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Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

A Safe Return

Plan for a Safe Return to On-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22

June 2021

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1 Government commitment and objectives

Commitment

On 29 April 2021, the Government made a commitment to a significant increase in on-site further and higher education from the beginning of the next academic year. The purpose of this document is to set out the plan to achieve this commitment.

This document will also enable ongoing adaptive responses should circumstances change during the year.

The intention for 2021/22 is for a predominantly on-site learning experience for all students and learners¹.

Research is an essential activity intrinsic to higher education and in normal circumstances is undertaken on-site in universities, technological universities and institutes of technology. This plan also encompasses the return to on-site activity for researchers² in the higher education sector.

Key objective

The key objective of the plan is to achieve an overarching planning framework within which institutions and providers can plan for consistent significant increases in levels of safe and sustainable on-site activities across further and higher education³ and research for 2021/22.

¹ The term “students and learners” will be used throughout this document to represent the wide range of learning experiences across further and higher education, including but not limited to undergraduate and postgraduate students, trainees, research trainees, apprentices, PLC, adult and mature learners undertaking full and part-time study.

² Researchers includes post-graduate research students and research staff.

³ Further and higher education is made up of higher education (HE) and further education and training (FET), including universities, technological universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, and other private and independent HE and FET providers.

Additional objectives

There are seven additional objectives for this work which will support the overall objective. These are:

1. To support the ongoing public health requirements;
2. To support the ongoing needs of students and learners;
3. To retain some scope for online teaching and scope for continuity for students and learners who cannot attend on-site for health reasons⁴;
4. To ensure coherence and consistency in planning and the implementation of public health guidance across the sector;
5. To support autonomy in the work of institutions and providers in the development of their plans;
6. To enable a significant resumption of disrupted research activity and return of researchers to campus;
7. To enable a phased return to on-site learning for the summer period.

Principles

From the beginning of the pandemic, this sector has adhered to six key principles to guide its work and ensure consistency. These principles are:

- Prioritising the immediate health and safety needs of students, learners and staff and the health and safety of the broader community;
- Prioritising learners' interests;
- Recognising the importance of maintaining continuity in educational services and research activity;
- Ensuring the integrity and quality of solutions;
- Ensuring that, at a minimum, disadvantage is not exacerbated by the crisis and actions taken in response to it; and
- Sharing best practice, solutions and leveraging unity.

⁴ Institutions and providers will provide for the needs of vulnerable and high risk staff, students and learners, where vaccination is medically contraindicated.

The purpose of this document is to:

1. Set out an agreed overarching plan for returning and remaining on-site in 2021/22.
2. Serve as the foundation for the development of wider enablers for the achievement of the objective:
 - a. Building on the benefits that will flow from progress in the vaccination of the population and the impact of this on COVID-19 measures;
 - b. Securing public investment to support a more resilient predominantly on-site educational provision and research activity.
3. Serve as the impetus for further sector-led initiatives:
 - a. Updating guidelines where necessary;
 - b. The consolidation of the discretionary framework for adaptation;
 - c. Planning in accordance with the discretionary framework and review of plans;
 - d. The development of stronger vigilance systems for COVID-19 (including rapid testing);
 - e. Remaining in step with changing public health advice; and
 - f. Local implementation on each site within the approved guidelines.

Components of the plan

There are five key components of the Plan:

- The Government commitment
- Expanding essential on-site activities in the designation of the sector as essential
- A pact to achieve significant increases in on-site further and higher education and research
- An expanded discretionary framework of necessary on-site activities
- Updated sectoral guidance and responses

Blended learning

The benefits of blended learning for learners and in particular for some specific groups including vulnerable learners, mature learners, learners with disabilities and learners with caring responsibilities is recognised and has been documented during this pandemic. The flexibility that online/blended learning provides is

important and it is important that the development and experience in relation to these forms of education provision in this sector is not lost. Further research and analysis needs to be undertaken on this issue with a view to developing policy in this area. This will be undertaken in co-operation with the relevant stakeholders at the earliest opportunity.

2 Overview of the plan

Higher and further education is essential insofar as on-site presence is required and such activities cannot be held remotely. Research is also an essential service.

The Government has committed to a significant increase in on-site activities for the next academic year. The sector is equally committed to a significant increase in on-site teaching and learning activities and research. The sector is also committed to remaining compliant with prevailing public health guidance.

It is now confidently predicted that the majority of the adult population in Ireland will have been vaccinated by September 2021. This has the capacity to transform the operational environment on-site for this sector, as will be the case elsewhere in the workplace and in society generally.

Using this as the key assumption, the sector is planning for comprehensive on-site activity for the next academic year, with almost full scale on-site activities. Within this, the sector is planning to ensure that overall numbers attending on-site at any given time will continue to be moderated.

