

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, 22 Iúil 2021

Thursday, 22 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,* |
| Jim O'Callaghan, | Aisling Dolan, |
| Pádraig O'Sullivan, | Pauline O'Reilly. |
| Marc Ó Cathasaigh, | |
| Aodhán Ó Ríordáin. | |

* 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 in public session virtually through Microsoft Teams in Committee Room 2 in Leinster House. Apologies have been received from Deputies Alan Farrell and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, and Senator Rónán Mullen. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh is taking Deputy Ó Laoghaire's slot. Senator Malcolm Byrne will substitute for Senator Fiona O'Loughlin.

I remind members to ensure their mobile phones are switched off for the duration of the meeting as they interfere with the broadcasting equipment even while on silent mode. The minutes of the meeting on 20 July 2021 have been circulated to members. Are the minutes agreed to? Agreed.

Reopening of Further and Higher Education Institutions: Discussion

Chairman: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Simon Harris, as well as Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, with responsibility for Skills and Further Education, Deputy Niall Collins. The Minister and Minister of State are here to discuss the reopening of further and higher education institutions in a safe and sustainable way. The format of the meeting is that I will invite the Minister, Deputy Harris, to make an opening statement. The statement will be followed by questions from members of the committee. Each member has a six minute slot to ask questions and for either of the two 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 that 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.

I ask the Minister, Deputy Harris, to make his opening statement.

Minister for Health. (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Chair and the committee for the invitation to be with them today to share some information on our plans for on-site activities in both further and higher education this coming September. We all know we cannot have another year like last year in terms of our students or staff and further and higher education. It was necessary from a public health point of view, but it is not sustainable. We need to get people back to on-campus education. We have been working really hard to do that and I will update the committee on where we are on that in a moment.

The over-riding objective here is a recognition that education and training is not just about what you learn in a lecture theatre or in a tutorial. It is about how you learn, the people you learn with, and the experience of being with others. Education is about the overall development of an individual. There are aspects of learning that can only be imparted in person. We

have work to do to catch up on backlogs and to ensure that they are not further exacerbated as a result of some of the social distancing requirements that Covid-19 necessitated. Furthermore, many students and learners do better when they attend lectures and classes in person. That is not a universal, blanket statement, but it is true for many. These are the reasons, or some of the reasons, we are planning a safe return to on-site learning this autumn. I am pleased to say the Government has committed to a significant increase in on-site attendance in the third level sector in the next academic year. This is not just the wish of one Minister, but this was a decision made by the Government in April and conveyed by the Government in the Taoiseach's address to the nation. This was the decision reiterated by the Government in a memorandum in June, and again as recently as yesterday at our Cabinet meeting.

Following an intensive period of work with our sectors and stakeholders, including student representatives, staff, union representatives and management representatives, and with Government approval last month I published A safe return to on-site further and higher education and research in 2021-2022. In a nutshell, what this plan means is that all students will have an on-site college experience next year. It may not be every lecture or workshop, the numbers in the library may need to be smaller, and not all facilities will be open in exactly the same way as they were previously, just as things opened differently in towns and villages across Ireland as a result of Covid-19.

However, let me be very clear about this, we are getting our students and learners back to college. Whereas last year the presumption was that learning would be primarily online, this year the presumption is that learning will be mainly on-site. No doubt the prevailing public health guidelines will mean some learning is blended, but for all students, no matter what they study, on-site learning and attendance will be available. Specifically, at the very minimum, on-site activity next year will include laboratory teaching and learning, classroom based teaching and learning, tutorials, workshops, smaller lectures, research, return to work-spaces and access to libraries with appropriate protective measures in place.

Other on campus non-educational activities and facilities such as sports, bars, canteens, clubs and societies will also operate in line with prevailing general public health advice. This is important too. If the sports club can be opened in the town or village in any part of Ireland, the sports club needs to be open in the college campus. If the café can be open in a town or village outside the gates of the university, well the café or the canteen inside the gates needs to be open too, and the same for the bars, the clubs and societies. We need to treat the college campus like a town or village because in many ways, that is what it is.

Teaching within lecture halls will take place on-site but this will depend on the room size and on other factors. There will be moderation in numbers and there will need to be modification to normal practices. What I mean by this, for example, is entry and exit, ventilation, or indeed the length of time of on-site lectures. To be clear about this, I met yesterday with the representative bodies and they now need to do a body of work in regard to what modifications and safeguards they will put in place in regard to lecture halls. There will be an intensive period of engagement on this, with a meeting of our Covid-19 steering committee next Friday which includes staff representatives, student representatives and management representatives as well. All our plans have student and staff safety firmly built in. The plan is endorsed by public health and by the Chief Medical Officer, so this is a plan with public health buy-in and that also is very important.

Of course, this is going to cost money. It is important that we support our sector and our students. At the Cabinet meeting yesterday, I updated Government on the progress in regard to

planning and the expected level of on-site activity in further and higher education and research in the autumn. Crucially, we also secured the approval of Government for a significant package of financial support, amounting to €105 million for the third level sector. I thank my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, for the work we have done together on that. The package will include financial support for further and higher education to return on-site safely and in line with public health advice. Crucially, it will also provide additional supports for students. I am conscious that students have had a really difficult year. Therefore, €21 million of this additional funding will be allocated to provide specific extra supports for students in three areas. There will be an additional €3 million for student mental health and well-being services and an extra €10 million for the student assistance fund. This is the fund many of the members will know that students can draw money down from if they come on hard times, receive an unexpected bill or whatever. I am especially proud of the creation my Department came up with last year in the third area, which is a new mitigating against educational disadvantage fund. We are putting a further €8 million into the latter. This is a fund from which community education providers who are often working with the most vulnerable learners in towns and villages across Ireland can draw down moneys. Last year, that fund was used to help meet the childcare costs of some people in community education. It was also used to buy textbooks and laptops, with the focus being on people who might otherwise not be able to engage with our education system.

A working group for student and learner well-being and engagement was established by me in January. I asked the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, to chair that working group. I am pleased that we will start to make major progress on many of the proposals contained in the group's report as a result of the new funding announced yesterday. I want to specifically thank USI for the leadership it has shown and its determination to achieve an effective outcome for students.

Higher education institutions and further education and training providers are progressing their own detailed planning and work in respect of a comprehensive return to on-site activity. My officials and I have already engaged directly since the Government decision yesterday. As already stated, through our Covid steering committee scheduled for next week, we will continue to support all stakeholders with further guidance and clarity, where required. To enable the success of the plan, the sector has developed a pact of actions and commitments which has been agreed by my Department, its agencies, stakeholders, institutions and training providers. This will support ongoing efforts with regard to the pandemic and ensure that planning is well-grounded in safe and sustainable practices. Within the pact, institutions and providers have committed to addressing backlogs and deferred learning outcomes. Similarly, stakeholder bodies have committed to engaging with institutions and providers to achieve significant increases to on-site teaching, learning, assessment and research. In addition, specific commitments have also been provided in respect of international students in higher education with respect to accommodation and ongoing research.

The engagement and collaboration between my Department and the sector has been a key feature of how we have worked since the start of this Covid journey in March 2020. I sincerely - and I mean this - thank student bodies, learners, staff organisations and management for their incredible collaborative efforts. I have been taken by how collaborative the stakeholders have been and the solidarity they have shown around the table to achieve the best and safest outcomes for staff and for students who so need the best possible educational experience at third level. This partnership has been instrumental in developing the plan for safe return and the continuation and intensification of this approach will be central to its successful implementation.

We will continue to meet as a group, share experiences and design solutions.

I want to say a quick word on three topics, namely, summer provision, rapid antigen testing and vaccination. The vaccine programme is doing the heavy lifting with regard to how we can reopen our society. Let us be quite clear about that. The success of vaccines and the fact that, even with the Delta variant, they are proving so effective is what is helping us get back to and dare to dream again of getting back to normality and some forms of normality in our lives. As Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, I am delighted that the vaccine programme is now open to every single individual in this country from the age of 18-plus. If you are an 18-year-old, you have the option of registering for the Janssen vaccine in the pharmacy, registering for the AstraZeneca vaccine with the HSE and now registering for the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines with the HSE. I encourage all young people to get that vaccine because that vaccine is what will keep them, their community and our country safe and what will help us get our lives back on track. It is great news for our sector and for young people that the programme has been accelerated. I pay tribute to the HSE on that.

In order to enable summer provision, we are operating our sector on a more open basis for the summer period this year. This is in compliance with current public health advice and the phased reopening of activities and the protective measures in place are working well. We are getting our apprentices back on-site to complete their hands-on training which cannot be done online and we are getting our researchers back so they can advance their projects.

With regard to rapid antigen testing, I am fully committed to the role of rapid antigen testing as one part of a package of measures to support greater activity on-site. Indeed the role of rapid antigen testing as a possible way of strengthening Covid-19 responses and providing reassurance to staff and others has been recognised in the recently published Covid-19 national protocol for employers and workers. I am glad to say that the third level sector has been leading the way, while others have been debating the merits and demerits and chatting, considering and thinking about it, the third level sector has gotten on with it. I thank it for that. I thank it for its leadership.

There are two separate studies under way which will investigate and examine the potential for rapid antigen testing. We have University College Cork, UCC, University College Dublin, UCD, the National University of Ireland, NUI, Galway and Trinity involved in what they call UniCoV rapid antigen testing pilot. Last week, myself, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the HSE announced five more pilots in further education and training including in counties Mayo, Galway, Cavan and Dublin. The Secretary General of my Department has written to the expert advisory group on rapid testing, which comes under the remit of the Department of Health, asking for its assistance in determining the appropriate role of rapid testing should we decide to expand it further, pending the results of the pilot outcome. I look forward to adopting its advice as well.

Let me leave the members with the message before we get into the engagement: we are going back to college in the new academic year. Education has been deemed an essential service - all of education - not just education that stops at secondary school. The Government has deemed education as an essential service. We need, from a mental health and well-being point of view along with an educational point of view, to make this happen. I have spent the past year listening to students, learners and staff down a camera on my computer and I have heard them say time and again that they want to go back. This is especially the case for learners and students who are more vulnerable.

