

Universities Scotland

A brief from Universities Scotland for the Education & Skills Committee on the 2021 staggered restart of teaching in higher education

We understand that the 27 January Committee meeting will focus on the return of students to university and college in 2021 in the context of the pandemic. Universities support the need for the additional restrictions as a response to a particularly challenging public health situation following the festive period. Our focus is to prioritise the safety of our students, staff and wider communities whilst supporting the continued education of hundreds of thousands of students and managing a range of other critical issues in higher education as effectively as possible.

1. Our key messages in relation to the January lockdown measures and their impact on HE are:

- SG's framework for the staggered return of students does not foresee the resumption of in-person teaching for most students until the beginning of March, at the earliest (with exceptions for students who have essential in-person provision that cannot be further postponed if they are to graduate). A number of institutions have already announced that they do not expect the majority students to return to in-person tuition before Easter. This is a significantly bigger challenge for institutions to manage, both academically and financially, than it was in 2020.
- Whilst the lockdown measures imposed from January are necessarily restrictive, we are not in exactly the same situation as in March 2020. Therefore, it is not possible or helpful to apply exactly the same policies. This point applies to the need to secure critical worker status for a skeleton number of HE staff as it does to the approach to fairness in assessment for students.
- Student progression is important, as is continued regulatory and professional confidence in the calibre of degree certification. Universities, Government, and professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies will need to continue to work together, and show flexibility, to get this right.

2. Scottish Government guidance for higher education institutions (from January 2021)

At the time of writing [21 January] the Scottish Government has published HE-specific guidance for the management of the extended staggered return. A student-facing Q&A is still expected. We would like to see the following actions regarding the existing guidance:

2.1 Critical worker status

- This is not currently available to higher education staff in Scotland, in contrast to England (where it was announced on 8 Jan 2021). Universities want this to be available to a skeleton staff who are essential to support for students still in residence, essential teaching, and research functions (as permitted within the guidance). The decision to leave this discretion to local authorities, rather than take a national decision, is highly problematic for universities, many of which operate

across multiple local authorities. The fact that this is not currently an option is making life even harder for the staff who are essential to keeping core (and permitted) functions going.

- If the Scottish Government will not reach a national position, we would like the Scottish Government to ask COSLA to look sympathetically on the need for certain key roles in higher education to be able to access the same support as other critical/key workers.

2.2 Support for wellbeing exemptions that allow a change of household

- Universities are following the guidance and discouraging students from changing household back to a term-time address before in-person teaching can resume. To support this, most institutions universities have now confirmed rent waivers/rebates or equivalent on the accommodation they own.
- However, the guidance does provide for limited exemptions on the grounds of “wellbeing”. We want to ensure that students who legitimately use the wellbeing exemption to make a permitted change of household do not then find themselves subject to on-the-spot fines and inadvertent criminalisation (as Police Scotland may be unfamiliar with what is defined as a “reasonable excuse” in the content of higher education). Further, universities do not want to be forced to pseudo-police this point. There needs to be an effective connection to Police Scotland and, students should be trusted, as adults, to follow the guidance.
- Additionally, the guidance prohibits students who are not returning until their in-person teaching commences from making one visit to collect essential items such as medicines or learning materials. The guidance for institutions in England allows this as a risk-assessed measure to support students to continue to learn whilst away from their term-time address for an unplanned and unexpectedly long period. Such a visit can be made safely with limited or no contact with others.

3. Student progression, assessment and completion

- University students face another year of disruption to exams and assessment. Last year, institutions made emergency adjustments to academic regulations to ensure that fairness continued to be an underpinning feature in the assessment approach taken by all institutions and across all subjects, recognising the very different circumstances that students found themselves in. This was captured at sector level in a statement from [Universities Scotland](#).
- This year, universities start from the same and continuous principle of fairness. Universities approached the 2020/21 academic year having planned for dual-delivery model of in-person and online learning for at least one semester. In many ways, mitigations have been “baked in” to the learning, teaching and assessment plans for this year.
- However, accumulation of learning and credit is fundamental to successful progression. The cumulative impact of the pandemic, across two academic years, does make the situation now different to March 2020. As well as fairness, universities have a responsibility to ensure the validity and reliability of their degrees. A vast number of university degrees are accredited by professional,

statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) which have essential requirements to meet professional standards.

- Universities feel that the planning and mitigations they have put in place for 2020/21 (as permitted within the HE guidance) will see students meet their required learning outcomes and progress and complete on time. There are pressures, however, which would be increased by, for example, further restrictions within the COVID guidance for the sector. Relatedly, there some courses where external factors, such as restrictions to clinical and other placements, could result in a delay to graduation for these groups of students. We are in regular discussion with Scottish Government and NUS Scotland to manage this risk. To date, the only discipline where the challenges to students completing their studies have materialised is dentistry and this is being managed actively by institutions and NHS partners.
- Universities will consult with student associations when making necessary mitigations, as they did throughout 2020. We hope to be able to share more information on this over the coming days/weeks.

4. University finances

- It's estimated that universities made losses of £72 million of losses from just one income stream (accommodation, event and conference cancellations) during the first wave lockdown from March to July (academic year [AY] 2019/20).
- Since December 2020, but increasing again in January 2021, Universities expect a steep rise in accommodation contract cancellations from students who have been strongly encouraged by Government to stay at their family (non-term-time) residence and study remotely. Universities have offered rent waivers/rebates, but many students are opting to cancel contracts on the expectation that in-person teaching will not resume sufficiently ahead of the end of the academic year.
- Up-to-date projections gathered by the Funding Council in January 2021, in response to new circumstances, suggests universities will sustain losses of £132.2 million in AY 2020/21 in income from residences, catering and conferencing, compared to pre-pandemic income (2018/19). An estimated £32.5 million of this is a result of universities' decisions to offer students refunds for accommodation they are not using because of the pandemic.¹
- This builds pressure on institutions which have already endured considerable losses and additional costs since March 2020 and which entered the pandemic with existing "underlying risks" to their financial position, as identified by Audit Scotland. There are still major uncertainties about international student fee income, with some optimism about that before Christmas being tempered by the increased prevalence of the pandemic and heightened travel restrictions which will particularly affect students due to start courses in January. The Funding Council's latest collection of information shows that a total of 14 (of 18) Scottish -based higher education institutions are now forecasting underlying deficits in 2020-21.

¹ This is unlikely to be the full picture of losses incurred by institutions in AY2020/21 as this data is gathered in just one income generation stream for institutions. Other streams of income generated have also been adversely impacted by the pandemic.

- Universities see the January 28 Scottish Government budget as essential to their ability to get through the pandemic and contribute to Scotland's longer-term recovery. Short-term, strings-attached financial support for student accommodation would not be the most effective way to support universities, even if that were forthcoming from Government. We are asking, instead, for increased investment in our core grants for teaching, research, and capital. our budget bid asks for an increase of £205.9 million to help Scotland's 19 higher education institutions to address the wide range of impacts institutions face and to help get through this crisis.
- We strongly encourage the Scottish Government to support the example set by the Welsh Government. It increased investment in universities (as institutions) by 13.5% in its December 2020 budget and announced further financial support for students on 18 January. ([Follow link for more information](#)).