The sector is also putting in place contingency planning, aligned to a more restrictive public health environment but nonetheless leading to significant increases in on-site activities and thereby also ensuring that the Government commitment is met, albeit in a more limited and modest way.

The gap between planning and implementation will allow for ongoing review of plans and alignment with changes arising from the rollout of the vaccination programme.

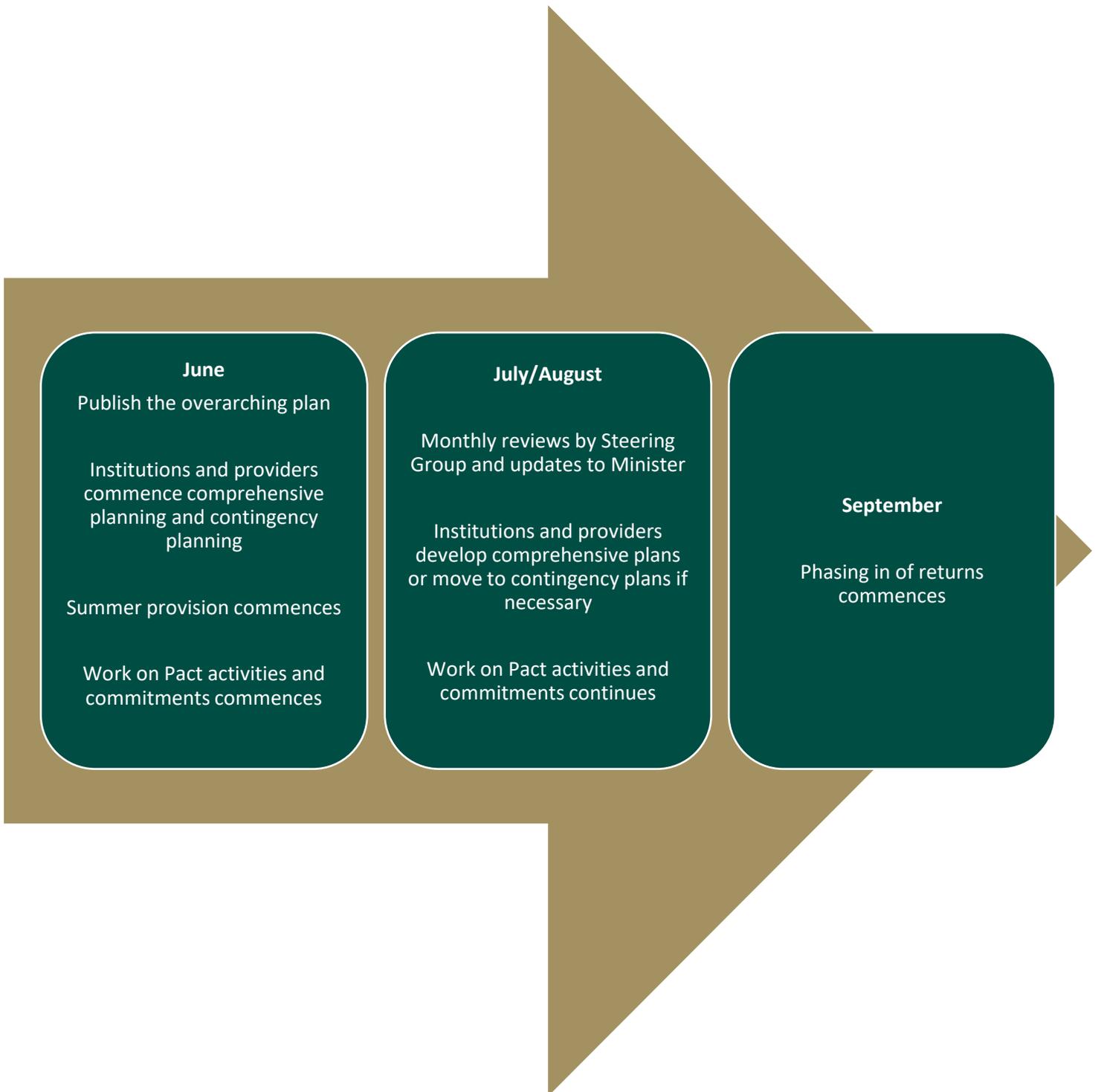
The plan is to proceed with a comprehensive return to on-site activity, while recognising that there can be no certainty in relation to the future trajectory of the disease and contingency plans will continue to be necessary. In the period between now and the return in autumn 2021, planning will be reviewed monthly by the COVID-19 tertiary education system steering group and monthly progress reports will be provided to the Minister for information. An update will be provided to Government before the commencement of the academic year 2021/22. This will ensure that there is ongoing support for planning in this sector and that planning proceeds in a manner that is aligned to prevailing public health advice.

