COVID-19 in university accommodation settings

Lessons learnt
(September to November 2020)
This is an experimental statistics publication

Experimental statistics are official statistics which are published in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to build in quality at an early stage. It is important that users understand that limitations may apply to the interpretation of this data, further details of which are presented in this report.

All official statistics should comply with the UK Statistics Authority’s Code of Practice which promotes the production and dissemination of official statistics that inform decision-making. Once the evaluation is completed and an enhanced report is developed that meets the needs of users and stakeholders, the experimental label will be removed.

Find out more about the Code of Practice at: https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/

Find out more about experimental statistics at:
www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/methodologytopicsandstatisticalconcepts/guidetoexperimentalstatistics
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Introduction

Between October and November 2020, the Scottish Government, in collaboration with Public Health Scotland (PHS), conducted a series of workshops with the university sector, university accommodation providers and the National Union of Students. These workshops were held to explore the learning experiences from the start of semester 1, and to discuss how to facilitate the safe return of students for semester 2.

This report presents a summary of three strands of work undertaken by PHS which was presented during these workshops to inform ongoing discussions around the start of semester 2.

- Section 1 presents provisional data on COVID-19 cases associated with university accommodation settings.

- Section 2 describes learning outcomes from Health Protection Incident Management Teams involved in semester 1 outbreaks in the student population.

- Section 3 summarises the experience of students who self-isolated due to COVID-19 while living at their term-time university or college accommodation, based on interviews with students.

We would like to thank all the students who took part in the interviews and the NHS Board Health Protection Teams for their contribution.
Key points

- Large outbreaks in student cases at the end of September and beginning of October were caused by the opening of university accommodation.

- Data suggest that measures taken either by universities or students themselves during/after the initial outbreaks were successful in reducing transmission/number of subsequent outbreaks.

- Overall, student cases associated with university accommodation accounted for approximately 3.0% of the cumulative COVID-19 cases in Scotland up to the end of November 2020.

- Social gatherings, particularly in halls of residence, were key factors in the initial student outbreaks of COVID-19 at the start of semester 1.

- Traditional halls of residence do not appear to be suitable in a pandemic situation, due to the numbers of students self-isolating. Consideration could be given to carrying out modifications, if appropriate, to encourage smaller 'households' within this setting. Students reported a need for increased and better mental health support, including a proactive and personal approach from the university to students required to self-isolate.

- Students also asked for consideration to be given to forming a unit in each university, which coordinates all COVID-19 interventions and communicates with staff and students on this issue.
Estimated COVID-19 cases in university accommodation settings

PHS and individual further education institutions provide ongoing monitoring and reporting of cases in the student population studying at Scottish universities. This information is published in PHS’s weekly report and the Scottish Government’s daily data release on COVID-19 in Scotland.

In this section, we present additional information on the number of cases of COVID-19 associated with university accommodation postcodes from 1 August to 30 November 2020. This analysis was carried out to inform discussions between universities, Scottish Government and PHS on the lessons learnt from semester 1 and how these could be addressed in semester 2.

Methods

A list of postcodes was provided by the Scottish Government where the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data indicated that students had reported living there in 2018/19 (the most recent data available). This analysis includes students living in university accommodation and privately rented accommodation. These postcodes were then matched to the postcodes of positive PCR test results in Scotland’s COVID-19 Test and Protect Case Management System.

The period reviewed for this report was 1 August to 30 November 2020. Although universities opened for the start of the first semester at the beginning of September, the analysis includes a count of cases and contacts from 1 August 2020 and is extended to the end of November to provide information on trends before and after semester 1.

The following analysis has been labelled as experimental statistics, defined as official statistics which are published to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to build in quality at an early stage. The following limitations, therefore, should be recognised in interpreting these data:

- HESA data for student postcode accommodation are only available for 2018/19 and will not take into account any new university accommodation
units opened since 2018/19. This will likely underestimate the number of cases associated with university accommodation.

- These data are likely to overestimate the number of cases associated with university accommodation settings, as the full set of postcodes used in the matching process may also contain non-university housing units.

- It is not possible to account for the occurrence of false-positive tests within these data.

Results

Cases associated with university accommodation settings, August to November 2020

- Between 1 August and 30 November 2020, there has been a total of 2,897 positive COVID-19 cases associated with university accommodation postcodes (Table 1).

- This represents 3.0% of the cumulative number of recorded cases of COVID-19 in Scotland (as of 30 November 2020).

- Just under two-thirds (62.5%) of cases occurred in a three-week period between 21 September and 11 October (Table 1).

- Following this initial spike in cases, the number of positive cases associated with university accommodation postcodes has dropped considerably since the middle of October (Table 1).

- University accommodation in the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh accounted for over three-quarters (79%) of cases (Table 2).
Table 1: COVID-19 cases associated with university accommodation postcodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>COVID-19 cases (n)</th>
<th>COVID-19 cases (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3–9 August</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–16 August</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>17–23 August</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>24–30 August</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 August–6 September</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–13 September</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–20 September</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–27 September</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 September–4 October</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–11 October</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–18 October</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–25 October</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 October–1 November</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–8 November</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–15 November</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–22 November</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23–29 November</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,897</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Transmission in university accommodation settings, August to November 2020**

- Overall, 42% of index cases had previously been registered as contacts of previous index cases. This varied across university town/cities from 32% in Edinburgh and Fife, to 64% in Aberdeen (Table 2).
• Based on the mean/median age of index cases, it was first (and, to a lesser
degree, second) year students driving cases among students living in
university accommodation (Table 2).

• One in five (20%) of index-case contacts had subsequently had a positive test
for COVID-19, ranging from 6% in Fife, to 27% in Dundee (Table 2).

• For student index cases, there has been an average of four contacts per case
(Table 2).

Table 2: Cases and contacts in postcodes associated with university
accommodation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University town/city/area</th>
<th>Total cases, n (%)</th>
<th>Was previously a ‘contact’ (n)</th>
<th>Cases that were ‘contacts’ (%)</th>
<th>Mean age</th>
<th>Median age</th>
<th>Contacts per case</th>
<th>% of ‘contacts’ that become a case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>2,897 (100%)</td>
<td>1,221</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
<td>191 (6.6%)</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dundee</td>
<td>280 (9.7%)</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edinburgh</td>
<td>1,070 (36.9%)</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife</td>
<td>60 (2.1%)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>1,212 (41.8%)</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stirling</td>
<td>84 (2.9%)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Over one in four (29%, n = 2,077) of index-case contacts were non-household
contacts and 15% (n = 410) of these subsequently tested positive for
COVID-19 (although we cannot say that there is a direct link here between the
index case and subsequent transmission to non-household contacts).

• A greater proportion of index-case household contacts subsequently went on
to test positive for COVID-19 than non-household contacts (22% vs.15%).
• Initial analysis suggests that one-quarter of cases (25.7%) were associated with two university accommodation settings: Murano Street Student Village in Glasgow and Pollock Halls of Residence in Edinburgh.

• In these settings, the vast majority of these cases occurred over, approximately, a two-week period though at different times (Figure 1).
  
  o In Murano village, the largest outbreak occurred around mid-September. From October onwards, cases had dropped significantly.

  o In Pollock Halls, initial outbreaks occurred at the beginning of October, though by mid-October cases had dropped significantly.

**Figure 1: COVID-19 cases associated with university accommodation in Edinburgh and Glasgow – August to November 2020**
Learning outcomes

- Large outbreaks in student COVID-19 cases at the end of September and the beginning of October were caused by the opening of university accommodation.

- Specific university halls accounted for a significant number of cases associated with university accommodation settings.

- The mean and median age of index cases would suggest first-year students contributed to the majority of cases associated with university accommodation settings.

- Data suggest that measures taken either by universities or students themselves during/after the initial outbreaks were successful in reducing transmission/number of subsequent outbreaks.
Incident Management Team experiences of COVID-19 outbreaks in university accommodation

Public Health Scotland conducted an investigation with local NHS Health Protection Incident Management Teams (IMTs) to provide some insights into the key factors behind outbreaks of COVID-19 in student populations in semester 1 and what lessons could be learnt to inform the safe return of students for semester 2.

**Setting**

Student university accommodation.

**Method**

Health Protection Teams (HPTs) in NHS Boards, covering university towns and cities in Scotland, were requested to respond to six questions, either by email or virtual meeting, over a two-week period in mid-November. The focus of the questions was on key factors for COVID-19 transmission in university accommodation at the start of semester 1 and what could be done to mitigate these at the start of semester 2 (January 2021). Responses were received from four of the six NHS board HPTs who were contacted.

**Results: Learning outcomes**

**Identifying index cases in outbreaks in university accommodation**

The index case was not clear in some outbreaks, while it was clear in other outbreaks. The number of cases also escalated quickly into large clusters as several cases appeared together after parties. Many cases were also linked by flats, or were sporadic from external links. There was no clear difference between domestic and international students – the only common denominator was travel.
Source of transmission (key factors in transmission)

Social gatherings, compliance/adherence to guidelines and university accommodation type (size and living density) were identified as the key factors in COVID-19 transmission in university accommodation settings:

**Social gatherings**
- Parties, social mixing and were sometimes sporadic from external links.
- Indoor social gathering, for example, pub attendance.

**Adherence and compliance with (self) isolation guidelines**
- Non-compliance with 2-metre rule.
- Non-classical clinical presentation and asymptomatic individuals.
- Delays in presenting for testing even when symptoms arose.

**Accommodation type**
- Large corridors of the halls of residence, particularly in ‘traditional’ halls of residence where there are no flats, but rather large numbers of bedrooms on each floor and sharing of kitchen/bathroom facilities.
- Traditional halls of residences also seemed to attract ‘kitchen parties’ of large numbers of people because of the same kitchen being available to large numbers of students.
- The hypotheses are household transmission, close compact living and cohorting capacity fuelled the transmission of the virus.
Key factors that could be mitigated to reduce transmission in semester 2

HPTs in NHS Boards were asked, from their perspective, what were the key factors that could be mitigated to reduce COVID-19 transmission and hence reduce the number of outbreaks in the student population at the start of semester 2. A summary of their recommendations is presented below:

- Suppression of parties by university security teams and the police, closure of communal areas in the flats.
- Quarantine of all students and staff on arrival back to university, not just those who have travelled from countries deemed high risk, but those going anywhere.
- List of key control measures for university accommodation would be useful in advance, for example, self-isolation and mask wearing in flats.
- Requesting that students spend some time isolating from others immediately before and/or after travel to the area. This could reduce transmission due to migration.
- Consider more testing on arrival/regular testing.
- Reduce density of students in hall blocks where lots of transmission has been seen, for example, corridor flats without ensuite.
- Reduce density of students living in the halls of residence.
- Traditional halls of residence involving ‘households’ of up to 30 people do not appear to be suitable in a pandemic situation. Consideration could be given to advising against their use or potentially putting barriers in place to split floors into smaller ‘households’.
- In traditional halls of residence where there are no flats, but rather large numbers of bedrooms on each floor, with people sharing kitchen/bathroom
facilities, HPTs in NHS Boards had to define each floor as a household. Beforehand, the university had thought that by telling students which ‘household’ they were in, they could split each floor into two households. However, there was no meaningful barrier, making this infeasible as an approach. These types of halls also seemed to attract ‘kitchen parties’ of large numbers of people because the same kitchen was available to a large numbers of students. This seems to have been a key factor in transmission early in the outbreak.

- Extra precautions and testing for students who go on placements to clinical settings or who have part-time jobs in care settings.
COVID-19 and student accommodation report: The student perspective

PHS carried out interviews with students, either singly or in groups, over a period of about three weeks between October and November 2020. Interviewees were from different year groups and were a mix of home and overseas students.

The interviews covered the topics listed below with accompanying themes arising from these interviews. For a full discussion of the findings from the interviews please see ‘COVID-19 self-isolation: The student perspective report’, which was published alongside this report.

- Experience of self-isolation, quarantine and ‘voluntary’ lockdown
  - How students were informed, advice and guidance, features of accommodation and definition of ‘household’

- Access to practical support
  - Food and drink, access to facilities and other services, access to fresh air/exercise, access to learning support and access to health care

- Impact of Isolation
  - Physical and mental health, course work/education, impact on finances, sources of support, support from the university and college, support from family and friends, and communication

- Public health guidance
  - Abiding by the guidance and discipline

- Christmas
Improvements suggested by students

As part of the interviews, students were also asked what could improve the situations they had described above. A selection of these recommendations is provided below.

For Christmas:

- To be allowed to study remotely, especially at home. This would include being able to take exams at home.

- Ensuring that those students who had to remain in halls (especially overseas students) were adequately catered for both practically and socially.

- Staggering the return to university in January.

- Making the return in January as late as possible.

For self-isolating students:

- A clear road map as to what happens when (a) you test positive or (b) you are a contact of someone who has tested positive. Clearer guidance as to what to do if students start to show symptoms after the index case in a ‘household’ and how long they then need to isolate after that.

