

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Déardaoin, 8 Iúil 2021

Thursday, 8 July 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Malcolm Byrne,*
Alan Farrell,	Aisling Dolan,
Carol Nolan,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Jim O'Callaghan,	
Pádraig O'Sullivan.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senator Fiona O'Loughlin.

Teachta / Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: The committee is meeting virtually through Microsoft Teams. The clerk and the assistant clerk are in CR4 in LH2000. I am in the Convention Centre where the Dáil is sitting. I remind members to please ensure their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of the meeting, as they interfere with the broadcasting equipment even when on silent mode. The minutes of the meeting of 6 July 2021 have been circulated to all members. Are the minutes agreed? Agreed.

Reopening of Further and Higher Education Institutions: Discussion

Chairman: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome Mr. John Kearney, CEO of Cavan and Monaghan Education Training Board, ETB Ireland; Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, president of NUI Galway, chair of the Irish Universities Association, IUA; and Dr. Joseph Ryan, CEO, Technological Higher Education Association, THEA.

The witnesses are here to discuss the reopening of further and higher education institutions in a safe and sustainable way. I will invite Mr. Kearney to make an opening statement and then Professor Ó hÓgartaigh who will be followed by Dr. Ryan. The statements will be followed by questions from members of the committee. Each member has a six minute slot to ask questions of the witnesses and for the witnesses to respond. The committee will publish the opening statements on its website following today's meeting.

Before we begin I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect of they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses of the Oireachtas or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. As the witnesses are giving evidence remotely from a place outside of the parliamentary precincts, as such, may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does and they have been advised of this by the clerk. They are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him or her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed by the Chair to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

I call on Mr. Kearney to make his opening statement, followed by the other witnesses. You have three minutes each.

Mr. John Kearney: Good morning Chairman and committee members. On behalf of the ETBI and the 16 education and training boards that the ETBI represents I am very pleased to make this statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the topic of reopening further and higher institutions in a safe, sustainable manner.

The ETB sector is the leading provider of educational training services nationally, and with a budget of €2.2 billion and 32,000 staff, is a key actor responding strategically to emerging trends and needs, both nationally and on the international stage. As a responsive sector, ETBs deliver further education and training to more than 220,000 unique further education and train-

ing, FET, learners annually in more than 200 FET colleges, training centres, youth education and training centres.

The pandemic has challenged us all and from the very outset ETBI contributed to the tertiary education system steering committee and the various working groups that have been navigating the challenges of the pandemic over the last 15 months. In August 2020 the FET stakeholder group was established with a view to ongoing collaboration and consistency in relation to navigating the various challenges posed by the pandemic.

Further education and training is multi-faceted in terms of provision. When ring-fencing provision, attention was focused on adult and community education, Youthreach and apprenticeships. Remote learning was targeted for PLC, VTOS, evening training courses, and contracted training.

Over the course of the last 15 months we have been navigating various challenges. In August 2020 we planned for full on-site return but unfortunately the pandemic intervened. There have been challenges along the way, particularly in lockdown in October 2020, and full lockdown again in January 2021. Online remote provision continued for the months of January and February of this year.

The full benefit of the stakeholder engagement across all union parties, SOLAS and the Department of Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science really came to the forefront in March when we looked at commencement of phased return for apprenticeships, vulnerable learners at levels 1 and 2, and leaving certificate applied students in our Youthreach centres. With safe returning being progressed, extended provision was arranged for more further education and training learners to return with the reopening of community education and literacy programmes in April. Attention was also given to the school of music learners, and in May additional accommodation was provided for work placements and workplace learning programmes.

We are contributing at various levels to the work of the tertiary education system in the safe return plan for the coming September and will be guided by the need to maximise on-site provision for teaching and learning, supporting ongoing public health requirements, and supporting the ongoing needs of learners through the various stages of the pandemic.

ETBI core principles are centred foremost on positioning the FET sector for future innovation, as a key contributor to developing appropriate teaching and learning policies. The function of ETBI is rooted in the Government's vision to make Ireland one of the leading providers of lifelong learning and long-term strategic national plans to maintain a sustainable economy. ETBI places learners at the heart of educational development. We realise the necessity for a full-site on return provision for the coming September.

On behalf of ETBI I welcome the opportunity to present to the joint committee on the reopening of our centres in a safe and sustainable manner.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: On behalf of the Irish Universities Association I thank the committee for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion on the safe and sustainable reopening of further and higher education this autumn. We particularly appreciate the reference in the session title to both the safe and sustainable return to our campuses, which are both critical considerations in this regard. Our preference is to refer to a return to campus rather than to a reopening. Our universities remained open throughout the pandemic, with

significant contributions to research, public health and the continuity of engagement with our students, albeit that much, though not all, activity has to be carried out remotely. Despite these challenges, our eight universities will have successfully graduated more than 100,000 students between this year and last, including the latest cohort of our doctors, nurses, teachers and other front-line staff.

We welcome the recent publication by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, of the plan for the safe return to a normal working operation for staff and students this autumn. I will focus my comments in particular on the main issues and challenges for our universities on behalf of the Irish Universities Association.

Our priority focus is on the health and well-being of our students and staff. All of our plans are predicated on the public health environment and 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 policy and by public health. Research is also an essential activity intrinsic to higher education and, as we have seen through the pandemic more than ever, for society itself.

The plan set out by the Minister sets out the expectation that the majority of the adult population, including third level students, will have been vaccinated by September. This is critical and its achievement lays the foundation for our return to campus plans. We share the desire of our students, staff and Government to safely reinstate face to face teaching and research activities on our campuses. 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 will be achievable in autumn 2021.

Each of our universities is finalising its detailed plans for the autumn for the resumption of on-campus teaching and learning. This 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. Readjusting timetables in our universities with campus populations of between 15,000 to 30,000 covering hundreds of courses and thousands of modules is a complex process. In doing so, universities will have a reserve plan in place in the event that greater levels of restrictions are required by public health guidelines than those currently anticipated.

We are working together and with other stakeholders, notably our students and our staff, 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. Universities have been willing partners in the Government response to Covid-19. We have made our facilities available for contact tracing and for vaccinations; we have seconded key personnel to support the health service; and we have partnered in Covid-19 research and test facilities, and some of these are located in some of our on-campus labs. We have given more details of these to the committee.

Four of our universities, Trinity College, Dublin, 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.

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The IUA has worked with the HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to seek to secure an additional Covid-19 funding package for the sector similar to that provided very generously, and we are very grateful for that, in July 2020. This includes additional supports for students, especially vulnerable students who may require supports for digital access or welfare and mental well-being supports. The capacity of universities to deal with the additional demands arising from Covid-19 needs the investment 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. Again, we are very grateful for this generous support. Further funding will be required to address the growing backlog in this regard. Plans are also under way 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 this regard.

The safe arrival of our international students is a priority for the sector and for society more generally. Our universities are working with other sector partners and with the Department to agree an updated protocol and put in place the necessary arrangements for the safe welcome of international students. Government decisions on international travel and the roll-out 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. Our sense is that there are insufficient funds in the HEA Erasmus budget to cover this expanded demand.

Seven of the eight member universities of the IUA have university-owned campus accommodation with a total of approximately 15,000 beds available. In the last year, our 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-19 restrictions.

Our students, staff and the universities themselves have shown great flexibility and adaptability to the challenges of Covid-19 over the last 16 months. In particular, I commend our colleagues and our students on the adaptability and resilience now being stretched by and into another academic year. We are now looking forward to a safe and sustainable return - those words we used at the beginning, in the title of this session - 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. Táim ag súil le bheith ag caint libh, go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: Covid is democratic in its reach. The experience for learners and their families and for our staff has been taxing over the past 16 months. Most learners have had little true student experience over two academic years. It says much for fortitude and the willingness to work collaboratively and with admirable flexibility that we have successfully completed another year.

I record appreciation to the Department of Education which in March 2020 established a

Covid-19 structure to manage and progress work that has begun to take place across tertiary education. This structure has been modified under the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and continues to oversee challenges and solutions at national level to complement the work taking place in the institutions. The key to the success has been inclusivity as it comprehends the Department, its relevant agencies, representative associations, social partners, and the student voice. Arising from this, the technological sector moved earlier this year to establish the partnership of stakeholders in the technological sector, POSITS, forum and that has proved efficacious in supporting the successful conclusion to the current academic year through inclusive social dialogue and it is now focused on the implementation of the plan for safe return.

I pay tribute to the cohesive approach that has served well at a most challenging time. In essence, we negotiated the period through the dedication and innovation of the staff concerned. We have witnessed an admirable volume of quiet, caring, and innovative work that has been essential to ensuring that so many students remained connected to their institutions and programmes.

If Covid-19 is indeed democratic in its reach, we know that it can impact unevenly. Considerable attention has focused on vulnerable students, and it has resulted in significant additional supports but these cannot ameliorate the complete brunt of the pandemic.

