

Joint Committee FHERIS to discuss – Reopening of Further and Higher Education Institutions in a Safe and Sustainable Way

Thursday, 22nd July 2021

Introduction

- Thank you Chair for the invitation here today to share information on our plans for onsite activities in higher and further education this coming September.
- We all know we cannot have another year like last. Education and training is not just about what you learn. It's about how you learn, the people you learn with, and the experience of being with others.
- There are aspects of learning that can only be imparted in person. We need to catch up on backlogs and ensure that they are not further exacerbated.
- Furthermore, students and learners do much better when they attend lectures and classes in person.
- These are the reasons why we are planning a safe return to on-site learning this autumn.

- I am pleased to say that the Government has committed to a significant increase in onsite attendance in the third level sector in the next academic year.

The Plan

- Following an intense period of work with our sector and stakeholders and with Government approval, in June, I published *A Safe Return: Plan for a safe return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22*.
- In a nutshell what this Plan means is that **all** students will have an onsite college experience next year. It may not be every lecture or workshop; the numbers in the library may be smaller; and not all facilities will be open as they were previously. But, and let me be very clear about this – we are getting our students and learners back to college. Whereas last year, the presumption was learning would be online mainly, this year the presumption is learning will be mainly on site. No doubt the prevailing public health guidelines will mean some learning is blended but for all students, no

matter what they study, on site learning and attendance will be available.

- Specifically, at the very minimum, on-site activity next year will include laboratory teaching and learning, classroom based teaching and learning, tutorials, workshops, smaller lectures, research, return to work-spaces and access to libraries with appropriate protective measures in place.
- 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.
- Teaching within lecture halls (of all sizes) will take place on-site but this will depend on the room size and other factors. There will be moderation in numbers and modification to normal practices. What I mean by this is for example, entry and exit; ventilation; or the length of time of on-site lectures.
- All our plans have student and staff safety firmly built in.

Covid Package €105m

- At the Cabinet meeting yesterday, I updated Government of the progress in relation to the planning process and the expected level of on-site activity in further and higher education and research in the autumn.
- I also secured the approval of Government for a significant package of financial support, amounting to €105m, for the third level sector.
- The package will include financial support for further and higher education to return on-site safely and in line with public health advice, and additional student supports for students in further and higher education.
- €21 million of this funding will be allocated to provide specific extra supports for students including an extra €3m for student mental health, and extra €10m for the Student Assistance Fund which provides financial supports to students experiencing financial difficulties while in college,

and €8m for the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund which supports and engages disadvantaged learners.

- A Working Group for Student and Learner Wellbeing and Engagement was established in January 2021, chaired by the Union of Students in Ireland, and comprising representatives from across the Tertiary Education Sector. And I am pleased to say that the majority of proposals contained in the summary report of Working Group for Student and Learner Wellbeing and Engagement have been included in the package. I want to specifically thank USI for the leadership they have shown and their determination to achieve an effective outcome for students.

Detailed reopening planning and Stakeholder Pact

- Higher education institutions and further education and training providers are currently progressing with their own individual detailed planning and work for a comprehensive return to on-site activity. My officials and I have already engaged directly since the government decision yesterday, and through our Covid steering committee scheduled for

next week, we will continue to support all parties with further guidance and clarity, where required.

- To enable the success of the Plan, the sector has developed a Pact of actions and commitments which has been agreed by my Department, its agencies, stakeholders, institutions and training providers. This will support ongoing efforts in relation to the pandemic and ensure that planning is well-grounded in safe and sustainable practices. These actions and commitments will be completed in time for autumn 2021.
- Within the Pact, institutions and providers have committed to addressing backlogs and deferred learning outcomes. Similarly, stakeholder bodies have committed 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.
- In addition, specific commitments have been provided in respect of international students in higher education, with respect to accommodation and ongoing research.

- Engagement and collaboration between my Department and the sector has been a key feature of how we have worked since the start of this Covid journey back in March 2020. I want to sincerely thank student bodies, learners, staff organisations and management for their incredible collaborative efforts and solidarity around the table to achieve the best and safest outcomes for staff and for students who so need the best possible third level educational experience.
- This partnership has been instrumental in developing the plan for the safe return to onsite provision of higher and further education. The continuation and intensification of this approach will be central to its successful implementation.
- We will continue to meet as a group, share experiences and design solutions.
- Before I conclude, I want to say a quick word on summer provision and rapid antigen testing.

Summer provision

- To enable summer provision in further and higher education and the resumption of research activity, the sector is operating on a more open basis for the summer period this year. This is of course in compliance with current public health advice and the phased reopening of activities and there are protective measures in place with limited congregation. So we are getting our apprentices back on site to complete their hands-on training which cannot be done online and we are getting our researchers back so they can advance their projects.

Rapid antigen testing projects

- I am fully committed to the role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of measures to support greater activity on-site. Indeed the role of rapid antigen testing as a possible way of strengthening COVID-19 responses and providing reassurance to staff and others has been recognised in the recently published COVID-19 National Protocol for Employers and Workers.

- I am glad to say that the third level sector has been leading the way on antigen testing pilots. There are two separate studies underway which will investigate and examine the potential for rapid antigen testing as another tool for the sector to ensure the safety of staff, students and learners.
- Following the establishment of an Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing under the Department of Health, my Department has written to the Group outlining steps already taken to pilot rapid testing initiatives in the further and higher education sector and has requested the Group's early advice in determining the appropriate role for rapid testing and parameters around its usage in higher and further education settings.
- I look forward to the adoption of the support and advice of the Expert Advisory Group on Rapid Testing regarding on site operations of the tertiary education sector in the next academic year.

Conclusion

- Finally, colleagues across the Houses, can I leave you with the message that we are going back to college in September. Education is an essential service and we can't have our young people losing out on educational experience with all that it entails for social development and good mental health. I've spent the last year listening to students and learners and staff down a camera on my computer and I have heard them say time and again that they want to go back. Particularly this is the case for learners and students who are more vulnerable.
- I am proud of the third level sector – and I want to thank all concerned – for the way in which they have worked collaboratively with each other and my department to build a pathway back to safe on site activity. That they have developed this plan with safety and public health guidance at its core, and have been willing to adapt.
- I'm particularly happy that Government agreed the package of supports for students – in relation to access, mental health and mitigating disadvantage. As I have said

in this House numerous times, education is the greatest of levellers and we are going back to college so that all our young people – and not so young – be they students, learners or apprenticeships, can fulfil their ambitions and get on with their lives.