To ensure consistent planning across the sector and the ongoing adaptability of the sector to changes in the operating environment, the sector has reviewed its current Discretionary Framework and revised it in the form of an Expanded Discretionary Framework of activities. The upper limit of the Expanded Discretionary Framework includes larger scale lectures within higher education, with some modifications where necessary and the moderation of overall numbers on-site. The lower limit of the Expanded Discretionary Framework includes a wider range of on-site activities that are attainable within the bounds of current public health guidelines.

The Department, its agencies, stakeholders, institutions and providers have agreed a Pact of actions and commitments to support ongoing efforts in relation to the pandemic and to ensure that planning is well-grounded in safe and sustainable practices. These actions and commitments, which will be completed in time for autumn 2021, are grouped under the following headings:

- Careful and safe opening up on-site
- Ongoing managing and monitoring of on-site activities
- Promoting public health
- Dealing with outbreaks
- A new vigilance scheme
- Regular and transparent communications
- Making specific commitments for international students and researchers, student accommodation and research.

To support this approach, and to enable summer provision in further and higher education and the resumption of research activity, the sector plans to operate on a more open basis for the summer period this year, in line with current public health advice and the phased reopening of activities and with appropriate protective measures and limited congregation, consistent with the operation of the current Discretionary Framework. This begins a phased and staggered approach, commencing this in a measured way in the summer period and providing an experiential basis for institutions and providers in organising and managing the safe resumption of on-site activities through initially modest and manageable levels of provision.



3 The tertiary education sector is essential

The further and higher education sector is an essential sector for students and learners and for the country. It has been designated as essential by public health. Research is also an essential activity intrinsic to higher education.

This sector contributes to social, economic, cultural and environmental development and sustainability. The prolonged model of predominantly emergency online provision of education and training, with very restricted on-site access to facilities and person-to-person contact, has had a deeply disruptive impact on institutions, staff, students and learners in further and higher education and research.

The prolonged online provision has had particularly negative impacts on vulnerable learner cohorts, especially in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. The capacity of institutions to conduct research activities has also been adversely impacted. There are particular challenges with addressing a backlog in craft apprenticeships, with over 9,000 apprentices awaiting training.

Early and more meaningful engagement, through greater levels of on-site provision of education and training, will be key to attenuating levels of permanent scarring coming out of the pandemic.

The sector is currently operating within a very restrictive Discretionary Framework. A more expansive Discretionary Framework will enable the sector to grow and sustain greater levels of on-site provision, bringing about the following improvements and transformations:

A more positive holistic experience for students, learners and staff

- Creating a positive impact on the wellbeing of students and staff.
- Significantly increasing levels of activity on the part of student clubs and societies, including sports and cultural activities, which will have a positive impact on the overall student experience and will contribute to a greater sense of belonging.
- Supporting students from less advantaged backgrounds who will benefit more than others by a return to on-site learning. Those whose home environment is not conducive to effective remote learning or those with

connectivity challenges will benefit the most and will also benefit from peer to peer support.

- Providing a more positive experience for International students who have also been acutely affected due to lack of access to family support etc.

On-site teaching and learning

- Increasing face-to-face learning in order to enhance the quality of learning. While digital teaching and learning brings many innovative and flexible opportunities, these are most effective when combined with face-to-face on-site experiences.
- Provision of connection and support for vulnerable learners which will support this cohort in remaining in education and being successful.
- Channelling the activities of students and learners who have returned to live on or near their institutions in anticipation of on-site learning.
- Reducing pressure and workload on staff, including those in support and administration.

Completion of work placements and practical components of syllabus

- Undertaking laboratory/ practical activities / skills based learning for all students and learners which will fulfil the required learning outcomes.
- Undertaking workshops and practical learning for apprentices and clearing the backlog of apprentices awaiting training.
- Undertaking planning and engagements in respect of addressing work placements and clearing the backlog of postponed work placements for earlier years over the summer and in the year ahead.

Robust Planning

- Planning for on-site learning as on-site timetables are fundamentally different to a remote-learning or blended timetable from both a pedagogical and logistical perspective.
- Planning in advance of the start of the semester due to the coordination required that must balance student, staff and facilities availability within the timetable.
- Allowing students and learners to make commitments and plan for accommodation, travel arrangements etc. and who need to know that learning will take place primarily on-site.