I am struck by how our practitioners are requesting THEA to bring to wider awareness their sense that while many students have resilience in the moment to weather immediate pressure, the professional anticipation is that the fuller financial and mental health impacts of this pandemic will not become evident until the coming years. For that reason, the unanimous ask from front-line colleagues tasked with the care of students is that the current welcome supports be extended over the coming two years.

The prime commitment is to keep our communities safe. To that end we adhere unfailingly to prevailing public health advice. The development of the plan has seen a detailed and inclusive process. We fully support and take joint ownership of the plan and will seek to implement it with input from all partners. The plan itself rests on key principles, including the Government's stated ambition of 29 April, to realise a significant increase in on-site activity. That education is deemed essential has been mentioned. Finally, the plan secured the endorsement of the Chief Medical Officer, and this is adjudged key to building confidence.

The challenge was always in formulating a plan for implementation three months ahead during a dynamic pandemic. This required cross-Government support for preparing in a manner where institutions are necessarily required, for the very purpose of planning, to anticipate a world beyond current public health advice. Effectively, this involved agreeing an assumption-base founded on the predicted course of the virus, including variations, and with especial cognisance of the vaccine roll-out and the suite of mitigations that will be available.

Under the discretionary framework, institutions are engaging in their own risk assessment exercises which will inform the balance between on-site and remote approaches but with the over-riding commitment to achieve maximum in-person activity. We will retain the learnings from the experience to date, including the power of technology, and some element of a blended approach is predictable as we carefully phase the return to campus.

On enablers, the Minister has acknowledged these plans will require resourcing support and has committed to same. In return, we acknowledge the considerable support that was provided

last year and which effectively ensured the maintenance of the system.

Antigen testing remains a contested space. Focused rapid testing in higher education was a recommendation from the Report of the COVID-19 Rapid Testing Group. The Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, strongly welcomes advance on this as it is perceived within the confines of the academy as an additional weapon for the protection of our communities. The success of the vaccine roll-out and recent changes offering single-dose option for the younger cohort are significant advances.

Attention to ventilation is one aspect within the suite of mitigation measures. Variations of concern may be a continuing factor and, thus, ventilation must command increasing attention.

The international student market, which was referenced, has been severely impacted by the pandemic. Some good collective work is under way currently but there is the danger Ireland may find itself outpaced by competitor countries which have moved more nimbly to agree protocols for safe inward travel.

I thank the Chair and members for this opportunity. We have been offered an opportunity to shape this plan and unambiguously support the determination to realise a comprehensive return to campus for the coming academic year. The plan is under constant review and prioritises public health and safety, and we are ever mindful of the proven power and adaptability of this virus. Our purpose is to work cohesively and in full partnership with all stakeholders, and especially students and staff, to build the confidence that together we can deliver a safe and holistic experience for our communities of learners and researchers. Go raibh maith agaibh go léir.

Chairman: I concur with Dr. Ryan's closing remarks. Each of our guests and all their organisations and colleges across the country will play an important part in bringing our students back safely to campus in September. I know they will do that in collaboration with the Minister and other Departments.

I call Senator Dolan, who will have six minutes, and she will be followed by Senator O'Loughlin.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome all our contributors. We are here today to discuss, as Dr. Ryan mentioned, a return to campus. Very many of our colleges and universities kept going all through the pandemic. We know that a return to campus is about having students' best interests at heart. It is about students having the most wonderful student experience, especially for those who have been extremely disheartened during the past year or two years. Our students are resilient. That strength has come through our primary and secondary school educational structure and that will continue as they enter college.

I have a few questions. Many interesting topics have been raised. Professor Ó hÓgartaigh, go raibh míle agaibh. It is great to see you here today. The UniCov project on antigen testing has kicked off and it has been running since 14 June. It is being led by Professor Breda Smyth. It is a link between the colleges and public health. Can Professor Ó hÓgartaigh give us a taster of how it is going? Will he give us an update on it? It is a comparative study in its initial stages. He might advise on the different groups that are working together and the researchers involved.

On behalf of the committee, I want to thank, as the Chairman has done, the thousands of staff and students who will be involved in this testing across four of the universities. They are doing this to ensure we can build and have an evidence base that will stand alongside PCR testing, but we can only make decisions based on evidence. Research has been crucial in develop-

ing the vaccines. They are all based on research. Researchers are crucial to dealing with this pandemic.

I thank Mr. Kearney for his contribution on the education and training boards. I am a pure advocate of them. The statistics he mentioned, that there are 200 centres, are amazing. Those centres are to be found in every town and village across Ireland. No matter where one is based in whatever county, there is a college of further education with which one can engage and continue to do further education and training, FET, courses. It is great that 32,000 staff and more than 220,000 FET learners have been back on track for the past few months.

I wish to ask Mr. Kearney about the apprenticeships, in particular. We are promoting that programme in terms of earning and learning. There will be a high number of school leavers and career changers at any point in their lives who may want to engage in this programme, particularly now when there is a changing of roles. Can he give an update on that programme? There are 60 courses available and it is anticipated another 18 will be provided. How has the apprenticeship programme been running across the education and training boards?

Dr. Ryan also contributed when he appeared before this committee earlier this week on Tuesday. We are getting to meet twice this week. I was delighted to see an opening date for Athlone Institute of Technology, AIT, and a brand new TUS, Technological University of Shannon: Midlands Midwest. It is wonderful news that it will be opening in October. Dr. Ryan mentioned our facilities and infrastructure have provided us with the vaccination centres. I went to the AIT international arena to get my vaccine and it was very well co-ordinated. The universities and staff in the colleges are working with the HSE's public health staff, community healthcare, the Army, Civil Defence and stewards. It was incredible to see all these groups working together.

Dr. Ryan mentioned the welcome supports for students. Will he expand on that? We have spoken briefly on funding. I am mindful of international students on an Erasmus programme. As a former Erasmus student, I would be very supportive of that programme. Will he comment briefly on that? Budgets are tight and this year and funding will be difficult, but we are here to support the colleges in whatever way we can, particularly the international students sector. I appreciate that will be dependent on the roll-out of the Covid passport.

Chairman: Would Professor Ó hÓgartaigh like to respond first?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Yes. Go raibh maith agat, Seanadóir Dolan. On the question on antigen testing, as the Senator said, it is being led by Professor Breda Symth. Her role in HSE West was particularly helpful in the context of our work in this regard. We were very grateful to her. She is leading this project with others across four institutions, including ours, on antigen testing. I understand a further announcement will be made this week in that regard, which I do not want to pre-empt.

A Government structure has been put in place and Professor Symth is chairing it. Technology, including app and website technology, has been developed. Clinical end to end pathways have been developed in each of the institutions, namely Trinity, University College Cork, UCC, University College Dublin, UCD, and ourselves at National University of Ireland, NUI, Galway. The recruitment to testing is commencing this week. It is anticipated there will be an announcement as to how that might progress. Four institutions are involved with different pathways in each involving testing across different platforms and technology. As was mentioned, the antigen testing is a contested space. At all times we would be both informed by this

research - as universities, it is our role to be evidence-based - and by public health advice about how effective it is and how we should implement it in the context of a return to campus in the autumn. A further announcement will be made this week. Those four institutions are involved with Professor Symth and Professor Charlie Spillane from Galway. I look forward to working with them further in that context.

Senator Aisling Dolan: It is great to hear Professor Spillane is involved. I remember him. Dr. Kearney might respond.

Mr. John Kearney: Certainly. The greatest challenge with the pandemic, and there are many in terms of the delivery of FET services, were the delivery of apprenticeships because of their focus on the practical dimension, but the benefit of the stakeholder group came through with our close working relationships with SOLAS, the union representatives and Department officials. That paved the pathway of a facilitative return for apprenticeship delivery as quickly as possible, with 251 apprentices returning on 1 March, 320 apprentices returning in the next phase and that was escalated to 589 in the second week of April. Currently, there is another plan of increased activity incorporating a return of 720 apprentices. SOLAS has been forward thinking in countering a significant backlog of apprenticeship placements with respect to providing for the three highest categories of apprenticeship delivery, namely, electrical, plumbing and carpentry in January, and it has put in place technical groups. They will look at an emergency approach. The normal extended phase 2 delivery is for 22 weeks. We are looking for a condensed, blended approach that will cut back the number of weeks required out of work in terms of the delivery of the phase 2 model. As we speak, technical groups are established with six to seven members throughout the FET sector itself, including FET directors, training centre managers and authorised officers and they are concluding a highly ambitious plan to be put in place, hopefully for September, with a view to countering over 4,500 significant components of the backlog with a view to targeted apprenticeship delivery.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank Mr. Kearney. It is great that one can reach the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, level 7 or 8 with all of those courses. If we have time, I would welcome a response from Dr. Ryan.

Chairman: Briefly.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I will be brief and will give quick-fire answers to Senator Dolan. The committee should note there is a parallel HSE antigen testing pilot taking place in the technological sector. I fully agree with the Senator that an evidence base is critical.

