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Attending university in 2021: A Level results and autumn provision



Summary

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Summary

A Levels in 2021

Students taking A levels in the summer of 2021 experienced the most disruption to their studies due to the coronavirus pandemic. In response, the Government allowed a reduction in course curriculums, and, for the second year running, summer exams were cancelled. Final grades were awarded based on teacher or centre assessment of student performance.

In 2021, 44.3% of A-level entries in England were awarded A* or A. This was a 6.2 percentage point rise compared to 2020's results and a 19.1 percentage point increase compared with the pre-pandemic exam results of 2019.

Impact on universities

A record number of 18-year-olds from the UK have been accepted by universities in 2021. The number of placed 18-year-olds was up by 19,000 or 7% by 7 September 2021. The estimated proportion of home 18-year-olds placed by this date was 37.9% compared with 36.4% in 2020, which was a record high at the time. Overall, around 508,000 applicants had been placed by 7 September 2021, which was down by 2% on 2020. This cut in numbers was the result of the large drop in EU applicants.

The high number of acceptances from home students has led to some courses being oversubscribed. This has caused particular difficulties for medical degrees, where student numbers are constrained by the availability of clinical placements. In such cases, students have been offered incentives to move to another institution or to defer their place to next year. There have also been implications for the availability of student accommodation for new students in some institutions.

Attending university in autumn 2021

University provision has been significantly affected by the pandemic. Campuses were closed to most students during lockdowns and teaching has largely been delivered online for the last eighteen months. This unprecedented experience of higher education has prompted student

complaints about a lack of support from their institutions and calls for tuition fee refunds.

The Government has made it clear there are no longer Covid-19 restrictions on in-person teaching and it is hoped most teaching will be delivered face-to-face when term starts in autumn 2021. Higher education providers (HEPs) are autonomous bodies, however. They have discretion over hcourse delivery, provided they act in the best interests of students and in accordance with published guidance.

Surveys have shown that while students recognise there are some benefits to remote learning, particularly for disabled students, a return to face-to-face teaching is a priority for many in the autumn. Most universities have said they will adopt a 'blended learning' approach to delivering courses. This will entail as much teaching as possible being delivered in-person, but digital learning and online materials will also feature where appropriate.

Universities are also dealing with the issue of their students' vaccination status and quarantine arrangements for arriving international students.

1 Background

1.1 A Levels in 2020 and 2021

Information on A level results in 2020 is available in the following library briefing:

- [A level results in England and the impact on university admissions in 2020-21](#), 2 September 2020

Students taking A levels in the summers of 2020 and 2021 experienced significant disruption to their studies due to the coronavirus pandemic. The online delivery of courses caused difficulties for some students, despite the Government scheme to provide laptops to disadvantaged students. Even when in-person teaching resumed, many students faced being repeatedly sent home due to Covid-19 outbreaks in their school. In response, the Government allowed a reduction in course curriculums, and, for the second year running, summer exams were cancelled. Final grades were awarded based on teacher or centre assessment of student performance.

1.2 University provision during the Covid-19 pandemic

University provision has been significantly affected by the pandemic. In March 2020 and during subsequent national lockdowns, university campuses were closed to most students. Students were encouraged to move back home and courses were delivered online. The re-opening of many campuses in September 2020 was followed by a spike in Covid-19 cases among the student body, despite the mitigation measures put in place by universities. Mitigations have included: organising students into 'households', quarantining students who tested positive, and continuing to deliver most teaching online. This unprecedented experience of higher education prompted complaints from students about a lack of support and calls for tuition fee refunds.

The following Library briefing papers set out how university provision has evolved during the pandemic.

- [Coronavirus Bill: childcare and education settings](#), 20 March 2020
- [Coronavirus implications for the further and higher education sectors in England](#), 11 April 2020

- [Coronavirus: Update implications for the further and higher education sectors](#), 21 May 2020
- [Coronavirus: Easing lockdown restrictions in FE and HE in England](#), 2 September 2020
- [Coronavirus: Higher and further education back to campus in England in 2020/21?](#), 6 January 2021
- [Coronavirus: Student accommodation issues](#), 25 January 2021
- [Coronavirus: HE/FE return to campus in England 2021](#), 7 July 2021

2 A levels in 2021

2.1 Assessment

Library briefing paper, [Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2021 and 2022, 26 July 2021](#) outlines debate and processes around the awarding of grades in A levels and equivalent exams in 2021.

