

A safe start to the summer semester 2021

Back to university – thanks to social distancing, face masks and COVID-19 tests

Legal notice

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OUR GOAL: A safe start together

Social distancing, face masks and COVID-19 tests

Unlike many other sectors, the entire higher education system never stopped operating, but largely switched to digital learning instead. We would like to thank all the staff responsible at various levels and also students at all institutions for making this possible.

However, it has been shown that the face-to-face approach cannot be completely replaced. Personal interaction and discussions are vital, especially for students, lecturers and researchers, because they allow universities to do what they were designed for: to develop creative ideas and solutions together, to bring about innovation through research, and to make a sustainable contribution to the continued development of society and the economy.

With current infection rates continuing to be volatile, protecting the health of all university students and staff remains our top priority at present. The gradual reintroduction of face-to-face university activities in the summer semester 2021 therefore needs to be implemented carefully: together, we must continue to take all necessary precautions to prevent the (further) spread of COVID-19 infections as effectively as possible. At the same time, we should enable steps to be taken that allow for a gradual reopening in a structured environment. In particular, this means creating frameworks and infrastructures in which small groups of people can meet in order to study, research and work together.

Given the ever-changing infection rates, this task poses a significant challenge and requires both a high degree of flexibility and staying power. Having had a wide range of experiences over the last few months, the universities themselves know best which individual measures have proven successful at their individual sites. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide an overview of various measures and thus to ensure a safe start to the summer semester 2021.

1 General COVID-19 safety measures

1.1 Testing as a 'game changer' in higher education

Many areas of everyday life already require proof of a negative COVID-19 test as an 'admission ticket', and a similar system is set to be introduced at universities. Anyone wanting to take part in certain classes and examinations at the university will need to take a test and present the negative result. The exact details are to be decided by university management. To this end, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) is currently drafting new legislation. The goal is clear: regular COVID-19 testing aims to ensure that infections are detected and anyone infected with the virus does not enter the university at all.

Universities play a key role in the national testing strategy

The decision to set up test centres at university sites is, of course, the responsibility of the autonomous higher education institutions. Taking special circumstances into account, the BMBWF provides financial support for individual institutions: universities will be given an additional €1 million to enable them to implement smart testing strategies. In addition, €20 million will be reallocated from current university funding to cover the additional costs of fighting the pandemic (€20 million + €1 million of COVID-19 support). In this regard, universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) will be provided with financial support over and above the existing funding if necessary.

Alternatively, universities can also direct students and staff towards the testing available to the general public, which is continuously being expanded nationwide. In addition to the public testing centres, selected pharmacies now also offer free COVID-19 tests.

In any event, the basic principle for higher education is that the more comprehensive the testing programme is in Austria as a whole, the more it can be used by universities to enable them to continue their activities. Moreover, a large number of higher education institutions have already developed their own testing strategies.

1.2 Vaccinating university students and staff

The long-term goal in the higher education sector is to be able to offer vaccinations to all students and staff. Although the vaccine rollout schedule is set out in Austria's national vaccination plan, its actual implementation depends in part on the approval of further vaccines and the distribution of vaccine supplies throughout Europe. Universities that can administer vaccines themselves due to their infrastructure and (medical/paramedical) staff have been asked to submit appropriate plans for establishing vaccination centres.

Universities play a key role in the national vaccination strategy

Plans of this kind play a key role in the general fight against and containment of the coronavirus pandemic, and help the entire higher education sector to be appropriately included in the vaccine rollout.

1.3 Continued implementation of effective COVID-19 measures

Over the past 12 months, universities have successfully implemented a wide range of coronavirus measures at their sites in order to continue teaching, examination and research activities as best as possible. University management bodies know exactly what has been effective at their institutions and where there is room for improvement. As a result, in the summer semester 2021 they will also decide autonomously and independently on the specific rules to be adopted and the contexts in which these rules will be applied. In all cases, the measures should be designed to guarantee a general level of protection. This level of protection is derived from the general COVID-19 protective measures defined by the Ministry of Health, which are regularly adjusted according to infection rates. These include the effective hygiene and protection measures currently in place, such as hand hygiene, sneezing etiquette, wearing face masks, social distancing, limiting the number of people in any one area and the number of staff in workplaces, regular ventilation, professional management of access and the segregation of spaces.

2 Prioritisation of student groups

Who will be 'brought back' to university first?

The common goal for the summer semester 2021 is to allow more personal interaction and discussions to take place on campus while at the same time preventing large gatherings. It is therefore expedient to decide which groups of students to prioritise in a phased return to university. In this regard too, many universities have already made specific plans.

- **First-semester and new students:** at the start of a degree course, in particular, it is important for students to understand the nature of their degree, experience university life and get to know fellow students. The aim is therefore to bring back first-semester and new students for increased face-to-face teaching at universities in the summer semester 2021.
- **Students who are about to graduate:** it is especially important to provide soon-to-be graduates with every possible form of personal support in the final stage of their degree programme.
- **Master's students who began their degree in the summer semester 2020 or winter semester 2020/21:** to date, a large part of their degree programme has consisted of online learning. In the summer semester 2021 at least, they should therefore be able to return to university for more face-to-face activities in the final stage of their studies.
- **Students studying particular subjects and fields:** this includes students taking courses and examinations in the summer semester 2021 that need to be attended in person for pedagogical or subject-related reasons.
- **Students in tandem settings and involved in digital learning formats:** this means students who act as tutors, mentors, advisers or buddies to other students. They specifically look after new students and/or help implement digital instruction and learning formats.

