Thousands at UK universities infected with coronavirus as new term opens

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The return of students to universities in Britain has produced an explosive rise in COVID-19 cases. With nearly 2 million students in higher education, cases will continue to grow. Outbreaks have already taken place in around 20 universities.

Scottish universities have been particularly hit, exposing the lying claims of the Scottish National Party government that its policies have protected public health during the pandemic, unlike the Tory government in Westminster.

At Dundee University, all 500 students in the Parker House student accommodation have been quarantined while contract tracing is carried out. By yesterday, 172 students at Glasgow University had tested positive for the disease and 600 are in self-isolation. Edinburgh Napier University has identified 120 cases, and Edinburgh University has admitted to a "small number of cases." At Aberdeen University, over 70 students are isolating. At St. Andrews University, 10 students and two members of staff have contracted coronavirus with more than 40 people self-isolating. There have been cases at Stirling University.

In her Friday press briefing, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon warned the country's quarter of a million students not to go out this weekend or return home. Around 35,000 live in university halls and 10,000 in private halls.

The former regional director for public health in northwest England, Professor John Ashton, said it was "almost inevitable" that the return of students would lead to a spike in COVID-19 cases. He called for student numbers at university to be limited to a third of their normal population.

English universities, with a later starting date in Scotland, are already witnessing a similar surge in COVID-19 cases. There were 87 positive COVID-19 cases at the University of Liverpool last week, prompting fears of a bigger surge as more students return to the city this week. Liverpool John Moores and Liverpool Hope Universities were forced to move most course online to avoid face-to-face contacts.

Of nearly 60 cases reported in Devon, half are being attributed to Exeter University.

The Tab, a student culture website noted, "A Sussex professor estimates 14,000 students currently have COVID at UK universities." It reported yesterday that five apartments across two Leeds University halls are self-isolating with the university confirming six cases of COVID-19. Cases have been reported at the universities of De Montfort, Leicester, Oxford Brookes, Bristol, Bath, Hull, and Warwick, as well as the University of the West of England.

On Friday evening, the *Manchester Evening News* reported that "case numbers have soared to 127" across the Birley campus in the Hulme district and another site, Cambridge Halls, "with a number of other students also recording symptoms." The newspaper revealed that "Halls at Manchester Metropolitan University's Birley campus, as well as Cambridge Hall near All Saint's Park, are to be locked down for a fortnight and 1,700 students living there told to self isolate 'with immediate effect'".

In Wales, 12 students at Swansea University have tested positive.

A relentless propaganda campaign is under way by the government and university authorities to lay the blame on students for socialising, centring their fire at parties held on campuses. An editorial by the *British Medical Journal* replied, "It has been disheartening to watch university leaders blaming students for outbreaks instead of admitting that the university's reopening plans were dangerous."

Lauren McDougall, a project officer at the University of Glasgow, pointed out in several tweets: "Many of the Covid + students will have broken no rules…the most conscientious students are the ones who will feel the weight of the blame. … Systemic failures need systemic solutions. … Blaming students as individuals for the current outbreaks at Scottish universities is not only unfair but downright dangerous. This wasn't caused by a handful of students going to parties and suggesting so only shifts the blame and seriously risks the mental well-being of students."

BBC's *Good Morning Scotland* on Friday featured responses from other Glasgow students. Lucy Owens, a student in the Murano student residence at the centre of the

outbreak, said, "What are we paying for? I could do everything I am doing from my house, so why have they sent us here? ... Putting two thousand students into such a confined area, something like this was bound to happen."

Politics student Tessa Morrison said she had tested positive and described conditions akin to prisons that students were now in. Tessa was living with 10 other students, some of whom had also tested positive. She had to share two bathrooms and one kitchen. "They should have waited until at least Christmas to let us come here…they are just trying to make money off us being in halls and they knew this was inevitably going to happen."

Helen Kirkpatrick's daughter is at Strathclyde and lives in a private hall. Helen said, "After going back there she has found out that all classes will be online for the first semester. She's signed an agreement and paid a lot of money to stay there and what for? She could have studied at home—I think the Scottish government could have handled this a lot better."

Universities are financially reliant on their annual influx of students. Thousands of redundancies are threatened, and management is utilising this situation to enforce face-to-face teaching. The *Guardian* reported, "One academic at a Russell Group university, who asked not to be named, said her university had dismissed her concerns about infecting her partner, who has type 1 diabetes and is therefore at an increased risk from coronavirus."

A "young PhD student at the University of St. Andrews" reported that "in his department PhD students teach 82% of the first- and second-year seminars that will now be face-to-face." He said, "We've basically been told, if you want one of these tutor groups the teaching will be in person." The student receives a pittance of just "£81.75 a week (which includes holiday pay) teaching three undergraduate seminars." He makes "below the £120 a week necessary to claim statutory sick pay if he contracts the virus."

The government and the press speak of universities as though they are hermetically sealed rather than existing within densely populated urban areas where tens of thousands of students, university workers and the general public live, work and study. Most university campuses are found in and around town and city centres. These working-class districts are where the highest levels of positive COVID-19 test results are located, and where most students rent accommodation.

While the government has made much of the relatively low death rate among young people, they have ignored the growing numbers of previously healthy young people suffering what is known as "long COVID," where the viral symptoms last months and for some have not subsided yet.

The terrible situation in the United States is a sign of things to come. There are at least 3,000 confirmed cases at the University of Georgia, 2,000 at the University of Alabama and another 2,000 at the University of South Carolina. With almost 90,000 confirmed cases on American campuses since the pandemic emerged, new regional surges of COVID-19 have been seeded by the return to higher education.

The herding of several million college and university students onto campuses would have been impossible without the collaboration of the University and College Union (UCU). Its position is that online education only should be the de facto position of higher education, at least until Christmas.

The union was fully aware of the criminal endangering of the safety of its members and students but did nothing to mobilise its 120,000-strong membership in opposition. Instead, it is calling on them to act as individuals and write to their institutions to complain about inadequate safety conditions. UCU members received an e-mail from union leader Jo Grady containing pro-forma letters for them to complete and send to their vice chancellor. Each begins with some variation on an identity politics theme: "Writing as a BAME member of staff…," "Writing as a female member of staff..." Nowhere are members encouraged to fight back collectively as workers.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators, teachers, and students to take matters into their own hands and organise independently of the education trade unions in rank and file safety committees. Join the newly founded Educators Rank-and-File Committee and share your experiences since returning to campus with other workers. To participate in our online meeting today from 2 to 4 p.m., click here.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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