

Implementing a Safe Return to Further Education and Training Centres

August 2021



etbi

Education and Training
Boards Ireland
*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*



Introduction

This paper represents a whole-of sector approach to the safe and sustainable operation for the coming academic year. It sets out detail for the implementation of the *A safe return to on-site further and higher education and research (Safe Return Plan)* published by D/FHERIS on 15 June 2021. We are also mindful of the success and reach of the vaccination programme and that represents a critical contextual pillar as set out below.

Context

The re-opening of further education and training centres in September 2021 is underpinned by three primary pillars:

1. Further education and training has been nominated as an 'essential service' by government.
2. There is an overwhelming desire from learners for a return to on-site activity, with practical learning to be delivered on-site and a need for all learners to have an onsite FET experience in order to maintain participation levels, particularly among those target groups most at risk of exclusion.
3. The vast majority, if not all, adults including further education and training learners will have been offered the opportunity to be vaccinated by September 2021.

Guidelines

Based on those foundational tenets, further education, and training higher education (FET) centres (FET) are now advanced in planning a return to full activity in September 2021, based on the detail set out in the adopted and approved *Safe Return Plan*. The following measures are being applied across the sector with each ETB adapting the measures to their local FET centre context and physical infrastructure.

To this end ETB FET centres:

- Commit to adherence to public-health informed Government guidance in *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead* and any further/future iterations of this guidance.
- Commit to maximising and optimising the on-site experience for all learners and to carefully balancing the public health risks against the known pedagogical, learner experience, and mental health benefits.
- Affirm the primacy afforded to public health and care for welfare and safety of our learning communities.
- Note the critical need for personal responsibility and shared collective responsibility to facilitate the safe operation of FET centres.
- Accept that the protocol is fashioned to afford a sustainable year with on-site activity and that it is reasonably anticipated that the public health context will evolve as the year progresses. It is calibrated to address not just one but all scenarios which can reasonably be anticipated.
- Undertake that the needs of all learners will be considered regardless of level, year, or discipline of study.

- Facilitate access to learning spaces, laboratories, placement sites, and other physical settings as appropriate.
- Continue to provide specific extra supports for learners where required.
- Ensure that all on-site FET centre operations are conducted in such a manner as to manage any risk to individual and public health through adherence to such relevant regulations, guidance, and advice as may apply from time to time:
 - Adhering to standard hygiene measures including hand hygiene and dispensers, sanitary hygiene, respiratory hygiene, cleaning and sanitisation procedures;
 - Requiring face masks in indoor on-site shared settings in accordance with prevailing public health regulations and guidance;
 - Requiring social distancing measures in indoor and outdoor on-site shared settings in accordance with prevailing public health regulations and guidance;
 - Working to optimise ventilation systems to minimise risk of viral transmission, in line with local context and assessment;
 - Ensuring that entry and egress to buildings and facilities will be carefully managed via contra flow and other measures;
 - Managing class times flexibly where required to provide for controlled exit and entry and to avoid aggregation;
 - Actively manage classes, either by applying percentage occupancy limits, setting a maximum class size, an upper limit on class length/ period of continuous occupancy or otherwise, depending on local context and risk assessment.
- Protect through reasonable accommodation any member of the learning community for whom vaccination is medically contravened.
- Promote fullest engagement with the vaccination rollout recognizing that high levels of vaccination protect all.
- Collaborate with the HSE to ensure rapid access to testing and vaccination, including on-site provision if practicable, subject to such measures being approved by government and the necessary resources and infrastructure provided.
- Support standard public health procedures for testing of symptomatic staff or learners with appropriate arrangements for management of disease incidence.
- Continue to assess on-site FET centres operation in light of the evolving public health status and to seek to enhance further the on-site experience in line with the overall progression of disease control and mitigation measures.

There will be circumstances under which teaching cannot be delivered while maintaining 2m distance between learners, i.e. practical elements of certain courses, skills demonstrations etc (see further advice below), and under such circumstances the distance between learners seats or workstations may be reduced to (but not less than) 1m, with appropriate precautions to minimise the risk of viral transmission, and specific provision made for vulnerable learners. In specific instances where close proximity to other people cannot be avoided e.g., in small laboratory groups, hairdressing instruction in a further education setting, it is recommended that face shields in addition to a facemask may also be worn, and/or an N95 face mask. Where proximity of less than 1 metre is envisaged/required, a face mask and a face shield may be recommended. Face shields may also be considered in place of face

coverings in limited circumstances the teaching context, particularly if teachers or lecturers have concerns around voice projection or if there is a requirement for learners to see their face etc.

Cognisant of the discretion afforded in the national framework, ETBs will work locally and nationally in consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure safe and sustainable implementation. FET staff will return to work as planned and support the planning and preparation processes for the safe and sustainable operation of FET Centres for the coming academic year.

Please note that attendance at full staff meetings should be facilitated remotely and gatherings of staff should abide by general public health guidelines in relation to face coverings and social distancing measures. Small group meetings and Classroom/Workshop/Laboratory preparation may be undertaken once abiding by public health advice.

A two-phased return of learners is recommended:

Stage 1: August 2021 - Vulnerable learners including Youthreach, CTCs, Apprenticeship, and practical training programmes¹

Stage 2: Post September 20th 2021 (date subject to change depending on public health advice) – All other full-time and part-time FET Learners.