On apprenticeships, I note Mr. Kearney's point that there is a crisis in apprenticeships at the moment and there is a national mobilisation around this. We are convening a meeting tomorrow. We will be working right across higher education as apprenticeships go right up the framework to level 10. Equally, we will be working with Mr. Kearney on a cross-sectoral piece as well.

On vaccination, my wife and I had the same experience as Senator Dolan. We went to AIT. I know it has a sports arena, which also functions as a location for graduations, but having seen it, the logistics and the wonderful organisation are a credit to everyone involved.

In terms of supporting the student voice, all of our professionals have engaged with students. The student voice has been very strong on the national steering group that I referenced in the presentation, but there has been so much that we have had to look at such as Wi-Fi,

access to devices, counselling and how all of that is done. We are working in a very holistic way. When students come back it is not just about the learning element of it, it is the broader experience. We are working, for instance, with Sport Ireland, to see the activities that students can get involved in.

Finally, on the international question, we are looking at flexibility around the use of moneys - Erasmus moneys, cross-Border moneys etc. – because there are a number of dynamics going on to try to support international student mobility, meet and greet etc., which was very carefully looked after last year. I will not delay you on this, Chair, but there is a lot going on in that space.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Gabhaim buíochas le Dr. Ryan.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Cuirim fáilte roimh gach éinne. Senator Dolan has covered a lot of the questions. Mr. Kearney and Dr. Ryan might look at the issue of apprenticeships, in particular in certain areas critical to housing. We rely very much on the throughput. There are concerns that apprentice electricians have not been able to get practical experience. When do the witnesses expect things to fully return to normal? It would have been difficult for those who had been pursuing apprenticeships last year. Could we get an idea of when we might see a normal throughput on the apprenticeship side? I accept that all depends on how we predict the pattern and journey of the virus. I realise last year was a difficult year.

I wish to follow up on Dr. Ryan's point about the support services for students on campus including the clubs, the societies, the students union and the support services. It is about getting those back up and running. While some of them have been innovative in what they have been able to do over the past year, it is not the same when one does not have on-campus activity. What structures are in place to ensure that will be in place?

The third issue is something the witnesses might examine. I know there has been a lot of innovation but to be honest, I would have hated to have been a first year for the past year. Those students have had a really tough year, after the difficulties they had coming up to the leaving certificate and then not being able to be on campus for their first year. That is going to present additional challenges when they come on to the campus. They will nearly be getting freshers' day at the start of second year. Some of those issues and problems that Dr. Ryan mentioned will only start to manifest themselves on campus.

I also wonder whether any measurement has been done on the learning outcomes or progression rates from last year's first-year cohort. They would have gone through some form of assessment at the end of first year. They have had a very unlucky and disruptive period and they will need support. Have there been any measurements in terms of what impact the last year has had on them?

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I am happy to start off with this and to leave space for my colleagues to come in if that is agreeable. On the question of apprenticeship, the Covid impact is exacerbating a backlog that was already there. As Senator Byrne knows, in apprenticeships we move through the phases and there is that mixture of theory and practice. It is the practice bit that has been very difficult. We have had to re-order theory and practice. The reason I mentioned the meeting tomorrow is that we are trying to take a holistic approach to see what we can do in a very focused way to address that backlog.

On the question of clubs and societies mentioned by Senator Byrne, the critical bit is around the student experience, so a lot of attention is being given to try to fuel that and to build it back

up. I did mention the uneven impact of the pandemic. Some students have been in college while others, just by the nature of the domain that they are in, that is, in large-scale pieces like business or social care, are the ones that have been most disadvantaged. If a student is on a three-year programme, he or she will have seen very little of the institution in the past while. People are very conscious of addressing that. It also brings us into areas like re-orientation and additional orientation, not just for those coming in into first year but for those going into second year. They are being addressed at the moment.

Finally, on learning outcomes and progression rates, a lot of work is being done on this by the chief academic officers. We are delighted to note that progression rates are very good. There are learnings from Covid, and I will not delay the meeting on that, but it is something that we are tracking.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I support those comments. First, in the context of the student experience, clubs and societies are crucial for that. Supporting students in their autonomy in doing that is particularly important. We found this year even in the second semester there was a sense that there was more activity among students clubs and societies, albeit online, than we anticipated. We would like to support that. There are new societies which emerged in that context. We did a student question-and-answer exercise in February and one of the excellent suggestions was exactly the same as Senator Byrne's, which is that for second year students next year, we need an orientation. On the back of that suggestion we are thinking that we would have a re-orientation or induction for second years as well as first years. Looking at the particular needs of students, focusing always on the student need and learning from what the student has told us they need is particularly important.

It is a very different context in both learning and assessment, but we have noticed better progression rates this year than last year and better retention. They are not comparable like with like; they are much more complex but, thankfully, we have noticed better retention this year than in previous years.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I appreciate they may be very raw data but are there any improvements, deterioration or challenges between different subject fields? Where does Professor Ó hÓgartaigh think the State may be able to step in to support that?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I think intuitively one would imagine that there are differences across various sectors. It was a particularly challenging context in supporting students where there was laboratory work and field work. That is where additional supports would be helpful, but also in the context of student support more generally, supporting vulnerable students in technology and well-being. In particular, I am keen on targeted supports for the students most in need, rather than across the board, whether that is because of technology or different approaches to learning and supporting different needs in that context. We have found that it is not universal. We in NUI Galway developed a universal design for learning programme that is aimed at expanding learning with technology, but also with other platforms or supports, to make it more accessible to a broader set of students. That project is worthy of support, not only in NUI Galway but across the sector. A universal design for learning is particularly useful as a concept in supporting student learning more generally.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: One supplemental fact for the Senator on that issue is that, given the nature of the educational model in the technological sector, placements have been quite a challenge. I wish to briefly acknowledge the work we have done, in very close co-operation with Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, on bringing together various approaches with the pro-

fessional bodies to try to address that.

Mr. John Kearney: To briefly return to the Senator's query, I reassure him that the sector very much shares his concern in respect of the apprenticeship backlog and the emergency needs in the context of the housing crisis. As such, the focus is very much on delivery of the three focal apprenticeships, that is, electrical, plumbing and carpentry, with a view to decompressing the backlog and responding adequately to the emergency needs. I am very confident that in the next academic year we will get back on track in the context of the backlog, which will also involve our third level colleagues in terms of the delivery of apprenticeships.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: That is great. I thank our guests.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I intend to use my time to ask short questions and facilitate an exchange with the witnesses, if that is okay.

Chairman: That is okay.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: First, I acknowledge the work that has been done across the sector and the challenges that have been faced in the past year.

On antigen testing, obviously I wish this had been done earlier. We are backing up into September. I am concerned that everything will happen in September. A total of €1.2 million was granted and a target of 8,000 students was earmarked. Will that target of 8,000 students be met by September?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I cannot comment specifically on the recruitment process. The Deputy is correct that we are up against time in that context. I understand an announcement is to be made in the coming weeks regarding the recruitment process. All the elements are in place to allow the research across the four institutions but I do not have an up-to-date figure in terms of the numbers. The Deputy is correct that it is challenging in terms of time to get those numbers and the results through before September.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That was my belief because during the summer many students, such as those in my house, live at home, which begs the question of from where one will get the students. The figure of 8,000 was not plucked from the air; there is a reason it was selected in terms of the integrity of what is being proposed.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: My understanding is that different technologies are being used across the various institutions used in order to achieve that remote recruitment, if one likes. That has been taken into consideration. I appreciate entirely the challenge of the time constraints in that context. I have asked for an update from Dr. Breda Smyth, who will be joining our management team next week in order to give us an update in that context, although I understand there will be an announcement in the next week or so on progress in that regard.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We look forward to that. The Minister, Deputy Harris, stated today that a funding package to support sustainable reopening will be made available. It will be announced on 19 July, which is a key date for many people across the State. Has all the money allocated last year been spent or is some of it being returned to the Department?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I will have to check that. I understand there are processes in place to ensure the money that was spent obtained value for money. The funding for research and cost continuation in particular is continuing. That support is still in place.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am sorry for interrupting Professor Ó hÓgartaigh but I have several questions to ask. What I am trying to get at is that if the money has not been spent this year, will it be rolled over? Can we be guaranteed that the money that will be announced on 19 July will be new money rather than money that has been sent back or not spent?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: That is an issue for the Department but, from our point of view, we anticipate that is still necessary not just for next year, but for another year or two afterwards, as was mentioned. I do not have the detail of how it works in the budget or whether it is new money or old money, but we believe new money is needed to the scale we anticipated.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is key. How many extra laboratory places or medicine places have been created with money that was allocated last year in terms of capital funding?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Much of the funding in that context has gone towards simulation and simulation work. I do not have a number in that regard for the whole sector. We could revert to the Deputy with the detail in that regard. There has been significant expenditure of capital funding in NUI Galway around simulation spaces, which relate to clinical spaces or HSE spaces. We added new spaces in medicine in NUI Galway last year, which is particularly welcome in the context of the pressure in that regard.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We can never have enough places in that sense. Can the institutions provide lectures online next year for vulnerable students? Can lectures in lecture theatres be recorded and provided online so that those who cannot attend in person can avail of them?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I do not wish to take all the time but the answer is “Yes”. We anticipate that we will use what we learned this academic year in order to support vulnerable students and those who may not be able to access the campus. We will be making lectures and learning material available online for those students.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I will turn to the issue of apprenticeships if our guests do not mind. I am really concerned on this issue. I am concerned because the waiting list was 6,928 at the beginning of the year but in May it was 9,071. The Minister told me today that the current waiting list is in excess of 10,000. Our guests have indicated that 4,500 will be addressed in the famous month of September or in the autumn. That would still leave a deficit of 6,500 if things stand still. The numbers are not adding up for me. I know the challenges that exist in this context. I ask the witnesses to speak to the numbers. If the target for September is 4,500, where does that leave the 6,500 who will still be waiting for on-the-job training?