Research

- Research operation at a higher capacity than currently possible. Due to social distancing requirements, operational capacity has been reduced to 25% of normal levels.
- Campus access for researchers and a phased resumption of full-scale research activity. This will facilitate progression and completion of research projects and mitigate against the detrimental effect of restricted access to research facilities including drop-out/deferral rates among master and doctoral students.
- Resumption of training of new researchers to develop skills and continue progress on research activities. Due to the physical proximity required by a trainer and trainee to teach a new user on an instrument, most training is currently on-hold impacting skills development and hampering progress on research activities.
- Improving researcher wellbeing: Due to restricted access to campus facilities, researchers (staff and students) are operating in small groups or, often, alone, leading to a sense of isolation and difficulties in fostering team spirit, with associated wellbeing (and therefore productivity) issues.

4 The discretionary framework of essential on-site activities

Through 2020/21, the sector developed a discretionary framework for on-site provision in restrictive circumstances in an iterative way in response to public health measures and in consultation with public health authorities and Government. This Discretionary Framework was essential to achieving consistency across the sector with scope for diverse responses within this.

Albeit in very restrictive circumstances, the 2020/21 Discretionary Framework provided for institutional and provider discretion to prioritise learning, research and other activities and specific groups of learners for on-site provision.

The Government objective is for a significant increase in on-site learning experience for all students and learners, and, in line with this objective, the retention of a baseline of significant on-site activity throughout the year.

To achieve this, a Discretionary Framework with a more expansive definition of necessary on-site activities is required. To support these expanded on-site activities, the sector has developed a Pact to ensure that they will be safe. The elements of this expanded Discretionary Framework and accompanying sectoral Pact will be developed and implemented incrementally between June and October 2021.

The sector is committed to planning for a significant increase in on-site teaching, learning and research within the minimum and maximum limits of this expanded Discretionary Framework.

By making an assumption that public health guidance will change following the extensive rollout of the vaccination programme, comprehensive planning can be aligned to the maximum limit of the expanded Discretionary Framework, with a resumption of almost full-scale on-site activities (including larger scale lectures within higher education, with some modifications where necessary). Within this, planning will ensure that overall numbers attending on-site will be moderated.

The achievement of a more expansive minimum limit, within the bounds of current public health guidance, will permit the sector to develop contingency plans based on no change to public health guidance with moderate increases in on-site activity and, for portions of the sector (e.g. further education), a full resumption of activities.

Overall approach

The expanded Discretionary Framework will operate in conjunction with:

- The COVID-19 Adaptation Framework which provides a structure, guidance and support for further and higher education institutions and providers. This is to assist them in consistently and collaboratively continuing to adapt to meeting the challenges posed by this pandemic. This is envisaged to go beyond the commencement of the 2021/22 academic year;
- Review of Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education following the planned review of public health guidance over the course of summer 2021;
- Updated institution and provider specific implementation guidelines in response to changes in public health guidance;
- A blended model of teaching and learning and research that is significantly on-site, with discretion for variance at a local level by institutions in accordance with local context and needs, and with scope to respond to changes in the public health environment; and
- Detailed planning and contingencies undertaken by higher and further education institutions and the communications of these to students and learners.

Institutions and providers can continue to use their discretion when deciding between on-site and remote for the scheduling of particular activities.

Recognising that it is difficult to change course mid-programme or semester, using this common baseline Framework, institutions and providers can continue to make some adaptations throughout the year, making changes best suited to their own context and the requirements of their staff and students and learners.

Proposed Minimum Activities within the Discretionary Framework

- Laboratory teaching and learning
- Classroom based teaching and learning
- Tutorials
- Workshops
- Smaller lectures (may need to determine a limit for these but is relative to room size)
- Research

- Work-spaces
- Libraries
- Other on-campus non-educational activities and facilities such as sports, bars, canteens, clubs and societies will operate in line with prevailing general public health advice for those activities.

Within this, institutions and providers will provide for the needs of vulnerable and high-risk staff, students and learners where vaccination is medically contraindicated.

This lower limit is achievable within current public health guidelines and with appropriate protective measures in place. Additional sector specific advice will not be required to achieve this.

Proposed Maximum Activities within the Discretionary Framework

The provision of larger scale lectures is achievable only in a very different public health environment.

It is hoped that, with the benefit of mass vaccination, this environment is achievable in autumn 2021.

Planning can be made for larger lectures with modifications to ventilation, the size / capacity of very large lecture halls, moving some of the larger lectures to remote learning, adjustments to the timetable to reduce the overall population on-site at any one time and other measures where needed.

The sector is planning now on the basis of the maximum scale of the Discretionary Framework.

As autumn reopening draws closer, institutions and providers will need to begin implementing their plans and communicating definitively to their staff, students and learners. Institutions and providers can communicate to their staff, student and learners the plan to return to significant on-site provision in the autumn. Regular sectoral reviews of planning and updates to the Minister will ensure that comprehensive planning remains supported and in line with the wider public health environment.

However, due to the many uncertainties in relation to COVID-19 and the future trajectory and profile of the disease, the retention of contingency planning is an important factor in the planning process.

