

UK: Sheffield health care students demand placements suspended to limit COVID-19 spread

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Healthcare students at Sheffield Hallam University are calling for their hospital placements to be suspended to minimise the spread of the coronavirus, which is already overwhelming the National Health Service (NHS).

Their petition to university bosses highlights the strength of opposition to the disastrous course of the Johnson government, which has already seen teachers, pupils and others force a shift in its reckless policy of allowing the spread of COVID-19 with the aim of developing “herd immunity.” It illustrates how 10 years of austerity have led to much of the UK’s social infrastructure—especially health care—left dangerously neglected, understaffed and under-resourced.

The petition was launched on March 17 and students have yet to hear a response even as their placements in hospitals are due to commence.

Speaking to the WSWs, one of those involved in the petition explained how it had emerged out of widespread concern among health care students at the situation and had already attracted hundreds of shares.

All of those involved went into health care to provide a vital service for the sick and vulnerable and the petition should not be taken as a sign that they are in anyway retreating from that commitment. Rather the students are concerned that they would be placing others at risk and, given that many are only in their second year of training, are not qualified to provide the type of assistance needed.

The petition states that, if the placements continue, “We fear that we may unknowingly spread the virus to those more vulnerable (elderly, immune-compromised or those with underlying health conditions) and our families have increasing concerns as the situation

develops, they too support us in launching this petition.

“A portion of students who fall under the ‘high risk’ bracket are concerned that they may become infected and, as their symptoms may be more detrimental to their health, they will have to take more time off placement, resulting in more time to make up.”

Face-to-face teaching has been suspended in universities to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The petition points out, “The university have released a statement that ‘[the students’] health and wellbeing is [their] top priority’; if this was the case, they would understand our concerns about attending placement, and would allow us to self-isolate, as recommended by the UK Government, with no repercussions with regards to making up hours that we miss.”

“Students are already displaying feelings of anxiety surrounding the nature of attending placement, even staying in hospital accommodation, and we feel that our mental health isn’t being considered. We understand this is a challenging time for everyone as we are in uncharted waters, we would just like to have our voices heard.”

Placements have been suspended by universities in Liverpool, Birmingham and elsewhere. At Sheffield Hallam it is only suspended for first year students. Third year students—like those across the country—are being fast-tracked to qualify to work in the NHS as an emergency response to the coronavirus.

Second year students at Hallam have only been told they do not have to attend placements if they personally have health problems. This takes no account of the family situation, with several students reporting households with members that are asthmatic, or immune-suppressed.

Such is the gravity of the crisis, and the disregard of the government, that 65,000 retired doctors and nurses are being called on to return to the NHS to boost frontline services. Many of these in the older cohort are more likely to become seriously ill and die from the pandemic.

The NHS has been deliberately gutted over more than two decades, through cuts in funding, rationalisation and privatisation. The current staff shortage is the outcome of such policies. Bursaries for all health care students were abolished in 2017 and all health care students must currently pay at least £9,000 annually in tuition fees. The move exacerbated an already chronic shortage of NHS staff.

The situation facing the students involved in the Hallam petition is typical. While paying exorbitant fees, many work unpaid on placements in hospitals for between 20 to 30 hours a week, sometimes involving nightshifts and 10–12 hour shifts. To fund their living costs, many take on part-time additional work, while trying to complete course work and exams.

The petitioner explained to the WSWS that placements are as much as a one-hour commute away from their homes. A large number are dependent on public transport to get to their placements. Some must stay in overnight accommodation.

Under conditions in which the government is now speaking of the need for social distancing, this raises the danger that students could unknowingly be transferring the coronavirus from hospitals into the general population and back. NHS staff are currently not tested for COVID-19.

The students petition comes amid reports that guidelines are now being drawn up to determine “which patients live or die” as severe shortages of staff and vital medical equipment—including ventilators and acute care beds—overwhelm the NHS.

The *Independent* reported that the guidance, to be issued shortly, had been drafted in “little more than a week” and means it is possible that patients with a greater chance of survival could be prioritised over those already on a ventilator in the event that none are available. The criteria cover patients with existing conditions such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes and respiratory disease. It is not known whether an age limit will be established above which treatment could be withdrawn.



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