In 2020, summer A level exams were cancelled. Confusion followed the awarding of final grades when the use of a controversial algorithm to standardise results was dropped, and grades were subsequently awarded based on teacher assessment.

It was initially expected that exams would go ahead in 2021, but on 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister [announced](#) that the summer AS and A Level exams would again be cancelled, and replaced by teacher-assessed grades (TAGs).¹

Several [consultations](#) were carried out by the exams regulator for England, Ofqual, and the Department for Education (DfE), on awarding GCSEs, AS and A Levels and vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) in 2021. The final approach to awarding grades was set out in two documents:

- Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on how GCSE, AS and A Level grades will be determined in summer 2021, 25 February 2021](#).
- Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on alternative arrangements for the award of VTQ and other general qualifications in 2021, 25 February 2021](#).

The Ofqual guidance on A levels gave a summary of how grades would be awarded on p4:

Assessment and evidence

- Teachers must assess their students' performance, only on what content has been delivered to them by their teachers, to determine the grade each student should receive.
- Teachers can use evidence of a student's performance from throughout the course to inform their judgement.
- Teachers should determine the grades as late in the academic year as is practicable, and not confined to a

¹ ["GCSE and A-level 2021 exams cancelled"](#), FE Week, 4 January 2021.

defined window, to enable teaching to continue for as long as possible.

- Schools and colleges should use a broad range of evidence across the taught content to determine the grades before submitting the grades to the exam boards.
- Heads of centres will have to confirm that students have been taught sufficient content to allow progression to the next stage of their education.
- Decisions on how GCSE, AS and A level grades will be determined in summer 2021 will not set requirements about the minimum amount of content that students must have been taught.
- Students should continue to work on their non-exam assessment (NEA), including for Project qualifications. NEA will be marked by teachers and will contribute to the overall grade, whether or not it has been completed, but we will not require exam boards to moderate it.
- In GCSE, AS and A level art and design, the student's grade must be based on the portfolio only, whether or not it has been completed.
- In GCSE English language, GCSE modern foreign languages and A level sciences (biology, chemistry, physics and geology), centres should determine and submit a separate grade or result for the endorsement. This result or grade should be based on work that has been completed towards the endorsement.
- Private candidates should work with a centre to provide evidence in line with the sort of evidence that other students will produce

Overall, it was intended that it would be no easier or harder for a student to achieve a particular grade in 2021 compared to previous years. Ofqual published guidance for students on results in summer 2021, which also covers how grades are awarded, and appeal processes, [Ofqual, Student guide to awarding: Summer 2021, 22 July 2021](#).

2.2

Results

A level and BTEC results were announced on 10 August 2021. The results showed a significant increase in the number of A* and A grades awarded and an increase in the overall number of students passing.

44.3% of A level entries in 2021 were awarded A* and A grades

In 2021, 44.3% of A-level entries in England were awarded A* or A. This was a 6.2 percentage point rise compared to 2020's results and a 19.1 percentage point increase compared with the pre-pandemic exam results of 2019. In independent schools, 70.1% of pupils achieved A and A* grades which was much higher than any other establishment type. The results also showed gender differences with 46.4% of entries from girls receiving A* or A compared with 41.7% of entries from boys.

The Ofqual [report](#) on the results said:

A level students are generally more able to study independently than younger students and have more study time for each subject. There has been an increase in outcomes at the top grades and stability at lower grades. This may be because the most academically able students were most able to study independently.²

The results are discussed in the following articles:

- Education datalab, [A-Level results 2021: The main trends in grades and entries](#)
- “[Nearly 45% of A-level entries across UK awarded top grades](#)”, The Guardian, 10 August 2021

Variations by establishment, pupil characteristics and region

The following table looks at trends in A level grades by type of school or college.