Governance of the discretionary framework

For 2021/22, the sectors will continue to work together through a regularly reviewed D/FHERIS⁵ coordinated structure, to respond to the unique set of challenges presented by the pandemic in a way that is inclusive, collaborative, productive and adaptable.

More recently, stakeholder fora were created for the technological sector and further education and training sector to enable stronger collaboration between sectors and social partners to support reopening in a very restricted context. These fora have been very successful in finding safe, careful and innovative ways of returning and maintaining staff, students and learners to safe on-site environments. There is potential to create a stronger ongoing engagement structure to support significant increases in on-site activity. There is a need to retain these groups in some form going forward as a means to meaningfully facilitate engagement and dialogue across the sector.

Working with public health

At key periods throughout 2020/21 this sector engaged with public health bodies to:

- Work closely with the Department and public health authorities in the development of guidance, protocols and sector-led responses;
- Collaborate with stakeholders, especially student groups, to promote public health responses;
- Enable on and off site public health facilities such as test centres;
- Work with public health professionals in responding to outbreaks; and
- Provide information and contacts to the HSE in their development of a database of contacts.

This provides a foundation for ongoing and strengthened engagements throughout 2021/22 to support the updating of guidance and the development of new arrangements for vigilance.

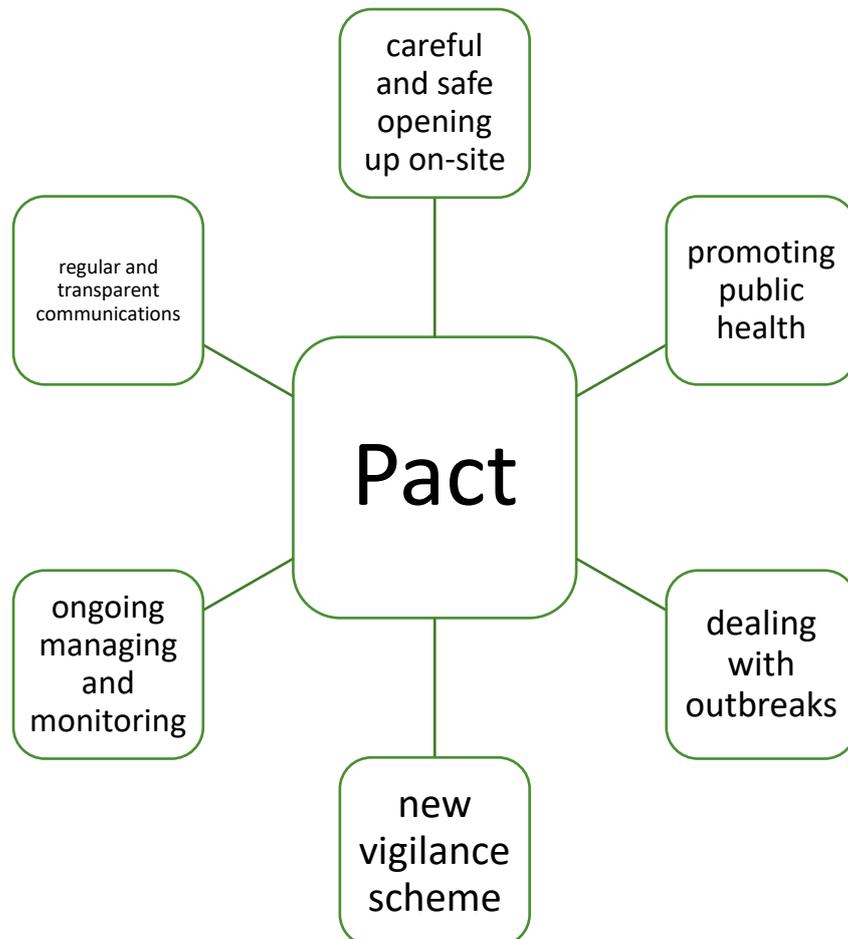
⁵ The term D/FHERIS refers to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

5 Pact for a safe on-site sector

The sector is proposing an expanded Discretionary Framework for its operations in 2021/22:

- with a maximum limit that extends to larger scale lectures (with moderations), dependent on public health guidelines;
- with a contingency baseline that is greater than the current limit;
- with appropriate protective measures in place;
- with a commitment to ongoing review to ensure its alignment with prevailing public health guidance.

The sector has agreed and commits to the following Pact to support the achievement of this.



Careful and safe opening up on-site

Institutions and providers commit to...

