

Minister John Swinney,

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

[DFMCSE@gov.scot](mailto:DFMCSE@gov.scot)

May 4 2020.

### **Future Reopening Of Schools**

Dear Minister,

We write collectively as the British and Irish Group of Teacher Unions (BIGTU) with regard to the issue of schools reopening across the 4 jurisdictions of the UK and that of the Republic of Ireland, following an end to lockdown arrangements in all our countries.

Collectively BIGTU represents almost one million education practitioners and staff, all of whom are committed to the children and young people we teach and support, as evidenced by the efforts which have been made by our members to support provision for children of key workers and also remote learning for others during lockdown. We hope, therefore, that you might give some consideration to our views, as the voice of the profession.

We wish to urge significant caution in any consideration of reopening schools.

Firstly, we would highlight the very real risk of creating a spike in the transmission of the virus by a premature opening of schools. We are convinced by the experience of other systems that a critical tool in preventing a surge of infection is an established capacity to “test trace and isolate” and we would argue that reopening schools before such a regime is in place, would be catastrophic to the rate of infection.

Secondly, it is clear to all that schools can only reopen and operate safely if there are significant operational changes in place to ensure effective social distancing, strong hygiene routines linked to thorough cleansing practices, appropriate PPE available where required, and ongoing risk assessments in place to monitor operations. This will mean that as schools cannot reopen as normal, a phased return will be required and priorities established around attendance, which is likely to be part time for most pupils.

As part of the establishing of priorities we would stress a third point – which is the need to consider equity. We recognise that children from poor and challenged backgrounds and vulnerable children will inevitably require significant additional support as we move

slowly back to a more settled situation. We need to recognise, also, that potentially all children will have suffered a level of trauma as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and we would urge that the initial focus when schools reopen, in any capacity, should be on the health, well-being, and emotional resilience of our students.

BIGTU also includes teacher trade unions which represent teaching, research and senior administrative staff in Higher and Further Education institutions in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Although many of the issues of concern to staff in these institutions are represented in the foregoing we do recognise that, at governmental level, it is common for matters pertaining to Higher Education and Further Education to be dealt with by a separate government departments. For this reason, and to facilitate a comprehensive response to the concerns of our members in all of the sectors, we will set out our submissions regarding Higher Education and Further Education separately in the attached addendum.

Finally, we would underline the strong commitment of the teaching profession referred to above. At the same time, we would assert the importance of Government taking teachers with them as we continue our societal response to COVID 19. That means sharing all available data informing decision making, demonstrating a commitment to the health and safety not only of pupils but of teachers and support staff also (recognising that many of them may well have suffered stress and trauma as well as their pupils), and above all listening to and respecting their collective expertise as practitioners by engaging meaningfully with their professional associations before arriving at decisions.

Thank you for your attention to this letter. We remain open to further dialogue and country specific bilateral engagement.

Yours sincerely,

Larry Flanagan, General Secretary EIS

Seamus Searson, General Secretary SSTA

Patrick Roach, General Secretary NASUWT

Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary NEU

Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary NEU

Jo Grady, General Secretary UCU

Jacque White, General Secretary UTU

**Kieran Christie, General Secretary ASTI**

**Joan Donegan, General Secretary IFUT**

**John Boyle, General Secretary INTO**

**John Mac Gabhann, General Secretary TUI**

### **Addendum**

To Ministers Responsible for Higher Education and Further Education.

Dear Minister,

The British and Irish Group of Teachers' Unions (BIGTU) is an association of all ten of the trade unions which represent teaching and other grades of staff in education institutions in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

BIGTU has written to the various Ministers of Education in each of the above jurisdictions setting out the concerns of members with regard to departmental/political responses to the current COVID 19 crisis. However, since we recognise that it is common that there are separate departments tasked with dealing with Higher Education and Further Education in some countries we are setting out our concerns in this addendum to the main BIGTU letter.

The unions which represent staff in HE & FE in the UK and Ireland are:

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT), The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) (Ireland), The Education Institute of Scotland (EIS), The National Education Union (NEU) and The University and Colleges Union (UCU) (United Kingdom).

While all of the above unions endorse fully the agenda of items of concern set out on behalf of BIGTU in its totality, we would ask that, in HE and FE, particular attention would be paid to the following issues:

**1. Emergency funding for the sector:** the envisaged collapse of income from foreign students, accommodation services, summer schools, research councils and other non-exchequer sources will greatly exacerbate the financial crisis already facing the sector. BIGTU is committed to working with the universities, FE bodies, governments and all other stakeholders to find solutions to the current funding shortfall – through, for example, an emergency package for the sector – as part of

efforts to ensure a long-term sustainable funding model for higher and further education in the various jurisdictions.

**2. Workload, working conditions and resulting stress:** staff have been asked to take on a wide range of new work around online teaching, online exams and student support; staff are working under difficult conditions while balancing work-life commitments, often with poor communications and computer services.

**3. Annual leave:** limit on carry-over should be lifted this year. We would also wish to discuss the impact of the changes which have already occurred on this year's annual leave entitlement.

**4. Vulnerable position of casual and contract staff:** such staff provide vital services to the operation of the universities and colleges but now are faced with the potential loss of teaching hours, non-renewal of contracts and limited access to IT services. BIGTU Unions will oppose any redundancies or reduction of hours for precarious workers and insist on negotiations around any proposed changes to staffing levels. We expect all obligations in terms of **entitlements to permanent employment contracts** to be honoured in full.

**5. Performance reviews** (including student feedback on modules) to be optional and all staff assumed to be performing at expectation unless specific problems have been raised.

**6. Next academic year:** numerous challenges await in the new academic year, including delayed intake of first-year students and the impact on working practices. BIGTU seeks a united approach across all sectors, supported by all stakeholders, and will insist on negotiation around significant changes in established work practices associated with an abnormal academic cycle.

We would welcome your department's response to all of the above and we look forward to co-operating with you in finding fair and sustainable solutions to the problems besetting us collectively.

Yours sincerely

On Behalf of BIGTU HE & FE Unions