We have learned good lessons and there are some positives coming from Covid-19 which we might reflect on, as well in terms of things we would like to keep in the education sector but in general, we now need to make sure we can get our students and our staff safely back to college campuses and training centres at the start of the new academic year. I look forward to working with this committee in ensuring we make that an absolute reality.

Chairman: Before we call on Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan, I compliment the Minister. It is very welcome that people will have an opportunity to learn on-site. I compliment all the third level institutions over the past number of months in doing this. One issue that has come up before the committee over the past 12 months is mental health and I welcome the funding the Minister has mentioned there for students on mental health. Our first questioner is Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan, followed by Deputy Conway-Walsh. Is Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan there? We will go to Deputy Conway-Walsh and we will come back to Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is just as well I was ready. I commend the collaboration that has happened. There have been huge collaborative efforts across the third level sector. We all witnessed that over the year and a half of the pandemic. I hope it will continue. I have no reason to think it will not because that is the way we can develop and bring forward the third level sector throughout the country and, mind you, right across the 32 counties.

I also acknowledge the extra funding, especially that allocated for student support. I hope that money will go directly to the students and families who most need it. That is probably the next challenge for us.

The Minister set out the position regarding the safe return of students. This is also a really good opportunity for him to address some of the anxieties students are experiencing. One of those is in terms of accommodation and the new legislation. The Minister will be aware of the legislation brought in on 9 July. There is a month set aside for that legislation to come into force. However, I am extremely concerned that I am getting reports from families and parents indicating that accommodation providers are putting pressure on them to pay large sums of money upfront. Those providers are trying to get ahead of the legislation in that regard. There seems to be a loophole in this regard. Can the Minister confirm the date on which the law to limit a landlord’s ability to ask for multiple months’ rent in advance will come into effect?

In view of the fact that the legislation allows for students to opt out and pay multiple months upfront if they wish to do so, what safeguards are in place to ensure that landlords will not simply favour those students and thereby make the legislation worthless? I am concerned. I accept that this matter does not come directly under the Minister’s remit, but I know he will share my concerns. A Kerry woman put it to me yesterday that it is like telling the fox not to eat the chickens when it is let into the henhouse. It seems that students are trapped in that at the moment. Will the Minister speak to that, in terms of speaking to the families, students and accommodation providers?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy and acknowledge, regarding the extra funding, the work and the survey she did, which was helpful and informed much of the discussion.

On the accommodation legislation, I welcome the change of legislation. It had cross-party support in the Oireachtas. It does two things. It limits the amount of upfront deposit a renter can be asked for to no more than one month’s rent and one month’s deposit, so no more than two months in total. Secondly and crucially, it means students in student accommodation do not have to give more than 28 days’ notice to terminate their rental agreement.

The Deputy is right that this does not come under my direct remit but, from checking with the Residential Tenancies Board, the information available suggests the legislation was signed into law on 9 July. All parts of it, except section 6, came into operation on that date. Section 6, which deals with rent setting, came into operation on 16 July. I do not suggest what the Deputy has heard is not true, but I would be concerned if it was the case. My understanding is the law of the land has been clear since 16 July. I would be happy to engage with the Deputy on any cases.

In relation to any issue a renter has, the agency to assist is always the Residential Tenancies Board. I think the Deputy and I share the view that we need to look at how to provide more purpose-built, college-owned student accommodation. I am in active discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform around the borrowing framework, particularly for technological universities.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What seems to be happening is there is a key part in section 7(5) of the legislation which states, “This section shall apply to a tenancy created not earlier than one month after the passing of the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021.” That seems to be the section that is being exploited. I am glad the Minister is sending out that message. He is saying it is illegal for landlords or student accommodation providers to force students and families to pay multiple months upfront. That is what he is saying, is it not?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am saying we all worked at speed across the parties in both Houses of the Oireachtas to pass this legislation to provide protections for students and I would take a grim view of anybody not rigidly applying both the letter and the spirit of the legislation. Many of the issues students have highlighted to me in relation to being asked for many months of rent upfront were from college-owned accommodation. I have discussed this with their representative bodies and they are satisfied and determined to implement the legislation.

As the Deputy said, there is an exemption. Some students, though I do not know many, and perhaps international students may wish to pay more than one month upfront and there is the option to do that. It is only an option; the law says they can never be asked to pay more than one month’s rent plus one month’s deposit. I would be happy to discuss individual cases.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Will the Minister raise it with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O’Brien? It seems to be confined to the Limerick area, including Kerry, Limerick and Clare, and to people attending the University of Limerick.

I thank the Minister regarding SUSI and what we are trying to do on getting the current circumstances assessed so students on PUP would not be excluded. I have had much toing and froing with SUSI since that time. We need to communicate with students and their families. Even if their grant or partial grant has been allocated from SUSI, once they stop the PUP, they can request an internal review by emailing the SUSI support desk. They need to put “internal review request” in the subject line. We need to make it as clear as we can.

My concern is that SUSI expects about 50,000 internal review requests. That will be a workload in September on top of the workload already there. What are we doing to ensure there will not be a bottleneck at that time and that those requesting the internal review will not be put to the back of the queue?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for her constructive engagement on this. We discussed it on the floor of the Dáil on many occasions.

I will give the Deputy the latest statistics from SUSI. As of 11 July, more than 80,000 applications have been received from new and returning students, of which 56,000 have been processed and 49,500 of those have been deemed eligible for support. In the last academic year, SUSI processed 96,000 applications with 76,000 students awarded funding. SUSI estimates an overall 2% increase in applications compared to last year. The increase in the postgraduate fee grant and in the fee threshold for postgraduate students has also made a significant impact on applications. SUSI forecasts a 133% increase in grant approval this year.

I echo what the Deputy said on the PUP. What she said and how she said it is correct. The way the change of circumstances review works in SUSI is if you have been receiving a fund, income or whatever and are no longer receiving it, you can say to SUSI: "Please review my application because it is not fair or accurate to assess me on income that I no longer have." That is the way the PUP will be treated. For better or worse, students will not be in a position to receive the pandemic unemployment payment from the start of the new academic year. Therefore, the pandemic unemployment payment paid to them cannot be used against them. The system cannot have it both ways. I am talking to SUSI directly and with my officials about making this as easy as possible for students. I cannot give a specific answer on how it intends to do that but I would like it to email all the students and tell them what to do if they have been on PUP. I am working with it to see if it can get a direct communication to all students to make it as clear and simple as the Deputy has done.

The Deputy touched on the issue that this will have a big impact on SUSI. It will. SUSI often takes on temporary staff for a limited period. It has now kept on those staff. It has informed my Department that it is satisfied it is adequately resourced to deal with the volume of applications and volume of changes of circumstances. Should it require more assistance in that regard, it will be forthcoming.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State. It is great to have them with us today with fantastic news about getting our staff and students back to college in September. That €105 million shows true commitment and that the Government sees this as an essential service, as has been noted clearly. I especially welcome the €23 million. We have done a lot with the SUSI consultation the Minister spoke about earlier to ensure our students have equal and fair access to further and higher education studies.

The Minister mentioned the breakdown. I am on the first mental health subcommittee ever in the Oireachtas. We heard from student groups about the importance and impact on mental health of students having to work from home. It has been a tough year. The thing one loves about college is being in lectures and having inspiring and passionate lecturers. I am sure they try to be inspiring and passionate online but it is not the same. It is good to hear there is a commitment to open up.

On the student assistance fund and the financial support, I know from NUI Galway the previous funding the Minister provided funded nearly 4,000 laptops in that university. There has been an impact. I spoke with the students' union president there during the week.

When it comes to mitigating disadvantage, it is important we look at how we support all groups, including vulnerable groups, to have access to third level. With the apprenticeship programmes, there are so many opportunities, not just through the colleges and universities system, but through further education. That earn and learn option is available and one can get up to National Framework of Qualifications, NFQ, level. A representative of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, appeared before the committee earlier this week and spoke about the options

and how QQI is working very closely with SOLAS.

The Minister of State mentioned that campuses of universities and colleges would be opening up to allow apprentices to do practicals that are part of their courses over the summer. Regarding the apprenticeship programme, there are about 60 courses at the moment and I know another 18 are planned. Will the Minister of State update us on the roll-out of those programmes?

The west is leading the way. I know the Minister was down in Galway during the week. It is fantastic to see UniCoV, which is funded by Science Foundation Ireland and led by NUI Galway. This is a randomised clinical study on the pilot of rapid antigen testing. I am delighted that Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board is one of the five ETBs selected to look at rapid diagnostic antigen tests. Research has had an impact all over the world with Covid and the lockdown.

Regarding extensions for researchers, there is a lot of anxiety about trying to meet all the deadlines researchers must meet. Does the Minister have any information about extensions for researchers? Those aged 18 to 24 can now log on to register for vaccination at vaccine.hse.ie and access mRNA vaccines. That roll-out is crucial for us to be able to open in line with public health guidelines in September.

Deputy Simon Harris: It was great to be back in the west and able to meet people in real life rather than on Zoom. I thank Senator Dolan for her work in highlighting the SUSI review. I can tell her that we received over 250 submissions via the public consultation process from a wide range of organisations, many of which work with students, parents, vulnerable people and people at risk of poverty, with ideas about how we could improve the scheme. We also received over 9,000 survey responses, which is a very significant number. The steering group, which has student and university representatives on it along with representatives from the Department of Social Protection and my Department, is working its way through those. It is expected that the review will be completed this autumn and will inform our policy priorities for the Estimates process.

Senator Dolan referred to laptops and the free laptops scheme we ran last year, which worked very well. I, and I am sure, many colleagues have met many students who benefited from the laptops scheme in third level education. I expect to be in a position to make a further announcement next week on a new scheme for additional free laptops. The Minister of State and I will have details on that next week.

