

Coronavirus – Scottish Government postpones return of students to college and university

The changes announced on Friday reflect the current status of coronavirus, the reality of the new strain, and a rise in cases in recent weeks.

College and university students will be taught online throughout January and February. Most are not expected back on campuses until the start of March, as part of a revised plan for their return in light of the spread of the new variant of Covid-19.

Only very small numbers of students will be allowed back on campus in January, for example, those who have remained over the winter break or those whose attendance is critical and whose education cannot be delivered remotely or postponed, essential placements, or for reasons of student well-being, where attendance is time-sensitive to the ability to graduate and cannot be delivered remotely or further postponed, very limited numbers of students may be able to return from mid-February.

However all arrangements are subject to a future review of Covid-19 conditions.

Colleges will follow the level guidance for their local

authority area which in practice means with limited exemptions the majority of college students' studies will be on line in January and into February.

The current state of the pandemic, the impact of suppression measures and the roll out of the vaccine will all be taken into account in considering whether it is possible for a return at any point.

Richard Lochhead, Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, said detailed sectoral guidance will be published as soon as possible next week, but that his basic message to students remains that they should not return to their term-time accommodation until in-person teaching resumes, as advised by their institution.

Mr Lochhead said: "These changes reflect the current status of the virus, the reality of the new strain, and the rise in cases in recent weeks.

"The return of students to campus, including returning to term-time accommodation, involves the mass movement of thousands of people across the country. The mixing of people on that scale, including the potential movement of tens of thousands of students to university halls and private-rented flats, simply isn't safe right now. It would fuel the virus, and that is something no one wants.

"Our immediate priority right now is to say to students, other than in specific special circumstances, they must not return to their campus or term-time accommodation before they are specifically told to do so by their institution.

"For the overwhelming majority of university students, this means all learning will be online-only at least for January and February, and students should not expect to return to campus or student accommodation before the end of February.

"We will review plans in light of the state of the pandemic

nearer the time, but right now even the very limited number of returns that were previously planned for phase 2 of the restart dates, cannot happen until at least the middle of next month for the majority of students, supported by rapid-result testing on arrival.

“We would like to thank everyone for their patience and fortitude in dealing with the pandemic over past months, and we understand this is more difficult news – but we want to give students and staff as much certainty as we can so they can plan effectively. That’s why we are setting this plan out now.

“As we have all seen, this virus moves fast and changes quickly but even in light of that reality, hopefully by setting out a clear plan that gives certainty for at least the next two months, everyone can now plan with a greater degree of confidence.”

Planning

Phase 1 – From 5 January:

- any university education that can be done online must be done online
- campus/accommodation can open – but only for students who have remained over winter break and other exceptional returners, including related to where their attendance is critical and time-sensitive to their course or assessment and cannot be delivered remotely or postponed, essential placements or student well-being

Phase 2 – From 15 February

- essential returners to campus/accommodation for in-person teaching where their attendance is time-sensitive to their course or assessment, especially ability to graduate, and cannot be delivered remotely or further

postponed

Phase 3 (provided safe and virus control is at a reasonable level)

- other students may return on a gradual basis to campus and accommodation
- guidance on the extent of in-person teaching will depend on the level the institution is in
- The Scottish Government will review this at the beginning of February and regularly thereafter when this phase can start
- it is unlikely that it will start before the beginning of March

Colleges will follow their own area's protection level guidance:

- in level 4, that means learning and teaching will be online with an exception of a small number of students where face to face teaching and in person assessments are critical to the successful conclusion of their studies but numbers attending colleges should still be kept at the absolute essential minimum.