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University Principals

18 March 2021

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK UPDATE AND PHASED RETURN OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Dear Principal,

I am writing to provide an update following the [First Minister's statement](#) to Parliament yesterday on the current COVID-19 restrictions and what this means for the further return of students to universities in Scotland.

We have been clear that in balancing the four harms and using the limited headspace available to us in keeping the R value below 1 that the return of education is our priority, with much of the emphasis to date on schools.

Returning students

Now until 26 April

Universities will continue to maintain in-person teaching at any one time at the currently agreed 5% maximum until 26 April. There will, however, be some very limited flexibility with specialised courses in institutions, where numbers of students attending for in-person learning may be above 5%, but would still be very low numbers, and also for some post-graduate courses where overall numbers would also be low.

Any flexibility given above the 5% will need to be approved by Scottish Government officials and be subject to appropriate mitigations.

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire
Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot.

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Any institution wishing to seek this approval should set out in writing the additional flexibility they are seeking, for what reason and the mitigations that will be put in place. This should be sent to [Roddy Macdonald, Deputy Director, Higher Education and Science](#).

26 April to 17 May

As the First Minister set out to Parliament, on 26 April, our hope is that all parts of Scotland currently under level 4 restrictions will move to a modified level 3. On that date, it is also expected that students on the shielding list will be advised it is safe to return to university, once their in-person learning has resumed.

Arrangements for any increase in the number of students beyond the 5% limit after the 26 April will be discussed with universities as part of ongoing engagement on managing the COVID response.

Final approval of the changes will be made week beginning 29 March, and will take into consideration the overall situation with the virus at that point in time.

17 May onwards

We then do not intend to make any further changes until 17 May, so that we can assess the data. However from this date, it is hoped that universities will be able to return to a more blended model of learning, with more students allowed back on campus.

Subsequent changes

The unpredictable nature of this virus means it is difficult to give as much clarity beyond the middle of May.

However, our hope and ambition is that from early June, all of Scotland will move to level 1 - which will allow for a further easing of restrictions including to the provision of face to face learning.

Student and staff testing

I am also pleased to inform you that regular testing (twice weekly) has now been agreed in principle for both staff and students at colleges and universities. Officials are currently working at pace, including dialogue with the sectors themselves, to plan through the logistics for rolling this out as soon as possible.

Easter break arrangements

I am aware that many of your students currently in term-time accommodation may wish to return home for the Easter break. However the 'stay at home' order remains in force across mainland Scotland until 2 April at the earliest, and people should only travel for an essential purpose.

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The restrictions in legislation make it clear that travel without some other factor, such as the start of face-to-face teaching, essential placements or serious wellbeing or safety reasons, is very unlikely to provide a reasonable excuse. Therefore our clear advice is that students should not travel home during the Easter break, unless it is for an essential purpose.

Those students who do need to travel for essential purposes are encouraged to use available testing facilities to test before changing household and, where possible, to use a Community Testing Site to test again once the household change has been made. Prior to returning after the Easter break, and ahead of any change of household, students are encouraged to book a PCR test through the Department for Health & Social Care online booking portal, with follow-up LFD tests taken on campus once the household change has been made.

Learner Journey Taskforce

The Scottish Government will continue to do everything we can to support students to complete their courses by the time originally planned. I have established Learner Journey and Student Hardship Taskforces to focus on solutions to reduce the potential impact of COVID disruption. Whilst the discussions are complex and ongoing, progress is being made at pace by SAAS and SFC, particularly around considerations of the financial elements for college and university students. I am also aware that extension of learning into the summer is being considered by colleges and universities.

During the pre-election period, this work must continue and meetings of the Taskforces will therefore be chaired by one of my senior officials.

Academic Year 2021/22

I know that you are all keen to get as much clarity and certainty over how the next academic year is likely to look. Although August/September can seem a long way away, I am very much aware of the long lead times that you work to (particularly as you look to encourage prospective students to choose your institution for their studies). It almost goes without saying that considerable uncertainties remain over what situation will face us all in the post-Summer period. Nevertheless, I know that officials will be intensifying their engagement with you in order to plan, as best we can, for the next academic year.

Finally, as the pre-election period rapidly approaches, I would like to again state my appreciation for all the work that has been undertaken. I know it has not been easy and it's been extremely challenging for all. I certainly did not imagine that a global pandemic would dominate my portfolio for over a year a sentiment I am sure you will relate to. I would like to however ensure you that during this time my officials will continue working closely with you as we continue to navigate the rest of this academic year and plan the next.



RICHARD LOCHHEAD

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