I will ask the Minister of State, who is leading for us on the apprenticeship scheme, to respond on the apprenticeship action plan and the Senator's questions. UniCoV is working really well. I thank Professor Breda Smith, the public health lead for the mid-west, who is leading the charge on that. Students can now go to the dedicated website where they can register if they are in Trinity College, UCD, NUI Galway or UCC. I am delighted that five more sites are in place, including one in the Senator's region.

Regarding researchers, we provided significant additional funding to help with research extensions. If this is required again, we will certainly provide it. This is a very pure Covid cost and the Government needs to meet what are legitimate Covid costs. Delays in research are not the fault of the researcher or institution; they are the fault of Covid. We have worked very closely with the research community to address any required extensions and will continue to do so.

Deputy Niall Collins: To address Senator Dolan's question about apprenticeships, as the committee will be aware, 61 apprenticeship schemes are up and running and a further 18 are in development. They are at various stages in the development process. Members will be aware that there are a number of phases through which an apprenticeship must go to be formalised. We will get the committee a note with an update on the status of each of the apprenticeships in development. We are being contacted continually and are engaging continually with interested parties on the development of new apprenticeships.

I was down in the west, at the Petersburg outdoor education centre in Clonbur, about two weeks where we launched the arboriculture apprenticeship programme, which is tree surgery for people who do not have the Latin skills. There was significant interest in that. It is a real growth sector that is significantly linked to our planning requirements involving climate change and some of the significant weather events we have had to endure over the past number of years where a large number of trees have come down. There is considerable demand for qualified tree surgeons.

I met with a group in Limerick through our mid-west regional skills manager, Joe Leddin, who were interested in progressing an apprenticeship relating to cybersecurity. Many industry players such as Dell are very invested in that. There is a lot going on in terms of development. I received an inquiry recently from a number of golf professionals. Each golf club has a golf professional. Golf professionals are looking at trying to advance an apprenticeship scheme where they take on apprentices. There is a lot of interest. We will provide the committee with an update on the status of what is in development.

Senator Aisling Dolan: It is great to see the arboriculture apprenticeship in the Petersburg centre in Galway. I know the Minister of State is probably delighted to see the applications coming in along with that of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance, which was submitted this week or last week.

I acknowledge the active consent programme that is being rolled out. We are getting staff and students back to college but we are going to be getting them back to a college that will be a safe environment in many ways along with public health. We will ensure we train our staff and students in terms of active consent. This is crucial. As far as I am aware, it is being rolled out next year. The Minister might not have time to comment on that now but perhaps he might do so at a later stage.

Chairman: I will give the Minister a few seconds to comment on that.

Deputy Simon Harris: I was delighted to be in Galway last week with the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, for the launch of the active consent programme. We have managed to fund Ireland's first ever digital hub - effectively a website - with resources for staff and students in consent. Sexual harassment is not confined to third level education but third level education should be leading in this area. The work being done by the active consent programme is NUI Galway is world class. We will now have a resource where we will be able to train and support students and staff in sexual consent. This will roll out from the start of the new academic year. The Senator will be aware that I wrote to every institution in Ireland to ask them to publish an individual action plan on sexual harassment. They should not just hide behind or under national guidelines. What are they going to do on their campuses to have a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment? I am really pleased that all those action plans have been submitted.

Regarding the technological university for Connacht-Ulster, I am delighted to see that the

international advisory panel is in town - virtually - and is meeting people in the region. I know it met stakeholders the other day. I had a brief opportunity to speak with it yesterday. I very much hope that we will have a technological university for the west and north west in 2022, subject to a lot of necessary work being done between now and then. It is a very exciting development.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: I commend the Minister and Minister of State. I was curious as to how the Department would work. Both the Minister and the Minister of State have made this new Department work. I hope that this Department is a feature of public policy into the future because it would be very difficult to have this type of conversation in the old Department that had everything under its remit, with one senior Minister.

The Minister has been very strong over the course of the year on all of the issues that have been touched on today. I congratulate him on that. If third level is to open up in September, as the Minister intends, it would be wonderful for all of those young people, and the students who are not so young. For many of us, attending third level education or colleges of further education was life forming. It was not necessarily just about what we learned in the lecture halls or tutor rooms. Mixing with other people from other backgrounds and other parts of the country and the world formed our identities. I congratulate the Minister on that plan.

The committee will have to meet again to consider the Cassells report. We must also talk about literacy, an issue on which the Minister is very committed.

Another issue I wish to raise is how we get role model professions that are under the Minister's remit to be more reflective of the society they serve. I have spoken to the Teaching Council and the Irish National Teachers Organisation on the issue. Let us consider, for example, the role of teaching. At primary level especially the teaching profession does not reflect the children in the classroom. We need to have proactive methodologies to encourage more working class children, children from a disadvantaged background, children with disabilities, children with an international background and children from a Traveller background into role model professions such as teaching. The CAO system is just not going to do it. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that. Other role model professions can also be powerful in that regard.

Notwithstanding the optimism around what will happen in this country in September, what is happening in the UK has worried everybody. We are not in control of that. Ireland's response to the Covid crisis was always contingent on what was happening next door. The Minister and Minister of State may not be able to repeat what I say, but what is happening across the water appears to be very ill-disciplined and reports are not encouraging with regard to the level of infection and the potential for new variants. If this happens over the course of the summer in the UK, and given that we have opened up to a certain degree here, I suggest we will still be talking about our envisaged opening up in August. Notwithstanding the well-placed optimism, I believe we need to be mindful of these factors.

My next question for the Minister is about next year's leaving certificate, which impacts significantly on the Department. Would it be a good course of action for the Department and the Department of Education to take time to engage with the educational partners at this point? If they were to roll out leaving certificate 2022 as they rolled out leaving certificate 2021, we would not be worrying about the leaving certificate in the coming spring arising from the potential loss of in-class teaching. This student cohort has already lost a large amount of in-school teaching. Could a quick decision be made on this issue to prepare for all of the knock-on effects for the third level sector, which falls under the Minister's remit?

I touched on a few issues and I am not expecting a full response on the Cassells report and all the issues I have raised. Considering what is happening in the UK and given that the situation is unpredictable, the big issue is that it would make everybody's life easier if we made a decision as quickly as possible on the leaving certificate for 2022, as we did on leaving certificate 2021.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Ó Ríordáin for his questions and kind comments about the work of the Department. I thank all of the officials who are trying to build a new Department. While it is not quite being built from scratch, it is taking many functions from the Department of Education and the previous Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and loading them together at a time when everyone is working from home and so on. The officials have risen to the challenge and I am very lucky, as is the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, to have such a dedicated team of officials who are passionate about this work.

I am also delighted that the new Department is causing Members of the Oireachtas to talk about the sector. We have a dedicated parliamentary questions session and committee discussions. We are getting a chance to discuss, explore and come up with ideas and solutions on issues that ran the risk of getting lost. I say that meaning no disrespect to other Departments. The proof will be in the eating and we need to get a lot of things delivered over the next while. I hope here will be a cross-party consensus that there is real value in this Department because, without getting into the international tax debate, our future economic and social well-being will become more and more reliant on what we call "human capital", or people, and investing in people. That is what this Department is about.

I confirm to the Deputy that I have now received the final report from Mr. Peter Cassells. I use the word "final" intentionally because I do not believe we need another report or a cross-party committee to commission another report. We do not need to build a shelf to put the report on. We now need to come up with solutions. I rule out student loans here and now. I have no interest in them, do not agree with them and do not believe in them. They do not work. They might work on paper but they do not work in reality. We will not be introducing student loans. We will come up with a way of moving forward on that. I hope to bring proposals to Cabinet later this year and, as part of the Estimates process, to be able to make some progress.

I would love to have a proper conversation about role models in the professions and how we can help through reform of the CAO, new pathways to work and the work being done on apprenticeships by the Minister of State, Deputy Collins. I would love to discuss that further with the committee.

With regard to Covid variants, the Deputy is right that we are in uncertain times. We know, however, that the vaccines work. My message to everybody is that we will see case numbers rising. If we look at what has happened in Scotland, the Netherlands and Portugal - just three examples - we saw numbers rise, peak and then begin to come back down. Vaccines work. Younger people can now get vaccinated and young people aged between 18 and 22 are being vaccinated today. Those aged 16 and 17 years will be vaccinated shortly. Before the new college year resumes, I believe that every young person will have had an opportunity to be vaccinated. While college attendance or access to education is not contingent on vaccination, we will see the benefit of the vaccine programme in the weeks and months ahead. Our reopening plans have been endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer. This is not the Department doing a solo run. It is very much a plan endorsed by public health advice.

On the leaving certificate, I am aware of the point the Deputy is making and I am sure he

would never wish to draw me into another Minister's remit. The leaving certificate, however, is a matter for the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and her Department. I will say that it is an incredible testament to the Minister and, more important, to all of the stakeholders, education providers, teachers, the State Examinations Commission, school principals, students, special needs assistants, SNAs, and everybody else involved that we managed to have leaving certificate examinations this year and that they went off pretty well. In the middle of a global pandemic Ireland held leaving certificate exams and provided students with the choice that they wanted around calculated grades. We learned a lot from listening to second level students this year as opposed to just telling them what was best for them. They showed themselves to be constructive and pragmatic and they helped to design the system. It was not the most straightforward system. We were one of the few countries in the world to take a dual approach. I commend the students on that.

From my Department's perspective, rapid clarity on what next year will look like is always useful. The Minister is well aware of that and will, I presume, want to move in that direction also.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I offer a big welcome to the Minister and the Minister of State. It is good to see them, although it is not in the committee room where we would like to be. Hopefully we will have some reopening of in-person committee meetings as well as a reopening of third level. It is important that we were reminded that this will not just be a reopening of third level but a reopening of in-person learning. Huge work has been done by all of the staff and students over the past year and a half. It has been incredibly difficult for them. It is important to recognise that they have gone above and beyond.

I welcome yesterday's launch of the active consent programme by the Minister. I am cautiously optimistic for the programme. I would like some clarity on what happens when a third level institution has a plan, publicises the plan and then fails to meet expectations. I hope that will not happen. We have had pre-legislative scrutiny over the past couple of weeks and we all recognise the importance of the independence of third level institutions. That can come undone when targets are not met, however. What is the Minister's plan to ensure these targets and plans are put in place and enforced?