² Ofqual, [Summer 2021 results analysis and quality assurance - A level and GCSE](#) (August 2021).

| A level outcomes by centre type, England | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------------|------|------|-------|-------------------|------|------|-------|--|
| Percentage of entries | | | | | | | | | |
| | Grades A*/A | | | | Grade C or better | | | | |
| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Trend | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Trend | |
| Independent | 44.0 | 60.8 | 70.1 | | 87.5 | 95.8 | 96.4 | | |
| Secondary Selective | 36.1 | 49.1 | 56.6 | | 83.4 | 91.9 | 92.2 | | |
| Other | 20.5 | 41.7 | 51.1 | | 62.9 | 86.6 | 88.5 | | |
| Free Schools | 26.7 | 40.0 | 46.6 | | 73.2 | 87.2 | 88.8 | | |
| Academy | 23.7 | 36.2 | 41.9 | | 75.3 | 87.1 | 87.7 | | |
| Secondary comp. or middle | 20.0 | 33.1 | 39.3 | | 72.2 | 86.0 | 86.7 | | |
| Secondary Modern | 17.3 | 29.9 | 35.3 | | 64.2 | 83.5 | 83.6 | | |
| Sixth Form College | 21.9 | 31.5 | 35.3 | | 74.5 | 84.6 | 85.0 | | |
| Tertiary College | 20.6 | 30.0 | 34.5 | | 75.4 | 86.0 | 85.9 | | |
| FE Establishment | 12.2 | 23.7 | 28.8 | | 63.9 | 80.0 | 81.0 | | |

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2021 results analysis and quality assurance - A level and GCSE](#)

The percentage of entries awarded A* or A increased in all types of institution in 2020 and 2021. Independent schools saw the largest absolute increase in A*/A grades of any major school/college type. There was a 26.1 percentage point increase at independent schools between 2019 and 2021 and 20.5 points at selective state schools which was the next highest. The smallest absolute increases were in sixth form colleges and tertiary colleges. The largest relative increases were in the centre types which started with the lowest proportion of entries at these grades - FE establishments, secondary modern and maintained comprehensive schools.

There was less variation in changes in entries at grade C or better. The greatest improvements were in the school/college types which started with the lowest proportion of entries at these grades.

Ofqual analysed A level results for a number of different groups to investigate whether the change in the way grades were awarded in 2019 and 2020 led to any impact on equality. The groups analysed were gender, ethnicity, major language, special educational needs, deprivation, prior attainment, region and type of school/college. They concluded:

For A level, the analyses show increases in outcomes for many groups and general stability in the differences in outcomes for students with different protected characteristics compared to 2020 and 2019.³

The only ‘notable’ change they found between 2020 and 2021 was for candidates from tertiary colleges where there was a small decrease in outcomes relative to the comparator group. They also noted a small decrease in outcomes between 2019 and 2021 for male candidates, those with special needs and those at selective schools and sixth form and tertiary colleges compared with their respective comparators. Candidates from independent schools had a small increase in two out of three measures compared with their comparator.

The following table shows results over the past two years by region. The largest increase in A*/A grades were in London and the East Midlands. The smallest increase was in the North East which was two points less than the increase in any other region. It was also the only region where the proportion of entries awarded C or better fell in 2021.

| A level outcomes by region in 2020 and 2021, England | | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Percentage of entries | | | | | | |
| | Grades A*/A | | Grade C or better | | Percentage point change 2020 to 2021 | |
| | 2020 | 2021 | 2020 | 2021 | A*/A | C or better |
| London | 40.7 | 47.9 | 88.1 | 88.9 | +7.2 | +0.8 |
| South East | 41.2 | 47.1 | 88.7 | 89.2 | +5.9 | +0.5 |
| Eastern Region | 38.3 | 44.8 | 87.5 | 88.5 | +6.5 | +1.0 |
| South West | 38.8 | 44.7 | 88.1 | 88.1 | +5.9 | +0.0 |
| North West | 35.8 | 41.4 | 87.0 | 87.6 | +5.6 | +0.6 |
| East Midlands | 34.5 | 41.3 | 85.4 | 87.0 | +6.8 | +1.6 |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 35.0 | 41.1 | 86.7 | 87.6 | +6.1 | +0.9 |
| West Midlands | 35.0 | 40.9 | 86.1 | 87.2 | +5.9 | +1.1 |
| North East | 35.6 | 39.2 | 88.1 | 87.7 | +3.6 | -0.4 |
| England | 38.1 | 44.3 | 87.5 | 88.2 | +6.2 | +0.7 |

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2021 results analysis and quality assurance - A level and GCSE](#)

³ Ofqual, [Summer 2021 student-level equalities analysis - GCSE and A level](#) (August 2021).