Mr. John Kearney: The most recent figure of which I am aware is 6,000. That is why I referred to a figure of 6,000. That possibly relates to the situation a week ago. This is very much an ongoing and evolving situation, given the intense and practical nature of apprenticeships. I reassure the Deputy and her colleagues that it was the first focus in terms of a return to a safe environment for both instructors and-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is very concerning. If the Minister is stating that it is more than 10,000 for phases 2, 4 and 6 but Mr. Kearney is saying the figure is much lower, that does not fill me with confidence.

Mr. John Kearney: I reassure the Deputy that we are very much aware of the crisis in apprenticeships. It is one of the very few areas with a backlog in accreditation, resulting from its practical nature, as such. As I stated, several measures have been put in place to try to address

the backlog concerns and the issues relating to the housing crisis. This is a challenging aspect of-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I acknowledge that it is challenging, as was discussed already. Are restrictions currently in place in respect of the number of classes that can be held on site?

Mr. John Kearney: It is a capacity issue in the sense that it was necessary to reduce the number of learners on training workshops. Some of us are working with training centres around the country to try to increase capacity in order that more training workshops can be held.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I apologise for interrupting. I will return to matters relating to universities and to the restrictions on the number of classes on site. What percentage of the normal amount of class time can students expect to have in September under the plans in place for universities? Dr. Ryan or Professor Ó hÓgartaigh may wish to respond on that issue.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I will happily come in. I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for the question. On the numbers coming in, as of today we are working on the basis of the current public health advice. We are anticipating a considerable increase in September. It will depend on the domains and so on but we are talking about a commitment to a significant increase. As I have said, that will depend on domains. While I have the floor, I will mention the question of apprenticeships. If we go on as we are going today, we will be in very serious trouble. That is why I talk about a national mobilisation. Something has to change. Some €10 million has been granted for further education and another €10 million for higher education. It will involve the recruitment of new staff. We are working with social partners on that. We are looking at things like summer blocks and increased blocks. We are also looking at different approaches to assessment and different pedagogical approaches. Architectural change is required to address this.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank all of our guests. It is good to see some of them for the second time this week. It is also good to see Professor Ó hÓgartaigh. As I said earlier in the week, I was on the údarás myself, albeit briefly. I will ask a couple of quite specific questions but first I will thank all of the staff in all of the institutions. The last couple of years have been incredibly difficult. As has quite rightly been said, this is not a reopening but a return to a safe environment. The terminology used may in some way indicate that people have forgotten the great deal of work that has been going on in the background. The realities of third level education have been quite invisible to a number of people who are not in touch with them. We are concerned about the students, their experiences and their mental health. I agree with an awful lot of what Senator Malcolm Byrne said earlier. I am anxious to hear whether we have any indication as to the impact on those students not only in terms of their educational attainment but also in terms of drop-out rates because it was flagged early on, perhaps by Professor Ó hÓgartaigh, that we may see fairly high drop-out rates. Has that been the reality?

The other specific questions I wish to ask relate to ventilation. This issue has been brought up by a couple of people. It seems that the witnesses are saying that ventilation systems will have to be adjusted. What does that mean? What adjustments are being considered? Staff are concerned because they need to feel safe in their working environment. Are CO2 monitors being considered to ensure transparency for university staff and students? I will ask the witnesses to answer those questions briefly before I come back in to ask another one or two.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir. Is maith an rud é í a fheiceáil arís. I thank her for her service on Údarás na hOllscoile, which was very valuable to

us. I completely endorse her comments on staff and colleagues. When I stood in our drawing room in the quad and informed people, at short notice, that we were moving university activities online, I did not imagine that we would maintain academic activity online for a year and a half. We were able to do so because colleagues quietly went about their business, supported students and put them to the forefront and supported research. They were keen to come back to do research and to come back to teaching. In either December or January, I had a sense that we could have done more in the second semester, if public health advice had allowed, because our colleagues wanted to do so. That is a great endorsement of our colleagues. I again put on record our thanks for that.

It is the same case for student support. The Senator is right. It may be because the context is different but we are finding that retention rates are slightly higher than they were last year, although that is based on raw data, as Senator Malcolm Byrne has mentioned. That may not translate once we come back to campus. How that will work out remains to be seen. In that context, student support will be critical. Much of the funding the Irish Universities Association has asked for through the Department relates to student support. I have certainly been advocating for that and supporting our students' union in that regard. I am talking about directed student support. It is not for the university *per se* but for students. I would certainly advocate for that.

Ventilation has emerged as a particularly important issue throughout the pandemic. There are a couple of aspects to it. One relates to the systems themselves, keeping them up-to-date and looking at international norms in that regard. A second aspect relates to the capacity of rooms. Not all large rooms will return to 100% capacity. We will have slightly smaller capacities depending on the ability of the systems to extract air quickly enough. We are also considering shorter lecture times. Rather than the normal 50 minutes to an hour, we are likely to ask for 45-minute lectures to allow for exit and egress but also to allow some time to ventilate the room between lectures. CO2 monitors are an excellent idea. We will look at that if we are not already doing so. We are certainly very keen to have transparency as to how the system may work. We have found that ventilation is a key aspect and it is something at which we are looking very carefully, particularly in the context of larger rooms. We will have to make sure that rooms are properly ventilated and to be transparent about that but this may result in lower than normal capacity. That is what we are looking at in the context of ventilation.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: Deputy Conway-Walsh raised the issue of students still being supported online. Is it the case that people will be able to choose or will they have to have medical certificates? People differ in when they feel vulnerable. This can also be associated with their mental health at a particular time. Will people be able to choose a hybrid model? Will a model such as the hybrid-flexible, HyFlex, model be available throughout next year? I also wish to come in briefly on apprenticeships.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: On the first question, I anticipate students having a choice for the first semester, if not for the full year. I advocate for kindness and flexibility. I am of the view that the learner should be allowed to find his or her own way through. We have found that many students want to be back on campus. Some will desire that and some will not. We need to accommodate those. We will find ways to provide material for those groups, as we did last year. The issue of access is slightly more challenging where labs or fieldwork are involved. However, more generally, we will support students to find their best way through their own learning. In that context, flexibility and kindness will be important.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank Professor Ó hÓgartaigh for that clarification. It is im-

portant and I appreciate it. With regard to apprenticeships, quite apart from the backlog, a new model is clearly needed. How many more places are required, apart from what is required to deal with the backlog? We are hearing from Green Party Ministers that there is an increasing need for ecologists and those with expertise in biodiversity. That is simply not coming out at the moment. That is not anyone's fault, but it is a fact. We hear about the building profession all the time but green training is also required for the revolution that is needed with regard to the green economy. Now that people are out of jobs in one sector, the focus of the economy will have to shift. Do the witnesses have any brief comments not only on the backlog, but about how we are managing the area of apprenticeships in general and what the pandemic has taught us?

Dr. Joseph Ryan: As the Senator may know, one of the initiatives undertaken last year was the Covid support moneys involved in the July stimulus. This gave us the flexibility to develop new shorter learning pieces to support exactly that type of innovation. The hope is that when the supports are announced on 19 July, as has been referenced by Deputy Conway-Walsh, similar incentives will be provided to assist us in that regard. It is part of the lifelong learning agenda.

Chairman: A number of members are at other committee meetings or are in transit between Leinster House and the convention centre. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan is next because Deputies Ó Ríordáin and Nolan are not on the line. Deputy Conway-Walsh, are you taking Deputy Ó Laoghaire's slot?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Yes, I will, if you allow me.

Chairman: Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan is at another meeting but Deputy Jim O'Callaghan is here. I call Deputy Jim O'Callaghan.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank our guests for attending the meeting. Everyone at the meeting agrees that it should be a top priority to get students back on campus from next September. We have heard terribly disappointing stories about the college experience that students have had since the pandemic arrived in February 2020. Many parents are concerned about the fact that their children's experience of student life has been limited to being on laptops in their bedrooms, not getting out to experience college life and missing out on massive parts of the social and intellectual development that comes with college on-campus life. That is a comment, not a question. I know it has been mentioned previously, but how confident are our guests that we are going to see students back on campus in September? To what extent do they believe it is important that we avail of antigen testing for the purpose of ensuring that this occurs?

