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16 September 2020

## **CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): The New Academic Term**

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to thank you for the efforts you and your teams have made to prepare for the start of the new academic year, and to stress the need for vigilance and action to keep the virus under control.

I know that colleges, universities and accommodation providers have been working tirelessly to ensure the safest possible environment for staff and students. I want to express my gratitude to you for this: your collective and collaborative approach throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has been greatly appreciated.

However, as you know, the virus continues to pose a significant threat to public health. In recent weeks there has been a significant rise in the number of positive cases in Scotland and internationally. We have seen some cases amongst the staff of colleges and universities and now in the student population. We therefore cannot be complacent. The revised [guidance for universities, colleges and student accommodation providers](#) published on 1 September 2020 sets clear expectations and practical approaches to public health and health and safety that will support institutions in ensuring the safest possible environment for students and staff.

We also recognise the significant challenges and sensitivities in relation to compliance, particularly around gatherings and parties including in student accommodation. Nevertheless, this poses one of the biggest risks of transmission. I know that many students are behaving responsibly, but it is clearly essential that everyone follows the rules that have been put in place to protect themselves and others. We need to do all that we can to re-inforce positive behaviours and minimise transmission. I recognise your considerable efforts to provide students and staff with information about how to keep themselves and others safe during this period, and I am very grateful for your continued support in promoting Scottish Government information campaigns - including FACTS, Test and Protect, We are Scotland and Protect

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Scotland – and the recent letter from Scotland’s most senior clinicians on when to seek a Covid-19 test.

I am however setting out some further requests as follows:

- That you proactively promote the new contact app Protect Scotland, for example by making downloading the app part of students’ registration or induction process – and providing my official Paul Wilson ([Paul.Wilson2@gov.scot](mailto:Paul.Wilson2@gov.scot)) with an update on what you are doing by Monday 21 September.
- That your communications to students and staff continue to make it clear that they must comply with the law on social gatherings, local lockdown restrictions and other public health measures. These measures are designed to keep the academic and local communities safe.
- That you have processes in place to ensure compliance with public health measures in particular social gatherings, quarantine, self isolation procedures, and, for those experiencing symptoms of Covid-19, to arrange a test.
- That you undertake frequent reviews of your mitigation practices and risk assessments to ensure that these are operating effectively, and improve them as required.
- That you have clear plans and processes in place in the event of an outbreak with appropriate contingency plans.
- That, in addition to notifying public health contacts as set out in the guidance and [Sector Advice Card](#), you continue to liaise with the Scottish Government on cases and outbreaks so that we can co-ordinate any necessary action.

I would also like to give you an update following my letter on the 18 August where I asked for sight of action plans on mitigations around various aspects of the new academic terms and outbreak management.

These plans were reviewed using a checklist devised with the aid of public health professionals. There were clear strengths in some areas with further work required to support aspects around student accommodation, supporting students to comply with quarantine and self isolation, and processes on outbreak management.

I realise these were a point of time and, as ever with this situation, much has changed including publication of updated sectoral guidance and a number of workshops on mitigations, outbreak, surveillance and this week on student accommodation. I would however draw your attention to the snapshots of good practice drawn from these returns listed in Annex A and ask that you consider these.

In closing, can I re-iterate that we are all in this together, and our collective response to this pandemic has highlighted the power of collaboration across this crucial sector which is something I very much hope to see continue into the new academic year.

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I fully appreciate how difficult this situation has been for each and every institution across the country and I can reassure you that everything will remain under close and constant review as the new academic year unfolds.

I wish you, your staff, and your students all the very best for the new academic year.



**RICHARD LOCHHEAD**

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## Snapshot of areas of good practice and areas to consider further drawn from the returns of action plans from universities, colleges and accommodation providers

### Process and support for students who need to quarantine/self-isolate

#### Process

- Covid-19 Emergency Response Procedure which provides guidance on actions to take if a staff or student displays COVID-19 symptoms.
- Early Warning Monitoring systems which is an adaptation of existing staff and student absence reporting systems to enable management overview of the numbers of self-isolation cases, possible and confirmed cases from staff, students and others who have been on campus and reports of people on campus experiencing symptoms of Covid-19 while at work.
- Detailed Standard Operating procedures to support those who are self-isolating/in quarantine
- Publication of a 'Protocol for those developing COVID-19 symptoms while on campus' offering guidance to staff and students
- An APP that students can use to communicate if they have to quarantine or self-isolate.
- Tracking of students in quarantine or self-isolating
- Videos to share with student's prior arrival so they know what to expect.
- Processes on compliance monitoring.
- Regular visits to households in managed student accommodation to: (a) ensure that students understand COVID-19 requirements for their circumstances; and (b) to check compliance with
- Setting out existing measures available under (non-academic) codes of practice for student discipline, including a gradual escalation of steps.
- Creation of a new role of Building Manager to encourage compliance with COVID-19 related aspects of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which are available per building across the estate.
- Students signing up to relevant codes of conduct combined with extensive guidance on the behaviours and practices required.

