

Covid-19 Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges Advice Note for an Early Stage Response to the Omicron Variant of Concern

10 December 2021

Background and context

1. This advice note is to support universities, colleges and the Community Learning and Development (CLD) providers with their initial responses to the emergence of the Omicron Variant of Concern.

A clearer picture about Omicron is likely to emerge in the days and weeks ahead. However, there are currently significant concerns about the variant, with early indications of its potential negative impact across all four harms. It is likely that this is the start of another wave of infections. It is important to be prepared to introduce, as rapidly as possible, any measures that could mitigate against or delay the spread of Omicron.

When considering such measures, it is essential every effort is made to prevent, to the greatest extent possible, intensifying the Harm 3 impacts already being keenly felt by students and learners, particularly in relation to loss of learning, and mental health and well-being.

Immediate Response

2. With the aim of reducing the amount of contacts for students, learners and staff, institutions should consider moving online or postponing, where possible, planned face-to-face events. Institutions should also ask related clubs, societies and student unions to consider doing the same. Students and staff should also seek to limit their number of contacts, as far as reasonably practical, within social settings in and around campuses. Institutions could also usefully re-examine planned in-person teaching activities due to take place between now and mid-January, with a view to assessing whether it could take place online, thereby allowing more staff to work from home. Institutions should also consider whether staff who are currently working 'on campus' could work from home wherever this is possible, while recognising that key functions and services need maintained.

3. Increasing asymptomatic and symptomatic testing take up is a highly effective way to counter the spread of the virus, which in turn may help avoid the introduction of further restrictions. Having a negative test before attending in-person events is a simple, low cost and unrestrictive exercise and is advised. Extending this requirement to lectures/classrooms/labs/libraries, etc. may also be worth considering if it allows for more in-person teaching/learning to take place should further restrictions be put in place. Although mobile testing units are being prioritised for deployment across all sectors, where capacity allows, institutions should work with public health teams to establish mobile test centres, to complement the existing core testing offer of LFD Collect. To enable successful self-testing in particular it needs to be promoted within a communicative and normative context e.g. supported by peers, creating testing champions, using social networks to promote these norms and testing, while considering inequalities.

4. International students should be encouraged to consider carefully the associated risks of returning home over the winter break in the event that any Covid-related restrictions, such as travel restrictions or additional hotel quarantine arrangements, are introduced. This is particularly important in cases where course completions could be compromised. Similarly, international students who are due to start their courses in January should receive regular and up-to-date communications from institutions to provide them with the key messages on how to be Covid-safe, what will be expected of them when they arrive on campus and what support is available to them.

5. On the basis of the current modelling, it is likely that when Term/Semester 2 starts in January, students, learners and staff will be returning to a different COVID scenario to the one they left. Therefore, the FE/HE/CLD sectors need to consider what different approaches they should adopt in the communication of key messages to students, learners and staff in order to promote the highest levels of compliance as well as informing individuals of any changes to the mitigations. The refreshing of Covid-19 in marketing materials could be considered to highlight the difference in situation between Delta and Omicron and would be useful to counter 'variant fatigue' as well as for reaching individuals who have not as yet adhered to the collective norms such as getting vaccinated.

Institutions should also be ensuring that robust and workable plans are in place to meet a range of possible scenarios that could be faced in coming weeks.

Adapting to Omicron as the potential dominant variant

6. FE/HE/CLD institutions are a combination of workplace, educational and recreational settings. Therefore, a nuanced approach is required – which recognises that different settings on campuses will have different levels of associated risk¹ - when considering how guidance is applied to these settings as well as a level of consistency across all educational settings including schools. It is also important that measures adopted within the FE/HE/CLD sectors align with wider society in order to avoid feelings of unfair or disproportionate treatment. This would also apply to worst case scenarios in the event that extreme measures may be needed in January across society and that might result in a reduction in face-to-face teaching.

7. Decisions on what research should continue to be conducted on the basis of assessing the risks versus the potential benefits and every effort should be made to retain ongoing essential research in laboratories (for example) regardless of whether or not they are Covid-related. There may be a requirement to re-visit the Scottish Government guidance document relating to research that was published at the beginning of the pandemic as the COVID landscape has significantly changed and a more flexible approach towards research may be more appropriate.

8. Self-isolation policy has also changed as a result of the Omicron variant and from December 11th, it is important that this is understood by students and staff. All close contacts of a positive case will need to isolate for 10 days irrespective of vaccine

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status and even following a negative test. This may change in future but it is recognised that this could have significant impacts on staffing and learning. Beyond planning for how to address this and maintain essential services and functions, it will be important to offer support to staff, students and learners who need to isolate. This would include support in relation to mental health and wellbeing, practical assistance and also support for students ensuring any work missed can be accessible in online forms and that students will not be disadvantaged in terms of assessments or progression due to self-isolation.

¹ Earlier advice from this sub-group had drawn a distinction between higher risk settings, such as student accommodation, and lower risk, including classrooms/labs/lecture theatres, etc. [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges - advice note - 15 June 2021 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19/advisory-sub-group-on-universities-and-colleges/advice-note-15-june-2021/pages/12/index.aspx)