Students returning to, and starting higher education in Spring Term 2021

Guidance for higher education providers
February 2021
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Introduction

Over the winter break we expect the majority of students will have returned to their family home, although we recognise that some needed or have chosen to remain at their term time address. Students have been able to temporarily join another household for the winter break as outlined in Student movement and plans for the end of term.

The welfare and wellbeing of students, staff and the wider community remains the government’s priority for the return of students following the winter break. Universities and other higher education (HE) providers have worked very hard to provide COVID-secure teaching and learning to all students and the government recognises that virus transmission in COVID-secure teaching environments has not been identified.

While we are confident that the face-to-face teaching element of blended learning can be done in COVID-secure environments, 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.

Due to the additional national lockdown measures now in place, we have taken further steps to reduce transmission, including by significantly reducing the number of students returning to university from their winter break accommodation, and limiting the number of people travelling to and from university facilities. We are prioritising the return to face-to-face teaching for courses which are most important to be delivered in-person in order to support the pipeline of future key workers. All other courses should continue to be delivered online until at least 8 March. Our aim is to minimise the number of students who return to university to access university facilities.

As always, when local or national conditions change, HE providers should check, revise and update their risk assessments. Providers should ensure they follow guidance on shielding and protecting clinically extremely vulnerable people.

The Department for Education (DfE) remains grateful for the HE sector’s support in making these plans work and understands that a great deal of flexibility will be required, including on the management of assessment and exams.

We will continue to work with providers to put in place asymptomatic testing arrangements for all students on return to/arrival at university, and for those students who have stayed on campus over the winter break, to reduce and better manage outbreaks of coronavirus (COVID-19).
When students can return to campus

During the period of national lockdown, we are asking HE providers to restrict significantly the number of students returning to face-to-face teaching from January 2021, and to reduce the numbers needing to access university facilities wherever possible. We are now prioritising the return to face-to-face teaching only for courses which are most important to be delivered in-person in order to support the pipeline of future critical workers.

On this basis, face-to-face teaching should be restricted to the following, and only where face to face teaching or placements are needed to deliver learning outcomes. Wherever possible, teaching and learning should still be provided online:

1. Medicine & dentistry
2. Subjects allied to medicine/health
3. Veterinary science
4. Education (initial teacher training)
5. Social studies (social work)
6. Policing
7. By exception only, a very limited number of courses which require Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) assessments and /or other PRSB mandatory activity which is scheduled for the Spring term and which cannot be rescheduled (although the presumption is that in the majority of cases, these will be rescheduled outside the period of national restrictions).

Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS) Labels for which HE providers could consider resuming face-to-face teaching, but there should be no presumption that all courses within these categorisations should return to in-person teaching. In keeping with the objective to limit the number of students who return to campus and to facilities, HE providers should seek to limit the courses that return to face-to-face teaching as far as possible. For courses falling within categories 1-3 above, the focus should primarily be on clinical courses.

For those courses which have Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) assessments, we expect that the majority of assessments, placements and other mandatory elements of these courses should be rescheduled until the wider return of students. In the small number of cases where students may not be able to qualify with professional accreditation if on-site learning or exams/assessments are not held in January and cannot be rescheduled, these students can return as planned. This should be considered on a case-by-case basis and should be the exception.

We appreciate that many providers have already had to compress practical elements of teaching in the autumn term (in part to enable students to return home safely for the
holidays), and we are acutely aware of the challenges that this poses to both providers and students. However, in these very challenging times, we must continue to adapt and put in place enhanced measures to reduce transmission rates across the country, while supporting HE students to continue to progress with their courses.

Staff who are required to deliver or to support delivery of teaching or research and the provision of appropriate university facilities (including catering, cleaning and provision of study spaces including laboratories and libraries) are considered critical workers for the purposes of their children’s attendance at school or college. Travelling for this work counts as a reasonable excuse for travel, notwithstanding wider travel restrictions in place. Parents and carers who are critical workers should keep their children home if they can.

International students who are not already staying on campus should follow the guidance on new and returning from overseas section of this guidance.

**House parties**

The government has now introduced a new £800 fine for those attending house parties, including in halls of residence, which will double for each repeat offence to a maximum level of £6,400. These fines will apply to those who attend illegal gatherings of more than 15 people from outside their household. Providers should ensure that students are aware of their designated ‘household’, particularly if they live within large scale student accommodation.
Return of remaining students

All remaining courses should continue to be offered online as they have been from the beginning of term. Given the ongoing national restrictions, the return/arrival of all other students should be postponed until at least 8 March. Providers should not offer in-person teaching before then, or later if further guidance to this effect is issued, and should encourage students to remain at their current accommodation until the resumption of their in-person teaching, wherever possible.

Because of the changing position relating to face to face teaching and occupation of accommodation, students’ loan entitlements for the current term will not be reassessed if they are still incurring accommodation costs away from home, meaning that students in receipt of the ‘living away from home’ loan will retain the maintenance loans paid at the start of term, which will be repaid in the usual way. This should help to ensure students have the financial support they need during these exceptional circumstances. Students who are no longer incurring accommodation costs away from home (e.g. because they have exited their contracts, or moved home permanently), or who no longer wish to receive the higher rate of loan, should continue to request reassessment.

We expect providers to help ensure students know when they should return. Some other students may also need to return before the resumption of their face-to-face learning, set out below.

Providers should prioritise the return of students to those courses where in-person teaching and learning is judged necessary to fulfil learning outcomes, such as for subjects which require clinical, practical or a vocational/professional learning element; the delivery of critical and time-sensitive learning, assessments, and work placements.

HE providers should set a clear expectation that all students should access coronavirus (COVID-19) testing immediately on their return to university and on a twice weekly basis thereafter (until the end of March). Those who are returning to placements should follow the testing guidance for their placement setting and undertake a test through their placement provider where offered, or through their university if advised by the placement provider.

HE providers should ask those who choose not to get tested on return, to self-isolate for ten days.

To minimise the risk to themselves and others on their return, students should act responsibly before they travel and follow National lockdown: Stay at Home - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) on social contact. Where available, and where they fit with locally defined priorities, students should access local community testing programmes to get a lateral flow device (LFD) test before they travel to university.
International students (including Erasmus+ or other exchange students) who are not already on campus should follow the guidance on new and returning students from overseas section of this guidance.
Other students who may need to return to university facilities

Wherever possible, students should remain at their vacation accommodation (including where they spent the winter vacation at their term-time address – see below) and should not travel to access their university facilities until the resumption of their face-to-face teaching.

Students should avoid returning to university to collect any of their belongings which they may have left at their university accommodation over the winter break. However, students can travel back to collect any medical equipment or items required for online learning if it is essential.

However, HE providers should consider supporting the return of students in exceptional circumstances, for example, where students do not have access to appropriate alternative accommodation, facilities or study space, or where students need to return for health or safety reasons. There may also be some students who have remained in their university/term-time accommodation over the winter break, or have already returned, including many international students, but are not expected to return to in-person learning until at least 8 March. These students should remain at their current university accommodation. They should be asked to only utilise campus resources when they have to, in order to reduce footfall on campus, but they should be offered testing alongside the first expected returners.

HE providers should consider appropriate provision to support access to university facilities for the purposes of online learning and to prevent isolation and mental health issues of students.

We would expect university libraries to stay open to provide library services, including study spaces, in a COVID-secure environment. However, students should not return to face to face teaching unless they study one of the practical courses identified above and at Annex 1. The following students should be tested as soon as they start accessing university facilities:

- international students who have remained in the UK and those who have arrived and do not have accommodation alternative to their term-time address
- any other students who have remained in their university accommodation over the winter break
- those who have returned to their term-time accommodation in exceptional circumstances, for example because they are without access to appropriate study spaces or facilities in their vacation accommodation
- those requiring additional support, including those with mental health and wellbeing issues
• commuter students, on an exceptional basis where they are not in the first tranche of returners, who require access to university facilities to access online learning (for example because they do not have access to appropriate study spaces or facilities in their usual accommodation)

• researchers and research students who require access to specialist facilities for their work. If research students can work from home, they are encouraged to do so
Opening of Facilities

