Minister Harris and the ACMO support USI campaign urging students to: ‘Keep it Small, Keep it Safe, Keep your Distance’

From Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

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Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris TD, and Acting Chief Medical Officer Dr Ronan Glynn have today announced support for a new USI campaign aimed at assisting college students in the new academic year.

Students are being encouraged to keep the public health guidelines and to Keep it Small, Keep it Safe, Keep your Distance. The social media campaign developed by the USI encourages students to follow the public health advice and ensure a safe resumption of the academic year.

Speaking today, Minister Harris said:

"The beginning of college should be an exciting time for any student but this year is like no other.

"COVID-19 has wreaked havoc for us all but it has deprived many young people of major milestones and key first moments in their life.

"We are asking students to follow three simple messages – keep your gatherings small, keep yourself and those around you safe and keep your distance.

"Throughout this pandemic, our young people have been leaders and I urge them to stick with us, to hold firm, and help us ensure a safe resumption of the academic year.

"I want to thank the USI for their leadership on this issue and ensuring the safety of students in this strange world."

Dr Ronan Glynn, Acting Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health said:

"There has never been an autumn quite like this for students continuing courses or entering into further and higher education for the first time. The unique challenges presented by COVID-19 mean that we all have to live and socialise differently to keep ourselves, our friends and our loved ones safe.

"For younger people in particular, this pandemic has impacted on your education, your relationships and your social lives."
"You have all been committed throughout the pandemic to following public health advice – and for that I thank you. But the disease is continuing to spread disproportionately among younger people. And so, I am asking you to stick with this and continue to follow the public health advice.

"Be a role model for others. Limit the number of people you meet, try and meet the same small group of people all the time, maintain 2 metres physical distance, wear a face covering, wash your hands well and often. Together, every safe behaviour counts."

USI President, Lorna Fitzpatrick said:

"This is a really difficult time for us all, we are living through a global pandemic and at times we’re all wondering what we should do. That is why USI developed this ‘Keep it Small, Keep it Safe, Keep your Distance’ campaign. Students have played a vital role in the island-wide response to COVID-19. Student nurses and midwives, pharmacists, shop assistants, delivery drivers and so many more have helped our country get through this really tough time so far.

"We all have a part to play in limiting the spread of the virus, but we are also concerned about the impact of loneliness or seclusion on students. So, depending on where we are in the country and the restrictions in place at the time, we can meet friends and family providing it’s done in a safe way. This will help support our mental health while reducing the risk of spreading the virus."

Students are also reminded to keep up to date with the guidelines for their region and to make safe decisions that take their mental health into consideration, along with their academic concerns.

Minister Harris has allocated an additional €5 million of mental health supports for students and has developed a new text line service to assist students:

"This is such a difficult time for people. Please reach out and use the supports available to you and please text 50808 at any time of the day or night, if you need help."

Lorna said:

"You can meet up with friends and family. You can have the craic and have a laugh. It’s not a bad thing to do that, but it’s important to do it in a safe way.

"For students based in Dublin, at the moment the virus is spreading at a much higher rate. For now, our ability to move around is further restricted. We know that is tough, but make sure you are reaching out to friends and family on the phone and online – please keep those connections strong and mind yourselves and each other."