Increasing COVID cases on UK university campuses as all restrictions lifted

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The Department for Education (DfE) has changed the operational guidance within higher education as a main plank towards eliminating all remaining COVID restrictions, in line with the "herd immunity" agenda of the Conservative government.

A January 19 DfE document specified, "With the removal of the Plan B measures, HE providers should note that there are no COVID restrictions that apply to Higher Education, and they should ensure that they deliver face-to-face teaching without restrictions".

Ominously, it continued, "Risk assessments should never be used to prevent providers delivering the full programme of face-to-face teaching and learning that they were providing before the pandemic". In other words, no matter how many students and staff are exposed to the risk of contracting a debilitating disease and potentially dying, nothing is being allowed to stand in the way of the universities being fully operational.

The guidance is being imposed even as scientists warn of the likelihood of major outbreaks of COVID-19 on campuses. Emeritus Professor of Applied Statistics at the Open University Kevin McConway noted that the number of booster shots among the student population is low, as many only became eligible in January. The *TES* (Times Higher Education) reported January 14, "The most detailed Office for National Statistics (ONS) data available—which indicated that one in every 15 people in their late teens or early twenties in London was infected with COVID in early December—offered the most helpful guide to infection levels in the student cohort, Professor McConway said."

McConway cautioned against returning to in-person classes: "Given the spike in infections in freshers week last year, the considerably higher rates of infection in the relevant age groups in the country now compared to then, and the fact that Omicron is so much easier to transmit, I think the risk of major outbreaks in universities as students go back for next term is considerable."

The rise in infection will also slow down the adoption of vaccines even more, as booster appointments are delayed by at least 28 days if someone has a positive test, ensuring students will continue getting ill in large numbers for the foreseeable future.

Recent weeks have seen a steady increase in the number of COVID-19 cases reported in universities. In the week ending January 31, Cambridge University reported 116 positive cases, up from 50 the week before. The University of Reading reported 124 cases for the week ending February 11 and 1,448 since the start of school year in September 2021. That is compared with 691 cases at Reading in the 2020-2021 school year, even though both students and staff have much higher rates of vaccination now. University College London reported 82 cases among staff and 210 cases among students in the week to February 11. At the University of Sussex there were 199 staff self-isolating as of February 9 due to testing positive for coronavirus and the 7-day average of positive tests has been increasing steadily since early January.

All these numbers are likely severe undercounts, as only a tiny slice of the student population is being regularly tested. Cambridge University reports testing only 3,000 students a week out of approximately 21,000 and is the only university that is testing asymptomatic students as well.

Higher education institutions have been implementing the government's new guidance with enthusiasm. Mask mandates have been lifted from virtually all campuses and most courses moved to in-person learning, with some reports of as many as 300

students crammed in a single lecture room. Social media users report of institutions enforcing attendance more harshly than before, with students being punished with lower marks if they are not present even in the most crowded lectures. A student at Cardiff University told the WSWS that members of staff are forced to come to campus to teach in-person even if one of their family members has tested positive.

The latest steps in eliminating restrictions have provoked outrage and disgust among students and staff. Student Ga Kitada tweeted, "Translation: Let's mass infect everyone with Omicron and build up herd immunity because it's 'mild' and it's not as if it causes tonnes of preventable deaths, multi-system complications and long COVID."

Other tweets point out the real motives behind government policy: "Yes, let's make children and school staffers cannon fodder for the good of the economy! Great idea! Magical thinking as policy". Twitter user Debbie Cameron exposes the lies being spread about the disruption of education: "Are they ever going to grasp that what disrupts education most is continuously high rates of infection rather than precautions taken to control them?"

The WSWS spoke to a second-year medicine student at the University of Bristol regarding the situation on her campus: "COVID cases seem to be on the rise among students but at the same time, it is a very vaccine accepting population. Anecdotally, the people testing positive are asymptomatic and find out through necessary lateral flows for societies and Uni events. My friends' sports team has someone announcing they have COVID every few days. So yes, there seems to be more cases, but it doesn't seem to be knocking people out as it may have done in the earlier waves."

When asked what she thought of the plans to end the legal requirement to self-isolate, she said it will lead to an increase in the spread of the virus. She pointed out the insufficiency of self-isolation under conditions where the virus is spreading rampantly, which meant that vital services such as rail transport were disrupted because of lack of staff: "I had a four-hour journey back from my home town because enough staff couldn't man all lines so there were many delays.

"I would love/prefer an eradication strategy, but I know people who have said they wouldn't follow it anymore because of 'partygate'. It sounds a lot better

than living with it." This was a reference to the crisis wracking the Conservative government after it leaked that Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other government officials held parties in Whitehall during lockdown, breaking rules and guidance in place.

When asked what she thought of the International Committee of the Fourth International's strategy of a global eradication policy against the herd immunity policies of capitalist governments, she replied, "I would support that!"

The University and College Union (UCU), the main university workers union, has been completely silent on the latest developments, with the latest article dealing with COVID-19 on their website being published over a month ago, on January 12, even before the latest DfE guidance was published.

The purpose of the UCU article was to pursue the fiction that campuses can be made safe for in-person learning if only a few cosmetic measures are taken to mitigate risks. Examples provided by the UCU include providing FFP2 and FFP3 masks to staff teaching in-person, ensuring effective ventilation measures are in place to reduce airborne transmission risks, access to regular free testing (PCR and LFT tests) and support to those who are asked to self-isolate. Even if these measures were implemented, they would hardly make any impact due to the sheer number of HE students (2.4 million) and staff (hundreds of thousands) that would be present on campus, coupled with the exceptional transmissibility of the Omicron variant.

New organisations that operate independently of the trade union apparatus must be established to lead the struggles of educators and students against unsafe conditions. During the pandemic, the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was formed to link up the fights of educators for safety, pay and conditions. College staff and students looking to take their fight forward should join the committee, attend our meetings and receive our regular newsletter.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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