UK students denounce dangerous conditions in universities and halls of residence

Our reporters
2 October 2020

University students across the UK have spoken to the WSWS, and posted on social media, detailing the appalling conditions they face after returning to campus amid a resurging pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of young people, many leaving home for the first time, were told to move to university halls of residence. Many have now been locked down or told to self-isolate in cramped and expensive rooms, left short of food and support and denied the right to return home.

Students and educators protested that students were being scapegoated, while universities and private developers pocketed rental incomes. On average, students pay around £150 a week for university accommodation, roughly £6,000 for a 40 to 42-week academic year—in London, the average is closer to £8,000.

Ben, an Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies student at Exeter University, noted, "I think they're using us as a cash cow by charging us full rates for a service that is half-quality at best, while simultaneously scapegoating us for the rise in cases due to their own ineptitude."

Steve, a third-year student at Sheffield, said, "We've had the most students in the past three years, it's hard to socially distance and there's so many cases. It's totally for profit."

A department head at York university, Helen Smith, tweeted, "Repeat after me: if you bring students from all over the UK (and beyond) and put them together in halls of residence, it is not okay to blame *them* when they contract COVID-19."

One parent tweeted, "My son's student residence already has a confirmed case of COVID-19 and uni hasn't even started yet. It's going to be a disaster."

Some students stayed at home. Others fear that if they return home now, they will endanger their families.

Olivia, studying Civil Engineering at Edinburgh University, wrote, "I'm so happy I decided to stay home, I think going to university at the moment is one of the most dangerous things you can do."

Imogen, studying law at Oxford, said, "If we're all getting sent back here and then everyone mixes and gets it, and then we all get sent home again like last time, we're all just going to take it back to our families and infect more vulnerable people."

Jamie, studying psychology at New York University's London campus, said, "It would be unwise to go back now. If given the choice and the means to avoid going back to university, students should take it. For some, going away from home is preferable to staying for various reasons, but generally it seems a good idea to stay at home where you'd likely have more security and stability in your life."

Around 1,500 students have been self-isolating at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Many put posters in their windows asking for help. Despite university demands that the posters be removed, the young people have been supported by local residents.

Iris Skipworth works at Hulme Community Garden Centre, near to Birley Halls student accommodation. She told the *Manchester Evening News* :

"Anyone could have predicted that students coming back to university was going to be a big problem. This situation suggests that proper plans weren't in place for an outbreak and now the University is having to react to what Public Health England has told them to do. But it's also partly down to the Government. They've set the rules that all universities across the country have to follow... It just seems very wrong that people were still persuaded to come away from home for the first time and move in with people they'd never met."

Maria, a PhD student at Lancaster University, made similar points. "The guidelines from the government

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are as unclear as they can be, and obviously that makes it difficult for the institutions to react properly. That is not to say that universities are exempt of blame." She warned that an outbreak at Lancaster was probably imminent. "The only way to stop the outbreak is to have a decent test-and-trace system, which as far as I am aware it is not a thing at all."

Maria was critical of information coming from the university. "I need to say that the amount of crap within every message about coronavirus that the University sends is overwhelming. In this situation the thing we need the most is clarity and concision, and not marketing."

The WSWS interviewed a second-year student at the University of Plymouth, Amy, who pointed to the fact that young people are more likely to do the sort of low-paid work that exposes them to the virus.

"The government only thought of universities as an afterthought... Students fall under the bracket of young people, who are being prominently blamed for the spike in COVID cases. However, it is these people who are on the frontline, ensuring that people receive their online shopping, takeaways etc.”

Amy had no confidence in the university's confusing infection control and social distancing arrangements for busy courses, having chosen to stay in the accommodation despite problems with Zoom and the local Wi-Fi. "I’m too nervous to be around other people, even if socially distanced, because I don’t know how careful people have been and if they have followed guidelines. I would rather stay in my house safety bubble."

The lockdown measures have also exposed shocking fire risks in student accommodation. Students using The Glasshouse on Union Road, Nottingham, circulated images of the only ground floor fire exit in their accommodation block closed with cable ties. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) circulated images from Marsden House, Leeds, where another fire exit was held shut with cable ties. FBU leader Matt Wrack has been obliged to write to every university in the UK to remind them "that blocking, locking or impeding fire exits is both dangerous and illegal—to be clear, the pandemic is no excuse, nor mitigating factor for this sort of action."

The catastrophe unfolding around university accommodation has deepened popular disgust at Boris Johnson’s government. Polled by YouGov, some 45 percent of respondents considered it a mistake to allow universities to re-open against 40 percent who approved and 15 who were unsure. An earlier poll by Survation found that 48 percent of people in university towns and cities would blame the government for any rise in cases caused by students’ return, against 23 percent who would blame the students and 21 percent who were unsure.

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