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I fully agree with the Deputy's first comments. The disappointment of students with the experience was very keen. The Deputy might recall that last December there was a determination to make sure that the second semester was better, but then we experienced Christmas. This time, we go in with that lesson. A great deal of cohesive work has gone into this preparation and the commitment is to increase the experience substantially for September. Obviously, we are keeping a weather eye on what is a very intelligent virus. We are watching for the variations of concern that I mentioned. The antigen testing is seen to be a critical part of the armoury for this. As I said, I note it was contested space, but within the academy one is talking about a confined area where one can build up intelligence on this, see how it works and record it within that closed community. We see it as being very important. The fact that the vaccine roll-out now being offered has been changed to offer a focused attention on the single-shot Janssen vaccine for the younger-age cohort is also seen as a critical part of this, because

it is quite predictable that there will be a large movement of people roughly eight to ten weeks hence.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: On that final point, I believe that, more than antigen testing, the vaccination roll-out is critical. The plan is contingent on a different public health environment next year from what we had this year. In that context, the vaccination roll-out is particularly critical for the college-attending age groups. On antigen testing, we will be evidence based and take the public health advice to see whether that is also appropriate and to what extent, but I emphasise that the vaccination roll-out is increasingly important. The news cycles make us more or less optimistic, depending on how things are going, and for me the vaccination roll-out is what makes me more or less optimistic about September.

Mr. John Kearney: Further education and training is multifaceted with, to put it simply, degrees of provision in terms of Youthreach, adult education and apprenticeship delivery. Each of those facets, and the Government policy on ring-fencing those, was greatly appreciated in that in October there was a similar delivery last year. Then they were successfully re-engineered again for on-site delivery from March onwards. Based on that, the sector is very confident that it will be returning to that state of delivery in September as well. The big unknown is whatever challenges the pandemic will throw at us over the next couple of weeks, but the sector was ready for reopening for post-leaving certificate, PLC, provision. In line with what my two colleagues said, the antigen testing and the vaccine roll-out would instil confidence in us that we will be ready for very significant on-site delivery of PLC programmes in September.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank our guests for those answers. I am very encouraged by them. All of us are aware of the desire of students to get back on campus. This may be unfair, but sometimes there is a perception that some of the academic staff might not share that desire to get back. Our guests will correct me if I am wrong about that. If there is a situation in September whereby vaccination appears to be effective and we are in a much better place, who will make the decision as to whether lectures proceed remotely or in person? Is that a jurisdiction that rests with the individual lecturer or do the institutions have a say on whether that occurs?

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I will happily tackle that. It is a difficult question, but the sheer determination is to be back on-site. There is a national steering committee which includes the social partners. They are part of the construct around this. All institutions have been very sensitive to vulnerable staff and vulnerable students. As the president of NUIG said, they will take those cases on an individual basis. However, the determination is to get back onto campus, and to do that through discussion with partners at local level.

Mr. John Kearney: That has been the experience in respect of the FET provision I have outlined. Once there was leeway for on-site delivery, there was an openness, willingness and engagement by staff to be back on-site. As was alluded to, whenever critical situations arose for vulnerable staff there was a degree of accommodation, but it was very much a full return being welcomed by staff as much as by the learners.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank our guests for their answers.

Chairman: I am going by the members I can see on my screen because I am in the convention centre. There is a toss-up for the next two slots between Deputies Alan Farrell and Pádraig O'Sullivan. I will call Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan first because he is on the speaking list before Deputy Alan Farrell. I only see the members who are on the screen in front of me, so my apologies if I am annoying people with the rotational slots.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I still have not worked out how to multitask. I have two Zooms and two committee meetings on at the same time, so I am finding it difficult. I have been trying to listen to both. However, I heard the opening presentations and I thank the three speakers. I will ask my questions one at a time. I followed what was said about the vaccination roll-out and the positive impact that, hopefully, antigen testing will have in the coming months. In that regard, much of the contingency planning that all institutions will have made will be formulated on the basis of predicting where the virus is going. Now, of course, we are getting information that cases are increasing. The one thing we know is that there is nothing predictable about the virus and what is to come. In that context, I have a quick question for all three speakers. Bearing in mind that things are so unpredictable, are we best placed to prepare for the challenges that lie ahead in September? The follow-up on that relates to online learning. Is the role of online learning, and is the case for it, strengthened post pandemic? Is it something that will become a wider feature of third level and further education?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I will take that first. Ours are learning institutions so we need to learn from what happened last summer. I will make two or three comments in that context. One is that it is a very uncertain context, so it is extremely difficult to plan ahead and predict. The second point is that if we do it together, the sectoral piece is particularly critical. The Department’s plan, which is cross-sectoral, is very valuable. Where we step together, that working together in order to work through the process is particularly important. The third point relates to planning as early as we can. Last year, it was particularly problematic that we marched up a hill and marched down again very quickly. That was necessary because of the changes to the virus but it would be better if we planned earlier. That is why the mid-July timeline is important because it will allow us to see further ahead. As we know, the pandemic has made life uncertain for all of us. It is particularly difficult to plan in that context. Planning together and ahead of time as much as possible is important. The roll-out of the vaccination programme is important in that regard.

My view has always been that online learning is a supplement to, not a replacement for, the on-campus experience. This year has brought that point to the fore. Even when online learning is available, students and staff want to be on campus. We have learned a lot in short order and with agility about access to technology and its use from our experiences of this year. We have also learned that online learning will not replace the on-campus experience which students and staff wanted this year. We have learned a lot and will bring many good things forward with us but, at the same time, we know that online learning is not a replacement for university life as students and staff want it to be.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: It is worth noting that students were asked specifically about their Covid-19 experience in a recent student survey. One of the things those students asked for was the retention of that online piece as a supplemental or support piece. That was particularly interesting.

The Deputy asked what we have learned through the past year. We have learned an awful lot and I fully agree with what has been said by Professor Ó hÓgartaigh. Much of that has been down to working cohesively with the Department, its agencies, the unions and with the students’ voices at the heart of things. Much credit must be given to staff for their innovation. We were bounced into online learning. We have made considerable advances through the year by happenstance or necessity. Online learning will be a part of our world in the future.

Mr. John Kearney: I will come in on behalf of further education and training, FET, service delivery. All of our preference is that we would have a significant on-site presence but whatever

challenges will come our way, we can look back with confidence at what we have dealt with successfully over the past 16 months. In that regard, I would, in line with previous speakers, point to our ongoing collaboration with the Departments responsible for education, SOLAS and the union stakeholders. Challenges came at us quickly, including the lockdown in October last year and the revised lockdown in January. FET services have continued to reopen since the middle of March. Changes were necessary as the situation evolved and we were successful and competent in our stakeholder engagement. That gave us the confidence to take on whatever challenges came thereafter. Notwithstanding the fact that we would prefer to be on site, we are confident we will be able to deal with whatever comes at us over the next couple of weeks and months, however difficult and challenging.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I have a specific question about apprenticeships for Mr. Kearney. What is the outlook for apprenticeships in terms of targets set by the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins?

I will ask the following question of the representatives of third level education. What has been the impact of the pandemic on the numbers of international students in their institutions? What impact has the pandemic had on the financial side of things on their institutions? Perhaps the witnesses could offer a brief comment on those matters.

Mr. John Kearney: There are national challenges around apprenticeships, as we mentioned in response to other speakers. There is a housing crisis. The first priority is to address the considerable backlog in existence. Ambitious plans are being put in place. The sector is committed to addressing those backlogs and once they have been dealt with successfully, we can get back on track and national targets will be set by the Minister and the Minister of State.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I thank Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan for his question about international students. Much good work is going on to try to hold onto that market but the truth is that the pandemic has had a huge impact. We will not know the measure of that impact until we see how these particular pieces work. We know that competitor Anglophone countries are working ahead of us. The message from Ireland is that we have managed this pandemic very carefully and cautiously. We are open within the country but there is sometimes an inconsistency between that openness within the country and the barriers to getting students into the country. To give a practical example, vaccinations that are given in other countries but that are not recognised by the European Medicines Agency are not recognised here either. That is difficult for intending students to understand. We are still trying to work through some of those final pieces.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the witnesses. The positivity in their opening statements was palpable. Many of the questions I had for them have already been asked. I am glad that the discussion has touched on antigen testing, international travel, the roll-out of the vaccine and other matters. Those issues are incredibly important in terms of a sustainable and safe return to third level education.

