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College and University Principals

15 December 2021

Dear Principal,

I am writing following the First Minister's [statement to Parliament yesterday](#), which provided an update on the Omicron variant and set out the further steps we are taking to slow its spread.

As the First Minister set out, the new variant presents us with a very severe challenge in the period ahead – and that challenge remains even if Omicron does lead to a 'milder' form of disease than previous variants. It is therefore vital that the college and university sectors are appropriately prepared for the challenges Omicron may bring, and that everything possible is done to ensure the continued safety and wellbeing not only of staff and students but of the wider population.

### **Measures to reduce transmission**

I am conscious that colleges and universities continue to operate in an environment more akin to Level 0, with a range of voluntary measures in place. I am grateful to the sector for its continued adherence to those measures, and would ask that these are maintained.

In light of the new variant, I ask institutions to consider whether any existing measures could be stepped-up, and to consider where additional steps could be taken to limit in-person contacts or to make those necessary contacts safer. This may include moving some additional in-person learning or other activities online, if it is possible to do so; reinforcing messaging on physical distancing, face coverings and hygiene measures; postponing or putting online any planned in-person events between now and the end of January (and asking student unions, clubs and associations to do the same).

I would also welcome an indication of what additional steps can be taken to improve on campus ventilation, including a risk-based approach to the use of CO2 monitors. I appreciate that much work is already underway in this area, and fully recognise the challenge posed by

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the range of settings on any individual campus. Nevertheless, given the critical role that ventilation can play in managing transmission, making possible more in-person activity, I would hope that a risk-based approach, working closely with students and staff representatives, will provide an additional measure of reassurance to staff and students alike.

As the First Minister noted in her statement, we will be putting a legal duty on employers to ensure that people who can work from home do so. I recognise that for colleges and universities, a lot of activity cannot be undertaken at home and staff will therefore be expected to attend work. However, if you have staff currently working on campus, who could be working from home, they should now do so. Where a member of staff has made a case to work from home, it should be accepted unless there is a strong and compelling reason not to do so. Adopting a similar approach for students who feel uncomfortable attending in-person activity on campus is also worth putting in place.

With the rapid transmissibility of the Omicron variant, it is more important than ever that everyone tests regularly and repeatedly – even if they have no COVID symptoms. The Scottish Government’s message on testing is clear: people should undertake a lateral flow test before mixing with other households. I therefore ask you to redouble your messaging to staff and students on the importance of regular testing, particularly before coming to work or attending campus in-person.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges has considered possible further steps that could be considered to combat the threat posed by the Omicron variant. I ask that you ensure you keep up-to-date with the advice of the Sub-Group and consider whether your institution should implement some of the additional measures they have advised might be helpful in combatting the Omicron variant. The Sub-Group’s most recent advice note on the Omicron variant is available on the [Scottish Government website](#).

It will also be important to ensure that students remaining in term-time accommodation over the winter break, who are required to self-isolate, are also offered support from your institution. It goes without saying that allowance should continue to be made for students who have been unable to undertake learning as a result of infection or self-isolation, in terms of assessment.

The impact of an increasing number of cases, leading to illness and/or self-isolation of staff, has the potential to cause significant disruption to essential services on campus. Giving full consideration to ensuring sufficient resilience is built into those essential services will be crucial, and I know this is something you will already be looking at.

### **Students returning home for the winter break**

I am grateful to institutions for the work already undertaken to encourage staff and students to test regularly. This is particularly important for students and staff who will leave term-time accommodation for the winter break. With this in mind, I am asking institutions to please redouble messaging to students encouraging them to test before they travel in order to minimise the risk of the virus spreading. Students should test three days before they travel and on the day they travel. Institutions should ensure that lateral flow testing packs continue to be readily available to students and the locations of testing pick-up points on campus are well sign posted. Students should also be encouraged to test on the same basis prior to returning to term-time accommodation.

As the First Minister set out in her statement, there is still much we do not know about the Omicron variant, and it is possible, indeed likely, that advice, guidance and possibly legal

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requirements could change in what is a very fast moving situation. Institutions should therefore consider how this continued uncertainty about the situation we may find ourselves in after the winter break could potentially affect students, including in relation to essential belongings in term-time accommodation and/or possible requirements for international travelers. You may wish to communicate to your students about this uncertainty in order to allow them to plan accordingly.

### **Vaccines and booster doses**

In her statement yesterday, the First Minister also set out the steps we are taking to accelerate the COVID vaccine booster programme, and she highlighted that from today all 18-29 year-olds can book their booster online. At the beginning of the academic year, institutions worked with local health boards to maximise student vaccinations and to ensure the vaccination of international students arriving in Scotland. The work undertaken by institutions to encourage vaccination was a vital component of Scotland's successful vaccination rollout.

The early evidence suggests that booster doses should still be highly effective in protecting people from infection or disease, even in the face of a new variant. I am therefore asking you to continue your engagement with your local health board(s) to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to provide booster doses to any students remaining on campus and to students returning after the winter break who may not yet have received booster doses. In addition, I ask that you continue to encourage any students who are still to receive their first or second dose of the vaccine to get these as soon as possible.

I want to thank those institutions who have already offered assistance with the wider vaccination programme to their health board(s). If your institution is able to offer any support to Scotland's vaccination effort, whether in the form of venues, providing relevant staff to the NHS vaccinator programme or in the form of other support, I strongly encourage you to contact the relevant health board(s) to offer this support.

I fully appreciate that this will be a challenging and uncertain time for the sector, staff and students. I am also mindful of the concern and anxiety that the spread of the Omicron variant is causing. Whilst this is not the message I had hoped to deliver to the sector at this point in the pandemic, it's important that we do all we collectively can to slow the spread of Omicron and to mitigate its impact on our NHS.

I look forward to discussing the above points at the Advanced Learning Covid Recovery Group meeting tomorrow. Given the fast-moving and changing nature of the Omicron situation, it is vital that the sector is as prepared as it possibly can be for the weeks and months ahead. I and my officials will continue to communicate and work closely with you in the weeks and months ahead.

Yours sincerely,

**JAMIE HEPBURN**

(copy:  
Colleges Scotland  
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Advanced Learning Covid Recovery Group)

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