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College Principals

18 March 2021

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

Until 5 April

From now to 5 April, colleges must abide within the current restrictions; a limit of 5% at any one time for in-person teaching for those learners for whom this is critical for the completion of their studies.

5 to 26 April

From 5 April, colleges are also permitted to return students within the top 3 priority groups identified by Colleges Scotland as being most at risk of not completing this academic year (engineering, construction, hairdressing, beauty and complementary therapies), which

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equates to approximately 29% of FE students. This approach will be in place until Scotland moves into the level restrictions on 26 April.

This period 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.

26 April to 17 May

As the First Minister set out to Parliament yesterday, on 26 April our hope is that all parts of Scotland currently under level 4 restrictions will move to a modified level 3. As you will recall, that means that 'restricted blended' will be allowed in colleges. Learning and teaching will be predominantly online, with in-person provision only where it is judged necessary to fulfil learning outcomes, such as for subjects which require clinical, practical or a vocational / professional learning element, and to support student welfare and retention. The First Minister said that we will discuss with island communities whether they will go into level 3 or level 2. That will have implications for the island colleges.

From 26 April, 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.

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.

17 May

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.

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.

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Easter break arrangements

I am aware that some 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.

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 once the household change has been made.

Learner Journey Taskforce

The Scottish Government will continue 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. 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.

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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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