

Universities and Colleges Sub Group - Report to Outbreak Management Advisory Board

Overview

Since the last update cases of Covid at all our institutions have fallen substantially. Both Universities are reporting only single digit numbers of new cases per day and amongst the entire HE and FE student population we have less than 100 active cases.

Our Test and Trace teams continue to discuss cases daily with the City Council public health team, and our shared analysis across all four institutions and the City Council remains that all but a very few cases are derived from household to household transmission. We continue to have no evidence of transmission in learning and teaching settings.

End of Term

Attention across the university sector is now focusing on preparations for the end of term. For students who wish to travel home for the holiday period the Government has announced a 'student travel window' from the 3rd to the 9th of December during which we will work to manage departures in a safe way, in particular through a booking system for students who will be picked up by family members.

Alongside students who are permanently resident in the York area, we also usually have over a thousand students staying with us - on campus or other University owned accommodation in the City - over the Christmas holiday period and we are putting in place detailed plans to ensure these students are supported throughout this period.

We should also note that guidance on end of term arrangements for the FE sector, including residential FE students is still pending from government.

Mass Testing

The Government has also announced plans for mass testing students as term ends. At the time of writing we are still confirming exact entails with the Department of Education and Department of Health and Social Care but we hope to be able to offer this for students at both Universities and the over 18 year old residential students at Askham Bryan College.

The scheme is voluntary, but we hope to see a good uptake by our students and hope the results will allow students to make informed decisions about when and how they choose to go home or travel elsewhere for the Christmas holidays. As we move into the spring term we also hope that large scale testing, combined with an effective local test and trace system will be an

important way of managing the risk of virus transmission and allowing us to re-introduce more in-person activity on our campuses.

Support for Students

Reflecting on the first term of this academic year, the Universities and Colleges Sub Group also wanted to highlight the challenges faced by our student population - a cohort of young people who have been materially disadvantaged in a number of ways that will have profound impacts on their wellbeing. Despite the support we - and our Students' Unions - have put in place for students they have still been deeply affected by lost employment and earning opportunities, and through the continuing effect of the disruption to their education during the first lockdown.

Universities, colleges and students have responded as positively as we possibly could have throughout this year. But we know from our student welfare team and our Students' Unions that the financial pressure on students is increasing as the pandemic evolves, not least in the current lockdown period.

As such, we would welcome any action the Outbreak Management Advisory Board might take to support our call for greater financial support for students - specifically, we have asked the Government to provide additional hardship funding to help universities support students who have lost casual jobs or are otherwise facing financial hardship. We do not want to risk students being unable to support themselves and being forced to leave higher education. And we have asked the Government to help us manage future infection rates by providing self-isolation payments, like those available to others on low incomes, to any students who are either diagnosed with Covid-19 or are required as household members to self-isolate.

Universities and Colleges Outbreak Management Sub Group
16 November 2020