Vulnerable Learners:

Vulnerable learners, including Youthreach, CTCs, adult literacy and community education learners that require onsite presence to support wellbeing and access to workspace and Wi-Fi to complete course work will return to FET Institutions as planned at the commencement of the academic year.

In line with the current health advice, further and higher education institutions staff and learners should continue to wear face coverings in line with public health advice other than in the circumstances previously outlined above, i.e. In specific instances where close proximity to other people cannot be avoided e.g., in small laboratory groups, hairdressing instruction in a further education setting, it is recommended that face shields in addition to a facemask may also be worn, and/or an N95 face mask. Where proximity of less than 1 metre is envisaged/required, a face mask and a face shield may be recommended. Face shields may also be considered in place of face coverings in limited circumstances the teaching context, particularly if teachers or lecturers have concerns around voice projection or if there is a requirement for learners to see their face, direct instruction requiring proximity of less than 1 metre etc.

Practical Programmes including Apprenticeship:

¹ Excluding self-financing programmes and night training

Following the successful return of apprentices from 1st March 2020, the return of time-critical onsite practical training and assessment is recommended for the new academic year 21/22.

In order for learners to engage with the practical activities, real time delivery and demonstration of the practical elements of the course will be important. This could be organised through, smaller class groupings for in person lessons where learners can participate in dialogue and discussion with their designated FET practitioner/subject FET practitioner. Alternatively, appropriate online video recordings of practical activities could be used to support learner learning. For practical demonstrations, digital technology such as the visualiser could be used to provide additional support for learners as many have the capability to record demonstrations.

Some practical skills can be practised at home for the range of practical subjects. However, where specialist equipment and skills are required, in person classes with their designated FET practitioner are recommended. Alternatively, learners can be provided with appropriate recordings of short explanatory videos which learners could watch.

Where group work is required, the groups should be as small as practical and in so far as practical the membership of groups should be consistent for as many activities as possible (pods) to minimise mixing of people.

The FET Institutions, to the greatest extent possible, should record attendance by learners and staff at all scheduled classes, practical classes and workshops and retain records for 4 weeks in case required for contact tracing purposes.

Canteens:

Indoor service in bars and restaurants reopened on 26th of July 2021. Restaurants in education facilities are regarded as 'workplace canteens' provided that they are open to staff & learners only. Therefore, the 'indoor hospitality' rules do not apply and there is no requirement to check proof of vaccination or recovery for staff and learners. Indoor dining in the form of canteen or lunch facilities must follow the industry standards in relation to dining guidelines. Currently, indoor dining is permitted in FET centres.

- A maximum of 6 people aged 13 and over are allowed per table.
- Learners should wear a face covering when not sitting at the table.

Using the canteen in this limited capacity means the following etiquette must be adhered to:

1. Learners must clean their hands before and after entering the canteen area.
2. Maintain a social distance of 2 metres between individuals.
3. Implement a queue management system.
4. Break times should be staggered to ensure crowds do not congregate.
5. Everyone should restrict their non-essential social contact as much as possible.
6. Cleaning & disinfection procedures should be in place for equipment, premises, contact surfaces and touch points e.g., counter tops, tongs, service utensils, open self-service displays, trolleys, door handles and keypads.

7. Staff should not work if they have any of the symptoms of COVID-19 and they should self-isolate and follow HSE guidance.

Erasmus projects:

Léargas recognise that the pandemic continues to affect planned project activities funded by Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps and other European programmes. Léargas will facilitate realistic alternative project activities as far as possible, while still following the regulations of the particular programme. Above all, project activities must be carried out in full adherence with the national and local regulations in place in the sending country, and in the receiving country. Project activities should only take place after a review and due consideration of the policies of all partner organisations. Organisations should undertake their own risk assessment and assume ownership of the subsequent decisions taken.

If the Erasmus+ or European Solidarity Corps activities involve travel to or transit through affected regions, or hosting participants from those regions, please take the following steps:

1. Check the [Department of Foreign Affairs](#) (DFA) website for travel advice.
2. If there is a **DFA travel alert for COVID-19** in place for the region involved, travel should be postponed or cancelled.
3. Contact the project partners to establish if additional local restrictions are in place.
4. Document all evidence of the reasons for the decision, including screenshots of the DFA travel alert.
5. Immediately inform the Léargas Programme Finance and Operations team at opsfin@leargas.ie that a learner wishes to postpone or cancel travel – include their **project reference number** (for example, 2018-1-IE01-KA102-100100) and the details of the query.
6. The Programme Finance and Operations team will advise of any additional documents or information needed to submit as a result of the postponed or cancelled activity.
7. If the project is funded through a different [National Agency](#), please also contact them immediately.
8. If a learner has already had to cancel project activities and wishes to apply for force majeure, download this zip file with the forms and procedure: [Force Majeure Process & Forms 130320](#).

If a learner wants to apply for an extension to the duration of their project due to COVID-19, or if they have already been granted an extension and wish to apply for an additional extension, follow the steps [here](#). The additional **extension should be limited to what is strictly necessary and will be reviewed on a case-by-case assessment**.