

Opening Statement to
Joint Committee on Education, Further & Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science
on the
Reopening of Further and Higher Education Institutions in a Safe and
Sustainable way.

Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion on the safe reopening of further and higher education this autumn. We particularly like the reference to both a 'safe' and a 'sustainable' return to our campuses, both of which are critical considerations in this regard. Having said that, at the outset, I should say that our preference is to refer to a 'return to campus' rather than a 'reopening' – our universities have remained open throughout the pandemic, with significant contributions to research, public health and the continuity of engagement with our students, albeit that much of our activity has had to be carried out remotely.

Despite the challenges, our 8 universities will have successfully graduated over 100,000 students between this year and last including the latest cohort of our doctors, nurses, teachers and other frontline staff.

We welcome the recent publication by Minister Harris of the Plan for the Safe Return to a more normal working operation for staff and students this autumn. I will focus my comments on the main issues and challenges for our universities.

- Our priority focus is on the health and well-being of our students and staff. All of our plans are predicated on adhering to public health guidelines and to providing the best possible student experience.

- Further and higher education are 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 and, as have seen through the pandemic, for society.
- The expectation that the majority of the adult population, including third level students, will have been vaccinated by September lays the foundation for our return to campus plans with the maximum possible student levels. We share the ambition of students, staff and government to safely re-instate face-to-face teaching and research activities on campus.
- Noting in particular that the provision of larger scale lectures is achievable only in a very different public health environment, it is hoped that, contingent on the benefit of mass vaccination, this environment is achievable in autumn 2021.
- Each of our universities are finalising their detailed plans for the autumn for the resumption of on-campus teaching and learning. The preparatory work includes substantial modification of campus layout and facilities management, entry and egress protocols to buildings, sanitisation and cleaning regimes and adjustments to ventilation systems.
- Re-adjusting timetables in our universities with campus populations of from 15,000 to 30,000 covering hundreds of courses and thousands of modules is a complex process. In doing so, all universities have a reserve plan in place in the event that greater levels of restrictions are required by public health guidelines than that currently anticipated.
- We are working together and with other stakeholders, notably our students, to review and learn from our digital experience over the last 16 months, and to ensure that the positive aspects of this can be embedded into the ways we teach, learn, conduct research and organise our institutions going forward.

- Our universities have been willing partners in the government response to Covid. We have made our facilities available for contact tracing and for vaccinations; we have seconded key personnel to support the health service; we have partnered in Covid research and test facilities are located in some of our on-campus labs. More details of our broad-based support for the Covid response can be found at <https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Irish-Universities-Help-Fight-COVID-19-Pandemic-May-2020-spreads.pdf>
- Four of our universities, TCD, UCD, UCC and my own NUI Galway are involved in pilot research projects to assess various approaches to on-campus rapid antigen testing. While it will be some weeks yet before results from these pilot programmes emerge, it is hoped that they will provide useful evidence as to the role that rapid antigen testing could play in the safe return to campus.
- The IUA has worked with the HEA and the Dept. of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science to seek to secure an additional Covid funding package for the sector similar to that provided in July 2020. This includes additional supports for students, especially vulnerable students who may require supports for digital access or welfare / mental well-being supports. The capacity of universities to deal with the additional demands arising from Covid needs to be supported through a further such funding package.
- The pandemic has led to significant backlogs in research projects across our universities. The HEA COVID-19 Cost Extension Fund of 2020 is being used extensively to support researchers as many need more time to complete their research. Further funding will be required to address the growing backlog. Plans are also underway for the gradual return to increased research capacity over the summer months.
- We look forward to welcoming our students back to campus and to Government investment to support us in that regard.

- The safe arrival of our international students is a priority for the sector. Our universities are working with other sector partners and with the Department to agree an updated protocol and to put in place the necessary arrangements for the safe welcome of international students. Government decisions on international travel and the rollout of the EU Digital Pass are crucial enabling measures for this. In addition, we are liaising with government to support us, as last year, in funding the costs arising in this regard and to resolve a number of visa processing issues from and to certain countries.
- We have seen a dramatic increase in applications from Irish students to participate in the Erasmus programme. This includes a backlog of students who were unable to travel abroad to study last year. There are insufficient funds in the HEA Erasmus budget to cover the expanded demand. Additional funding of c. €4m is required and we would welcome the Committee's support to secure this.
- 7 of the 8 member universities of the IUA have university-owned campus accommodation with a total of approximately 15,000 beds available. In the last year, universities saw a sharp reduction in the income from these facilities and all universities provided refunds to students who had booked on-campus accommodation last autumn but were then forced to study from home due to Covid restrictions.
- In conclusion, I would say that our students, staff and the universities themselves have shown great flexibility and adaptability to the challenges of Covid over the last 16 months. In particular, I commend our colleagues and our students for the adaptability and resilience, now being stretched by and into another academic year. We are now looking forward to a return to campus that will enable a more fulsome student learning experience, a resumption of the full range of our research work and the first phase of the restoration of the academic, social and cultural aspects of campus life.