

John Swinney MSP
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
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25 August 2020

Dear Deputy First Minister,

Safe returns to university campuses

Thank you for coming along to the Ministerial Leadership Group last Thursday 20 August, it was helpful to have your reports on a number of important matters facing the university sector.

We agree with your analysis on the current fragile position in relation to the prevalence of Covid-19 in Scotland, and that university campuses must only re-open when it is safe to do so. Our union is clear that as we approach the start of the new academic year, we must take every precaution possible to avoid universities becoming Covid hotspots.

UCU has appreciated the opportunity to contribute our views to Scottish Government work on safe returns to campus over the past few months. We have contributed to discussions which led to the sectoral guidance for higher education, the laboratories and research facilities guidance, and the student accommodation guidance. In the last week our union has reflected on the latest position as regards campus returns, and drawn on the experiences and knowledge of the union's lay officers and our branch health and safety officers in particular. We were able to provide your officials with our views on a range of mitigations late last week (as per the attached note), and I wanted to reiterate some of those key demands to you too, as the Cabinet Secretary for Education.

A key request from our union is that the Scottish Government take steps to require the use of face coverings for students and staff when indoors on university campuses. Given the increasing calls from the World Health Organisation for use of face coverings, we believe that in the interests of safety, minimising the risk of spreading the virus, and for consistent and clear messaging, everyone that is able, should be required to wear a face covering when indoors on university premises. We are urging you to update the Scottish Government's directions on this issue, which will keep our sector consistent with the Government's "FACTS" guidance.

We believe that the need for students or staff to be physically present on campus and to engage in face to face contact in the current climate should be minimised as much as possible, and we fully endorse the Scottish Government's position that home working should remain the default position where possible. Our sector has shown that lectures, tutorials and student support can be delivered remotely to students to a significant extent. Given the risks associated with having large numbers of students and staff from all parts of Scotland, the UK and the world, travelling to study in Scotland's university campuses, we strongly believe that as much education as possible should be delivered via virtual means for the immediate future. The union is urging government and employers to adopt this precautionary approach.

Maintaining the two metres social distancing rules are strongly supported by our union for all parts of campus. We would additionally urge cognisance to be taken of the importance of volumes of space, for there to be clear rules on ventilation, and for additional cleaning and hygiene regimes to be implemented on campuses too. It is clear that we also need a robust system of widespread testing in place, which includes testing of international students and staff, regular sample testing, and easy access to walk-in testing centres for all students and staff.

Our union remains concerned about staff and students who are being required to be on campus, particularly those who are more vulnerable to the virus, including older people, BME people, pregnant colleagues, and disabled people. It was helpful to have Professor Jason Leitch's reference to the Scottish Government's individual risk assessment index, and our reps are urging employers to use this, and ensure people in high risk categories are not forced to work in face to face roles, as per Professor Leitch's advice.

I hope these comments from our union help to shape the Scottish Government's revision of current guidance for our sector, and we do urge you to ensure that the highest safety and public health standards are in place in Scotland's universities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Mary Senior
Scotland Official

Cc Richard Lochhead MSP, Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science.