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Claire Adamson MSP
Convenor, Education and Skills Committee

19 March 2021

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

Dear Convenor,

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

We have been clear that in balancing the four harms and utilising 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

From 5 April, colleges are permitted to return more students than the current 5% cap allows, and specifically students within the top 3 priority groups identified by Colleges Scotland as being the most likely to not complete this academic year. This will be in place until Scotland moves into the level restrictions, where colleges will operate under the revised regional levels approach from 26 April.

This return of students should also include the further return of senior phase school pupils to college so that there is equity of access to education for senior phase pupils across college and school settings.

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.

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

Given the need to ensure these welcome easements are made in light of the most up to date data around virus transmission the final approval of these changes will be made week beginning 29 March, and will take into consideration the overall situation with the virus at that point in time.

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 colleges and universities will be able to return to a more blended model of learning, with more students allowed back on campus.

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

Student and staff testing

Students changing household during the current term have been offered rapid result asymptomatic testing – the first on arrival at term-time accommodation, and the second three days later.

I can also confirm to the committee 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 students currently in term-time accommodation, particularly university students, may wish to be 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, such as for serious wellbeing or safety reasons, essential placements, or the start of in-person learning.

Therefore our clear advice remains that students should not travel home during the Easter break, unless it is for an essential purpose.

Further information on travel is available for students on the [Student Information Scotland website](#).

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.

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Prior to returning after the Easter break, and ahead of any change of household, they are also 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.

SQA has offered flexibility where it can on assessment of National Qualifications and colleges are making progress in similar conversations with other awarding bodies. SFC is also working to offer a number of supporting flexibilities to ease FE Learner Journey progression. Extension of learning into the summer is being considered by colleges and universities. I will write to the committee with a further update on the work of the Taskforce next week.

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

Our universities and colleges are keen to get as much clarity and certainty as possible 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 our HE and FE institutions work to (particularly as they look to encourage prospective students to choose their 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 both sectors in order to plan, as best we can, for the next academic year.

I fully appreciate that for the further and higher education sectors, the past year has been a period of unprecedented change and uncertainty and for many students, a time of worry and anxiety. I continue to be impressed by the resilience of our colleges and universities both in responding to the challenge of COVID and their continued hard work to keep staff and students safe. I would also like to place on record my thanks to our students and staff for the patience and understanding they have shown during these incredibly challenging times.

RICHARD LOCHHEAD

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