

UK universities expose thousands of international students to raging pandemic

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Universities have played a major role in the UK's second wave of COVID-19 infections. Daily infections almost doubled over the first week of October as campuses reopened.

This was the entirely predictable result of the reckless drive to encourage students back to the campuses for in-person teaching this term, with lies about "COVID-secure" campuses and a normal "university experience".

The marketised universities, increasingly dependent on private loans, feared that a move to fully online teaching would lead to masses of students deferring their entry, not taking up places in rent-racking student accommodation blocks or paying into the network of private interests with a place on university campuses, and demanding reductions in tuition fees.

One of their primary concerns was that international students would view coming to the UK as too risky.

International students have long been viewed by universities as "cash cows", with their financial strategies based on ever more aggressive international recruitment strategies and on increasing the fees charged to international students. According to the *Times Higher Education*, international students now often pay between £10,000 and £26,000 per year for undergraduate study.

In April, there was widespread panic among UK universities as the pandemic looked likely to deter students from abroad travelling to the UK for study in the coming academic year. A briefing from the House of Commons library observed in April that international students paid £7 billion in fees alone in the academic year 2018-19 (17.3 percent of the income of the university sector).

Many universities reacted to this prospect by announcing plans for staff take redundancies and pay cuts or freezes. Some, such as Lancaster University, even asked staff to voluntarily return part of their pay as a donation to the university's balance sheet.

However, the threat of an exodus of international students failed to materialise. The number of international students accepting offers from UK universities in fact increased by seven percent over the previous year. This was in large part due to lies promoted by the government and universities that a safe return to campuses was possible. They sought to capitalise on the huge importance of UK university degrees for the life

chances of many international students—whose families often save for years to meet the extortionate fees.

The criminality of this policy is most glaringly exposed in the case of the thousands of Chinese students being flown to UK universities, taken from a country where the spread of the coronavirus pandemic has been virtually halted to one where it continues to spiral out of control.

In July, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) announced that it would be arranging charter flights directly from Beijing to Belfast to guarantee that hundreds of Chinese students, who make up around five percent of the student population of QUB, would attend in-person rather than use distance learning. After arriving in September, these students will have been exposed to a far greater risk of infection than they faced at home. The infection rate per 100,000 people in Belfast was 68.1 for the week they arrived, compared with 1.4 cases per 100,000 people in China at the time. Promises of an in-person teaching experience then evaporated as all but essential teaching was moved by QUB to online delivery on the October 14, in response to a surge in infections.

The same happened on a far greater scale in England. A "working group" involving universities across Greater Manchester, local authorities and businesses arranged 31 charter flights to Manchester Airport to bring 7,000 Chinese students to the north of England—with the encouragement of the Chinese Consulate. The original plan, only prevented due to travel restrictions, was to bring between 20,000 and 30,000 Chinese students by September. In comments reported in the *Manchester Evening News*, the University of Manchester's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, said, "one of my responsibilities is to make sure the University of Manchester is financially sustainable," and commented that the loss of international students would have a big impact on the university's finances.

Winning Chinese investment is a key mechanism by which Greater Manchester's regional business interests, and those throughout the UK, seek to increase profits. Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham commented previously on growing relationships with China: "Manchester is a city of collaboration, with academic institutions working with the city's public authorities and businesses to drive forward a

dynamic economy.”

The thousands of Chinese students flown into Manchester—where the infection rate was over 550 per 100,000 at the start of October and over 370 per 100,000 in the past week—were assured that they were safe. But such are the horrendous conditions, with the Conservative government set to end its national lockdown on December 2, that many international students will contract this deadly disease. Chinese news site CGTN reported the comments of Lyu Xiaomei at the Chinese embassy in Manchester that “[e]ach university, has taken, or they’ve pledged to take, very draconian measures to contain the spread on campus when students arrive.”

“Draconian” is the right word. Measures taken by the University of Manchester (UoM) have not been directed against the pandemic, but against the student population itself.

Three weeks ago, students at UoM tore down seven-foot high fencing that had been put up, without any warning, around the Fallowfield campus. Protests last week to mark the start of an occupation of Owens Park Tower at Fallowfield were met with an enormous deployment of police and university security, who filmed protesting students and blockaded the occupied building to prevent food deliveries.

Students began the occupation in protest against high rents, the scapegoating of students for the spread of the pandemic, and threatened staff redundancies. The action won widespread support as students increasingly recognised that the return to campuses had nothing to do with their educational needs, but was all about making universities “financially sustainable”.

The response of the university to the protests and occupation was to declare they would increase security patrols on campus, a measure intended not to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, but to intimidate students.

Universities’ callous treatment of international students in the pandemic is a dramatic exposure of a vastly marketized higher education system.

Over the past period, the UK higher education sector has become increasingly reliant on income from the enormous fees it can charge international students. According to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, between the academic years 2014-15 and 2018-19 enrolment in full-time undergraduate study grew by 3.6 percent for UK and EU students, who pay maximum annual fees of £9,250. For students from outside the EU who pay much higher fees, the increase in enrolment was by 17 percent.

Chinese students make up the largest nationality among international students, and recruitment of students from China is also growing most quickly, increasing by 47 percent over the same period. Last year, 120,000 Chinese students came to study in the UK, spending £1.7 billion in tuition fees.

A host of prestigious British universities are reliant on the income from Chinese students to stay afloat. The University of Glasgow relies on 31 percent of its *total income* from Chinese students, the University of Liverpool (29 percent) and

University of Sheffield (26 percent). University College London took in £127 million in income from Chinese students last year, followed by the University of Manchester—where one in eight students is Chinese—at £110 million.

The total amount paid by non-EU students is growing far faster than the increase in recruitment, with the £5.9 billion collected in the academic year 2018-19 representing an increase of 39.5 percent over the year 2014-15. This is in part due to increases in undergraduate tuition fees, but a large role is played by the growth in popularity of single-year taught masters courses, viewed as increasingly necessary to find employment in many industries, and marketed aggressively by UK universities.

Safe, high-quality online education was entirely possible for this academic year. Many lecturers undertook hours of unpaid training and studied the enormous literature on how to carry out online education effectively. There was no good educational reason to force international students to travel to one of the centres of the global coronavirus pandemic.

Students and educators alike must fight for the right to education based on a rational plan to guarantee both health and pedagogical needs. This will include asynchronous online lectures, a timetable of online contact hours suitable for all time-zones, arrangements between universities to share lab time, and the allocation of the massive resources and staffing levels required to make this possible.

Such a fight requires a unified struggle of students, university staff and the broader working class against the capitalist system, which has transformed universities into profit-making enterprises and students into funding sources to be exploited.

This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Party and the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. We encourage all educators and students to join the committee and attend its next online meeting on Saturday November 28 at 2pm.



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