3 Impact on universities

The number of applications for higher education reached a record level in 2021, with [UCAS reporting 682,010](#) applications by June 2021.⁴ The increase in the award of top-grade A levels meant that unusually high numbers of students met their first choice offers this year, and there were fewer places available in clearing at high tariff higher education providers (HEPs).

3.1 Applications in 2021

The total number of applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities was 682,010 by 30 June 2021. This was around 29,000 higher than at the same point in 2020; an increase of 4.5% and a new record level. Within this total, applications from home students increased by an even larger amount. They were up by around 37,000 or 7.3%. Applicants from the EU were down by 43% and those from other overseas countries up by 14%.⁵

The number of 18-year-old applicants was up by 9%. The estimated application rate among 18-year-olds increased to 43.3%. This was nearly three percentage points higher than in 2020, which was itself a record figure. The largest increases in applicants by age were in the 25-29 and 30-34 age groups, which were up by 12% and 13% respectively.⁶

Applications can be made after the 30 June deadline but these go straight into the clearing process.

3.2 Acceptances in 2021

The latest data from UCAS on applicants with a place is from 7 September 2021 which is four weeks after A-levels/Scottish Highers results day. Around 508,000 applicants had been placed by this date, **down by 2% on 2020**. This cut in numbers was the result of the large drop in EU applicants. The number of home applicants placed was up by 6,000 or 1%. There was a large increase in applicants who gained a place at their first choice university or their 'insurance' option. This reflects the increase in higher grades in 2021.

⁴ UCAS, [2021 cycle applicant figures – 30 June deadline](#), 8 July 2021.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

However, the numbers placed through clearing have, so far, been substantially lower than in earlier years.⁷

The situation with regard to places in a number of institutions is discussed in a Guardian article, [A-level results: almost 150,000 students in scramble for university places](#), 10 August 2021.

The number of placed 18-year-olds from the UK was up by 19,000 or 7% at 7 September. The estimated proportion of home 18-year-olds placed by this date was 37.9% compared with 36.4% in 2020 which was a record at the time.

There was a marked increase in students applying to and getting into ‘higher tariff’ universities in 2020. These are the third of institutions with the highest average entry qualifications. This was largely due to the increase in top grades awarded in 2020. More students got into their first-choice university. This trend has continued into 2021. The number of placed applicants at these universities was up by 3% while it was down at medium and lower tariff institutions by 3% and 4% respectively. In 2021 There were more placed applicants at higher tariff providers than at the other two groups for the first time ever.⁸

The increase in entrants at some universities comes after a large increase in 2020 so there was already pressure on places. It also comes at the start of a demographic bulge in the number of 18-year-olds. The [Office for National Statistics](#) projects that their number will increase by 2-4% each year from 2021 to 2026. The annual increase will be around 22,000 per year. This means that even with no increase in the entry rate the number of new entrants would be expected to increase.

3.3

Oversubscription of courses

The difficulty in predicting grades this year, the increase in applications, and the increase in awarding of high grades has resulted in many courses being over-subscribed. Popular courses such as health-related courses are facing particular difficulties, and this has led some institutions to offer students incentives to defer their places till next year.

Leeds University has offered students with places to study law or business £10,000 and a year’s free accommodation if they defer their places till 2022.⁹ The University’s Deputy Vice Chancellor Peter Jimack said the university was making the offer as some courses were full, since the nature of teacher-assessed grades, as opposed to exam-based grades, had made it “harder to predict” the number of successful applicants. The number of students who

⁷ UCAS [Daily clearing analysis 7 September 2021..](#)

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ “[University of Leeds students offered £10k and free housing to defer](#)”, BBC News, 11 August 2021.

had chosen to defer their place at university was at a record high on 7 September 2021, with 31,070 students, higher than the 29,360 students who had chosen to defer at a similar point last year.¹⁰

Medical school places

The number of places for medicine in England is capped by the Government and based on how many clinical placements are available in local hospitals. A record number of students applied to study medicine this autumn, a rise of more than 20% on last year and this has put extreme pressure on places.

