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12 January 2021

Dear colleague

Critical workers in Higher Education

The sector has requested further clarification about how critical workers in Higher Education should be identified. Ian Coates first wrote to you on this subject on 21 April 2020.

Following the [Prime Minister's announcement on 4 January 2021](#) of new national restrictions, only children of critical workers and vulnerable children and young people should attend school or college. All other pupils and students will receive remote education. The government issued further guidance, updated on 8 January 2021, on [children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings](#). [DfE guidance](#) confirms that higher education staff who are required to deliver or to support delivery of teaching or research and the provision of appropriate university facilities are considered critical workers for the purposes of access to education.

It is also essential that we collectively make every effort to protect the NHS and reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19. Children with at least one parent or carer who is a critical worker can go to school or college if required, but parents and carers should keep their children at home if they can.

The Government's position remains that everyone who can work from home should do so.

While decisions about employment, including those staff deemed critical to the continuing operation of the institution should be agreed on a case-by-case basis, we expect employers and staff to show understanding and offer flexibility when making these decisions. As such, we ask that accessing school places is considered as part of a range of family friendly working practises.

Roles that may be prioritised for accessing school places, would usually fall in four broad categories:

1. Staff or research students responsible for research and other activities to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and for other essential research and supporting activity necessary to meet regulatory, legal, health and safety or other on-going requirements. This would include long-running research which cannot tolerate a break, staff or others looking after living resources (e.g. animals, plants or bacterial cultures) or hazardous materials; or those that are essential for the maintenance of equipment and facilities.

2. Academic and teaching staff, to deliver face to face teaching to those students that are permitted to receive teaching on campus, or to support those students who are continuing their placements in person and cannot be supported remotely, as well as those developing or delivering resources for remote learning including where these need to be created or updated using facilities only available on the provider's premises.
3. Staff responsible for providing services for students who need to remain in student accommodation or in facilities which remain open for students or essential research, including catering staff, cleaners, wardens, mental health support, IT and security staff.
4. Staff critical to the safety and security of the university estate and other business-critical operations.

We also understand that healthcare students on placement who have children may have encountered difficulties in finding a place for their children at schools. HE providers or the providers of the placements may therefore choose to designate such students as critical workers within health and social care for these purposes. We suggest that this is formally confirmed in writing. Please note that initial teacher training (ITT) students are also included in the definition of a critical worker (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-initial-teacher-training-itt/coronavirus-covid-19-initial-teacher-training-itt#critical-workers>).

In April, we shared a template of a letter for providers to use in order to confirm that certain staff had been deemed critical to the continuing operation of the institution, for the purposes of securing school places and also to demonstrate reasons for travel. We attach a revised template and suggest that providers consider using this letter for staff who might need to present it to their children's school or college to confirm they have a critical role to support the necessary continuation of essential public services and are therefore considered a critical worker, even if they work from home.

With best wishes at this challenging time.



Hannah Sheehan

Director, HE COVID Co-ordination
Department for Education