- Developing and implementing plans to significantly increase on-site teaching, learning, assessment and research
- Enabling a return to a holistic experience including activities and services for students, learners and staff
- Enabling all learners to participate, especially vulnerable learners
- Ensuring that all learners across all areas have a significant scheduled period of on-site learning
- Appropriate provisions for vulnerable staff, students and learners where vaccination is medically contraindicated
- Continuing to ensure the quality of educational and research activity
- Continuing appropriate mitigating actions
- Addressing backlogs and deferred learning outcomes

QQI commits to...

- Assuring the quality of provision including the significant increases in on-site provision

SOLAS/HEA commit to...

- Working with the sectors to identify resources and support securing them

Stakeholder bodies commit to...

- Engaging with institutions and providers to achieve significant increases to on-site teaching, learning, assessment and research, to progress mitigating actions and to address backlogs
- Engaging with institutions to ensure consistency in on-site activity within their sector

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Engaging with Government to represent the needs of the sector
- There are existing and projected costs associated with the continued safe operation of the sector during the pandemic and the planned approach to increased campus provision in the next academic year. A Contingency Reserve was provided as part of Budget 2021 for a number of sectors including Further and Higher Education. The allocation of contingency funding is to be agreed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the context of this plan, having regard to the prevailing public health environment and based on an assessment of the temporary, funding provided to support the sector in the 2020/21 academic year
- Supporting the sector in developing guidelines

- Working with stakeholders to clarify the transitions process for first year entry to enable planning

Ongoing managing and monitoring of on-site activities

Institutions and providers commit to...

- An expanded Discretionary Framework, significantly on-site, that provides for:
 - Carefully managed increases in on-site provision and research activities for the summer period
 - Phased and incremental returns in September 2021
 - Providing appropriate blended learning options as determined through engagements
- Continuing to use the Adaptation Framework
- Ongoing risk assessments
- Making the best use of autonomy and adaptability to meet the needs of learners
- Maintaining consistency with the principles and framework laid out in this Plan, noting the considerable variation in scale, complexity and diversity of institutions across further and higher education
- Stakeholder engagement through stakeholder fora and other institution and provider structures
- Continuing special institutional and provider governance structures for COVID-19
- Participating in the D/FHERIS structure for COVID-19

Stakeholder bodies commit to...

- Engaging with institutions and providers on the development and implementation of the Discretionary Framework and Adaptation Framework
- Engaging through stakeholder groups and other engagement structures
- Participating in the D/FHERIS structure for COVID-19

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Continuing to review the COVID-19 governance structure to ensure its relevance
- Supporting stakeholder fora
- Supporting the sector in developing an expanded Discretionary Framework

Promoting public health

Institutions and providers commit to...

- Updating sectoral guidelines
- Compliance with general public health requirements
- Developing and keeping up-to-date a COVID-19 response plan
- Supporting the work of public health authorities nationally and locally
- Compliance with sector specific and local public health requirements
- Adjusting on-site attendance if necessary due to changes in public health advice

SOLAS/HEA commit to...

- Working with the sectors to identify resources and support securing them

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Engaging with Public Health Authorities for the sector
- Working with the sector and public health authorities to update practical guidance
- There are existing and projected costs associated with the continued safe operation of the sector during the pandemic and the planned approach to increased campus provision in the next academic year. A Contingency Reserve was provided as part of Budget 2021 for a number of sectors including Further and Higher Education. The allocation of contingency funding is to be agreed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the context of this plan, having regard to the prevailing public health environment and based on an assessment of the temporary, funding provided to support the sector in the 2020/21 academic year

Dealing with outbreaks

Institutions and providers commit to...

- Expanding sectoral protocols for outbreak management
- Strong engagement with local public health authorities
- Strong engagement with other public authorities
- Close cooperation with staff, students and learners

Stakeholder bodies commit to...

- Engaging with institutions and providers to deal with outbreaks

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Enabling the sector and public health authorities to update the foundations for outbreaks protocols

A new vigilance scheme

Institutions and providers commit to...

- Developing a sectoral scheme for COVID-19 vigilance for staff, students and learners on-site and online to include:
 - The promotion and implementation of standard public health measures in accordance with prevailing public health advice including:
 - hand hygiene and dispensers
 - sanitary hygiene
 - respiratory hygiene
 - cleaning
 - ventilation of indoor spaces
 - The wearing of face-masks in indoor on-site shared settings
 - The promotion of vaccination and support for the vaccination programme rollout
 - Managed movement on-site including entry and egress to buildings and large indoor settings and minimising the convergence of students and learners before, during and after scheduled on-site activity
 - Timetable adjustments if necessary to moderate the numbers on-site at any one time
 - Support for PCR testing pathways for symptomatic students, learners and staff
 - Encouraging and ensuring symptomatic or tested positive students, learners and staff self-isolate
 - Support for tracking and tracing mechanisms
 - On foot of the recently published HSA Protocols and feasibility studies in train, sectors will begin preparing for a scheme for the operation of rapid antigen testing
 - Engagement with local and national public health advice and guidance

SOLAS/HEA commit to...