3 Recommendations for teaching and examination procedures in the summer semester 2021

The past 12 months have shown that two things are critical to ensuring the successful organisation of teaching and examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic: effective preparation and flexibility. Infection rates are still not stable, which makes it necessary to adjust the way in which teaching, learning and exams can take place. Prioritising certain courses and examinations according to their content, form and participants has proven to be effective here.

3.1 Prioritising and differentiating between classes and examinations

- **Differentiating between classes and examinations that can be substituted and those that cannot be substituted or can only be substituted with difficulty:** e.g. laboratory work or art seminars for which the presence of lecturers, individual students or very small groups of students is essential. These courses and examinations are characterised by the fact that it is impossible or very difficult to hold them online.
- **Differentiating between classes and examinations to determine those that should be taken in person due to subject-related or pedagogical aspects:** these are primarily subject-related or pedagogical aspects for which attendance in person is preferable.
- **Differentiating between courses and examinations that are held in hybrid formats and those that are held in digital formats.** Hybrid classes and examinations provide lecturers with more organisational leeway because they can switch between face-to-face and digital delivery formats.
- **Pinpointing solely digital classes and examinations** that – regardless of infection rates in the summer semester 2021 – will be held in a digital format.
- **Prioritising certain types of classes and examinations that are aimed at the groups of students who are to be brought back to university first:** in particular, these are classes and examinations taken by new students in the introductory and orientation phase, and also seminars and examinations that are typically taken at the end of the degree (e.g. accompanying seminars for the bachelor's thesis).

- **Alternative access options for high-risk groups, students in quarantine and international students who are unable to, cannot be expected to or are even not allowed to come to the university:** alternative class and examination formats (generally online) should be available for these students to help them continue their studies without undue delay.

3.2 Factors that have proven to be effective in ensuring that teaching and examinations run smoothly

- **Announcing course and examination formats and any changes to these, and naming the responsible contact person, in good time:** if classes or examinations are changed or postponed at short notice, it is important that students are given the opportunity to withdraw from the class or examination at short notice without this having a negative impact of any kind, including on the number of times that they are allowed to take an examination.
- **Providing clear guidelines regarding the technical and organisational framework in which digital examinations will be held,** such as the choice of technical platform (Moodle, BigBlueButton, Zoom, etc.) that will be used for the class or examination, how identities will be verified, the precautions that will be taken to prevent digital cheating and the specific method of assessing performance (e.g. multiple-choice, single-choice or open-book examinations, etc.).
- **Providing general and timely information about alternative examination methods and timely alternate dates** for people unable to take part in face-to-face classes and examinations.
- **Scheduling face-to-face classes and examinations to prevent different groups of people from mixing as far as possible.** Block scheduling of classes or (staggered) examination weeks have proven to be effective methods of achieving this.
- **Ensuring that there are ways to ask questions during online examinations:** this could be via chat or other channels and should cover both content-related and technical issues.
- **Providing information on how to contact** lecturers and the responsible administrative units.

3.3 Factors to be observed in order to ensure that teaching and examinations run smoothly

- **No ‘mass lectures’:** given the expected infection rates, these will still not be possible in the summer semester 2021.

- **Examinations should not be automatically conducted face-to-face** just because switching to an alternative digital format might involve more work.
- **Workload should be kept manageable:** with examinations being held online and an increased amount of self-study, it has become apparent that the workload has been miscalculated at times. This has led to a significant increase in student workload over the past few months.
- **No excessive time pressure during digital examinations** in order to prevent cheating, especially when open-book examinations are held.
- **Examinations must not be postponed for an unspecified period.**

4 Creating learning spaces and meeting areas

- **Libraries to reopen:** as soon as infection rates allow, libraries will once again be available as usual – both to university staff and students and to the general public.
- **Reading rooms and learning areas should also be accessible again** provided that the hygiene regulations in place, especially compulsory face masks and social distancing, are observed. These regulations automatically mean that fewer users than normal will be allowed to enter the libraries and reading rooms at once. Universities will ideally put in place appropriate access and use regulations, which may include advance registration or other access measures.
- **Vacant lecture theatres to become ‘open learning spaces’ for students:** as university sites begin to reopen, students should once again have access to central places where they can work, learn and meet up with others. At home, not all of them have a sufficiently stable internet connection or a suitable workspace where they can study and work in peace. Where lecture theatres and seminar rooms are not being used or are temporarily free, universities are therefore asked to make these spaces available to students as a place to study.

5 General information about university operations

As soon as infection rates allow, staff are to return to the university in greater numbers. They should make use of the option to work from home to the required extent provided that this is compatible with their role and university operations. As important and beneficial as working from home may be, the aim is for the campus to gradually become the heart of university activities once again.