#### Student support

- Welfare support teams and 24/7 telephone support available through student support services
- Student accommodation team on-hand to provide additional support during the quarantine or self-isolation period (e.g. collection and delivery of medicines);
- Welcome packs provided and delivered to the room comprising food (e.g. 24 hour supply), bedding, toiletries, kitchen crockery
- Exclusive use of site laundry services at certain times
- Advice on COVID-19 safe grocery options (e.g. deliveries)
- Free airport collection service for students arriving from non-exempt countries.
- Adopting a proactive approach to managing student wellbeing and mental health during quarantine or self-isolation combined with clear procedures and resources in place for students to use directly if more urgent support is required (i.e. if issues aren't captured via the institutions proactive engagement around wellbeing);

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- Provision of online social events to help students maintain social engagement during this period;
- A 'hot tips' for quarantining update (e.g. Netflix and book recommendations)
- Provision of online yoga and mindfulness sessions.
- Ability to stagger arrivals by entering accommodation before the start of the course and free rent during quarantine
- Measures concerning distancing and formation of student households accounts for the personal circumstances and preferences of the students (e.g. allowing students to form households with existing friends / colleagues, where this is aligned with wider COVID-19 public health guidance and measures).
- Raising awareness of support available also that messaging is in the appropriate range of languages and formats, reflective of the local student population
- Clarity of support/provision for students not living on campus.

## Process to support contact tracing and outbreak management

- Apps and digital technology to support contact tracing
- Enhancing building access system and the archiving of reports with contact details for each individual accessed if required for contact tracing.
- Supporting escalation measures with the development of a central absence monitoring system to collect self-isolation categories as well as survey to new and returning students asking for travel, contact and accommodation details
- Clear recording of contact details using a QR system
- Development of Covid case and outbreak response plans with local public Health Protection Team's.
- Defining engagement pathways with key partners such as local public health teams.
- Identification of roles, responsibilities and mechanisms to identify staff and students who present at particular campus locations and to be able to collate their contact details to pass to the Test and Protect
- Creation of a clear infographic to accompany Track and Protect Procedure.
- Staff communication such as The Staff Toolkit.
- Action plans and procedures to respond to outbreaks
- Centralised management process in place to monitor wellbeing and to identify and respond to actual or potential outbreaks. An overview of the process as a flowchart.
- Protocols and flowcharts relating to management of COVID transmission of on campus for students and staff.
- Clear definition of what the escalation points would be and then details of the response (e.g. who to report to, decision tree / process for declaring an outbreak, actions as a result e.g. closing buildings, deep clean of facilities, communications strategy).
- Consideration of local circumstances in response to cases/outbreaks aligned with central / corporate communication approaches
- Clear and regular communication adapted to the different target audiences approaches in the event of an outbreak a clear sequence of communications covering all aspects of outbreak management (e.g. cleaning, transport issues, self-isolation and the need for staff and students to take appropriate levels of responsibility for the actions, in line with communications.

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## Institutional readiness, communication and adaptation

- Comprehensive, dynamic plans detailing the structure of leadership and operational input required to manage a safe return
- Clear reflection in documentation of implementation of the Scottish Government's sectoral guidance – revisited as necessary
- Comprehensive and rigorous use of risk registers and risk assessment (e.g. considering likelihood / impact of risk, mitigation, risk / mitigation responsibility, residual risks etc)
- Process to ensure consistency of practice, in keeping with public health and spatial distancing guidance and to provision of guidance and directives to operational areas.
- Consideration of how processes can be implemented in the long term to ensure compliance for the foreseeable future
- Participation in learning networks to disseminate good practice.
- Communication channels detailed include both staff and student intranet, use of websites and social media; internal publications, inductions and use of on-campus signage.
- Use of infographics
- Use of national communication campaign and co-production of messaging.
- Clear processes on application of the public health measures in accommodation settings.
- Engagement with staff and students in developing plans
- Communication of risk assessments to people accessing student accommodation
- Clear consideration of the formation of households within accommodation including allocating students to households on the basis of course / study area only

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