The Government has for a second year running increased the amount of medical school places. The DfE has said around 9,000 places could be made available in total, depending on universities' capacity to expand; some of the most popular medical schools are located in areas that do not have the facilities to offer any further placements.¹¹ This however is not likely to be enough places to cover all the students who have met their offers.

The Government and institutions have created a scheme which will offer applicants on oversubscribed medical courses £10,000 to move to other universities. This scheme is expected to affect about a third of England's 33 medical schools:

Students with places at oversubscribed medical schools in England are being asked to move to a course at a university elsewhere in the country in exchange for £10,000 after a surge in applications was followed by hundreds more students than expected meeting their grade offers.

If not enough students choose to move, some of them may be asked to defer the year by their university. The move is expected to affect about a third of England's 33 medical schools.

[...]

Although final details on how the £10,000 payment scheme will work are yet to be determined, the MSC said the grant would be split between the government, which will provide £6,500, and the oversubscribed university, which will pay £3,500.¹²

The University of Leeds has created extra places for medical students:

The university was also creating an extra 30 places to study medicine for students who were unable to get a place at universities which were oversubscribed.

¹⁰ UCAS, [Statistical releases – daily clearing analysis 2021](#), 7 September 2021.

¹¹ [“Grade inflation forces ministers to pay for extra medical school places”](#), The Guardian, 5 August 2021

¹² [“Medical schools in England offering new students £10,000 to study elsewhere”](#), The Guardian, 10 August 2021

Prof Jimack said: "We recognise that there is a national need and we know from the last 18 months how important our doctors and nurses are. "So we're stepping-up and making available some additional places that we will make available to students from oversubscribed universities to come and study with us at Leeds."¹³

Exeter University had opted out of the Government scheme because it has [implemented an alternative](#), which offers a year's free accommodation and a bursary of £10,000 to medical students who agree to defer their studies. No other oversubscribed university has opted out.¹⁴

3.4 Accommodation

The number of new students starting university in September has had implications for the availability of student accommodation. In addition to the pressures from increased numbers of students, it has been suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to university accommodation being oversubscribed. This is partly due to students thinking that they will have more flexibility to end accommodation contracts with a university, than with a private provider, if in-person teaching is suspended.¹⁵

Accommodation problems have been caused at many universities. Glasgow University guarantees accommodation for all first-year students who applied before 22 August. Some students however, had not been [offered a room by early September](#). This delay in finding accommodation can cause difficulties for some students and of particular concern it can cause visa problems for international students. Other students have been offered places in a private hall of residence in Paisley, a long way from the university¹⁶ At Queen's University Belfast, there has been a [twelve per cent increase in the number of first-year applications for university accommodation](#) compared to last year. Students are being offered £1,250 in cash and other incentives not to take up rooms in university accommodation.¹⁷

The Guardian has found that some students in English universities will be offered rooms at a distance from their campus but with a travel bursary.¹⁸

¹³ "University of Leeds students offered £10k and free housing to defer", BBC News, 11 August 2021.

¹⁴ "Medical schools in England offering new students £10,000 to study elsewhere", The Guardian, 10 August 2021.

¹⁵ "Queen's offers students £1,500 not to take up university accommodation", BBC News, 9 September 2021.

¹⁶ "Glasgow University housing shortage causes chaos for first year students", Glasgow Evening Times, 3 September 2021.

¹⁷ "Queen's offers students £1,500 not to take up university accommodation", BBC News, 9 September 2021.

¹⁸ "Elite UK universities send students out of town as housing squeeze bites", The Guardian, 14 August 2021.

Other universities are renting accommodation blocks from private providers to sublet to their students.

4

Attending university in autumn 2021

It is hoped that when term starts in autumn 2021, most teaching will be delivered face-to-face, and students will be able to have a more normal experience. The Government has made it clear that there are no longer Covid-19 restrictions on in-person provision.¹⁹ While the Government recognises university autonomy it expects providers to act in the interest of students and in accordance with published guidance.

