attendance. If this is done visibly as a principle, it is likely to make those who are reluctant to work ‘in the office’ more likely to choose to do so when it would be helpful, since a culture of agency is better than a culture of enforcement.
 - e. Flexible working, in collaboration, is important, since no one size fits all across groups of student-facing staff; non-student facing staff; academic staff with/out sole-occupancy offices; staff who want to work on campus; professional services in (mostly) shared offices; staff and students who need to travel to work and use public transport; staff and students who can walk to work; people who are CEV or shielding; commuter students.
3. **Adopt evidence-based communication principles** to foster a community and collegial university environment, which include invoking shared identities and group norms and focusing on support rather than coercion. Two research-based guides are appended belowⁱⁱ.
4. **As institutions of research and knowledge, learn from international experience and data.** The re-opening of US schools and colleges happens much earlier than in the UK. Last year, the autumn term “[was disastrous](#)” in the US which made it easy to anticipate the high rates of

cases among students in Autumn 2020. At the current time, [US universities](#) are already switching from planned in-person to classes to online because of [case numbers](#).

5. **Work collaboratively with other universities** rather than in competition across the sector to make the case for properly funded higher education, which is even more important in the post-Brexit and pandemic contexts. The economic drivers of COVID strategy have a chance of being challenged if university leaders are collectively vocal.
 - a. The [Student Futures Commission](#) states that the UK HE sector “is finding itself under intense pressure - from students, and via the media - to explain and justify its moves. For many outside higher education, online learning looks like a cost cutting measure, or one of a lazy unwillingness to go back to face to face and other ‘harder’ methods of teaching. This is not a view that the Commission shares.”
 - b. The report further states that “universities will need to prioritise work from September with students and with parents, including through the media, to understand expectations around what is variously called ‘hybrid’ or ‘blended’ learning, and to explain clearly exactly what students will receive, rather than simply broad framing and debates about terminology. Furthermore, universities would benefit from discussing openly the pedagogical benefits of their proposed models - not just the underpinning technological architecture. This is not a debate that the sector can duck.”
 - c. Further, “The sector has found itself most recently at the end of significant criticism from parents and students, through the media, over the value for money and effectiveness of online learning. ... [which] illustrates the narrow ledge of public and political opinion and practice that universities are navigating their way along. It is positive that [in recent weeks there has been greater discussion](#) of this issue in sector press, pointing to the need to engage students and the public more effectively.”
6. **Embrace the financial benefits of the global demand for university education** that cannot be met, as one UK university Vice-Chancellor has written, “[through the traditional means of on-campus teaching and on-campus continuing professional development](#)” and meet the “[challenges such as those embodied in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals](#)”.
 - a. UUK, as part of the [Student Futures Commission](#), stated that “Although immensely challenging, the pandemic has also brought about significant innovation and adjustment at rapid pace. The pandemic has compelled the sector to review curriculum design, course structure, assessment methods, and move rapidly to online delivery. The sector has questioned deeply ingrained beliefs about how education should be delivered.”
 - b. The pandemic has rapidly changed the shape of many workplaces. It has Before the pandemic, [research](#) showed that “online education in its various modes has been growing steadily worldwide due to the confluence of new technologies, global adoption of the Internet, and intensifying demand for a workforce trained periodically for the ever-evolving digital economy. Online education is on track to become mainstream by 2025.” Online education, and other activities such as [online conferences](#), reduce costs, reduce carbon emissions from travel, increase access, and support Net Zero.
 - c. The [Student Futures Commission](#) states that “new ‘blended’ model of teaching was accelerated rather than initiated by the circumstances of the pandemic”, making it difficult “to separate out what students want now, as we emerge from the pandemic, and what they might want in a year, or in five years’ time.”

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1. Sept 2020: [Independent SAGE Statement on Universities in the context of SARS-CoV-2](#)
2. Sept 2020: [Independent SAGE response to SAGE “Principles for Managing SARS-CoV-2 Transmission Associated with Higher Education”](#)
3. Sept 2020: [Independent SAGE Emergency Statement on Universities in the Context of Rising SARS-CoV-2 Cases in Late September 2020](#)
4. Feb 2021: [Independent SAGE Statement on Universities and Colleges Winter-Spring 2021 in the Context of SARS-CoV-2 and the UK Government ‘Roadmap’](#)
5. Nov 2020: [Independent SAGE Statement on University Winter Term 2020 and Winter-Spring Transitions in the Context of SARS-CoV-2](#)
6. Dec 2020: [Independent SAGE Winter-Spring Universities Transitions in the Context of SARS-CoV-2](#)

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1. [Evidence-based guidance on COVID communications: Seven core principles](#)
2. [“Principles for organizational communication for universities and similar organizations in the context of Covid-19”](#)

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