

Explosive outbreak of COVID-19 at British universities

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1 October 2020

The return of two million students to Britain's universities has produced a massive rise in Covid-19 cases. As of Tuesday outbreaks had taken place in at least 45 universities around the UK from a total of approximately 130, according to research by *Sky News*. This represents a more than doubling of the 20 universities reporting outbreaks at the weekend. With around 2 million students in higher education (HE), cases will only grow.

Almost a third of universities have had Covid cases already with the new term just getting underway, and with more students still returning. By September 29, at least 865 Covid-19 cases have been identified among students and staff since HE reopened, according to *Sky News*. Thousands of students are self-isolating as the new term begins. At Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) approximately 1,700 students were told to isolate for 14 days after 127 tested positive for the virus; at Glasgow University 600 are students isolating after 172 tested positive and at Queen's University Belfast another 100 are isolating after 30 tested positive for the virus.

A statement from Labour Party-run Manchester City Council last Friday said a decision had been taken with the university and Public Health England to "implement a local lockdown for student accommodation at [MMU's] Birley campus and Cambridge Halls" to "stop the transmission of the virus among students and prevent it getting into the wider community."

Students living in two main dorms were told via email to self-isolate in their residences for 14 days, regardless of whether they have symptoms. Further testing revealed that 140 students have tested positive for the virus.

Students are being kept under conditions that will facilitate the uncontrolled spread of the virus. They are

stuck in a confined space, having to share communal areas including kitchens. Other students now find themselves living under curfews and banned from the local pubs.

Lawyers are challenging the legal basis of a two-week lockdown. Levins Solicitors said it had seen recordings showing security and accommodation staff stopping students from leaving blocks. Jon Heath, a partner at Levins, accused MMU of operating "a shadow enforcement regime". He is acting pro bono for nine students who want "urgent clarification" of how they were wrongly told on Friday that if they left their halls they "would be breaking the law".

Students around the UK have protested their conditions on social media and by putting up statements of protest in the blocks. At the Murano Street Student Village in Glasgow, one sign read, "Students Not Criminals."

MMU apologised after reports of students being told via email to remove protest signs from their windows. It said the email "didn't reflect the University's view" and it respected "the rights of students to express themselves," before threatening, "the posters must not break the law or they'll have to be removed."

Many students did not have time to do shopping for basic necessities before being told they were not allowed out. University authorities have done next to nothing to help. MMU Vice-Chancellor Malcolm Press offered locked down students two weeks' rent, plus a £50 voucher to spend at a supermarket. The University of Glasgow has made a similar financial offer.

A living support assistant told the *Glasgow Guardian*, "I was on duty the other night and I had a girl phone me saying she hadn't eaten anything for 24 hours because she's high risk and can't leave her room, and no one's left her a food bag or anything..."

“The student was given a food parcel made up of pasta, pot noodles, tinned foods, oats and juice. There's really nothing you can make a meal with in there, it might do you for an hour or two, but you certainly wouldn't be able to survive off that.”

The mother of a fresher at the University of Edinburgh took to social media to denounce university authorities who gave her daughter a “Mars bar and a croissant for dinner”. Her daughter was unable to eat the food as she is a vegan.

Many are refusing to accept being locked down in student halls and are heading home. The *Guardian* reported how Dan Johnson, studying drama and contemporary performance, said seven of his nine flatmates left the MMU Cambridge halls Sunday evening. They had been isolating for 11 days when the measure was announced, after one person tested positive on September 14.

The government knew the start of the academic year would bring about a resurgence of the virus but continued nevertheless as part of its herd immunity policy. There is no mass testing and tracing arrangements for schools and universities, except at the elite Eton school and Cambridge University. Higher education was reopened when all medical bodies argued against it and urged a switch to online teaching. Had the necessary resources been mobilized, students could have begun their studies at the family home. Instead, students and staff were told that learning must be delivered in a ‘blended’ manner with online sessions “complemented” by face to face classes. As with every calculation made by the Conservative government since the beginning of the pandemic, business takes precedence over science, logic, and reason. The HE business model, based on the intensified marketisation of education, revolves around students paying exorbitant fees for their courses and being milked for high rental accommodation costs.

Under conditions of an explosion of the pandemic, the University and College Union's (UCU) general secretary Jo Grady said only, "Students must be allowed to safely return home if they wish to and without fear of financial penalty for leaving their student accommodation." After the union collaborated with the Johnson government and universities to facilitate reopening, Grady cynically complains, "Health and safety should have been the number one

concern.”

The National Union of Students has done nothing to prevent a return to campus and on its website only asks whether students' shopping habits had been negatively affected by the pandemic. The only advice given to students are a list of safety measures to take in their accommodation, and on campus.

The UCU is calling on their members to continue teaching and take responsibility for their own safety. A letter sent to branch members at MMU by the UCU headed, “Urgent advice to all members teaching face to face on campus” states, “In the attached room plan analyses, you will see that colleagues sitting at desks meant for the lecturer, are NOT 2 metres away from students.” It continues, “You cannot rely on your desk and chair being set at a 2 metre distance from students, even when the risk assessment documentation says that it is. You must check for yourself.”

It advises members to “bring in a tape measure and check the distance from where your head will be to where the heads of the students sitting in the front row of seats will be.”

If “you have taught in a class where you were less than 2 metres from your students for longer than 15 minutes,” then “this is a close contact” and “You should self-isolate”. If “you have been told that there have been cases in your class, but you do not need to self-isolate because you were at a safe 2m distance from your students,” lecturers should do nothing other than “check the floorplan of the room where you were teaching.”

The message ends in larger point size wording, “UCU does not recommend that any member refuses to teach. We are not currently in dispute with our employer.”

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 and schools with other workers.



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