Universities are also dealing with the issue of their students' vaccination status and quarantine arrangements for international students arriving ahead of term.

4.1

The return of face-to-face teaching

For much of the pandemic, university courses have been delivered online, with most students learning remotely and living at home rather than their term-time address. There is an ongoing debate about what university provision should look like from autumn 2021. Gavin Williamson has said he expects all universities to move back to face-to-face teaching and “if universities are not delivering what students expect they should not be charged full fees.”²⁰ As autonomous institutions, however, universities are free to set fees within maximum fee limits determined by regulations (£9,250), and most plan to combine in-person teaching with aspects of online learning.

Department for Education guidance

New [operational guidance for HEPIs \(17 August\)](#), published in response to the continuing pandemic, states that previous Covid-19 restrictions are no longer in place and face-to-face teaching can resume. HEPIs are expected to continue to conduct risk assessments for their circumstances, and have contingency plans to deal with positive cases of COVID-19 and changing health advice. These plans, and their possible impact on student experience, should be clearly communicated to students.

Face coverings

The guidance says “face coverings are no longer advised for students, staff and visitors either in teaching rooms or in communal areas”, but also that the

¹⁹ [PQ 35531 \[Universities: Coronavirus\], 22 July 2021.](#)

²⁰ [“Williamson says universities must 'stand up' offers to students with in-person teaching – video”, The Guardian, 10 August 2021.](#)

Government “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.”²¹ Steps should be taken to ensure teaching rooms are both well ventilated and comfortable.

Testing

The operational guidance states that students and staff should continue to test themselves for Covid-19 twice each week using home test kits or at an on-site testing facility.

A parliamentary question on 7 September 2021 made clear this would remain the case until the end of the month, when guidance would be reviewed subject to the latest public health advice.²² Currently, HEPs are able to claim recovery costs for the set up and running of asymptomatic testing sites on campus. This policy will also be reviewed at the end of September.

The Government’s [Covid-19 response: Autumn and winter plan](#) states that they expect testing to continue for students throughout this term.²³

The Guardian has reported that while academic staff are looking forward to the return of in-person provision, there is anxiety among some about teaching in poorly ventilated rooms and the fact that safety precautions are for the most part only guidance rather than compulsory measures.²⁴

Office for Students guidance

The Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, has highlighted the role of the Office for Students (OfS) in regulating the quality of online higher education provision. She said:

The Office for Students has also made it clear that all HE providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards. This means ensuring that courses provide a high-quality academic experience, that students are supported and achieve good outcomes, and that standards are protected, regardless of whether a provider is delivering its courses through in-person teaching, remote online learning or a combination of both.²⁵

The OfS has [produced guidance for universities](#) that sets out expectations regarding the quality and standards of provision during the pandemic. It applies whether provision is in-person or online. The guidance relates to:

²¹ DfE, [Higher education COVID-19 operational guidance](#), updated 17 August.

²² [PQ 41104 \[Universities: Coronavirus\], 7 September 2021](#).

²³ The Government, [Covid-19 response: Autumn and winter plan](#), September 2021, p10.

²⁴ “[Awaiting a ‘tsunami of Covid’: UK lecturers fear students’ return](#)”, The Guardian, 11 September 2021.

²⁵ [PQ 35531 \[Universities: Coronavirus\], 22 July 2021](#).

- Maintaining the quality of courses and student support
- Securing the standard of qualifications and credit
- Student protection considerations, including consumer protection law.

The guidance explains that HEPs are likely to meet the OfS' conditions for quality and standards if they make "all reasonable efforts" to provide alternative teaching and support for students "broadly equivalent to the provider's usual arrangements."²⁶

Nicola Dandridge the Chief Executive of the OfS has said that "England's universities must take student views into account when deciding how much to teach online".²⁷

Student attitudes to online learning

The National Student Survey (NSS) is an annual survey run by the Office for Students (the higher education regulator in England) that gathers students' opinions on the quality of their courses. In 2021, the NSS included [additional COVID-related questions](#), which revealed that only 47% of students were content with the delivery of learning and teaching during the pandemic.

