

College and University Principals

15 November 2021

Dear Principal,

I am writing to follow up on our meeting on 11 November, and to thank all of those who attended this useful discussion on plans for in-person teaching for the remainder of the current semester/term and for semester/term two.

I reiterate my sincere thanks to you, your staff and students for your collective and continued efforts to ensure learning continues in as safe a way as possible. As we heard from Professor Jason Leitch, the mitigations in place are an essential part of our strategy to tackle this deadly virus, and are helping to protect the whole of our society. I am also conscious that you have been operating in an environment more akin to Level 0 (with a range of voluntary measures) than to the Beyond Level Zero approach operating more widely across society. The voluntary measures you have in place sit fundamentally alongside the mitigations that are in place across all other sectors, to complement the collective effort against this virus. I am grateful to you for doing so.

As Professor Leitch set out, the NHS is facing unprecedented pressures, and the prospect of winter respiratory illnesses, together with an increase in Covid-related admissions, is a sobering one (harms 1 and 2). Alongside those impacts, the meeting also made clear the ongoing and serious impacts of the other harms, particularly harm 3 and its impact on young people. I am grateful to Professor Linda Bauld for her important contribution on that at the meeting.

Another important point made in the meeting was the distinction between in-person learning and in-person teaching.

Moving forward, I think it will be helpful if I set out some guiding principles for institutions to follow in determining their approach to in-person teaching in the remainder of semester/term one and for forward planning semester/term two. These guiding principles are:

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1. At the current time, **any increase in face to face interaction** with people we don't live with **provides a chance for the virus to spread**.
2. The **strongly preferred** position is for the sector to not make any changes next semester given real and increasing concerns over harm 1 and 2.
3. **We recognise harm 3, and take that seriously**. We are genuinely worried about it given the duration of restrictions, and note that the sector has introduced many mitigations, over and above the baseline required now we are operating in Beyond Level 0. Those measures, along with vaccines, have resulted in a successful return of students to university accommodation and campus life this academic year.
4. Given harm 1 and 2 concerns as above, **it is important that any changes are phased, very modest and are focused on groups whose qualifications/ progression are at risk** without changes – as well as **those who are particularly isolated or disadvantaged**.
5. Along with that, a commitment from institutions to **increase adherence to existing Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions** (any increase in numbers using classrooms, etc will need to be taken into account for regular cleaning timetables, hand hygiene provision, and ventilation assessment) and vaccine uptake, with stronger messaging on the importance of regular testing (both asymptomatic and symptomatic).
6. **Engagement with trade unions, staff and student representatives** should be an integral and ongoing part of the process for determining an institution's approach to in-person teaching/learning.

My officials will continue to work with you to assist in the operationalisation of these principles. Alongside this, please continue to use the Covid Recovery Group chaired by the Minister for Higher Education, Further Education, Youth Employment and Training as a place to highlight and work through particular challenges.

It would also be helpful to have a clearer understanding of current levels of in-person teaching, along with any indicative planned increases. Officials will work with you to establish the specific 'ask' on this, and I would ask you to please support this request when it is made.

As I said at our meeting, I appreciate that we all long for a life that is "near normal", and that is what we are all collectively working towards.

I look forward to continuing our work in the weeks and months ahead.

Yours sincerely



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE

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