With regard to the reopening, I understand the funding from yesterday is again very much on an institution by institution basis and how they might manage that funding. Correct me if I am wrong, but I know there is specific ring-fenced funding, particularly with regard to mitigating educational disadvantage, for instance. When it comes to giving security to these staff around a safe reopening, is there a plan around ventilation and carbon dioxide monitors, in particular, in order that people can see the levels of ventilation in their workplace? A third level institution is absolutely a social good but it is also a workplace and people need to have confidence.

My third issue for the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, is around apprenticeships. We see today that Ireland is an incredibly expensive place to build. What place does the Minister of State believe his Department has in helping us to achieve our targets around building but particularly from a green perspective and all the targets we have around greening our economy? It is a concern that we have a backlog regarding apprenticeships. What does the Minister of State see in the future, over the next year or two, to make sure we have the workers we need for that green economy?

I am not only interested in the climate aspect but also in biodiversity and around having ecologists in place, for instance. That will be needed for forestry and farming. Macra na

Feirme appeared before us at the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. Young farmers are asking to have ecologists help them as well. It goes across all Departments but it is very much reliant on the workforce.

Deputy Simon Harris: First, I thank Senator O'Reilly very much for making the point better than I did that we are not talking about a reopening of third level because, of course, third level never closed in terms of the delivery of the service. I say that out of respect to the staff and students, who worked in the most extraordinarily difficult circumstances to keep the show on the road. People managed to graduate, albeit in a different from normal way. It often was not a graduation ceremony in person. I thank the staff for going, as the Senator quite rightly said, above and beyond.

All I can tell people absolutely honestly is that in my many engagements with staff unions, student unions and management bodies, I was really taken by the common purpose they all had to do well by the learner and follow public health advice. I have never asked and will never ask them to do anything that goes contrary to public health advice. I know they will never ask me to do anything that is not in the best interests of students and educational outcomes. I really want to say that. We are talking about the return to on-site education but not a reopening because it did not close. It just had to move online.

A really interesting question, which I am glad the Senator asked me, was about the issue of following action plans and what happens if people do not deliver. I take the point she made and I echo it. I see much goodwill, determination and passion across the sector to implement its action plans on sexual harassment and sexual violence.

The Senator asked a valid question, however, about what happens if something goes wrong and how we can ensure targets are met. Really, the answer is twofold. For the very first time in the history of the State, we have made it a requirement that every individual institution reports against delivery on its action plan to the HEA every year. That is important. Up until now, we have been asking our colleges to report on how they are doing on financial management, etc. We are now saying, as an Oireachtas and a Government, that we believe taking a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment and making sure campuses are safe is as important, if not more important, than many other issues. We want them, therefore, to report annually and not - I do not mean this flippantly - against woolly national frameworks but against their own specific institutional action plan and what they said they would do in college X. That is the first change both culturally and practically.

The second is exactly what the Senator said around the legislation. We have a chance to get the HEA governance legislation and higher education governance right. I thank the committee for the work it is doing on pre-legislative scrutiny. I want to get that legislation passed this year come hell or high water. We can work late at night like we have done many times to pass important legislation. It is essential we get this done by the end of the year. We need to know we have modern, fit for purpose, 21st century governance structures and that is not interfering with autonomy or education independence, which I value and respect so much and which is essential. It is, however, absolutely appropriate that we make sure the governance structures are fit for purpose. I would hope, as we begin to work through it, that we get the balance right between protecting autonomy and making sure the values and important national priorities we have around issues like sexual harassment are absolutely delivered on.

The third issue goes back to the reopening, about which I have a couple of things to say. First, everything we do on reopening will be grounded in public health advice. That is impor-

tant to instill confidence in our staff, students and the communities in which the institutions are based. That is why our plan for reopening the third level sector - I am now using the “reopening” term - I should say our plan to return to on-site education is endorsed by public health and by the Chief Medical Officer. It is important that I say this to reassure staff and students that we are asking them to do only what our public health doctors believe is safe to do.

The second issue is the funding we have provided, on which I can send the committee a note. It is effectively to make sure that any changes can be made to campus layout in terms of health protection equipment such as face masks, personal protective equipment, PPE, other essential equipment for laboratories and workshops and additional college health and welfare service provision as well as taking into consideration additional cleaning and sanitation costs, costs associated with remote working that has been required to date, any *ex gratia* payments to contractors required under public work contracts, staff and facility costs and testing and tracing costs. It is not money for a black hole; it is very much money to make sure the college campuses are safe for staff and students.

And yes, when I talked about some of the measures we will want to see taken to modify lecture halls to ensure people are safe, policy around ventilation will be a very important part of that. We will be intensively engaging in that with stakeholders over the course of the next week before we have our Covid-19 steering committee meeting. I will hand over to the Minister of State for the rest of the Senator’s questions.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Senator. With regard to her question around the construction industry and our green skills, a series of programmes and courses are available to achieve upskilling and reskilling for the green economy. They have been funded by the Department through our Springboard+ initiative, our human capital initiative and through Skillnet Ireland.

In addition to that, a report will be launched in early September with regard to our low carbon economy. That will build on a number of earlier reports in terms of collating the skills needs and skills deficits we have right across that sector.

Finally, the Senator will have heard that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, and Government will be launching Housing for All, which is a ten-year strategy with regard to housing and the construction sector. Specific within that will be a number of actions for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the delivery of our green skills, retrofitting and achieving the low carbon economy, which is set out in the climate change Act.

Senator Pauline O’Reilly: I thank the Minister and Minister of State.

Chairman: I thank Senator O’Reilly. Our next speaker is Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan. If Deputy O’Sullivan is not online we will go to Deputy Jim O’Callaghan.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I do not think he is online so I might come in.

Chairman: Deputy O’Callaghan may go ahead.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank the Chairman. I welcome the Minister and Minister of State to the committee. I commend them on the very positive message they are giving to us and by extension the public. It is extremely important that the message goes out that it is the Government’s intention that in-person learning will recommence in September in our third level institutions.

It is also equally important that the Minister and Minister of State have the support of all Members of the Oireachtas in seeking to achieve that. I am conscious there are concerns out there about variants and such issues. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is correct when he emphasises the positive impact that vaccines are having on the pandemic. We are in a much different place now than we were 12 months ago.

Has the Minister read the AONTAS report that was published yesterday, which is reported in *The Irish Times* today? A number of issues in it were of considerable concern to me. One is that 54% of third-level students who had been surveyed reported that they had struggled with motivation and lack of structure in the online learning. More significantly, 59% said they struggled with their mental health as a result of how the pandemic has affected their lives and specifically third-level education. I do not know if the Minister read that or if it is part of the motivation for why he thinks it is so important we get third-level students back on to campus.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have read it. I had the honour of saying a few words at the launch of the report yesterday. It is a really good piece of work. I thank Ms Niamh O'Reilly, who heads up AONTAS, and all of the team. They are members of our Covid steering group which meets regularly, generally on a Friday. That is very important, as they are often the voice of community education. We have pretty good structures in place for talking. We also talk about universities, institutes of technology and technical universities. That is very important, but there is a whole community education sector that is often working in all of our constituencies with the most vulnerable learners and providing people with second-chance education. AONTAS does incredible work. What it found in the survey goes to the heart of why the Government wants to do two things: first, to get students back to college campuses and to have on-site learning. We recognise that for some learners, especially mature learners, for example people in their 40s with a couple of kids, a mortgage and a full-time job, packing the bags and going to college might not be an option, but school-leavers in particular want the full college experience. The report very much highlights the challenges that many students have found when they had to do college effectively in their bedroom or on the corner of the kitchen table. We want to get students back to campus.

The second thing we want to do is recognise that while students are excited about going back to campus, a lot of them will be also very anxious. In many ways, people are anxious as they try to resume parts of normal life. That is why yesterday we took the decision as a Government to allocate significant extra money, €21 million, for additional student supports. The money is being allocated to the student assistance fund, the mental health and well-being fund and a new educational disadvantage fund. It is very much grounded in the reasons that came to light in the AONTAS report.

I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for being a firm believer for some time in getting students back to college campuses. I accept there will be issues of concern but once we get people vaccinated, we must look at how we can live safely. We cannot live in a country where we can go on holidays to Spain, have a pint, and go in and out of shops but where we cannot access in-person education. We have decided education is a priority, just like we have decided lots of other parts of society are a priority. Therefore, we have to make sure we get people back to campuses in a safe way, in compliance with public health advice.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I welcome the extra €21 million that is being provided. As the Minister indicated, students who have spent the past year learning online in their bedrooms may have developed anxiety and it may be difficult to get them back into in-person learning. Does the Minister think it will be necessary for the funding to be used to try to gain contact

with students who are not returning to campus to ensure they could return if they got a bit of encouragement?

Deputy Simon Harris: I do indeed. I will ask the institutions to show that flexibility. I often think of the soon-to-be second year college students who physically left a school building in March 2020. In many cases, they have not been physically inside an educational setting since then. It would be unusual not to need a period to re-adapt. Anyone would need that after such a level of disruption. I have spoken to the presidents of many universities, institutes of technology and other educational institutions and I think they get this. I will ask that they would show flexibility. The first priority must be the well-being of students, getting them safely back, looking out for them, looking after them and showing flexibility. We should remember that second years need to be inducted into college in just the same way as first-year students. The extra funding must be used in a way that works. It will be different from institution to institution. Crucially, we must listen to the voice of students on how to use the funding. Let us not tell the students how best to use the mental health and well-being funding, but talk to students and individual student unions and come up with plans. We all need to show that little bit of flexibility because there is a huge amount of anxiety out there as people try to resume activities that were normal but have not happened in quite a while.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: International students play a significant part in the third-level education system, in respect of funding to a certain extent as well. There will be greater obstacles for international students. What are we going to do to restrict the barriers or to try to get back to where we were before? Is that an issue the Minister thinks cannot be prioritised until later?