- Being clearer on what constitutes a household and consideration given to whether a household should have a maximum number of students and the accommodation arranged accordingly. For example, limiting the total number of students to any bathroom or kitchen to 6–8 people.

- Increased and better mental health support, including a proactive and personal approach from the university to students required to self-isolate.

- Appropriate practical support including the provision of a period of exercise outside for isolating students.
For students who have tested positive:

- Consider offering alternative accommodation to students who test positive where they can mix with other students, have exercise and their health can be regularly checked.

- Have services who check regularly on isolating students and who phone or actually see people in person, even if at a distance wearing personal protective equipment.

For universities and colleges

- Consider forming a unit in each university which coordinates all COVID-19 interventions and communicates with staff and students on this issue.

- Consider the use of sanctions carefully, and only threaten to expel students in the most extreme cases.

- All universities to have a consistent approach to student discipline throughout Scotland with regard to breach of guidance.

- An understanding by the further/higher education sector and policy-makers that students have different issues and needs than other parts of the population, for example, in relation to household definition and accommodation design.
Office for National Statistics (ONS) student COVID insights study

In addition to the PHS study on student experiences with self-isolation, further insights into student experiences and behaviour since the start of semester 1 are provided in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) student COVID insights study. This survey was conducted between 3 November and 8 November 2020 and achieved a sample of 4,322 university students from four British universities. The four universities which took part were the University of Chester, Sheffield Hallam University, the University of Dundee and the University of East London.

Winter break

- A total of 62% of students who live away from their usual non-term-time address reported that they planned to return home for the winter or Christmas break.
  - 33% of these students reported they would return home for the winter break regardless of government guidelines.
  - 29% said they would return home for the winter break following government guidelines.

Guidance compliance

- The majority (87%) of students (compared to 85% living in university accommodation) reported that they always or very frequently try to keep 2 metres away from those outside of their household.

- Of those who had left their house in the past 7 days and spent more than 15 minutes indoors, 19% had come into direct physical contact with people from outside their household while they were indoors.

- Of students who had left home in the past 7 days, 91% met with six people or fewer (including themselves) on the last occasion that they met indoors with friends and or family they do not live with.
- Of these, 15% said that those present at the last social gathering had stayed 2 metres away from each other at all times.

- During term time, an estimated 10% of students who are not living in their usual non-term-time home regularly travelled between their non-term-time address and student accommodation. A further 39% occasionally travelled between those addresses.

- Most students (89%) said that they would request a test if they developed symptoms of COVID-19, and a similar percentage (86%) would self-isolate for 10 days or longer. Of those who said they would not request a test, the most common reason given was that someone else may need it more (28%).

**Mental health**

- At the universities studied, 65% of respondents indicated that their wellbeing and mental health had worsened since starting in the autumn term of 2020: 33% said it was ‘slightly worse’, 32% said it was ‘much worse’.

- Students are significantly more anxious than the general population of Great Britain (6.5 compared with 4.3, respectively), where 0 is ‘not anxious at all’ and 10 is ‘completely anxious’.
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## Appendix 1: Publication metadata

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<td>This paper presents a summary of three strands of work undertaken by Public Health Scotland to support workshops involving Scottish Government, universities and other stakeholders for the safe return of students at the start of second term.</td>
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Appendix 2: Early access details

Pre-release access

Under terms of the ‘Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Order 2008’, PHS is obliged to publish information on those receiving pre-release access (‘pre-release access’ refers to statistics in their final form prior to publication). The standard maximum pre-release access is five working days. Shown below are details of those receiving standard pre-release access.

Standard pre-release access

- Scottish Government health department
- NHS Board chief executives
- NHS Board communication leads

Early access for management information

These statistics will also have been made available to those who needed access to ‘management information’, i.e. as part of the delivery of health and care:

- Scottish Government education department
- Universities Scotland

Early access for quality assurance

These statistics will also have been made available to those who needed access to help quality assure the publication:

- Scottish Government education department
- Universities Scotland
Appendix 3: PHS and Official Statistics

About Public Health Scotland (PHS)

PHS is a knowledge-based and intelligence-driven organisation with a critical reliance on data and information to enable it to be an independent voice for the public’s health, leading collaboratively and effectively across the Scottish public health system, accountable at local and national levels, and providing leadership and focus for achieving better health and wellbeing outcomes for the population. Our statistics comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics in terms of trustworthiness, high quality and public value. This also means that we keep data secure at all stages, through collection, processing, analysis and output production, and adhere to the ‘five safes’.