- Working with the sectors to identify resources and support securing them

Stakeholder bodies commit to...

- Engage with institutions and providers to support vigilance

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Enable the sector and public health authorities to develop the foundations for sectoral vigilance schemes

Regular and transparent Communications

Guiding Principles

- “When we know, you know.” Plans, guidance and policies will be communicated as far in advance as possible, recognising that public health advice is subject to change and that some uncertainty will always exist
- The safety of our staff, students and learners is paramount

Institutions and providers commit to...

- Timely communications with staff, students and learners. If there is a reason for delay or uncertainty, that reason will be communicated
- Close engagement with each other and with public health to ensure that communications are consistent and evidence-based
- Close engagement with D/FHERIS to support and inform national communications
- Clear communications to students and learners on the increases in on-site activities that they can expect

Stakeholder bodies commit to...

- Close engagement to ensure that communications are consistent and evidence-based
- Develop specific but aligned messaging for members

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Timely communication with stakeholders and institutions
- Supporting institutions in developing communications materials
- Communicating the plan nationally and internationally, and in support of institutions

Specific actions and commitments for key areas

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND RESEARCHERS

Institutions and providers commit to ...

Developing an agreed sector-wide protocol with key principles of assurance for Government that the arrival of international students and researchers for the next academic year will be managed in a safe manner in accordance with the most up-to-date public health advice. This protocol will include measures such as pre departure and post arrival training and symptoms checking or testing, measures to implement specific public health accommodation requirements, and the provision of medical and pastoral care services for international students and researchers.

D/FHERIS commits to ...

Working with the sector and across Government Departments to seek to address the challenges that international students and researchers will face when planning their study/research trip and on arrival into Ireland. These challenges include, but are not limited to, immigration issues and the implications of public health measures for international students.

STUDENT ACCOMMODATION

Institutions and providers commit to ...

- Timely communication with students and learners on timetabling and on-site attendance to enable decision making on accommodation
- Close engagement with each other and with public health to ensure that safety is paramount in managing accommodation
- Where possible developing accommodation offerings that align with timetabling approach (i.e. flexibility in offerings)
- Providing refunds to students and learners in the event institution owned accommodation is vacated on public health grounds

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Working with the sector and public health authorities to enable a safe increase in the numbers using student accommodation
- Timely communication with institutions
- There are existing and projected costs associated with the continued safe operation of the sector during the pandemic and the planned approach to increased campus provision in the next academic year. A Contingency Reserve was provided as part of Budget 2021 for a number of sectors including Further and Higher Education. The allocation of contingency funding

is to be agreed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the context of this plan, having regard to the prevailing public health environment and based on an assessment of the temporary, funding provided to support the sector in the 2020/21 academic year

RESEARCH

Institutions and Providers commit to...

- Enabling full access to on-site research facilities and support services
- Research laboratories and work-spaces operating up to maximum occupancy where local risk assessment determines that the appropriate levels of ventilation and protection are provided
- Addressing backlogs
- Using the responses to the forthcoming results of the StudentSurvey.ie PGR COVID-19 questions to better understand the challenges faced by research students
- Supporting researcher and research student wellbeing

D/FHERIS commits to...

- Engaging with Government to represent sectoral research matters
- Working with D/Health to address specific research challenges, for example, servicing of research equipment
- Working with the sectors to identify resourcing issues

6 Guidance

Current Guidelines

In 2020, arising from the publication of the HSA Return to Work Safely Protocol, the further and higher education sector stakeholders communicated a request for additional expert guidance as to how the principles and requirements set out in the Protocol should be applied to deal with some specific difficulties, issues and challenges which will arise for the further and higher education system in order to safeguard the health and safety of students, learners, visitors and staff.

Sector specific issues were identified by stakeholders arising from the Protocol where more granular, expert advice would add value in the application and implementation of the guidance contained within the Protocol in relation to the various contexts, environments and scenarios in further and higher education and campus settings.

These were collated by the department and were considered by the specialist expertise available to the department.

Guidance in relation to those issues was set out in this document:

[Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education for Returning to On-site Activity in 2020](#)

In addition, the sectors built on this guidance to provide practical guidance specific to their own contexts. These are set out in the following:

[FET Implementation Guidelines](#)

[Implementation Guidelines for Public Health Measures in Higher Education Institutions](#)

Planning for A Safe Return 2021 is proceeding using the assumption that public health guidance will change following the extensive rollout of the vaccination programme. On this basis, comprehensive planning can be aligned to the maximum limit of the expanded Discretionary Framework, with a resumption of almost full-scale on-site activities (including larger scale lectures within higher education, with some modifications where necessary). Within this, planning will ensure that overall numbers attending on-site will be moderated.

