

Students back on UK campuses amid explosive growth of Indian covid variant

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University students began returning to campus on May 17, during the Johnson government's reopening the economy while removing restrictions on the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first reopening of campuses last September led to the massive spread of Covid-19, forcing thousands of students to self-isolate after travelling away from friends and family. The government is repeating the same reckless policy, recommending that all students be "eligible to return to in-person teaching and learning."

Around one million students in England alone have been told to return to campus in every major town and city in the country. This was sanctioned by the government in the full knowledge that dangerous and highly contagious mutations of the virus were in circulation in Britain. This includes the main Indian variant, B.1.617.1, which is highly transmissible and now detected in at least 43 countries. Speaking to the BBC *Today* programme Thursday, Imperial College London epidemiologist Professor Neil Ferguson confirmed, "It's now in well over the majority of local authority areas in the country and is now the dominant strain, the majority of new cases are of the variant—that is obviously concerning. It's gone from being really a small minority a month ago to the majority variant."

Campus returns are being sanctioned despite the government advising online Tuesday, with no announcement made, that people not even travel into and out of the eight areas hit hardest by B.1.617.1: Kirklees, Bedford, Burnley, Leicester, Hounslow and North Tyneside, Bolton in Greater Manchester and nearby Blackburn. This "advice" was changed the next day to "unless necessary" after a protest led by the Labour Party, in line with its own support for ending containment measures.

The government recommendation is that students "should get tested twice a week upon return", with the

vaccination campaign and the availability of mass testing held up as ensuring campus safety. However, more than 50 percent of the adult population have yet to receive a second dose. Office for National Statistics data show less than 21 percent of under 40s have been vaccinated, and the lateral flow tests available on campuses and widely used in schools are not authorised for "test-to-enable" purposes.

An expert on the government's Joint Committee for Vaccinations and Immunisation has warned that lateral flow tests "are not 'green light' tests. You cannot be sure that if the test is negative you are not infectious and you must continue to take the usual precautions." The use of these tests would lead to 60 percent of asymptomatic cases being missed, enabling more "super spreader" events.

While the World Health Organization recommendation was that any negative lateral flow test should be followed up with the more accurate PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) test, to enable the December return of students from campuses the government recommended that only *positive* lateral flow results be confirmed by a PCR test. This guaranteed that many asymptomatic students infected with COVID-19 were told it was safe to travel home for Christmas. For the latest reopening, confirmatory PCR testing has been scrapped completely.

When the promises of a "covid-secure" return in September proved to be lies, it led to a mass rebellion among students, with thousands joining rent strikes and protests to demand compensation for the way they had been treated. Many universities were forced to make concessions, offering rent rebates and refunds for students unable to travel to their accommodation.

The successes of the rent strike movement in the first term of the academic year inspired thousands more students to withhold their rent in January, but also stiffened the resolve of university management teams to

avoid making further concessions, and claw back lost income.

An occupation of a campus building by students at Sheffield Hallam University was met by physical violence from the university's security team, and the occupiers left after threats of disciplinary action. Video of the assault was posted and widely condemned on social media. Coordinated occupations at the University of Manchester and University of Sheffield were both ended after the students reported receiving threats of legal action from the universities. Students and staff have denounced the University of Bristol after it hired private debt collectors to pursue rent strikers.

In an online meeting hosted by the pseudo-left People's Assembly during the occupations, two contrasting perspectives were put forward. Students involved in the occupations expressed hostility to the whole marketised system of education, where universities are run as businesses, opposed the reckless reopening of campuses and called for nationwide action.

By contrast, leaders of the National Union of Students (NUS) and University and Colleges Union (UCU), sought to tie students to limited protest on their own campuses. Both denounced the students for raising political issues, with UCU General Secretary Jo Grady describing their concerns about marketisation as "a bit niche", and NUS President Larissa Kennedy bluntly claiming that "nobody cares".

The UCU has put up no real opposition to the return to campuses, with Grady complaining only, "The decision to return to in-person teaching on university campuses when classes for the vast majority of students have already finished is a distraction, placing more workload on to burnt out staff." She politely advised, "It would be much safer to delay any in-person teaching until September when many more students and staff will have been vaccinated."

Scientists in the Independent SAGE group, which has criticised aspects of the government's pandemic response, warned in February that "college campuses are at risk to develop an extreme incidence of COVID-19 and become super-spreaders for neighbouring communities." It recommended that online teaching be maximised, to reduce transmission on campuses and to prevent the spread of variants when students travel across the country.

Announcements from universities that there will be no in-person teaching for most courses this term despite the return to campus, and that online lectures may continue into the next academic year, have been met with anger

from students asking why they have been asked to return to campus.

Some have demanded a return to "normal" lectures, with a petition set up by a student at the University of Leeds signed by over 3,500 students and parents, denouncing plans for blended learning in the next academic year. Echoing government propaganda that "the cure cannot be worse than the disease," the petition demands, "Normality must return in all areas of society, and most importantly we demand a complete return to in-person teaching for all students at the University of Leeds."

In reality, media propaganda that young people are not at risk from the coronavirus is false, and the further removal of restrictions will put students at risk from the long-term effects of Covid-19. The full reopening of the economy is a direct attack on working class youth and students, who often pay for their studies by taking front-line jobs which expose them to infection. Universities have taken advantage of the pandemic to cut at least 3,000 jobs, degrading further the quality of education. Hypocritical statements from the government that universities must "provide consistently good courses for all students" are exposed by the proposal to halve the subsidy for arts and other courses not among "strategic priorities."

The only way to defend the right to the provision of high quality education and safety from a dangerous disease is through opposition to demands of the political representatives of the capitalist class that profit must come before the right to study in safety. Students must join their struggle with that of lecturers and other educators in a fight to end the pandemic and demand the resources necessary to provide all with a free and decent education, wages and conditions. Students looking to wage this struggle will find the means to do so through the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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