Deputy Simon Harris: That is a really good question. I will say two things. Ireland is open for international students. Ireland has not closed its borders. There are strict rules in place as to how one safely enters and leaves the country and students need to follow those rules just like anybody else. If one is coming from a country that is on the red list, the law of the land is that one needs to go into mandatory hotel quarantine. If one is not coming in from such a country, one is welcome to come in and like anybody else, follow the self-isolation at home rules if that is the rule in place for the country from which one is coming. We are working with the institutions. We have provided funding as part of yesterday’s package to assist them with some of those costs in terms of safely getting students from the airport to college accommodation, among other things.

I also briefed the Cabinet yesterday on a review of our international education strategy and our intention to form a new international education strategy. I have yet to launch it but I will do so in the coming week. Post-Covid, which we all hope to get to, post-Brexit and with the establishment of the new Department there is a real opportunity to have a discussion around international education and research and how that can assist Ireland with external relations. I will be happy to keep the committee briefed on that too.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank the Minister.

Chairman: Deputy Conway-Walsh is substituting for Deputy Ó Laoghaire who is absent due to family reasons.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister stated there would be extra support for technology. That is very important, but I wish to make one point to him. Rather than more hardware in terms of laptops, could he look at providing extra IT support staff? From my visits to

them, that is what the institutions seem to be crying out for. They often have laptops, but they have nobody to open the boxes and do all the necessary work involved. IT support staff would be very welcome.

Will there be restrictions on the numbers in classes on site? What percentage of the normal classes can students expect? What constitutes a larger scale lecture in terms of numbers? I want to get a picture of what being back on campus would look like for students. Will some of them be told to come in for half a week and others for the other half of the week? How is all of that going to be managed?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will take the point on IT infrastructure as read, so as not to waste the Deputy's time. It is a valid point and I will see what more we can do in that regard.

In fairness, the issue of what the return to the campus will look like on site is a key question. Deputy Conway-Walsh will have read the framework we published. What we have said is that at a minimum it is safe to come to the classroom, workshops, tutorials, laboratories, etc. That will happen and it is not envisaged to happen at reduced numbers. That is because we have safely had people back in school classrooms for some time. The outstanding issue on which work is being done is the lecture halls. Even within the lecture hall, not all lecture halls are the same size, shape or construct. What we are doing over the course of the coming week is asking the sector to look at what modifications it can put in place to make the lecture hall a safe environment. I do not believe there will be a one-size-fits all scenario because the infrastructure is very different. Senator Pauline O'Reilly mentioned ventilation. Another issue is the length of time of a lecture. We know that the longer one spends in a room, the greater is the risk. Face masks are another issue. The sector is hoping to bottom that out and have an understanding of that by the time the Covid steering committee meets. I will stop after this point. What I do not want to happen, which is what the Deputy potentially fears, is for the science students to all come back because they have the practical side while law students, who have a lot of lectures, do not come back. I want every student to be back as much as possible. I want the lecture halls to be used but they will have to be used in a modified way. It is unlikely at this point that there will be 100% capacity. That is being honest. It is likely that lectures will be blended in some way. I want to make sure that it is done in a fair and equitable way with everyone getting on site.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is what we all want to achieve. I am trying to get into the mindset of a second-year law student who is at home now wondering if he or she will be on campus half, three quarters or full time. That has knock-on effects on accommodation and other issues for students. There is significant pressure because of accommodation and the housing situation, especially in Dublin, with students now trying to get accommodation arranged. I have never seen anything like it. We all need to be aware of it, as does the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

I have a question about English language education, especially the stamp 2 visa holders, who are now being held that if they do not return to in-person classes, they could be deported. Do they have any recourse if they have underlying health conditions or if they work in a nursing home, as many do, or as a carer? On what public health advice was the decision to bring them back to in-class tuition at this particular time based? I think there are 10,000 of them. What safety measures are in place in these schools? The Minister said that this is only for the cohort of students who are in Ireland and it is not for international recruitment. How will that be enforced, given that international travel is now permitted within the EU? Will the English language education, ELE, schools be allowed to recruit from within the EU? What measures

are in place and what is the underlying health advice for putting all those students into a class?

Deputy Simon Harris: On the specifics of how much time students will have on-site etc., that will be a matter for the institutions when timetabling and it will vary from institution to institution. We are starting from a point this year of wanting a majority of experience to be on-site rather than online. Timetables will issue from institutions in the normal way. Over the course of the next weeks and through the month of August, students will start to get their individual timetables. The prevailing public health advice is key. I would never do anything to risk the health and safety of our students or staff. The vaccination programme will do a lot of the heavy lifting between now and then. The Deputy knows what happened in the last academic year. Effectively everything was online. Libraries sometimes were not open, workshops did not take place and classrooms were closed. All of that will take place now.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What about English language students who are here now?

Deputy Simon Harris: Sorry. I had not got to that yet.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Most of them are unvaccinated. My concern is that there is this variant and the numbers are increasing exponentially. There are 10,000 mostly unvaccinated students. Will the Minister maybe contradict me on that or provide some information?

Chairman: I ask Deputy Conway-Walsh to give the Minister an opportunity to reply and respond when he is finished.

Deputy Simon Harris: I take the point the Deputy is making. I was answering the broader question about timetabling for students in Irish higher education institutions. While I do not mean this about the Deputy or her interpretation of this, I think the issue of English language schools has been somewhat misrepresented. What we are saying about English language schools is in line with the public health advice that we have about increasing summer provision of further and higher education. I said in my opening statement that as we prepare for a broader resumption of further and higher education in general in September, we are allowing a little more to happen over the summer months, whether in laboratories, apprenticeships or research.

Regarding English language schools, many students who already came to Ireland in good faith have been left somewhat stranded. I am not blaming anyone. They came to Ireland to learn English but because of Covid, they were not able to access lessons because schools were closed. We have a duty of care to them. While the Deputy gave a figure of 10,000 students, the average number in a class here is seven. We are talking about far fewer students than were ever in a primary or secondary school class. I am not telling the English language schools that they must open. They may opt to remain closed. They may opt to provide blended learning or to continue to operate wholly online.

The resumption of in-person activity is subject to there being no deterioration in the public health situation or changes to public health advice, which I have yet to receive. We see this as a small, cautious, conservative stepping stone on a pathway to broader recovery. A voluntary moratorium on recruitment of new students has been in place. I do not want to see new students recruited into the English language education sector at present. I would like us to get to that point but we are not there yet. If there were breaches of that, I would view that seriously. I would view it as a breach of faith regarding the agreements that we have with the sector and I would act accordingly. The Deputy knows that I am going to say that the visa issue is a matter for the Minister for Justice, because it is. I would not like to see any student lose out or face

alterations to visa terms and conditions as a result of not being able to attend a lecture due to an underlying health condition. I will pursue that directly with my colleague, the Minister for Justice, on foot of the Deputy's representation.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Good. I do not want to leave out the Minister of State, Deputy Collins. He said there were more than 10,000 apprenticeships on the waiting list when we last spoke in July. I have received figures from his Department indicating the number was 13,440 at the end of June. That is a significant increase. It means that something like 67% of apprenticeships are waiting for off-site training. I am concerned about that. I am also concerned that there were savings of €6.7 million in 2020 due to the reduced numbers of apprentices accessing off-site training and only €12 million was allocated to address the backlog in waiting lists. Will the Minister of State please make sense of all that for me? I am concerned about the apprentices. I welcome the announcements about new apprenticeships, broadening the range, increasing the numbers and so on, but 67% of all apprentices are waiting for training as matters stand.

Deputy Niall Collins: Deputy Conway-Walsh is right. The Minister, Deputy Harris, the entire Department and I share the concern which the Deputy has articulated about the backlog. There is no point in me explaining how the backlog has arisen. The Deputy is well aware of that. We were constrained due to the various lockdowns we have had to endure since March 2020 and because the majority of off-the-job training has to take place in person across our further education training centres, institutes of technology and technological universities.

The Deputy is correct that the figures I provided in the Dáil during parliamentary questions were for the end of May. The Deputy has received updated figures from the Department. We are continuing to engage with SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority and all the stakeholders across the sector. There are two main stakeholders, namely, the apprentices and the training providers who are public servants working in our further education and training centres, education and training boards and technological universities. They are working might and main to address the backlog. They are aware of the pressure it is creating for the system and for individuals, with regard to allowing them to progress with their careers. That feeds into the various sectors in which these apprentices will ultimately work.

The vast majority of the backlog relates to the craft apprentices. We prioritised a return to on-site learning in March 2021 and this will continue throughout the summer, subject to public health advice, with restricted numbers. A three-step plan is being drawn up to tackle the backlog, particularly in the craft apprenticeships, with a view to addressing the backlog over 12 to 15 months. That is being worked on by SOLAS and the further and higher education providers. As I said to the Deputy when she raised the issue in the Dáil recently, an additional €20 million in capital expenditure was provided to SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority to facilitate 4,000 craft apprenticeship places across the system, and an additional €12 million had already been allocated to support additional classes and teaching capacity. We are aware of this, as is the Department. Our dedicated public servants right across the sectors are aware of it and they are dedicated to addressing the problem with a plan and addressing the backlog over a period of time. I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: One of the challenges of being so far down in the running order is that a great number of the questions I was going to ask have already been asked. There is a lot of optimism and good feeling on the committee this morning and I share that. The Minister and the Minister of State have announced many good things. I welcome the mental health aspect of their announcements in particular. That is going to be so important. Other Deputies

and Senators, and the Minister, have referred to the fact that so much time has been spent by leaving certificate cohorts in their own rooms. I worry about those introverted students and I am glad that we are beginning to think about structuring their participation back into what can be an upheaval and quite a transition for any school leaver in normal times, when moving from a secondary school environment into a college or university environment. That can be quite difficult.

I welcome the mitigating against educational disadvantage fund, which is also important. I was delighted to hear the Minister ruling out student loans. We have a challenge in how we fund our third level sector but I am glad to hear that student loans do not form a part of that solution in the Minister's mind. I agree with him on that.