I will speak briefly about ventilation, CO2 monitors, allocation of space etc. What guidance and support have the witnesses been given by the Department of Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science and other Departments in that regard? It is of critical importance that students feel safe in the environment to which they are being brought this September. I glanced across a student survey recently and noted the desire to retain the online piece was strong. That was particularly true for vulnerable students, lecturers and staff. The ability of those staff and students to participate in remote lessons while others are present in a lecture theatre is incredibly important. Dr. Ryan might give me a brief comment on that matter.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I thank the Deputy for the question. I have referenced the national steering group that is sitting. Mr. Kearney also sits on that steering group. It has gone through phases of concentration. There was a phase when there was a real concentration on physical distancing. We have been arguing for some time that the concentration now needs to move towards ventilation. We have seen what has happened in respect of the monitors at second level. The Deputy is right that this is a critical issue. Many of the questions at the moment refer to large lectures. The arrangements for large lectures are context-specific and depend on how big the halls are and the numbers of people involved. The truth is that air throughput is going to become critical as we move into autumn and changes to physical infrastructure are going to be needed in certain cases. What advice has been given? The simple truth is we are waiting for more advice in that regard. We would welcome such advice.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I appreciate Dr. Ryan's honesty. Ventilation is of critical importance to the safe and sustainable return of education.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I will quickly come in on that point. Our colleagues are looking at international norms in the context of ventilation. The announcement of new guidelines on 19 July will be critical in the context of giving us good guidance. There is a sectoral approach to those concerns that look at international norms. We hope more public health clarity will be provided on 19 July.

Deputy Alan Farrell: As for the student experience, I appreciate the witnesses cannot control what occurs outside their campuses but the student experience is not all about the lecture and campus experience. It is also about the things that happen after 5 p.m. We had instances last year of campus parties and issues like that. We have seen the early vaccine roll-out for the over-18s in recent days and I am sure that will be ramped up. There must be recognition that by the time we get to September, the vast majority of people will be vaccinated but at the same time, there most likely still will be concerns about congregations. Specifically on campus, what contingency plans or procedures have our guests put in place to try to limit large gatherings and mitigate their effects, or do they have such plans?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: As I mentioned earlier, lecture times and students going in and out of classrooms is one aspect of that. We had plans in place for how the campus works last summer and we will again. We will learn a lot from that. Deputy Alan Farrell is right. We will need to be very conscious that in bringing students together again there are obviously opportunities and a tendency to congregate. It is something we will have to monitor carefully, certainly in our residences. We work very closely with HSE West on that and on rapid testing where it is needed, and student responsibility in that regard. The Deputy is right that it is a cause for concern for us all, I think, and in the context of the role our students play in society more generally. We will consider the public health advice very carefully and very cautiously. I am very concerned about this, as I have been all year, and I share that concern with the Deputy.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: The reason I did not jump in to answer was not just the bell-----

Deputy Alan Farrell: I am sorry about that.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: -----but rather the fact that, in the main, we do not have student accommodation within the technological sector. We would love to have that problem. The truth is that the Minister and all others involved in this have been very careful not to get into a blame game. These are young people and they have been deprived of so much. They are going to congregate. We will give advice. We work very closely with the students' unions to try to do

that in a managed way. The phasing Professor Ó hÓgartaigh mentioned is a key piece of the planning but, obviously, there is only so much we can control, in truth.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I fully appreciate that.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: The Deputy made a very good point that on-campus activity has been very well managed or well supported and that it is more a question of the broader societal aspect of this and off-campus activity. I am very concerned about that and we are working very closely on it.

Deputy Alan Farrell: We will learn about this as a society in the coming months, particularly as we return to indoor dining, among other experiences.

I am conscious of the time. The issues relating to international students have been touched on. I appreciate entirely that that is dependent on Government announcements. Dr. Ryan, I think, has said Anglophone countries are ahead of us. Can he help the committee understand how we can improve that position? Is it entirely down to Covid restrictions on international travel or are there other measures he would suggest we take to try to support a return of our international students? They are of critical importance, of course, not just to the sector but also to research and in moving on to highly skilled jobs that are in demand in this State.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: Yes, and it is also about Ireland's reputation. Ireland was very good on this initially. Ireland cared for its international students very well. Where we did not do quite as well was in not doing the early planning for this last year as quickly as we could. There was very cohesive work but it happened quite late, and that left us behind in the market. To some extent the same sort of thing is happening this year. There will be lessons to be learnt from this if we go through something similar in future years, and it is to be hoped we will not. It is not that there is any element missing; it is just that getting that cohesion as early as possible is the critical element.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Professor Ó hÓgartaigh might have a view on that.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: There are two things. First, there is a meet-and-greet element, which is important. Second, we really need to be conscious of international travel. We cannot bypass those public health requirements because, first, for society at large, that is a very important issue and, second, this is a very important support for our students. We do not by any means wish to bypass any of the requirements and we support all public health requirements in that regard, but in that context I think we could do more to support international students, first, as Dr. Ryan said, to plan ahead and, second, when they arrive, in how we might accommodate them in their isolation, quarantine and so on. We hope that in the Department's support package there will be support for those measures because, as Dr. Ryan said, they are important. It is about the learning experience and the talent. We should be open to all talent internationally and provide that opportunity. There are those two aspects: planning ahead and then working with students when they arrive while remaining conscious all the time of the public health advice and the fact that we need to work within those constraints. We are very supportive of those.

Deputy Alan Farrell: My final question is about the elephant in the room of potential further waves of Covid-19 and contingency planning for the unfortunate event which might require the closure of in-person third level education and further and higher education. Clearly, in the context of this matter, the sector will lean on the experience it has had over recent months, particularly, I would have thought, last October and in the new year. Are there any particular

aspects of that where the witnesses feel the sector has not been supported sufficiently? Is there insufficient funding for the sector to put in place the supports for students to access material online or are the witnesses happy enough with the hearings they have received from the Department?

Dr. Joseph Ryan: The plan has a forward line, which is what you might call the optimistic line. That is what we are aiming for. It also has a fallback line. I am no epidemiologist, but what I am hearing is that we are on the foothills of a fourth wave. That fourth wave is coming, as people here have said, at the same time as a very successful vaccination programme and antigen testing. We anticipate, even in the worst-case scenario, that we will be significantly in advance of where we were.

As for the supports, the collegiate work that has been done on this and the support from the Minister, the Department and the whole political establishment have been very impressive. Obviously, we hope that that will continue and that when we come with informed advice as to where those supports need to be targeted, we will get the same hearing as we have been getting.

Mr. John Kearney: That has been the experience to date during the 15 or 16 months of the pandemic. Whatever challenges came at us and whatever targeted needs were identified, a very responsive plan was being put in place by the Department and SOLAS. We have not been found wanting in terms of needs that have been identified, and I am confident that that will be the same moving forward, irrespective of what the pandemic throws at us.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: We have a Department that is listening and focused, and we welcome that. We made a submission both as the IUA and collectively with the other organisations. We would welcome that investment in student supports in particular. It is a matter of financial assistance, well-being and access to technology, but there are many issues around financial assistance. Clearly, the broader support mechanisms that are there are good in that context, but there are some particularly challenging measures. I also urge that supports be extended to international students. The tendency is to think of supports for EU students, whereas international students have particular needs as well, and if we are to maintain our reputation with that group as a sustainable location we need to look after that group. However, we have a very supportive Department, and we welcome that and look forward to that investment continuing in the future.

Deputy Alan Farrell: That is very positive to hear. I will finish as I started with the remark about the palpable positivity that is there, which is really welcome. I thank the witnesses for their time.

Chairman: I have just a couple of questions and then I will call on the other members - whomever wants to come back in - for a second run. Dr. Ryan spoke about third level institutions being used as vaccine centres. I would like to say "well done". I got my two vaccines in Carlow and was delighted to do so. In that context, I would be happy for Dr. Ryan to pass on my thanks to President Mulcahy because it was run very smoothly. I know all the third level facilities that were used as vaccine centres. It was greatly appreciated.

I wish to ask Professor Ó hÓgartaigh about antigen testing, the process and how he foresees it happening. A student will have an antigen test. There will be thousands of students coming into the campuses. It will be very slow on, say, the first day. How will that be managed over the following days? Will a certain number of students come in each day? How often will they have to take an antigen test?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Gosh. That is anticipating what antigen testing might look like and stepping into a live debate on the matter. The research is ongoing and we will follow the public health advice in that context. Our experience with students is that when we ask them to engage in a testing process and to be tested with HSE West - returning to the original question of Deputy Alan Farrell around off-campus challenges - they were very forthcoming. My expectation is that students will engage with this process if asked and will welcome it as part of a broader mechanism. The protocols around it, how it might work, and whether it will be implemented at all is really a question for the evidence base and for the public health advice. The logistics of this are probably a bit further down the road than we are right now but my expectation is that it will work quite smoothly in the context of how students have worked with us so far in, for example, the testing regime. We are stepping into a debate that is quite live and we will await the outcome of the research in the first instance and will then work through the logistics of it.

I also return to the point that I made in that context. Of much greater importance to me is moving at a faster pace for September with the vaccination roll-out. Whether we get there by early September or when in September we get there is, to me, the more critical question at this stage. We will wait for the public health advice and the evidence base on antigen testing to give us more detail in that context.

Chairman: It is to be welcomed that we have passed the 2 million number of vaccinated persons as announced by the Taoiseach today, which means that we are getting closer now to the student cohort.

