

# THEA Principles and Guidelines for the delivery of 2020/21 Programmes in the Institutes of Technology in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic



## Background

This short guidance document has been prepared by THEA, to facilitate contingency planning in the Institutes of Technology for the 2020/21 academic year. It is framed on the basis that the existing public health requirements to combat the Covid-19 virus pandemic, including the maintenance of physical or social distancing and personal hygiene measures, will continue in some form into the new academic year.

In this context, it seeks to provide assurances to learners that the academic environment is safe, and that their interests will be at the forefront of all measures undertaken by the institutions to maintain academic delivery during the pandemic. While it is anticipated that certain features of the existing public health requirements may change and be lessened as the summer progresses, it is also the case that some new measures may be introduced, such as the wearing of face coverings in certain circumstances. Mindful of this evolving situation, Institutes must nonetheless plan to deliver their programmes on the basis of the best information currently available to them, and these guidelines are attended to assist them in this work. The document will be kept under review ahead of, and during, the 2020/21 academic year, and will be amended as and when necessary.

## Overarching Principles

- The health, safety and wellbeing of their students and staff is the paramount concern for all Institutes of Technology. Institutional leaders will ensure that the planning for the delivery of programmes in 2020/21 is informed by this principle at every stage.
- Institutes of Technology will endeavour to maintain and protect as fully as possible the quality of the student experience and the academic integrity of their programmes and awards, against the backdrop of the necessary public health measures.
- Communications with staff and students should be clear, frequent and informative and should endeavour to provide assurance about the measures being taken to protect the health and wellbeing of the community, the quality and integrity of the academic offering, and the protection and reinforcement of the institution's sense of community.
- There are a multitude of tools, practices and procedures that combine to protect the health and welfare of the communities in our institutes. Institutes of Technology must balance the various tools, practices and procedures available to them to

maximise their commitment to health and safety and to deliver an appropriate learner experience. This necessitates a risk-based approach to operations and academic delivery.

- Institutes of Technology will endeavour to maintain an inclusive approach in the delivery of their programmes, and that all measures introduced to combat the Covid-19 virus will be proportionate and designed to protect the needs and interests of the entire student cohort.
- Public health requirements issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team and other Government bodies will be embedded in the measures adopted by Institutes of Technology for the delivery of their programmes in 2020/21.
- Each Institute of Technology is best placed to evaluate the needs of its students and staff, and the possibilities and limitations of its facilities and resources, in delivering its academic portfolio.
- Contingency and scenario planning must necessarily take place at the institutional level, and it will be mindful of the particular requirements of the academic disciplines in which it teaches and conducts research. It will likely involve the participation of a wide-range of institutional functions to determine the feasibility of different scenarios/options, including, but not confined to, academic planning/affairs, estates (for spatial/workflow planning), human resources and student welfare/health functions.

### General Delivery Guidelines

- Institutes of Technology are mindful that their students aspire to preserve the on-campus student experience. We are supportive of that aspiration, while working within the constraints of public health guidelines. The sense of community and collective learning that underpins the higher education student experience is appreciated and valued.
- Institutes of Technology recognise that scientific knowledge about the Covid 19 virus is steadily growing and that, in response, public health measures to combat it are subject to constant review and adaptation. In this context, the parameters for planning and delivering the 2020/21 academic year are necessarily fluid and will change over time.
- Institutes of Technology, in these circumstances, will adopt a flexible approach to their provision in the 2020/21 academic year, in which they will adjust and adapt their teaching, learning and assessment approaches as and when necessary, and in a manner that is:
  - appropriate and proportionate;
  - linked to public health advice;
  - supports all learners in meeting the learning outcomes of each programme;