In May 2021, a poll of 2,147 university students for the Student Futures Commission revealed that [a return to face-to-face teaching was a priority for many in autumn](#). Asked what they were most looking forward to when term starts, 59% of respondents said in-person teaching and studying, while 36% said socialising with peers.²⁸

64% of students said they would like recorded lectures to continue going forward.

Some students believed there were benefits to remote learning, including flexibility (77%), not having to commute (71%), being able to live somewhere cheaper/nicer (47%), and a better work/life balance (25%). The most popular option (45% of respondents) for delivery of courses from the autumn was "a mostly in person method of delivery with online teaching once or twice per week". 29% of respondents wanted fully face-to-face teaching, 21% wanted mostly online teaching, and 6% wanted no in-person delivery at all.

More than 9,000 students at the University of Manchester have [signed a petition](#) stating that tuition fees of £9,250 a year would be "unacceptable" if learning was delivered partially or wholly online in the long term.²⁹

²⁶ Office for Students, [Guidance for providers about quality and standards during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#), April 2020 (updated January 2021), p4.

²⁷ "[Students must have say over online learning - regulator](#)", BBC News, 19 September 2021.

²⁸ UPP foundation, "[Student Futures Commission: Students prioritise a return to face to face teaching from September 2021](#)", May 2021.

²⁹ "[Thousands of students at University of Manchester sign petition against 'blended learning'](#)", Manchester Evening News, 2 August 2021.

Universities' plans for course delivery

A survey by Times Higher Education of the teaching plans of 65 HEPs from September 2021 revealed that all planned “as much in-person teaching as possible”, but nearly two thirds said most lectures would remain online.³⁰ The reasons given included the dangers of Covid-19 transmission in full lecture halls and the pedagogical benefits of ‘blended learning’.

A spokesperson for the Russell Group said most of their universities would be offering a mix of face-to-face and online learning:

Students can expect most seminars, small group classes and lab work to be taught in person, alongside a range of extracurricular activity, social events and support services on campus."

But, he said, an element of digital learning would continue, with many large group lectures remaining online.

He said many students saw benefits to this approach which was more flexible and accessible.³¹

The website [StudentCrowd](#) maintains a list of planned teaching delivery methods for universities in 2021/22. It states which HEPs are planning on-campus, blended or online teaching, and gives some brief notes from the university on this and links to further information. The details in this list are updated weekly.

What is ‘blended learning’?

Blended learning means a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching and learning. According to the Russell Group (an association of 24 public research universities in the UK) blended learning will become more common in universities:

Blended learning involves enhancing in-person lectures, seminars, small group discussions, tutorials, lab work and workshops with technology, digital learning or high-quality online materials for self-study.

Learning is personal and social, which is why in-person teaching is so important. And why our universities are looking to use digital to improve and not to replace on-campus teaching and learning [...]

³⁰ [“Universities ‘must win value argument’ as lectures stay online”](#), Times Higher Education, 5 August 2021.

³¹ [“Students must have say over online learning – regulator”](#), BBC News, 19 September 2021.

Traditional lectures – where a lecturer talks to a large group of students – only made up a small proportion of teaching and learning pre-pandemic and are likely feature [sic] much less in the future.³²

Nearly all Russell Group universities have said that they will adopt a blended learning approach of in-person seminars and lab work alongside elements of online learning from September.³³ They argue this is not about saving money, but instead the pandemic has accelerated an existing trend in the use of digital materials and technology to enhance the learning experience of students.

Case study: Provision at the University of Birmingham in 2021/22

The University of Birmingham have said that from September [lectures will go ahead in person](#). Lectures will also be recorded, and in many cases live remote access will be made available so self-isolating students and international students facing travel restrictions can access them.

Small group teaching, including seminars and lab sessions, will go ahead in-person, but additional online sessions and/or hybrid sessions will also be offered in some cases so students can access them in person and online simultaneously.

The library and campus study spaces will be open, but students will be encouraged to wear face coverings in shared and enclosed spaces, and to wipe down desks before and after use with provided cleaning materials.

4.2

Covid-19 vaccinations for students

It was speculated that university students might be required to have Covid-19 vaccinations before returning in September.³⁴ However, the DfE made it clear in late July that while students should be encouraged to be vaccinated, there were no plans to bring in vaccine passports in education settings. A spokesperson for the DfE said:

The Government currently has no plans to require the use of the NHS Covid pass for access to learning, however, universities and FE [further education] colleges are encouraged to promote the offer of

³² [“Blended learning at Russell Group universities”](#), Russell Group, 13 August 2021.

³³ [“Russell Group comment on plans for autumn term teaching”](#), Russell Group, 9 August 2021.

³⁴ [“Covid: University students could be told jabs are required – Raab”](#), BBC News, 29 July.

the vaccine and should continue to conduct risk assessments for their particular circumstances.³⁵

Universities have adopted a variety of approaches to encourage their students to get vaccinated. Some have opened vaccination centres on campus to make it easy for students to access a vaccine.³⁶ The University of Sussex is entering all its students into a prize draw, with ten winners to receive £5,000 if they can prove they will have had their second vaccination by 7 December or are medically exempt.³⁷ Hartpury University and College have said it will be a 'mandatory requirement' for students in onsite residential accommodation, or wishing to join sports activities to prove their vaccination or exemption status.³⁸

Students registered with a GP can book appointments for their Covid-19 vaccination online through the National Booking Service. Those not registered can request to book appointments as an unregistered patient through a local GP. Students who have received their first dose at home are able to receive their second at their term-time location. Further details can be found in the [FAQ document produced by the NHS](#) for students in HEPs.³⁹

4.3 International student arrivals

Remote learning visa concessions are in place until 6 April 2022, so international students can start their course remotely with no detriment to their visa status. Students arriving in the UK for the autumn term from overseas face restrictions depending on which country they departed from or travelled through in the preceding 10 days. All students will be required to fill out a passenger locator form, return a Covid-19 negative test result before departure, and take a PCR test on arrival or within two days.

Students who have departed or transited through an [amber list](#) must [self-isolate in their own accommodation for 10 days](#) when they arrive in the UK. If students arriving from an amber-list country have been fully vaccinated with a USA Food and Drug Administration (FDA)/European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved vaccine, they do not have to self-isolate but should still take a test within two days of their arrival. Other students travelling from an amber-list country may be able to leave self-isolation early via the [Test to Release](#) programme.

³⁵ "[Covid vaccine status proof will not be required for students in England](#)", The Guardian, 31 July 2021.

³⁶ "[UK universities open vaccination centres on campus to encourage student uptake](#)", The Guardian, 14 August 2021.

³⁷ "[University offers ten £5,000 cash prizes to students who get vaccinated in bid to boost take up](#)", **inews**, 7 September 2021.

³⁸ "[University becomes first in the UK to ban unvaccinated students](#)", The Telegraph, 19 August 2021.

³⁹ NHS, [COVID-19 vaccination FAQs: students in Higher Education Institutions](#), 18 June 2021.

If students have travelled from, or transited through, a [‘red list’](#) country, they must complete ten days of [self-isolation in a managed quarantine hotel](#).

Hotel quarantine for students

[Guidance produced by the DfE](#) explains that students travelling from or through ‘red list’ countries must quarantine on arrival. This must be at a Government-approved quarantine facility (generally a hotel). The cost is borne by the student and must be booked in advance of travelling.

The Government have said that all red-list travellers will be accommodated, but since it is peak travel-season is August and September, HEPs have been advised to encourage students to “consider travelling slightly later, or at a time when there is more availability.”

The Government have also said that international students facing significant financial hardship because of the hotel quarantine requirement can apply for hardship arrangements, including deferred payment plans, and in exceptional circumstances reductions and waivers may be granted.⁴⁰

Universities UK has developed a [checklist for HEPs to support students who are required to self-isolate](#).

More information about travel restrictions in the UK can be found in the Library briefing [Coronavirus: International Travel FAQs for England](#) (August 2021). International students can get a Covid-19 vaccine free of charge when they arrive, and while they are encouraged to register with a GP to do so, it is not necessary.

⁴⁰ [PQ 41101 \[Travel: Quarantine\]. 7 September 2021.](#)

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