In-person education and the drive to get back into the classroom or the lecture hall are important. I know this from my own teaching experience but a number of college lecturers have also told me that they just cannot read a room online. They cannot single people out or spot those students who may need a hand on the shoulder or a little bit of additional time. They cannot even get a sense of whether the room is on board and engaged in the same way on Zoom. We all know this from Zoom activities.

I was interested to hear the Minister refer to the borrowing framework for technological universities because that is one of the central concerns and worries for people involved in the technological university model. I do not expect him to answer now as to whether that work is ongoing but he can be sure that members of the committee would love to know more about that.

The Minister of State has dealt with some of the questions I was going to pose about apprenticeships. We need to be planning not just how we upskill our apprentices but how we catch up. This is mission-critical to solving the housing crisis because we need to make sure we have the skills in place as well as the funding and the political will, which we absolutely have, to solve the housing crisis. We also need the people with those skills. We are long on optimism today and maybe a little short on detail. That is understandable because of the rate of change in the transmission of this virus but there has also been a positive rate of change in the roll-out of the vaccine. That makes it difficult for us to define exactly where we are going to be in four or six weeks. Are we going to see clear, specific advice in time for reopening? I make specific reference to WIT. Last year, its president, Professor Willie Donnelly, went out on a limb, and was subsequently shown to be correct in doing so, by asking students not to return to campus. It was a very difficult decision and he left himself exposed to criticism by making what ultimately turned out to be the correct decision. Are we going to get that specific information out to people in a timely way?

I read something fascinating recently about the impact the Spanish flu had on the built environment of the 1920s and I think ventilation will be this century's response to this pandemic. Solving the ventilation issue will do much more than solve Covid. It will have a lot of positive knock-on benefits, not just on education but across our built environment. That would not be money poorly spent.

My final question relates to international students. I have touched on the challenges in funding third level and international students form a big part of the current funding model. Does the Minister have any further detail on the numbers expected this year or modelling on the funding implications? Do we have any specific requirements for incoming international students, such as vaccination, digital passports, etc.? I ask the Minister to comment on that.

Deputy Simon Harris: On the borrowing framework for technological universities, I am aware of the Deputy's interest in this matter, both from a regional point of view in the south east and more broadly in terms of the roll-out of technological universities. We are engaging intensively with the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform on this matter. It could be a potential game changer for technological universities in Ireland and for the regions. In fairness to the Departments, it is not a straightforward issue. It requires a bit of work but it is worth doing that work and it is under way.

I take the Deputy's point about specific information for students and he put that across in a very fair way. I would contend that we have published a lot of information already. The benefit of the information this year, as opposed to last year when this new Department barely existed, is that we have been working very collaboratively. The document we have published to show how people are going to get safely back to college campuses was written by staff, students and management and has been endorsed by public health, my Department and the Government.

On not one occasion but three occasions - in April, June and July - the Government has said that we want to get our students back to campus. Instead of taking an all-or-nothing approach, we developed a framework and that framework details what people can expect at a minimum and at a maximum in terms of on-site education. At a minimum, tutorials, classroom-based work, laboratories and libraries will come back. Other facilities like societies, clubs and sports can come back in line with the overall advice outside the college campus. At the maximum end, we will get back to the larger scale lectures. It seems prudent, according to public health, to plan for the lectures now but we are planning for them in a way that will require modification. That modification relates to some of the issues upon which the Deputy has touched, such as ventilation, face masks, duration, entry and exit points.

I commend Professor Willie Donnelly on all the work he has done, and did last year too, but I would like us to have an overarching framework and understanding as to what those modifications are, in order that we can all speak with one voice. We must accept that there will be differences between WIT and other places, for example, but there would be an overarching framework for how to safely modify lecture halls for staff and students in a way that is endorsed by public health.

On the issue of international students, the basic rule of thumb is that the same rule applies to a student coming in as to anybody else when it comes to the digital Covid certificate or mandatory hotel quarantine. We do not discriminate positively or negatively in favour of students coming in because the virus does not discriminate positively or negatively, whether people are here on their holidays, for work or for college. However, we go one step further. Something that worked very well last year was that we worked with institutions, particularly our larger institutions where international students tend to come to study, to put in place measures to help the students self-quarantine if that is the requirement, depending on where they have come from. For example, we would have a meet-and-greet service at the airport, where students would be safely accompanied to college accommodation and so on. Those measures and protocols, which worked really well last year, will be in place again this year. Part of the €105 million funding package announced yesterday includes supports for the colleges around welcoming those international students safely to Ireland.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the Minister and Minister of State. In closing, I echo Deputy Ó Ríodáin's comments on how important it has been to see this Department set up and how well it has done during the year. It is really showing the complexity of issues, as has been outlined, and the level of planning involved. It shows the need for the Department and the

worth of having it.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for contributing to the meeting. I echo the comments around how they have helped make the new Department a success, particularly given the challenging year we have had. For the entire system to work as effectively as it did over the past year is testament to the efforts of staff and students and indeed all the Department and agency officials as well. I commend both the Minister and Minister of State on expanding, in these difficult times, particularly for students, the number of places available in both higher and further education. It is very significant. The level of access we have to further and higher education and the participation rates, which are among the highest in the world, are something this country should be really proud of. It is part of the debate and we should be shouting about it. We have moved on from the corporation tax rate. Talent is now the reason companies say they are coming here.

I know the Minister does not want to get into the Cassells report but one of the challenges over the past year obviously has been that the non-State sources of income for the higher education institutions have been effectively non-existent. This presents a major funding hole that will have to be addressed. The Minister might like to comment on that. I appreciate there is the big picture but there are also the losses over the past year to 18 months.

On the specific issue of international students, which the Minister raised, I wish to discuss the matter of international students who have received a vaccine not approved by the European Medicines Agency, EMA. These include the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines. This is an issue for graduates returning to Ireland as well, as the Minister knows. It is particularly an issue for significant numbers of students coming from Asia. It is up to each member state to make a determination, if some of the WHO vaccines are approved, to allow those students to enter. Let us say a student is coming from a country not on the red list but the student has received a non EMA-approved vaccine. Has there been any progress on that?

I appreciate it falls between the Departments of Health, Finance and the Minister's own Department but there is an issue around international student insurance which continues to be a problem. Will the Minister reply to those questions and I will then come back in on one or two other issues?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Senator. That point about the additional places is worth briefly commenting on. This is a whole-of-Government effort, be it with the July stimulus, the last budget or now the additional places we got sanctioned by Government a few weeks ago. The further and higher education sector in Ireland has never been larger. Not only that, it has never been larger in areas where there are jobs for the future, be those around green skills or retrofitting and much of the work the Minister of State is leading on the apprenticeship agenda. We are beginning to see the real benefit of the human capital initiative in expanding graduate places and undergraduate courses in things like science, engineering and the likes as well. I acknowledge the huge amount of work and resources that went in there and thank in particular the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, for working with us on that. He, I and the Government as a whole see a real part of our economic recovery being founded in properly expanding the further education, training and higher education space.

On the Cassells issue, while we will not have time to get into it today I always have to mention one thing when people raise it. The Senator did not do this but many people say it has been six years since the report was published and nothing has happened. That of course would be 100% untrue because in the years since the Cassells report was published, funding to the

higher education sector has increased by around €500,000 or 40%. I still believe, and of course I would, that it is not sustainably funded and it needs to be properly funded and we have much work to do on that. It is important to say we are now funding higher education, exclusive of research, to the order of €1.98 billion. The Government has taken an approach in terms of loss income for all sectors of society that the Government does not cover loss of income. Thus the Government supports have been directly related to Covid-related costs and I would be first to acknowledge that does leave other challenges for the higher education sector around some of what we might call commercial losses. My Department is engaging intensively with the representative bodies to see how we monitor that first of all and then how we might be able to help in ways other than direct financial assistance from the Exchequer.

I am very much aware of the the matter of students who have had non EMA-approved vaccines and have heard from institutions on this. My Department, at official level, is engaging with officials in the Department of Health and we will be guided on that by a decision or policy direction from our public health officials and our Department of Health. The issue has not progressed further, to the best of my knowledge.

On the insurance matter, I must admit I do not have the latest on it with me so I will reply to the committee and the Senator on that in writing, if that is okay. I am very much aware of the issue and we have been working with the Departments of Justice and Finance to progress it.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister. I appreciate the funding levels for higher education have increased but as he has pointed out himself, the numbers going into it have significantly increased as well.

I wish to quickly raise a number of other issues. I agree with Deputy Ó Cathasaigh's point around the change in design. With our capital works, the matter of how we can improve ventilation is something we need to explore. A concern has been flagged with capital works and it is one which applies across the economy, namely, the rising cost of building materials. As we all know, this will impact on the sector.

Looking to life post-Covid, one of the things we have seen is a far greater use of technology. As the workforce and everything is changing so quickly we will see a greater use of micro-credentials, upskilling and the Springboard programme will have to expand further. It is something there must be a focus on from the innovation side of the Minister's Department to look at not just what skills are needed post-Covid but which ones will be needed in about ten years' time. I suggest there be funding provided for research on this. I am aware some work has been done by Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, and the Irish Research Council, IRC, on the impact of Covid of society, which will be relevant. We must ask what our learnings from this period are, both from a health point of view but also from a social one, on the impact of what has happened.

I have a final point of concern, on which the Minister may want to comment. Research is always evidence-based and academics argue their cases on the basis of such research. I am somewhat concerned about the case of an academic in a tenured position who encourages vaccine hesitancy and indeed has sought to undermine the public health advice of the Government, particularly given the position they occupy. I am obviously not going to go into the individual circumstances of the case but I think there is-----

Chairman: I am going to cut off the Senator there as I do not expect the Minister to answer that. That is a policy matter for the institutions involved.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I appreciate the Chairman's point but it is important to say there is an obligation on academics and those in the academic community. We must respect freedom of expression and freedom of thought and I am a big advocate for academic autonomy but that autonomy is undermined when evidence-based research is not followed.

