

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's 300,000 students have arrived, like a flock of migrating geese, to settle into their winter quarters.

But they won't be packing the campuses, labs and lecture rooms in our 19 universities and 26 colleges. Instead, they face what the government admits will be "a fundamentally different year" because of the Covid-19 crisis.

It will be "blended learning", much of it online. Class sizes are limited to 30, with social distancing and there will be, in official speak, "a need to drastically curtail the socialising many would associate with this period".



It's exceedingly odd there's no one about in the quad. The University and College Union has warned of a "recipe for disaster" as students, travelling from all parts of the country, get together, living in student flats and halls of residence. It claims the student return may result in a repeat of the care home crisis.

But there were similar scare stories when the schools re-opened a fortnight ago and, so far, there's been no major

resurgence of the virus. Despite the increased number of pupils being tested, less than one per cent have proved positive. Instead we have several local outbreaks among adults, the largest being in the Glasgow area where a semi-lockdown has been imposed. Families in Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire are being told not to visit each other's homes or hold house parties for the next fortnight. And it's not just party goers in the west of Scotland who have been misbehaving. Police had to break up a party of 300 people in a house in Gorebridge, Midlothian last Sunday night.

Overall, the number of confirmed cases has been rising slightly as more venues are being opened, such as gyms and swimming pools. The reinfection rate is thought to have risen to a little over 1:1. But the death rate is remaining low, the total now standing at 4,228, with 6 deaths in the last week.

The universities, though, are facing a financial black hole as the number of fee-paying foreign students has dropped by 50 per cent. The umbrella body, Universities Scotland, has estimated a loss of £75m this year alone. And a report for the University and College Union warns the loss may be as large as £500m. So far, the government has offered an extra £75m in research support and has promised a review of funding when the position becomes clearer.

Students may not be as interested in politics as they once were but when they come to the end of their studies and discover a failed economy they may wake up. This week Nicola Sturgeon used her "programme for government" speech to parliament to try to address the economic crisis. There's to be a £1.6bn fund for "green investment", including insulation and heating of homes and public buildings, better public transport and cycling facilities and an expanded tree planting programme.

For young people, there will be subsidised job placements. On

the Covid-19 front, there's to be a new NHS tracing app and more GP video consultations. And, of course, there's to be yet another search for the Holy Grail of a national care service to address the crisis in our nursing homes.

But, for the kilted members of the SNP, the topping on the cake is the promise of a referendum bill, laying out the timing and details of second vote on independence, if only the Westminster government will allow it.

The opposition parties have condemned talk of a referendum as a distraction from Ms Sturgeon's "day job". The new Conservative leader, Douglas Ross, has suggested she should instead be revitalising the economy with a large-scale town regeneration programme and building a third lane on the M8 linking Edinburgh and Glasgow.



New College which is usually festooned with Assembly banners
PHOTO ©2020 The Edinburgh Reporter

As the students arrive in Edinburgh, it's a reminder of those other empty quads, where last year at this time the festival shows were being dismantled. The grand Edinburgh Festival and its gigantic Fringe have all been online this year but they've proved to be surprisingly successful. They may have lost two million real audience members, but they have gained 1.5 million virtual viewers. [The Edinburgh International Festival](#) itself reckons it doubled its audience with 26 concerts broadcast online. [The Book Festival](#) staged 146 events, attracting 210,000 viewers, 60,000 more than it ever attracted to the tents in Charlotte Square. And the Fringe organisers say they know of at least 300 shows that were broadcast online.

For all that, I yearn for the return of the real world where we jostle with crowds to get into concert halls and I see students milling around the campuses.



“My Light Shines On”. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
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