Providers should consider opening facilities to support the teaching and learning of those who fall into the categories above, but these should be maintained for essential use only wherever possible. Providers should make their own judgement on the facilities that need to be made available and should complete appropriate risk assessments to do so. Providers should take any additional measures as required, including limiting access or numbers of students accessing facilities. Facilities that providers may consider opening include:

- libraries and specialist collections, for both studying and borrowing materials, on an essential access only basis
- study spaces and practice areas. Practice areas have been included because students who have remained on campus, or who have already returned, may not have access to an instrument or suitable space to practice in their university accommodation, where this is a key part of their ongoing studies. However, this does not mean that all performance students should return to university, each of us must play our part to reduce the transmission of the virus. If students have already travelled back to university, they should remain on campus and not return home
- facilities required for research activities, including those undertaken by postgraduate research students, if the research cannot be reasonably conducted from home, including laboratories, suites and associated offices and specialist collections. Providers should also adhere to the guidance on working safely in labs and research facilities during coronavirus (COVID-19)
- catering facilities provided as parts of halls and educational accommodation can continue to provide that service. All other catering outlets on campus would need to follow the takeaway only model but on-premises provision can continue where there is no practical alternative for staff and students to obtain food and drink, and alcohol is not served for consumption on the premises. Students should take their food home to the place where they live to consume it wherever possible
- whilst any on site gym and leisure facilities should be closed in line with the wider government guidance for gyms and leisure facilities, providers may want to designate specific outdoor areas to allow those students who live in halls, access to space for exercise
Students who cannot return to university because they are self-isolating

HE providers should provide guidance to students if they are self-isolating at their home address and are not returning to campus on their original planned return date, setting out what steps they should take to return as safely as possible to university when the isolation period ends and how to access learning and teaching while self-isolating.
Testing plans for asymptomatic students

The government is working with HE providers to offer:

- two tests to all students eligible to attend their university or HE institution, upon their return from the winter break
- twice weekly testing to all students currently eligible to attend their university or HE institution (until the end of March).

All HE providers should:

- set an expectation that students should take up the testing on offer and inform students of how they can access asymptomatic testing
- set out that students should self-isolate for ten days if they do not get tested when requested when they return to their university

If students are on a placement and not attending university facilities, they should follow and participate in any testing regime in place at their placement. It is not necessary to travel to university to be tested before travelling to a placement, unless this is advised by the placement provider.
Testing staff

The government has also worked closely with providers to support those offering LFD testing to staff in parallel to students. As we move to a programme of twice weekly testing, HE providers are strongly encouraged to make testing available for staff and to advise those staff that are required to be physically present at work in the university, to take part in the testing programme.

Staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable

During the period of national lockdown, individuals who are clinically extremely vulnerable are advised to work from home and where this is not possible, they are advised not to go into work. Individuals in this group will have been identified through a letter from the NHS or from their GP and may have been advised to shield in the past.

Staff should talk to their employers about how they will be supported, including to work from home where possible. You should continue to pay clinically extremely vulnerable staff on their usual terms. Those living with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable can still attend work where home-working is not possible.

Staff who are pregnant

Pregnant women are considered ‘clinically vulnerable’ or in some cases ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ to coronavirus (COVID-19) and therefore require special consideration as contained in government guides for different industries.

Employers should carry out a risk assessment to follow the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSW). This may involve obtaining advice from the occupational health department. See the workplace risk assessment guidance for healthcare workers and for vulnerable people working in other industries. Information contained in the RCOG/RCM guidance on coronavirus (COVID-19) in pregnancy should be used as the basis for a risk assessment.

Pregnant women of any gestation should not be required to continue working if this is not supported by the risk assessment.

Women who are 28 weeks pregnant and beyond, or are pregnant and have an underlying health condition that puts them at a greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19 at any gestation, should take a more precautionary approach. Employers should ensure pregnant women are able to adhere to any active national guidance on social distancing and/or advice for pregnant women considered to be clinically extremely vulnerable (this group may previously have been advised to shield).