The sector is also putting in place contingency planning, aligned to a more restrictive public health environment but nonetheless leading to significant increases in on-site activities and thereby also ensuring that the Government commitment is met, albeit in a more limited and modest way.

The gap between planning and implementation will allow for ongoing review of plans and alignment with changes arising from the rollout of the vaccination programme.

Revisiting the guidance for 2021/22

At the time of their publication, the Guidance documents were considered to be iterative and liable to changing and adapting as necessary to reflect up-to-date public health advice. Due to the prevailing circumstances of 2020/21 the use of the Guidance documents was restricted to very low levels of on-site provision and therefore no updates were required.

It is recognised that the limited on-site provision in 2020/21 was safe and did not result in outbreaks. The strategies for dealing with off-site outbreaks were successful as were the use of adaptive and discretionary frameworks and stakeholder engagement fora.

It is now confidently predicted that the majority of the adult population in Ireland will have been vaccinated by September 2021. This, as early evidence of the vaccination programme suggests, has the capacity to transform the operational environment on-site for further and higher education and research, as will be the case elsewhere in the workplace and in society generally.

If public health guidance changes on foot of widespread vaccination then there may be a need to revise sectoral guidance.

Outbreaks Protocols

In line with the national requirement to manage the risks associated with the escalation of the transmission of COVID-19, the higher and further education sector acted to reinforce the 2020 Framework through the completion of a Protocol for Managing Outbreaks in both the higher education and the further education and training systems.

Working closely with the Department and public health authorities, the further and higher education sectors developed and published response plans for managing outbreaks of COVID-19 in educational settings. These outline the

major steps that need to be taken should there be a suspected case of COVID-19 on-site and the subsequent procedures should a positive test be returned.

In addition, the sector provided information to the HSE in their development of a database of contacts and locations of further and higher education centres.

Enhancing outbreaks responses 2021/22

The return of students and learners to accommodation proximate to their institution resulted in a small number of outbreaks during 2020/21, through community transmission and mostly in private accommodation.

These highlighted the broader societal challenges pertaining to promoting and encouraging continued compliance with public health measures including by younger people.

Institutions and providers established strong and regular engagements with their local public health authorities. There was regular sharing of information and in some instances large scale proactive work such as mass testing and the provision of public health facilities on-site.

Institutions and providers promoted HSE pop-up walk-in testing centres in their vicinity using their own communications networks, aiming their messaging at students and learners. Institutions and providers also worked with public health communications specialists to develop messages to promote compliance amongst students and learners. In many cases, the local students' unions were to the forefront in communicating to students and learners the requirement to comply with public health advice.

In addition, institutions provided ongoing messaging to promote health, compliance and to reduce the spread of infection, working in close partnership with their student bodies. In some instances they invoked disciplinary procedures. However, it is recognised that this should be a point of last resort. Working proactively with students and learners locally and implementing processes to allow and encourage safe social interaction is the best way to avoid these challenges.

Institutions and providers also engaged actively with other public authorities such as An Garda Síochána to promote compliance.

A New Vigilance Scheme

With the advent of widespread vaccination nationally, the response to COVID-19 is moving into a new phase of widespread inoculation accompanied by controlling the spread of the virus amongst those who are not vaccinated, those for whom vaccination has not been effective or more vaccine-resistant strains of COVID-19. However, it will still be necessary to build a robust vigilance system to support reopening in 2021, with the understanding that this may be modulated in accordance with Public Health advice during the academic year.

This vigilance system will be composed of:

- facilitating and supporting the vaccination programme for students, learners and staff
- promoting symptom awareness and tracking
- creating incentives and easing pathways for symptomatic students, learners and staff to PCR testing
- if feasible, the development of a rapid testing system for the sector
- engaging strongly with local and national public health advice and guidance.

Rapid antigen testing may potentially be a significant element of this system. If proven through piloting and feasibility, the benefits of rapid testing could also provide an additional element to the control strategy set out in national guidance. On foot of the recently published HSA Protocols and feasibility studies in train, sectors will begin preparing for a scheme for the operation of antigen testing through the formation of either sectoral or cross-sectoral working groups.

7 Resources

The Plan for A Safe Return to On-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22 and the Discretionary Framework outlined in this plan will operate along with and be supported by:

- The COVID-19 Adaptation Framework
- Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education, (to be updated in line with prevailing public health advice).
- Sectoral guidance (to be updated in line with prevailing public health advice):
FET Implementation Guidelines
Implementation Guidelines for Public Health Measures in Higher Education Institutions
- Sectoral Pact as outlined in Section 5 of this plan
- Work Safely Protocol published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- The Government Plan - COVID – 19 Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead