

# IMPLEMENTING A SAFE RETURN TO CAMPUS

3<sup>rd</sup> August 2021

## Introduction

This paper represents a whole-of sector approach to the safe and sustainable operation for the coming academic year. It sets out detail for the implementation of the *A safe return to on-site further and higher education and research (Safe Return Plan)* published by D/FHERIS on 15 June 2021. That plan has been inclusively formed and is endorsed by our public authorities. We are also mindful of the success and reach of the vaccination programme and that represents a critical contextual pillar as set out below.

## Context

The re-opening of higher education in September 2021 is underpinned by three primary pillars:

1. Higher education has been nominated as an 'essential service' by government.
2. There is an overwhelming desire from students for a return to on-campus learning and research activity.
3. The vast majority, if not all adults, including college students will have been offered the opportunity to be vaccinated by September.

## Guidelines

Based on those foundational tenets, higher education institutions (HEIs) are now advanced in planning a return to campus in September 2021 based on the detail set out in the adopted and approved *Safe Return Plan*. The following measures are being applied across the sector with each HEI adapting the measures to their local context and physical infrastructure.

To this end our institutions will:

- ✓ Commit to adherence to public-health informed Government guidance in *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead* and any further/future iterations of this guidance.
- ✓ Commit to maximising and optimising the on-campus experience for all students and to balancing carefully the public health risks against the known pedagogical, student experience, and mental health benefits.
- ✓ Affirm the primacy afforded to public health and care for welfare and safety of our learning and research communities.
- ✓ Note the critical need for personal responsibility and shared collective responsibility to facilitate the safe operation of campus life.
- ✓ Accept that the protocol is fashioned to afford a sustainable year on campus and that it is reasonably anticipated that the public health context will evolve as the year progresses. It is calibrated to address not just one but all scenarios which can reasonably be anticipated.
- ✓ Undertake that the needs of all students will be considered regardless of level, year, or discipline of study.
- ✓ Facilitate access to research spaces, laboratories, placement sites, and other physical settings as appropriate.
- ✓ Continue to provide specific extra supports for students where required.
- ✓ Adopt the separate protocol agreed by the HEIs for the arrival of international students to Ireland to ensure their safety and that of the communities in which they will live and study.
- ✓ Ensure that all campus operations are conducted in such a manner as to manage any risk to individual and public health through adherence to such relevant regulations, guidance, and advice as may apply from time to time:

- Adhering to standard hygiene measures including hand hygiene and dispensers, sanitary hygiene, respiratory hygiene, cleaning and sanitisation procedures;
- Requiring face masks in indoor on-site shared settings in accordance with prevailing public health regulations and guidance;
- Working to optimise ventilation systems to minimise risk of viral transmission, in line with local context and assessment;
- Ensuring that entry and egress to buildings and facilities will be carefully managed via contra flow and other measures;
- Managing lecture times flexibly where required to provide for controlled exit and entry to large lectures and to avoid congregation;
- Actively manage large lecture theatres in particular, either by applying percentage occupancy limits, setting a maximum class size, an upper limit on lecture length/ period of continuous occupancy or otherwise, depending on local context and risk assessment.
- ✓ Protect through reasonable accommodation any member of the research or learning community for whom vaccination is medically contravened.
- ✓ Promote fullest engagement with the vaccination rollout recognizing that high levels of vaccination protect all.
- ✓ Collaborate with the HSE to ensure rapid access to testing and vaccination, including on-site provision if practicable, subject to such measures being approved by government and the necessary resources and infrastructure provided.
- ✓ Support standard public health procedures for testing of symptomatic staff or students with appropriate arrangements for management of disease incidence and investigation and control of outbreaks.
- ✓ Continue to assess campus operation in light of the evolving public health status and to seek to enhance further the on-site experience of the institution in line with the overall progression of disease control and mitigation measures.

Cognisant of the discretion afforded in the national framework, institutions will work locally in consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure safe and sustainable implementation.