9 December 2020

Dear Principal,

Following the Deputy First Minister’s statement to Parliament on 8 December, I am writing to provide further detail on our plans for a safe return to learning for students in semester 2.

The welfare and wellbeing of students, staff and wider communities is the Scottish Government’s priority for the return of students following the winter break. In considering our approach, we have taken into account the lessons learned from semester 1. We have also recognised that there will be considerable uncertainty surrounding the virus levels in the whole population in January (given the potential effect of increased mixing of households over Christmas) and the need to balance the four harms of Covid-19 as set out in our Strategic Framework.

We have published guidance in relation to semester 2 which sets out that college students – who largely do not move away from home to go to education – should return as planned, in line with the protection level for the area their college is in at that time.

We are developing at pace a detailed FAQ which will be particularly helpful to returning university students and I have summarised the main details of our guidance for that sector below.

Return in semester 2 for university students

- The return of undergraduate students to university will be staggered over six weeks. Testing will also be in place as part of the return.
- With only very limited exceptions, undergraduates should initially plan to restart their studies at home and only return for in-person learning and term-time accommodation when notified to do so by their universities.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot
To minimise the risk to themselves and others on their return to their term-time household, we are asking students to voluntarily reduce their social mixing for two weeks before and two weeks after returning to university. This means going out only for essential reasons including learning, food shopping and exercise.

Universities and student accommodation providers should actively consider as a priority additional measures to reduce density of student residents. For instance, serious consideration should be given to dividing shared bathrooms and kitchen facilities in corridor flats and open halls to ensure a lower density of students who need to use those communal spaces.

Universities and accommodation providers are expected to support students through this process. Where applicable, we encourage students to work with their accommodation providers to come to an appropriate resolution of issues around tenancy agreements. Accommodation providers should treat students sympathetically and take student's circumstances into account so that they are not disadvantaged.

We will continue to discuss the implementation of the above guidance in relation to semester 2 with our universities, colleges, student representatives and wider sector in the coming days. We will be looking to collect information from you on student campus and halls numbers as well as migration patterns to support further policy development and decisions as we move into the new semester.

I hope this update has been helpful and provides assurance of the work that has been done, and will be done in the coming weeks, in order to ensure a safe resumption of learning after the holidays.