- ensures the safest possible environment for their communities, while prioritising the student experience;
  - and moves towards maximising onsite provision and the resumption of the regular academic calendar.
- A more blended academic offering will be necessary in 2020/21 to maintain the quality of the student experience, preserve academic integrity and ensure the safe delivery of programmes. This may entail replacing some face-to-face or in-class delivery with online or remote delivery. The relative volumes of face-to-face and online/remote delivery will vary across institutions, and will be dependent on such factors as:
    - the identified needs of individual learners and groups of learners, including those at particular stages of programmes (First Year, Final Year etc.) and those with special needs;
    - the particular teaching and learning needs of individual academic disciplines
    - the overall student population;
    - the available physical spaces;
    - and the general layouts of individual campuses.
- Training will be provided to staff and students — including specifically tailored Covid-19 induction programmes for students, academic staff, support staff, and management — to help the college community adjust to the altered campus experience, and to support the wellbeing of all members of that community.
- Appropriate and proportionate measures will be adopted to assure the quality of refashioned programmes.
- The transition experience of new entrants is of primary importance in establishing a positive student experience more generally, and particular care must be taken to ensure that the transitions dimension is central to all planning in providing a blended academic offering in 2020/21.
- Particular care must be taken to provide a positive induction element to first year students, including international students, and must incorporate some face-to-face elements.
- In line with their commitment to providing access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, Institutes of Technology will endeavour to maximise on-campus engagement for vulnerable students to ensure a positive learning experience. In circumstances where this is not possible additional measures will be taken to protect their interests.
- Institutes of Technology will adopt a range of measures based on a formal risk assessment of the type and requirements of the learning environment for each cohort of students. These measures may include:
    - Preventing the entry of the virus into circulation in the community and isolating potential cases in a proactive manner;

- Putting in place procedures for the provision of learning to those at risk and unable to enter the physical environment;
  - Establishing campaigns to promote appropriate social behaviour including in relation to non-attendance when symptomatic; hygiene and hygiene etiquette; social distancing behaviour; and broader awareness on expectations of community behaviour and incident reporting;
  - Strengthening the medical offering to support institutional identification of potential cases of Covid-19, and appropriate student behaviours;
  - Creating protocols on contact tracing and virus spread prevention;
  - Creating a formal policy on student activities and events that supports social distancing norms and appropriate measures for their enforcement;
  - Physical redesign of the spatial layout to minimise social contact where students are in transit;
  - The application of classroom rules on social distancing based on the needs of the discipline and the physical environment;
  - Procedures that support students to access lecturer materials if they are unable to attend, and the removal of all mandatory attendance requirements unless required for professional accreditation.
- Based upon institutional risk assessments, the nature of any class room activity will be reviewed to ensure the appropriateness of:
- the size of the group/class;
  - the duration of lectures/tutorial or laboratory activity;
  - the range and type of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) necessary to support the activity.

Where necessary and appropriate, it will also facilitate the creation of permanent class/teams/groups to limit unnecessary interaction.

### General Health and Hygiene Guidelines

- Students and staff exhibiting Covid-19 symptoms, including fever (temperature), cough, shortness of breath and breathing difficulties, must not attend campus and participate in face-to-face teaching and learning activities. They must self-isolate for fourteen days.
- Staff and students who are in 'at risk' groups, or are otherwise vulnerable, should be supported to attend campus and participate in face-to-face teaching and learning activities. Additional protective measures should be put in place to facilitate their participation or, when necessary and as needed, alternative and temporary provisions made for off-site participation. Student support structures, medical facilities and general management structures should be available to engage with individuals on their particular situations and to assess their individual needs.
- Hand hygiene remains one of the most effective measures in suppressing the virus and Institutes of Technology will put in place hygiene stations throughout their

campuses to enable staff and students to wash their hands regularly and thoroughly while onsite participating in teaching and learning activities.

- Students and staff will be reminded continually to maintain cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene measures, including coughing and sneezing into the sleeve or elbow, and disposing of tissues.
- Wearing of face coverings will be mandatory for certain teaching and learning activities, in line with current public health advice.
- The expectation that staff and students will act responsibly when exhibiting symptoms, and in adhering to the required hygiene measures, should be communicated regularly and directly, and the assistance of staff and student representative bodies should be utilised in such communications.
- The requisite social distancing measures will be adhered to and will inform planning for academic delivery in terms of the numbers of students allowed on campus each day, and the numbers allowed in particular spaces for individual teaching and learning sessions. Scenario planning will consider options for delivery with both two metre and one metre separation requirements. It is generally recognised that a separation requirement of no more than one metre, if sanctioned, would better facilitate planning, and the maintenance of a quality student experience.
- Thorough cleaning and disinfection of all frequently touched objects and surfaces, both in teaching spaces and communal areas, will be maintained throughout the academic year.