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27 January 2021

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): SEMESTER TWO RETURN OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Dear student,

I am writing following the [First Minister's announcement](#) on 8 January, and the subsequent updating of our guidance, to provide further clarity on arrangements for college and university students at the start of term in 2021.

Since last writing to you, we have seen the emergence of a new variant of COVID-19 which is significantly more transmissible; and with the overall level of community transmission currently being very high, it is important to limit the numbers on campus.

I understand that this situation is very difficult for students and that you will be more keen than ever to return to your campuses and term-time accommodation. However, controlling levels of community transmission plays an important role in ensuring that our colleges and universities can remain safe for staff and students, and I am grateful for the effort and sacrifices you have made to help protect yourself and your fellow students.

It is important to be very clear on this point - by staying at home; by not travelling to your term-time accommodation; and by following the guidance and restrictions; you are helping to protect yourselves and others by preventing the spread of the virus. I am extremely grateful to you all for your continued efforts and sacrifices in this regard.

From 5 January, any university education that can be done online must be done online, while colleges will follow the protection level guidance for their local authority area which will mean the majority of college students will be taught online in January and into February.

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University and college campuses and accommodation will be open only for students who have remained over the winter break and other exceptional returners, where their attendance is critical and time-sensitive to their course or assessment and cannot be delivered remotely or postponed; for those on essential placements; or for reasons relating to student well-being.

[Guidance](#) has now been published to provide clarity on semester two arrangements for college and university students, including important information on when students will be permitted to return to their term-time accommodation, supported once again by rapid-result testing. We have also published an [FAQ](#) for students on the Student Information Scotland website.

The Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.2) Act 2020 introduced notice to leave periods for students in halls of residence and Purpose Built Student Accommodation for reasons relating to COVID-19.

I am aware many students are taking advantage of the provision to withdraw from leases for accommodation and I understand the concerns of students about the impact the current lockdown has on their accommodation. I have written to institutions and accommodation providers to make clear that where a student is giving notice, we expect them to be helpful and facilitative in giving effect to this, in line with the provisions in the Act.

The Act does not require students who wish to terminate their agreements to confirm what their reason relating to coronavirus is. Nor does it require them to provide evidence of that reason, nor does it require accommodation providers to approve the reason. I therefore do not expect accommodation providers to ask for evidence from students, or refuse to accept a notice due to a lack of reasons being given or because they disagree with the reasons being provided.

Colleges, universities and accommodation providers have a duty of care to students, and I expect them to continue to support your wellbeing and development. Essential in-person student wellbeing and study support services can continue to be provided by exception only where it is not possible to do this remotely - this includes providing access to safe study spaces on campus and in student associations for students who need it the most.

I am aware of the financial impact this crisis has had on students and I recognise how difficult the situation continues to be. I'm delighted therefore that we have this week announced £30 million of additional funding to provide further support for affected students and to support our institutions. £20 million of this funding will be used to help alleviate the financial pressure on students. I recognise that this crisis has caused additional financial difficulties for many of you and this extra funding, which adds to the support we have already made available, will relieve some pressure for those facing hardship. Further information is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/support-for-students-in-hardship/>

Information on FE/HE student support is available at: [Student Information Scotland - Funding, Finance and Student Life](#).

It is important that you submit any application at the earliest opportunity so that help can be made available quickly.

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Finally, I want to reiterate that I share your frustration that your educational experience continues to be disrupted, and I want to thank you again for all of your hard work and effort during these extremely challenging times.



RICHARD LOCHHEAD

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