More advice is available at advice for pregnant employees.
Risk assessments

As an employer, you have a legal responsibility to protect workers and others from risk to their health and safety, including from the risks of COVID-19. You should complete a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks of COVID-19 in the workplace and identify control measures to manage that risk. Employers have a duty to consult their employees on health and safety matters.
Testing students using lateral flow devices (LFDs)

The government has worked closely with providers to support the roll-out of testing via LFDs for all students. DfE will continue to support smaller HE providers in partnering with neighbouring providers if they cannot provide their own asymptomatic test site. Individual HE providers may choose to offer tests to students using different testing technologies.

How students should be tested

If providers are using LFDs, students should be tested twice in their first week of return – immediately upon their return and then again three days later. Providers should offer students twice weekly testing thereafter (until the end of March). Some providers may be unable to provide twice weekly testing at this moment and once a week may be appropriate where students only visit campus once a week. We will work with all HEIs to implement practical solutions, including partnering them with other providers, where appropriate.

While awaiting their result (typically it takes one hour), the student should not interact with other students to avoid virus transmission.

If a student has recently (within 90 days) tested positive for COVID-19, they are likely to have developed some immunity. If a student has had a positive coronavirus (COVID-19) test in the last 90 days through NHS Test and Trace and been recorded as a positive case on the national system, they do not need to be tested again within that time period if they are asymptomatic. They are still required to self-isolate if they are identified as a close contact of a positive case, even if this is within the 90 day window.

Negative result

If the first LFD test result upon return to the HE facility is negative, the student will not need to self-isolate for ten days but they should limit their social contact and interaction with other students until they receive a second negative LFD test result. This is to limit the risk of transmission following the mass movement of students across the country. Students should be encouraged to undertake two LFD tests three days apart upon their return.

Students that test negative as part of the twice weekly testing programme should continue to follow any national or regional tier restrictions, but they will not need to self-isolate.

Positive test result

Upon notification of a positive LFD result, students are legally required to self-isolate for ten days and contact tracing will be initiated. A confirmatory PCR test will not be required for LFD tests taken at HE asymptomatic test sites. This is a temporary change to procedures.
Supporting students who need to self-isolate

For those students who do need to self-isolate at university, HE providers are responsible for ensuring their students are safe and well looked after during their self-isolation period.

Universities UK have also produced bespoke guidance for HE providers on how to prepare for and care for students who are required to self-isolate on arrival in the UK. We encourage providers to review this guidance when considering how best to support their international and other students arriving from overseas.
Travel guidance for students arriving from within the UK

Where students are resuming face to face teaching, or where they have other exceptional reasons to return, travel to return to university counts as a “reasonable excuse” for travel, including to and from the devolved administrations, subject to any local rules in place within the devolved administrations. This includes family or others within the household who travel with the student to transport them back to their term time address. Students can travel by private vehicle or public transport but, to minimise the risk of transmission to others when they travel, they should use private transport wherever possible and only use public transport if they have no other option.

HE providers should advise students using private vehicles to:

- avoid car sharing with anyone outside their household or support bubble
- rigorously follow the safer travel guidance for passengers to reduce the risk of transmission to others where this is not possible

They should advise students who cannot access private vehicles and need to use public transport that they should:

- book their travel in advance
- rigorously follow the Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer travel guidance for passengers

If students have already booked rail tickets to travel back to university, they can now re-book wherever they bought the ticket without paying administration fees.

HE providers should also communicate travel guidance to all students, including how to help reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) by:

- wearing a face covering unless exempt
- keeping their distance from people from other households when they travel, where possible
- washing or sanitising their hands regularly
- avoiding the busiest routes, as well as busy times like the rush hour
- downloading the NHS COVID-19 app before they travel, if possible and checking in where they see official NHS COVID-19 QR code posters

Further actions

HE providers should continue to work with local transport providers and ensure that they are aware of providers’ plans. DfE will continue to work closely with the Department for Transport to support HE providers.
New and returning students travelling from overseas

Our HE providers remain flexible and are ready to teach students either online or in person this academic year.

