University and College Union Scotland

Priorities for academic year 2021/22 in the context of Covid-19

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, staff and students in Scotland's higher education sector have demonstrated incredibly flexibility, with staff showing it is possible to deliver teaching, learning and student support remotely when required to keep everyone safe. Whilst on-line learning can never replace the full campus experience, as the pandemic continues we will need to make use of virtual learning to minimise the spread of the virus.   As we prepare for the new academic year, UCU Scotland is setting out our key priorities for a safe learning environment for all.

1. **Preparing for uncertainty**
    If we've learned anything from the past 18 months, it is that the Covid-19 global health pandemic is one of rapid change, uncertainty and a high level of unpredictability.   The repeated but necessary changes in UK-wide, Scotland-wide and local restrictions since March 2020, underlines this uncertainty. We must learn the lessons of these past 16-18 months, and not rely solely on overly optimistic predictions or pressures. Therefore, we must plan for a level of uncertainty, and so prepare for a number of different scenarios to enable students and staff - along with learning, research and knowledge exchange activity - to adapt to this uncertainty. Importantly this means factoring in the uncertainty, and the likely need to pivot between in-person and virtual activities, into staff workloads.

2. **Prioritising learners**
    In all our planning and preparations for the new academic year, UCU is clear that we must prioritise learners. This means ensuring equity of access to learning, including addressing digital poverty. It means supporting students' articulation from school or college to higher education, addressing and acknowledging the disrupted experiences over the past 18 months.   It also means supporting progression and completion challenges some learners will have, where their university education to date has been disrupted by the pandemic.

3. **Supporting student places**
    Prioritising learners must mean we ensure no one loses out from the pandemic and the disrupted education and exams/assessments diet. This means ensuring there are sufficient student places for 2021/22, learning lessons from last year's exams/SQA situation, and the challenges of the

assessment period for 2021. We must ensure that students applying to universities and colleges for study in this coming academic year have a smoother path.

4. **Safety first – the continuation of social distancing**
UCU is committed to a safety first approach in delivering teaching, learning, research and student support. We strongly disagree with those advocating the removal of current physical and social distancing rules for the higher education sector. With the advent of new variants, (such as the Kent variant, the April02/Delta variant, and the mutation of the Delta variant first identified in Nepal) which are all known to have greater transmissibility than the initial Covid-19 strain, it is bizarre to be suggesting mitigations should be relaxed. Physical distancing, along with appropriate mitigations (provision of PPE, screens, face coverings, enhanced cleaning regimes), should continue to be a priority as it is fundamental protection against an aerosol spreading virus.

5. **Healthy and safe campuses**
Safe and healthy campuses and workplaces for all need to be prioritised. Regular and updated risk assessments must be carried out in conjunction with campus trade unions, to risk assess the diversity of campuses and the university estate in Scotland, as well as risk assessments for individuals where appropriate. Risk assessments should ensure appropriate procedures, occupation levels, hygiene and mitigations are in place, along with reasonable adaptions and mitigations for individuals as required. A safety first approach entails effectively assessing activities and spaces to ensure safe social distancing measures are put in place. It also means focussing on ventilation, hygiene and enhanced cleaning systems along with other mitigations. Good communication on hygiene and safety procedures with staff and students is essential to promote safety and wellbeing.

6. **Regular testing and comprehensive vaccine regime**
Any on-campus activity must include regular and robust testing regimes for students and staff. This should cover routine asymptomatic testing, as well as support for students and staff who need to self-isolate due to Covid-19. Transparency in reporting of cases and outbreaks is vital to foster confidence of staff and students, and to minimise further spreading. The sector needs to factor in a vaccine regime that takes into account the range of circumstances students and staff will present. This should include consideration of international staff/students and others who have not yet received vaccination; students/staff who are not able to be vaccinated; as well as factoring in booster vaccinations, and the regular flu-vaccine provision. Students should be encourage to register for vaccinations in their term time and home locations (where they have them) to ensure that everyone gets vaccinations at the earliest opportunity.

7. **Supporting staff and students**

While there is some recognition of the stresses and strains placed on students and staff in this challenging time, it's vital that plans for the new academic year factor in the genuine difficulties people are experiencing. This means working with students' associations and campus unions to ensure mental health support is available for all students and staff. For staff this must include addressing excessive workloads, and building the capacity for flexibility into work planning, so as sudden changes do not increase workloads and cause mental health difficulties.

All plans need to be equality impact assessed, and take into account the manner in which Covid-19 has differential impacts on people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities, for women, LGBT+ groups, for people of different ages, and those with caring responsibilities. All students and staff who need to self-isolate due to Covid-19 should be supported to do so with no educational or financial detriment.

Plans should factor in students and staff journeys to and from campus, recognising the significant travel to campus journeys for some, and the need to minimise public transport use during rush hours.

8. **Fair work**

Fair work principles need to underpin industrial relations in the sector. This means working with trade unions to address the increasing job insecurity experienced during the pandemic, avoiding compulsory redundancies, supporting staff on precarious contracts, and in particular supporting international/migrant staff whose work situation is often insecure due to their migrant status. Effective workforce planning should be in place to avoid excessive workloads for all staff.

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