



**An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta**
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

A Safe Return

Government Commitment

On 29 April 2021 the Government made a commitment to a significant increase in on-site further education and training, higher education and research from the beginning of the next academic year.

Higher and further education and training, and research are essential activities, and so the plan for 2021/22 is for mainly on-site activity for all students, learners, and staff.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a framework which will allow for a safe return for all is being developed. The framework allows institutions to adapt to changing circumstances.

Public Health Advice

It is expected that the majority of the people over 18 in Ireland will have been vaccinated by September 2021, and so planning is proceeding on the basis that full resumption of on-site activity is possible, while ensuring that overall numbers attending on-site are monitored and controlled.

The return to on-site activity will take place within public health guidelines. Early planning, well in advance of the beginning of the academic year, allows for ongoing review of the plan and adjustment in line with any changes to public health guidelines.

Objectives

In addition to the safe return to on-site activity, there are seven further objectives for this work. These are:

- To support ongoing public health requirements
- To support the ongoing needs of students, learners and staff

- To retain some scope for online teaching and scope for continuity for students and learners who cannot attend in person for health reasons
- To ensure coherence and consistency in planning and the implementation of public health guidance across the sector
- To support autonomy in the work of institutions and providers in the development of their plans
- To enable a significant resumption of disrupted research activity and return of researchers to site
- To enable a phased return for on-site learning during the summer period

Summer Provision

Summer provision in further and higher education and training, including on-site presence for apprentices, English Language Education, and the resumption of research activity, will go ahead over the coming months in line with prevailing public health advice. Appropriate protective measures will be in place and numbers on site will be controlled.

This approach to returning on-site over the summer period will assist institutions and providers in organising and managing the safe return of larger numbers in the autumn.

New Framework

A new framework has been developed for a safe return to on-site activity for September 2021.

The framework allows institutions and providers to consistently and safely adapt to ongoing changes to COVID-19 guidance and circumstances.

On-site activities

The vaccination programme is rolling out successfully, and so it is expected that a full return to on-site activity is feasible.

This will mean that larger lectures can happen within limits linked to reducing the size / capacity of very large lecture halls and adjustments to the timetable to reduce the number of people on site at any one time. Institutions and providers will determine how best to do this in their own context.

The following will take place on site from September:

- Laboratory teaching and learning
- Classroom based teaching and learning
- Tutorials
- Workshops
- Smaller lectures

- Research
- Workspaces
- Libraries
- Canteens – operational in accordance with public health advice on work place canteens
- Sports facilities – operational in accordance with public health advice
- Clubs and societies – operational in accordance with public health advice
- Bars – operational in accordance with public health advice

Institutions and providers will provide for the needs of individual staff and students who remain at risk of infection, in line with public health advice.

Background

The publication of this plan has been preceded by several months of work undertaken in partnership by the Department, institutions, student representatives and staff representatives.

Further detail on the commitments that each partner has made and actions they will take are available on the Department's website.

These include specific commitments and actions in relation to:

- International students and researchers
- Institution-owned student accommodation; and
- Research

Timeline

June

Publication of A Safe Return

Institutions and providers continue planning, including contingency planning

Summer provision commences

July & August

Ongoing monitoring by Steering Group

Institutions and providers develop maximum attendance plans or move to contingency plans if necessary

September

Safe return to on-site activity

Pillars

The new framework will operate along with and be supported by:

- The [COVID-19 Adaptation Framework](#) which provides a structure, guidance and support for further and higher education institutions and providers.
- [Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education](#), to be updated in line with changes to public health advice.
- Implementation guidelines from each institution and provider.
- A blended model of teaching and learning that is predominantly on-site, with the ability for institutions to amend at local level to meet local context and needs, and to respond to changes in the public health environment
- Detailed planning and contingencies undertaken by higher and further education institutions and the communication of these to students, learners and staff.

Recognising that it is difficult to change direction mid-programme or semester, using this common baseline, institutions and providers can continue to make adaptations throughout the year, making changes best suited to their own context and the needs of their staff, students and learners.

Institutions and providers can continue to use their discretion when deciding between on-site and remote for the scheduling of particular activities, while committing to the principle that as much activity as possible should take place on-site.

Safety during Transition

While the national vaccination programme is proceeding well, and planning for reopening is on that basis, there is still a need to be mindful of the ongoing pandemic and to be prepared for any possible outbreaks of COVID-19.

This preparation will include:

- facilitating and supporting the vaccination programme for students, learners and staff
- promoting of symptom awareness and tracking, and self-management of their own health by students, learners and staff
- supporting pathways for symptomatic students, learners and staff to PCR testing
- engaging strongly with local and national public health advice and guidance

Rapid antigen testing may potentially be an element of this system. If proven through piloting and feasibility, the benefits of rapid testing could provide an additional element to the control strategy set out in national guidance. On foot of the recently published [Work Safely Protocol](#) and feasibility studies that are in train, the sector will begin preparing for a scheme of antigen testing through the formation of working groups.

Communications

Recognising the importance of timely communication with students, learners and staff, and their families, plans, guidance and policies will be communicated as far in advance as possible, recognising that public health advice is subject to change and that some uncertainty will always exist.