To follow up on lectures online, students had these last year. If a person feels for any medical reason that he or she would prefer to continue with lecturing online, will these be live lectures as they are happening or will they be recorded and given to the students? What way does Professor Ó hÓgartaigh see this happening?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: That is dependent on, presumably, the technology and the lecturer. Students had different views on this. Some preferred live and others appreciated the asynchronous nature of them, in that they could look back over these lectures. It will be a mixture of both of these, with a particular emphasis on making material available online to allow students to progress where they cannot come on to the campus.

Our experience is that most students will want to be back. We will support all of our students, particularly vulnerable students, and international students likewise. Some of them may not be able to arrive, within the public health advice, by September. We will be supporting both of those vulnerable and international student groups through the technology that we had this year in a mixture of both recorded and live material. Different views and preferences have been expressed by students for both of those but our expectation is that we will make those available and that is what we are asking colleagues to do in the context of the learning experience.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I wish to make one supplementary point on this, if I may. It was very interesting to talk to the teaching union on this. Staff themselves were very anxious to have forward planning on this as it is very difficult to do both. It is one thing to record a lecture and have it there asynchronously but trying to work in two modes is very challenging. For that reason, as Professor Ó hÓgartaigh has said, the commitment is to try to get back on campus with certainty.

Obviously, we will be very caring about individual cases who cannot, for whatever reasons, be on site. This will apply to both staff and students. I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: I have number of questions for Mr. Kearney but I will come back to those in a while.

I was canvassing during the by-election on Monday or Tuesday of this week. I knocked on the door of a 19-year-old who is his first year in a third level institution. He recognised my face and knew that our witnesses were attending today. He was very well tuned in and had a great interest in politics. He has been learning online since September of last year. I asked him whether he had met many of his colleagues and he replied that he was there for the induction day and had met a small number of people from his class. He said that he was looking forward and could not wait to get to the third level college. He said that he only knows two people with whom he would be quite friendly in the third level institution who were in his class or lecture at present and that he was very apprehensive about going back to college. This was a very confident guy and I was amazed at how honest he was with me. He asked me to put the following points to our three witnesses. He said that if he was going into first year, he would get the tender loving care, TLC, of the college and all that involves but now this TLC will have to be given to both the first and second years. That will be a very great challenge. I am not certain if the colleges have chaplaincy services or what the position is in that regard. Our witnesses have been involved in this sector for many years and would be able to pick out the shy students or those who might be struggling or whatever the case may be.

The other issue raised was that those going to college usually want to stay on campus for the first year to find their feet. They probably are far more confident in their second year to go and live off-campus. There will be first year students looking for accommodation on campus. Will many second year students be looking for on-campus accommodation or how will that be managed? Are second year students allowed on campus or is there a lower percentage of these students on campus?

What are the witnesses' views on this student's point of view as outlined by me and how will they face this challenge that lies ahead? He asked me to put those questions to our witnesses and I expect that there are thousands of students out there, some may be shy than others, who feel apprehensive about going to college in September, even though they are in second year.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: The Chairman's question encapsulates that whole challenge of the student experience for so many students and that view would not be untypical. I give full credit to the student in that if he knows the Chair of the joint committee and knows what is coming up on the schedule of that committee, something is working in the education system regardless of whatever course this young man is on.

As to the TLC, a very interesting piece on this is that the State Examinations Commission, SEC, process going into the CAO, is in itself going to necessitate a phased reintroduction of students. That question of orientation and reorientation is in its own way going to be assisted through that architecture. We have spent much time trying to build the design of that with colleges over the past while.

I will leave the question of accommodation to Professor Ó hÓgartaigh as we do not have accommodation other than to say that one of the things about early planning for this was driven greatly by the need to give incoming students certainty. There is no point in telling people in August that we are doing X or Y because they have to get in to book that accommodation. In our sector, it is all private accommodation. I will pass over now to the professor, if I may, through the Chairman.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I thank the Chairman and Dr. Ryan and as Dr. Ryan has said this is not an untypical student response. I also encourage students to come forward. Sometimes they find it difficult to put their hands up and ask for help. For those either tuning in or if members come across students who need assistance, please let us know. We are there, first and foremost, for our students.

Second, we are looking at an induction or reorientation for second years. As Dr. Ryan has mentioned, the delayed start of the first year group will allow us to spend more time on the second and third year students, that is, those who are returning to college, earlier in September all going well. The reorientation piece will be helpful to us in that regard.

On accommodation, it is worth noting that only 10% of the housing stock for students is on-campus university or third level institution accommodation. There is a significant portion therefore that is off campus and a need for us to grow on-campus accommodation as a consequence. We prioritise first years and international students for the most part on campus. Again, we may be able to do this on a phased basis and accommodate other students for an early part of September, particularly international students. We are looking at that in the context of accommodating incoming international students. The phased timing and approach would be helpful, because the later years will start earlier in September and the first years will start on the last Monday in September. That will allow for the TLC to which the Chairman referred.

Returning to my first point, if anyone sees students who need help, please let us know because we want to help them when we can. There is an infrastructure on campus. There are really good colleagues who work with us and with our students in order to help them through the university experience. Part of that is informed and shaped by Covid. We are very anxious to help students where we can.

The date of 19 July is critical because there will be further guidelines available to us. That will allow us to plan ahead but also it allows students to plan for their own accommodations and plans for September. We are really pleased that the Department has identified 19 July and is encouraging that date because it is really critical for our planning and for our students.

Mr. John Kearney: The working group established by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Science must be complimented on this as well. So, too, must the Minister for regularly attending the group's meetings. The benefit of that tertiary education system is that allows the types of issues the Chairman encountered on the canvass to be represented, which the Union of Students in Ireland has done very successfully over the past 16 months. As the pandemic has gone on, there have been different challenges. Those mentioned by the Chairman have been raised at the steering group. I concur with others that the 19 July date is critical so that the institutions are afforded sufficient time to plan for those issues.

Chairman: The Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, will be before the committee next week. If the guests had one or two requests, what would they be? What would they like us to ask them relating to the return of thousands of students to campus from all over the island to different colleges, institutions, cities and towns across the country. It will be a major issue. Hopefully, there will not be a fourth wave in view of the fact that our older people are vaccinated and that young people from their late teens up will be vaccinated soon.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: That is a good invitation. First, this is a whole-of-society approach. It needs all of us to work together and the Department, the Minister and the HEA

have been particularly good at this and we welcome that. We want to see them encourage that along and have 19 July as the date. The funding mechanisms we asked for are particularly student-focused. The support and the timing around that will be critical.

Second is welcoming students and encouraging the continued focus on them. The Minister, the Department and the HEA and all our institutions have been particularly focused on student needs. We are not advocating here for our institutions, universities or the third level and higher education sectors; we are advocating for students. We would welcome that continued focus on student needs from the Minister. So we particularly encourage first, the whole-of-society approach, including the vaccination programme, and the sense that we are essential to society and second, the focus on student needs.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I will offer two observations. First, there has been that cohesive approach through all this. I know the Minister and his officials very much want the return on campus but they also want it to be sustainable. I have emphasised ventilation and I would ask questions around that. The second observation echoes what Dr. Ó hÓgartaigh said, that the inclusive approach and the structure that has been set up be maintained. I know what the Minister will say but I would certainly ask the question in that regard. The fact that I am echoing what a colleague has already stated says something about cohesiveness.

Mr. John Kearney: Picking up again on that theme of cohesiveness, I would emphasise the degree of communication and clarity from the Government and, in particular, the Minister. The Minister has attended many of the meetings. He was obliged to come in at difficult and challenging points and tell us that we were going into another lockdown. A full, extended reopening was not possible or feasible. We must continue with the sense of connectedness and cohesion and communication with all stakeholders in order that we can continue to deal with whatever challenges arise.

Others have spoken of the need to continue with the focus on learners. I also acknowledge the work of the Minister in establishing the working group on learner well-being. That group highlighted several key objectives and how to deliver support. That should be continued in the coming weeks and months, whatever challenges the pandemic may throw at us.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: The critical date is 19 July. It is vital that we have clear guidelines then to allow us and our students to plan ahead.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: We came together last year to put in place a protocol for the safe sustenance of the higher education system. The situation has changed and we need to update that protocol. We are all aware of that. That has to be critical.

Chairman: Senator Byrne and Deputy Conway-Walsh are indicating. Senator Byrne had his hand raised first. I know I should say ladies first but B comes before C, and so I will go to Senator Byrne first. They both will have six minutes.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank my Wexford colleague for his indulgence. I want to assure the Chair that the confident, intelligent, politically engaged young voter with a strong interest in education is a Fianna Fáil supporter. I am glad that he met him.

I am glad this discussion became very much on student focus and how we can do that. I have three questions or points on that and another around Covid. Many of those going through second level have shown amazing resilience. There are far more places in higher and further education than ever before. However, significant numbers of students who have had their edu-

cation disrupted will not make it through the system and will not complete to leaving certificate. The ETBI has played a particularly strong role, especially in the context of programmes such as Youthreach. We have to look at how the system will respond to those students who have really lost out during this period, who have not been able to avail of senior cycle education and who may have become disengaged. How do we provide opportunities for them?