Chairman: I concur fully with the Senator but I do not expect the Minister to answer. I would ask the question myself but I want to stick to what the Minister has been brought in to discuss. I absolutely agree with the Senator's sentiments. If the Minister wants to comment on it I have no problem but I do not expect him to comment on it.

It is a matter for the institution involved. I feel strongly regarding the sentiments expressed, but I will say no more. The Minister can comment on it, if he wishes, but I do not expect him to do so. I call the Minister.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will be very careful and restrained in what I say, other than to agree with the sentiments expressed by Senator Byrne. I refer to the importance of the vaccination programme and science research. We have seen the great value derived from science and research in, literally, saving lives and allowing our country and world to reopen. As a former Minister for Health, I witnessed the incredible endeavours of those working 24-7 to try to save lives. It is an awful kick in the gut, to put it mildly, when we see some of this kind of carry-on. I had better bite my tongue, though, beyond saying that much. However, I do not disagree with what was said.

Turning to funding, we are going to have an exciting discussion about properly funding higher education. The Taoiseach is up for it and he is prioritising this undertaking. He wants to get this done and it is one of the reasons he set up this Department and his bona fides in this area are beyond reproach. One aspect we must examine, though, is the staff-student ratio at third level. We talk about it all the time at primary and secondary levels, but we have lost ground, to put it mildly, on the staff-student ratio at third level. As part of a sustainable funding model, one of the things I wish to rectify is how we can get to a good, decent staff-student ratio at this level. I put that down as a marker for a longer conversation that we will undoubtedly have about such a sustainable funding model. It must not be just a case of us asking how much more money we are going to put into the system. It is an important aspect, but also important, however, is what the country is going to get in respect of outputs and outcomes. A proper and sustainable staff-student ratio is one metric we should examine.

The point about microcredentials is important. Again, when we have the discussion about funding, it will go hand in hand with reform. There will be three pots of funding. One will be for what is required as core funding, accepting that there are deficits in that regard which must be addressed. Then, there will be the funding to do new things and to allow us to have a flexible and agile system rather than allocating new money for old rope. In that context, we must explore how we can ensure a 40-year old with three kids, a mortgage and a full-time job - which is the example I refer to frequently - who needs to access a module of higher education can do so in a flexible and agile way. The third pot of money is concerned with how to support students, the provision of supports for those students and enabling access to and inclusion in third level education. Those are going to be the three distinct areas which must be brought together and then knitted together.

Turning to skills, what was said is correct. We will not have time to get into this aspect in detail now, but we are undertaking a massive body of work in my Department on skills infrastructure. We have a lot of it in Ireland. There is the National Skills Council, the labour

market unit in SOLAS and the regional skills forums. However, now that we have a dedicated Department with responsibility for skills, if I may call it that, the question is how we can get the most out of it for the country. In the area of research, for example, we have published the general scheme of the proposed Bill relating to the Higher Education Authority, HEA, and that is important. However, and I flag this aspect for the first time at this committee, because I have not done so elsewhere, I also intend to introduce legislation and a research Bill in 2022. While some things will be dealt with in the governance Bill for HEA, and they should be, I think the breadth of our ambition regarding what we want to do in the research sphere and the structures that we want to put in place to achieve such an outcome will merit a stand-alone research Act. I look forward to working with the committee on that proposed legislation and I thought I should mention that point here.

Chairman: Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan has returned, so I call him now.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I thank the Chair for his patience. I have finally sorted out my IT issues. As Deputy Ó Cathasaigh said, many of the questions I was going to ask have been already posed. I will address a few points. I acknowledge the funding announced yesterday and it is a massive boost for this area. Hopefully, it will allow for further reopening in time. I also raise the issue of mental health supports, which are going to be partially funded from the moneys announced yesterday. I ask the Minister if he can give us clarity on the specific targets for that allocated funding. For example, will the money be directed towards additional emotional and therapeutic counsellors or will it be left up to each university to do what it chooses with its allocation? I would like the Minister to clarify what those specific mental health supports will be.

My second point concerns antigen testing. We have spoken about this aspect now for the best part of 18 months. To be fair, and I have said this to the Minister before, he always has been consistent in his position that we should embrace antigen testing. He stated that not in the context of antigen testing being a replacement for our overall policy in this area, but in respect of such testing having a specific role to play. The Minister has been consistent in making that point. He said in his opening statement that his Department had written to the Government’s expert advisory group on rapid testing to request its early advice. When is a response anticipated? It is an important element in respect of preparations being made for the new term.

Turning to vaccinations, a previous speaker mentioned that the online portal is now open to those aged 18 to 24 years old and an increasing number of adults will now be vaccinated ahead of the return to college. I am always reluctant to ask former Ministers for Health about the current status of health affairs. However, given Minister Harris’s former role, what impact does he think the increasing number of students being vaccinated will have on the overall return to college in September?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy O’Sullivan for his three questions and those topics have been very much on my mind in the past 24 hours. Starting with the mental health supports, I must concede that I am a little torn on this issue. I want to do two things. First, I want to give the individual institutions maximum discretion. For example, if a really good idea is conceived in University College Cork, UCC, and the students and staff get together and devise a scenario regarding what they believe would happen if a certain approach was implemented, then I want to allow them the discretion and flexibility to come up with such local innovative ways to look after mental health and well-being. Second, though, I want to ensure we do not just announce funding for mental health supports only for all of us to be asking what difference it has made in six or 12 months’ time. Since this funding was approved in the past 24 hours, therefore, I have

been discussing its allocation with my officials. We will, basically, allocate the money to the HEA and then that body will, in turn, apportion it to individual institutions.

Before that money leaves the HEA, I want to have a shared understanding regarding what we will view as a menu or metric of good outcomes from that spending. For example, after talking a great deal to students, I feel strongly about increasing the number of hours of availability of access to student mental health counsellors. I will put it like this, while we will not micro-manage this endeavour and we will allow the institutions the flexibility to get the best out of this funding by working with the student unions and, crucially, listening to the voices of students, we will also try to set out some parameters that will enable us to acquire an understanding of the outputs and outcomes of this funding allocation rather than just being aware that more money has been provided. I will be happy to keep the committee updated on this and I will write to it regarding this matter probably next week, once I have concluded my deliberations.

Moving on to antigen testing, I acknowledge the brilliance of the people working in our sector on this issue. I refer to Professors Breda Smyth, Kingston Mills, Paddy Mallon and Mary Horgan. I am sure that I have left out a load of names, but those are just some of the co-applicants for the pilot project which is now running in UCC, University College Dublin, UCD, the National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIG, and Trinity College Dublin, TCD. They have now become household names in respect of having provided expert advice throughout the pandemic. Two are members of the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, and one is working on the front line in St. Vincent's University Hospital. Therefore, these are people who really know what is going on when it comes to Covid-19.

I acknowledge and praise my successor in the role of Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, for setting up the expert advisory group in the Department of Health under the chairmanship of Professor Mary Horgan. I think that group was established the week before last and we wrote to it then to say we would need its expert advice in the context of a situation where we might reach a decision point in respect of our pilot project demonstrating benefits in using rapid testing. In that case, we might have to ask the expert group how we could best go about scaling up such an approach and how to undertake that endeavour. In fairness to the group, we wrote to it only in recent days, so I am not suggesting it is being in any way tardy with its response. However, I hope our request could be treated with a sense of urgency, given the level of importance the Government has attached to the reopening in the autumn. Therefore, I am certain we will engage with the expert group in a collaborative fashion.

On the vaccination programme, I sometimes get criticised for commenting on my former Department while also being asked about it frequently. I am delighted to see the acceleration of the vaccination programme. Huge credit should be given to the Department of Health, the Minister and the HSE for getting us to a position where we can accelerate the vaccination programme. However, let me be clear that being vaccinated is not a requirement to go to college in September. On the other hand, the more people we have vaccinated, the better we will be able to get on top of this virus and live more safely. Therefore, I have no doubt it will have a very positive impact. I encourage students to get vaccinated, but I do not need to encourage them because there is great excitement and enthusiasm among students who want to get their lives back on track and to get vaccinated. We have not seen the sort of hesitancy that has been seen in some countries.

The next ask I have, and which I believe we all have, is to get the portal open as quickly as possible for 16 and 17-year-olds. Many of them, particularly 17-year-olds, could well end up being college students. We are also seeing a particular spike in cases among 16 and 17-year-

olds and it would be great if we could see the portal open early in August for this age group. It is my expectation that will happen. To address Deputy O’Sullivan, the mood music around the vaccine programme, the acceleration of it and the fact that if one is 18 one can now access a Covid-19 AstraZeneca, Pfizer or Moderna vaccine through a pharmacy is great news. This should mean that we are on track to have the overwhelming majority of adults fully vaccinated in our country by the end of August. That has to be very helpful for the reopening of education in general.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Do I have time, Chairman, for one final question?

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I welcome the Minister’s comments on the mental health supports and it is good that there would be some specification or descriptor going to the colleges rather than just a tranche of funding as this is important.

To finish on the issue of international students that was raised previously, many of these students coming into the country have missed out on the possibility of education here over the past while. I have written a number of parliamentary questions in the past year and the latest response I received a number of weeks ago stated that the Minister did not have the exact enrolment figures for 2020 and 2021 but that those figures will be available later on this year. Again, does the Minister know when these figures will be available or can he even give a rough estimate to gauge the potential loss of international students to the colleges nationwide and the financial implications for those institutions?

Finally, on contingency planning, if other variants of concern or if further twists in this Covid-19 tale arise and we face the possibility or threat of more disruption and closures in the autumn, where are we placed to deal with that, hopefully, never-to-be-seen eventuality but it is always a possibility?

Deputy Simon Harris: On the question of international students which has been raised on a number of occasions today, I commit to the joint committee Chairman to obtaining a detailed briefing note for the committee. While we may not have final figures for another while, we should be able to provide the committee with indicative figures of this type and I will be happy to do that. We will revert to the committee in the month of August before the committee reconvenes.