Students are able to study online until in-person learning resumes. Our advice for international students (including Erasmus+ and other exchange students) travelling from overseas for the Spring term is to consider whether they in fact need to travel to the UK at this time, particularly if their course does not require them to be on campus yet. Those students should consider delaying if travel arrangements can be rearranged without undue costs.

Before making travel plans, students intending to come to the UK to study should:

- check additional entry requirements and restrictions that have been introduced due to coronavirus (COVID-19) before travelling to the UK
- check with their HE provider in advance to confirm when face-to-face teaching begins
- check with their HE provider when they intend to arrive on campus so that they can be appropriately supported
- inform their provider if they have already booked travel for dates outside of their specified cohort date

HE providers should try to be as flexible as possible with international students travelling to the UK from overseas. This is especially the case if students have already booked travel before this guidance was issued and they are unable to rearrange via their travel operator, or the cost of rearranging would be prohibitively high.

Arrival procedures for students travelling from overseas

Students must:

- check additional entry requirements and restrictions that have been introduced due to coronavirus (COVID-19) before travelling to the UK
- ensure that prior to departing for England they have proof of a negative coronavirus (COVID-19) test result taken within three days of departure to your transport operator. More information on pre-departure testing is available on gov.uk.
- complete a passenger locator form before arrival in the UK
- note that all UK travel corridors have been temporarily suspended to protect against new international variants. This new measure will now require all passengers to self-isolate for ten days on arrival. More information is available on gov.uk.
Exiting self-isolation early:

- International arrivals have the option to reduce their self-isolation period by taking a coronavirus (COVID-19) test from a private testing provider five full days after arriving in England, with a negative result releasing them from the need to self-isolate. Read the Coronavirus (COVID-19): Test to Release for international travel guidance. Look at A list of providers of tests for Test to Release.
- The Test to Release scheme is not available to anyone who has been in or through any country that is subject to a travel ban in the 10 days before arrival in England.
- Students who have chosen to self-isolate for ten days instead of taking a private Test to Release are not expected to take a further LFD test (administered by their University) at the end of their self-isolation period when they return to campus.
- After following the correct arrivals procedure, students should follow instructions on ongoing asymptomatic testing as set out by their HE provider.

If self-isolating, students should:

- only use public transport if they have no other option
- follow safer travel guidance for passengers
- only leave their accommodation in limited circumstances and follow guidance on how to self-isolate when they travel to the UK (England only)

Further guidance on self-isolation for international students

We are working with the HE sector to ensure that all students are welcomed to the UK and are supported on arrival by their chosen university. Universities UK has developed a checklist for providers to support students who are required to self-isolate to use as a guide in developing that support. This will be updated following the January return measures. Further guidance is available on entering the UK.

Visas

International students considering study in the UK should be aware that visa concessions for those on Tier 4 visas allow for the ongoing provision of online learning for the duration of the academic year 2020/21. Many HE courses are being conducted online. Government continues to keep further visa concessions under review.

Government has confirmed that international students studying by distance/blended learning whose courses end in summer 2021 will be eligible to apply for the Graduate route provided they are in the UK by 6 April 2021 to complete the final semester of their studies in the UK, and meet the other requirements of the route. Students should check additional entry requirements and restrictions that have been introduced due to COVID-
19 before travelling to the UK and only travel to their university when their provider has confirmed the resumption of face-to-face teaching for their specific course.

Students who commence a one-year Master’s programme in January 2021 will also remain eligible for the Graduate route if they enter the UK before 27 September 2021 and complete the final semester of their studies in the UK.

Students will not be penalised for being unable to collect their Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) while coronavirus (COVID-19) measures are in place.

Students should be aware that rules may differ depending on which UK nation they are studying in, so are advised to consult relevant COVID-19 guidance that applies to them. Students studying in England should see Higher education providers: coronavirus (COVID-19) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).
Travel Guidance for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps

This section of the guidance is for participants (students, staff and children) and organisers of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) exchanges planning to travel in the UK or overseas, and for those who are already overseas. As part of the Withdrawal Agreement legacy activity involving UK-based students on Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity agreed ahead of the end of the Transition Period will continue.