My second point relates to the fact that there is an issue with regard to international students who may wish to come here but who have received vaccines which have not been approved by the European Medicines Agency, EMA. What approach should we take to address this? There would not be a significant number of students outside the EU in that category.

My third point relates to assessment and performance. The Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, has indicated we will review the leaving certificate quite soon. The students this year will have a combination of calculated grades along with the traditional leaving certificate examinations. I am sure it will be done but is there a way of monitoring their performance depending on the option or combination of options they do. I am sure the institutions are working with the HEA to do that. It would be interesting to feed that data into what kind of model of assessment we should have in future.

Finally, on academic freedom, the third level sector has been superb in its contribution to tackling Covid, including by making facilities available. Professor Ó hÓgartaigh's former colleague, Professor Brian MacCraith, has taken on a lead role, as has Professor Philip Nolan. Many academics are contributing and helping us to learn through this process. I am strong believer in academic freedom and diversity of opinion, both of which have to be respected. However, some academics are deliberately engaging in disinformation or misinformation, particularly around Covid-19, vaccines, and so on. I do not want to mention a particular case that might be springing to my mind of someone in a position of authority. How should we try to address that as a society? I am talking particularly about tenured academics. With academic freedom comes responsibility. There is a challenge to the higher education system, as to how we address the issues of responsibility that come with academic freedom, particularly where disinformation is being spread about Covid-19 and vaccines.

Chairman: This question goes beyond what the committee brought the witnesses in for. I will allow some leniency, but not too much. I do not want to put the witnesses in a position where they are not comfortable.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I would be happy if the Chair would allow the last point to be made. If the witnesses do not feel comfortable, then it is an issue we need to return to. I have other questions.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I am happy to answer the question. I am stupid enough to walk into that minefield.

First, I will go back to where the Senator started, on second level and learning. With the construction of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, we now have to deliver on the linkage between those two. Thinking our way through that on a whole-of-system piece is an important next step. There have been learnings from the different assessment approaches to the leaving certificate. I am part of a current discussion that is looking afresh at all of that. Again, it is think tank discussion, but it is interesting.

Non-EMA vaccines are a challenge. I mentioned this earlier in the discussion. People who

have taken those vaccines, whether they are in China or India, understand themselves to be fully vaccinated. That is what the data shows. Again, conversations are happening between the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Health on that this week. We will wait for the advice that might come from that.

On the Senator's final question of informing public policy, academic freedom as a concept is a double-edged sword. If we declare and defend it, then we have to allow what comes out of it. On the other hand, what is stated must be evidence-based. If it is not clear and cogent, it needs to be challenged. That needs to be done openly and honestly.

Mr. John Kearney: To follow on from Senator Malcolm Byrne's observations, I concur with the previous point by Deputy Alan Farrell. There is tremendous affirmation due to the young students of Ireland. If we go back to our own school days, if we were told that we were going to spend a full, complete year in our various schooling communities, separated from our peers by a distance of a metre, and wearing masks up and down the school corridors, I am not sure we would have been eager or enthusiastic about taking that on. That is what every young student in this country did. Not only that, they also faced tremendous disruption of their learning for three or four months. This is the second year in which their teaching and learning was interrupted. This happened across all school disciplines and regulations. A tremendous note of appreciation is due to students and teachers in accommodating that. The various options ahead are challenging for students. The extra guidance support which the Department facilitated was greatly appreciated within schooling communities. It offered much needed pastoral, emotional, guidance, and assistance to our young students.

The benefits of the new SOLAS further education and training, FET, strategy are multi-faceted. It looks at further education into schools and into higher education. There are more and more options. Again, it is about offering every support to the learner so that the best option for them is selected, at all times. Education and Training Boards Ireland very much welcomes the approach-----

Chairman: I apologise to Mr. Kearney for interrupting him. We have to end within the next six minutes. I want to allow Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh to come in. I will allow Professor Ó hÓgartaigh to reply to Senator Malcolm Byrne with a brief sentence, if he can.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: We research the differences across leaving certificate. Colleges of education are likely looking at that already. For international students, we follow public health advice. That is the context in which we work. On academic freedom, diversity of voices is particularly important. That also means, as Dr. Ryan mentioned, there should be evidence-based challenge. It is part of a healthy society to have those debates, with a diversity of voice, where people are challenged if something is clearly contestable. That is a particularly important aspect of academic freedom. We should encourage a broad diversity of voice with an evidence base behind it to challenge, where challenges are to be made.

Chairman: I thought it was only the Dáil Chamber where we had those differences, but it turns out that they are in third-level institutions as well. I will allow Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh to continue until the meeting's conclusion.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I hope that student kept the Chairman long enough at the door to give us a chance; I am glad he was doing his job.

First, I recently visited Ballyfermot College of Further Education, BCFE, the principal, Ms

Cecilia Monro, and her team. The building belies the extent of their work, particularly around animation, as well as on other things. I could feel the student-focused ethos of the College. I want to commend that. As I have often said, the colleges of further education have not had the capital investment they need. Yet, fantastic work is being done there. I encourage people all around the country to look at what is available through further education. I commend everybody involved there.

The proposal Dr. Ryan has made to advocate for the retention of the vaccination infrastructure in, or near, the institutes in August and September is significant. Has Dr. Ryan formally requested that from the public health department? It is a good idea. Even for September and October, where we do not yet have facilities, if each of the colleges could have a vaccination centre, that would be a worthwhile preventative measure.

Finally, can we now meet the demands of 100% of those who want to come to college on campus? Will there be a percentage of students who may be turned away? What is the capacity of the colleges? There was an increase in the numbers last year and there is an increase again this year. If everybody decided right now, here today, that they wanted to be on campus, can that demand be met?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: On the vaccination question, we had a testing centre on campus. With a vaccination centre, we would work with the HSE if that would be helpful. Accessibility would be particularly important. Our staff was involved in that. We would welcome that.

On the other question, I am not sure if the Deputy asking specifically about the students on a university campus? Is she asking if they will be coming back to campus or not or is it a more general question around capacity?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: No. I am asking if there will be restrictions on the numbers in classes. Will that mean that we can accommodate, say, 70% students who want to come back? Would it be 60%, or whatever? I want to get a picture of expectations.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: That depends to a great extent on the vaccination roll-out, as well as on changes to the broader context of the public health environment. There may well still, particularly given ventilation, be limits on the capacity of rooms. In that context, we will either make the material available online or have an experience online, and-or have smaller supplementary classes. It would be “double teaching”, if you like. However, it depends on the broader context. As of right now, we are not clear on that context. Our expectation is that we will go as far as possible in making the on-campus experience meaningful. All of the other constraints around that will continue. The 19 July plans and guidelines are particularly critical to us in making those plans and being able to communicate to students accordingly. We are taking a sectoral approach to those communications. I hope that answers the question.

Dr. Joseph Ryan: I will provide some quick-fire answers, in light of the time constraints. I know Mr. Kearney mentioned Ballyfermot College of Further Education. I thank him for doing so. As someone coming from the creative arts side, I must say that the college has a huge impact. I thank Mr. Kearney for mentioning it.

I also thank him for mentioning the retention of the vaccination centres. That was a proposal that we put through the national steering group. I have been banging that drum for some time, to which people such as Mr. Kearney will attest. I am conscious that the single-shot Janssen

vaccine is being offered to that age cohort. It will change the game. Vaccination was always going to be a social contract. The idea behind the retention of the vaccination centres was to make it as easy as possible for everyone to have the chance of being offered an invitation to get vaccinated and to take it. I am conscious of younger staff and the students in that.

On the question of restricting numbers, as Professor Ó hÓgartaigh stated, the ambition is to get as many students on-site as possible. The truth is that it is too hard to tell at this stage what we can expect. We will just have to wait and see how it works out. It may be the case that we will not be able to have some large classes in full on campus, but we will monitor the situation through the summer.

Chairman: I thank the contributors, both members and witnesses. On behalf of all the committee members, I would like to wish the witnesses the best of luck in the reopening and getting back to some form of normality. I have no doubt there will be many challenges between now and the end of the year. With the work of all involved, including the Department, the HEA and the witnesses' institutions, the challenges that we have faced in the past can be surmounted. The most important things are the lives and education of the students. I am glad that aspect was very much part and parcel of today's discussion.

I would specifically like to thank Dr. Ryan. It is his second appearance before the committee in a number of days. I also thank Professor Ó hÓgartaigh and Mr. Kearney. The meeting has been most informative. I thank the witnesses for sharing their own insights and expert knowledge on the issue. On behalf of the committee, I ask them to wish all their staff the best of luck and to thank them for their commitment over the past 12 months. It has been a learning experience for everyone and also a challenging period. We will look into this area further when the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, appear before the committee next week.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.33 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 13 July 2021.