On contingency planning, there is always planning of this type. I am nervous even saying that because straightaway some people - not Deputy O’Sullivan - will misinterpret or suggest that we are not fully committed to getting people back safely. We are. The Taoiseach himself in his address to the nation said that he wants students back on college campuses. We have deemed it essential and have ring-fenced €105 million to make it happen and we have a public health endorsement for our plan. There is always, however, contingency planning.

The beauty of our framework this year is that it is not all or nothing. It is not a question of whether everything or nothing can happen on site but is a question of a scale as to what can happen on site. That is where the contingency plan really lies. If it does not become possible to do some of the larger gatherings that one would wish to do in a lecture hall, perhaps that piece can then happen in a blended way but that does not mean the whole college will go off-line and it being a case of “We’ll see you next year”. The tutorials and classrooms will still happen, the libraries will stay open, the societies, clubs and sports will happen in line with public health

advice so that every single student has a reason and opportunity to be on campus. That is the prize we are all working day and night to achieve.

Chairman: I thank both Deputy O’Sullivan and the Minister for those exchanges. On a number of points, I notice, like Deputy Ó Cathasaigh and O’Sullivan have, that most of the questions have been already asked. I have a question on antigen testing but the Minister has already answered that. In fairness, there has been a great amount of research and I commend all of the colleges that were involved in that.

What work has been done on CO2 and air filtration? I met an air filtration company just yesterday and it showed me some of its equipment that can clean the air. It mentioned that less than 20% of infections can be contracted by touching but with the new variant there is an 80% possibility of contracting it through the air. What work has the Minister’s Department done with the colleges on this issue and will all of the lecture halls have such filtration equipment in place by the time the colleges reopen?

On contingency planning, and I do not want this point taken out of context in any way, but when one looks at the new variants that are coming through, including the Delta variant - hopefully there will not be any more of them - I am aware that planning is ongoing to be able to get ahead of any such variants that may be forthcoming. Turning to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, there is a serious backlog in apprenticeships training caused by the pandemic and the need to expand apprenticeship places. I know the Minister of State has spoken about this in response to previous questions but on 8 May the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, referred to it as an emergency requiring national mobilisation to avert this crisis particularly in electrical, carpentry and plumbing apprenticeships. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, outline what measures are in place to avert the crisis to ensure this backlog can be cleared in as exponential a way as possible? In addition, what plans are there to significantly increase the number of apprenticeships specifically in the electrical, carpentry, plumbing and construction areas? Apprenticeships and their importance is an issue on which I hear a great deal on a regular basis from the construction industry. Will the Minister of State comment on that question please and perhaps the Minister, Deputy Harris, might respond first?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Chairman for his question. On the issue of air filtration, ventilation and such matters, as I stated earlier, as part of the plans in how we use lecture halls I expect our discussion around ventilation to be part of that. Part of the intensive work the sector is undertaking includes consideration of the modifications one might make to a lecture hall to make it safe from a staff and student point of view. Hopefully, we will have an outcome on our deliberations on that in the next week or so.

On variants, the Chairman is correct and as a former Minister for Health I am always acutely aware of Covid-19, the dangers of it, and the fact that this is a virus, as the Tánaiste has said, which can often rubbish best-made plans. I am very aware of all of that but I am also very aware that the vaccines work. That is now the difference. We have a very transmissible and contagious variant and we are seeing a very significant spike in cases in many countries and are likely to see a big increase here but we also know that if one is vaccinated, this vaccine provides one with very significant protection from this variant. My optimistic note is built against the backdrop that every single week hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of people are being vaccinated and fully protected together with the expectation of where we will be by the end of August as to vaccine level, coupled then with the fact that we have a plan that is endorsed by public health and is operating on a scalable framework as to a minimum and maximum amount of on-site activity which we monitor very closely.

In case I do not get the opportunity to make a further contribution, I must say to our stakeholders in the Irish University Association, IUA, THEA, the Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, SOLAS, the HEA, the Union of Students of Ireland, the trade union movement and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, IFUT, the Teachers' Union of Ireland TUI, and AONTAS, that we are very lucky to have these stakeholders who are working so collaboratively. They are all working with a common aim of increasing on-site provision in a way that is safe for staff and students and that is really what is helping us make progress. I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: I call the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, to speak now, please.

Deputy Niall Collins: On the query raised by the Chairman, much of what he has articulated is similar to what was raised by Deputy Conway-Walsh earlier. One of the issues we must be very conscious of as we address the backlog and which we have discussed with the off-the-job training providers is the maintenance of the standard and quality of the training and to also protect the integrity of the apprenticeship scheme. It is very important to maintain this context. Earlier in the year we provided €20 million of new money in capital expenditure to SOLAS and to the HEA to provide and facilitate an additional 4,000 places across the range of craft apprenticeships. That is specifically aimed at addressing the needs of sectors, particularly the construction sector, as the Chair outlined. Committee members will be aware also of the significant targets we have within the apprenticeship action plan to increase our registration of apprenticeships to 10,000 per annum by 2025. That is a key action within the apprenticeship action plan. On addressing the backlog, the answer I gave earlier is our position on that. We are working with the training providers, the education and training boards, ETBs, the institutes of technology, and our technological universities. A plan is being developed to address that backlog over a 12- to 15-month period. This recognises that we have to protect the integrity of the quality of apprenticeships.

Chairman: I want to allow one more person back in. Senator Dolan has been waiting and she did a favour for me last week by stepping in to chair a meeting. I will give Senator Dolan two minutes. We have gone beyond the allocated time and the Covid officer will be after me. I know she is smiling at me, but I have gone over 20 minutes today. I want to be fair to Senator Aisling Dolan.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Very briefly, I would like to acknowledge the response I received from the Minister, Deputy Harris's office about English language education in Ireland. Within the Minister's Department, a working group has been set up to specifically work with student representatives and providers across this area. The Minister probably does not have time to come back in on this. However, he noted that the educational providers would have their own systems in place for refunds. If they do not, there is an opportunity for students to engage with the Department of Justice. If there is dissatisfaction, as the Minister mentioned, there are opportunities for representatives to come in. I know from NUI Galway that international students would have to go through quarantining processes and measures as well, but we should get that back up and going for the third level sector, as a form of income for universities.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Senator Dolan. I want to say that Ireland is open for international education. Ireland is now part of the EU digital Covid system. As the Senator rightly said, the rules that are in place for anybody coming into the country also apply to international students. In many ways, there are more safeguards and checks in place for international students, because of the excellent work being carried out by our institutions, with our financial support.

On the English language schools, the provision of English language education presents a huge opportunity to our country, particularly in a post-Brexit context. Ireland can position itself as a leader in this area. That will require reforms, though. Many of these are being worked on in my Department, including, crucially, the quality assurance mark. We are calling this the international education mark. One of my big priorities for the coming months is to make progress on the implementation of the international education mark, so that we can stand over the quality of English language teaching in Ireland. This will be helpful to our country, to the English language schools and, crucially, helpful to the students availing of English language schools.

Chairman: I thank everyone for their contributions today. Before I close the meeting I would like to pass on my condolences to the O'Malley family on the passing of their dear dad, Des O'Malley. Des O'Malley was an icon in the Houses of the Oireachtas for many years. He made his mark on Irish politics. Does the Minister of State, as a Limerick man, want to come in or would the Minister like to come in?

Deputy Niall Collins: I join the Chair in expressing words of condolences and sympathies on the passing of the late Des O'Malley. He was a little bit before my time. I served with his daughter, former Senator Fiona O'Malley, in the Oireachtas during my first round in the Dáil. This is the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I note that the O'Malleys were steeped in education. The history of Des O'Malley's late uncle, Donogh O'Malley, is well known by us all. There is a broad family of O'Malleys right across Limerick city and county. They are steeped in community and in politics. Interestingly, much of the media discussion has naturally centred on the establishment of the Progressive Democrats by Des O'Malley and others. Interestingly, not all of the O'Malley clan across Limerick followed Des O'Malley and joined the Progressive Democrats. Many of them stayed in Fianna Fáil. There was an extensive gathering of a few hundred of the O'Malley clan in Limerick recently, when times permitted, and that was one of the key features which was discussed by the extended clan. Politics unites, but it also divides, as we know.

Chairman: I ask the Minister, Deputy Harris, to comment.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will stay out of Limerick politics as I know better than to get involved. I join the Chair, members of the committee and people across the Oireachtas in extending our sincere sympathies and condolences to the family of the late, great Des O'Malley. Looking back at his career as a younger politician is quite overwhelming. He confronted challenges with such courage. During his tenure as Minister for Justice, he was just 31 years of age. He and his family faced personal risks in a very different Ireland, thankfully, to the one we live in now. People would always remember Des O'Malley as a man of integrity, courage and principle, and as a man who made a real impact on political life. He made a positive impact on the life and well-being of our country. Our thoughts are with his daughter, former Senator Fiona O'Malley, who served in these Houses, with his son, Eoin, who contributes to public debate, and with all his family, former colleagues, and friends. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Chairman: I thank the Minister, the Minister of State, and their officials for coming before us today. I thank them for engaging in a comprehensive discussion on an issue that is of crucial importance to us, as public representatives, as well as to the thousands of students who want to get back to on-campus learning. The Minister, the Minister of State, their Department, and their officials, from the Secretary General down, will do everything possible to ensure that this happens in a safe manner. All the university and third level institutions want that as well. I thank them for their work over the last number of months in preparation for what will, hope-

fully, happen in September.

This is the last meeting before the summer recess. I thank the members of the committee. It has been a busy committee. We have dealt with a huge number of issues. I hope the work we have done has been of assistance to the Department of Education and to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We have highlighted some important issues. We have held Ministers and Departments to account, while respecting them for the jobs that they do.

As Chair, I again thank all the members of the committee. I would like them to enjoy your summer recess and to take a rest. We will see them all back in September. I thank the committee officials, two of whom, Séamus and Niamh, are departing, for their work since I became Chair. I thank also Ms Tara Kelly, the committee clerk.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.38 p.m. *sine die*.