Before starting a placement, participants should consult with their provider to confirm details and check the Living in guide and travel advice for the country they will be visiting, being conscious that their placement may not be able to continue as originally planned. There may be opportunities for it to start at a later date if the situation changes and this is feasible.

Participants should be ready to comply with local isolation, testing or quarantine requirements, and will need to rely on the local health system.

If participants need to return early from their placement, they should contact their provider to let them know of their plans.

We suggest anyone whose international educational mobility is affected discuss their placement with their provider, being conscious that their placement may not be able to continue as originally planned, but there may be opportunities for it to start at a later date if the situation changes and this is feasible.

UK participants who need emergency help from the UK government while overseas as the country they are in will not allow them to travel back to the UK, or there are no commercial travel options available, can contact the nearest British embassy, consulate or high commission or the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in London on 0207 008 1500 for help or advice 24/7.

For UK beneficiaries managing Erasmus+ mobilities, you should utilise any Erasmus+ funding to the best of your ability, while ensuring participants remain as safe as possible. We expect all universities, colleges, schools and other organisers managing international educational mobilities to follow the relevant FCDO travel advice for the destination country and highlight this to their participants, being aware the situation can change rapidly.

We expect all providers to explore alternative options for mobilities and study, whether blended or fully virtual, if appropriate and to be flexible in their approach and be conscious of the potentially rapidly changing situation on a country by country basis. Providers should be ready to make quick changes to projects and mobilities, consider delaying mobilities and amending start and end dates if feasible as restrictions may change over time.

The FCDO provides information and advice to help British nationals make their own informed decisions about foreign travel. Their guidance on how they develop travel

Travel insurance

The Association of British Insurers (ABI) has produced information on travel insurance implications following the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. If you have any further questions about your cover or would like further reassurance, you should contact your travel insurance provider.

More information

- [Scotland: advice for educational settings](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-the-foreign-commonwealth-office-puts-together-travel-advice)
- [Wales: advice for educational settings](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-the-foreign-commonwealth-office-puts-together-travel-advice)
- [Ireland advice: for educational settings](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-the-foreign-commonwealth-office-puts-together-travel-advice)
Students studying in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland

DfE has been working closely with the Devolved Administrations. Students at HE institutions in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland should follow any guidance issued by their HE institution and the relevant government. There is no restriction within England on students travelling to or from the devolved administrations for the purposes of attending HE institutions where their in person teaching has resumed or they need to return for exceptional reasons as outlined above.
Annex 1

Subjects within the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS) which could consider resuming face to face teaching from 4 January.

NB: there should be no presumption that all courses within these categorisations should return to in person teaching. In keeping with the objective to limit the number of students who return to campus and to facilities, HE Providers should seek to limit the courses that return to face to face teaching as far as possible. For courses falling within categories 1-3, below, the focus should be on clinical courses, and for all subjects, teaching should be done online wherever possible.

1. Medicine & dentistry
2. Subjects allied to medicine/Health
3. Veterinary science
4. Education (initial teacher training)
5. Social work
6. Policing

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<td>ophthalmology</td>
<td>medical genetics</td>
<td>policing</td>
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<tr>
<td>complementary medicines &amp; therapies</td>
<td>Optometry</td>
<td>genetics</td>
<td>physician associate studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>health sciences</td>
<td>Orthoptics</td>
<td>molecular genetics</td>
<td>operating department practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>healthcare sciences</td>
<td>Audiology</td>
<td>medical biochemistry</td>
<td>prosthetics &amp; orthotics</td>
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<tr>
<td>medical sciences</td>
<td>speech and language therapy</td>
<td>veterinary medicine</td>
<td>diagnostic imaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>natural sciences (those courses allied with medical/health only, i.e. with clinical elements)</td>
<td>Midwifery</td>
<td>veterinary dentistry</td>
<td>therapeutic imaging</td>
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<tr>
<td>nursing (all HECoS Labels)</td>
<td>bioengineering</td>
<td>veterinary epidemiology</td>
<td>biomedical sciences</td>
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<tr>
<td>human biology</td>
<td>Biomaterials</td>
<td>veterinary nursing</td>
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