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Dear Principal,

I am writing to invite you to a meeting on **Thursday 11 November from 3.15-4pm** to discuss the approach to in-person learning in the remainder of the current semester/term and for semester/term two. The Scottish Government's National Clinical Director, Professor Jason Leitch, and the Chair of the Covid-19 Expert Advisory Sub-Group on Colleges and Universities, Professor Linda Bauld, will join me at the meeting. A Teams link has been included in this email.

Firstly, I would like to thank you, your staff and students for all the efforts made in ensuring a safer start to the current academic year. Widespread vaccination has been critically important, of course, and the role played by universities and colleges has been hugely helpful in delivering high rates of vaccination amongst students. The other key element underpinning the positive start has been your efforts to ensure adherence to the public health measures in place – both baseline and voluntary – including physical distancing on campus, a cap on numbers in classrooms and lecture theatres and a general 'blended learning' approach. This has meant the academic year has looked 'more normal' than we could have expected when planning discussions got underway in the first half of 2021.

We had all hoped the positive trajectory on overall case numbers and hospitalisations we had seen in late September/early October would be maintained, thereby allowing a progressive further relaxation of measures in place. Unfortunately, the situation we face is much less positive. With case numbers fluctuating, and facing the prospect of winter respiratory illnesses adding to an already under-pressure NHS, relaxing existing measures could lead to the need for much more restrictive measures to be introduced later this year or in the early part of next year. Given the acute challenges that universities and colleges faced in January of 2021, I know you will want to avoid a repeat of this in early 2022.

To reduce the impact over winter – and reduce the likelihood that further restrictions will be required – we must all collectively take action now to bring down to a more sustainable level the stubbornly high levels of case numbers we currently have. The situation remains precarious and, as the First Minister said recently: "*Now is a moment to step up our compliance*". All of us across the country are being asked to make a renewed individual and collective effort to stick to the protections that are still in place to help drive case numbers down again.

Getting the correct balance between actions to deal with the direct public health harms of Covid-19, whilst doing all in our power to minimise the wider harms to student well-being and progression, has been, and continues to be, a real challenge for us all.

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I know you will have seen the recent advice note from the Covid-19 Expert Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges, which underlined that, for many students, “*more in-person learning will be key to mitigate immediate and longer term harms (particularly on learning progression) in the coming year and for the remainder of their time in FH/HE*”. I appreciate that many institutions are planning to progressively relax some of the voluntary restrictions, such as number caps and physical distancing, in order to increase in-person learning over the rest of the academic year, and that the key reason for doing so is to mitigate against some of the non-Covid harms faced by students. However, as the Covid-19 Expert Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges also pointed out, a significant increase in contacts on campus could contribute to rising cases, and is therefore a concern. Given the scenario the country could be facing in the period up to and after Christmas, I would strongly encourage institutions to use all available remaining flexibility to retain voluntary restrictions such as number caps and physical distancing, and to avoid shifting the current balance between online and in-person learning.

I fully appreciate the challenges this will pose to your institutions, your staff, and, most importantly, to your students. This is why I am keen for as many of you as possible to join Thursday’s call. My officials stand ready to assist you in your work to identify courses that need to be prioritised for in-person learning. For example, those courses with a significant practical element that cannot be undertaken online and/or in professions where there is an acute need to ensure a pipeline of qualified staff. It will also be important to ensure that those students facing significant health and wellbeing challenges arising from a lack of in-person learning are prioritised and offered necessary support.

The First Minister has regularly made specific mention of – and offered her thanks for - the efforts made by universities, colleges, staff and students, to tackle the impacts on our Higher and Further Education sectors arising from the pandemic. I know the ask set out above is yet another challenge to face, and it’s one I sincerely wish I didn’t need to make. Nevertheless, I’m confident that we can continue to work collectively to meet it.

I look forward to hearing from you on the call on Thursday.

Yours sincerely



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE