Medical student at UK's Cardiff University speaks to the Global Workers' Inquest

A medical student
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My first experience of universities was their indifference to human life. Despite the COVID-19 virus having killed over 40,000 people by the start of September 2020, they insisted on the mass movement of over a million students and university workers into crowded campuses.

The rise in cases after the earlier summer holidays prompted national restrictions to be reintroduced, limiting private gatherings to six people. But Prime Minister Boris Johnson made sure that campuses were exempt from this rule, declaring that "opening universities is critical".

Thus, with the promise of "COVID-secure" learning environments, the UK's biggest annual migration began. This included a total of over 30,000 Cardiff University students moving into shared accommodation within the space of a week. With no option to work from home or defer our application, we were forced onto highly disrupted courses, in a breeding ground for a deadly virus, and had to pay £9,250 a year in tuition fees for it!

Mass student migration in September 2020

Government guidance at the time maintained that there was no evidence that face-to-face teaching was unsafe if precautions were upheld. So the medical school at my university proceeded with a "blended learning" approach—a mix of face-to-face and online learning. Students were not notified of what this meant. We weren't given our timetable until days before starting, and even then it would be regularly updated, sometimes the night before.

They'd kept us in the dark about the reality of our teaching sessions: a lack of mass testing for students, lack of social distancing, and lack of PPE while training.

The Medical Schools Council justified this by stating that "it may not always be possible for students to observe rules around social distancing in these environments (clinical placements). However, any risk this poses is 'outweighed' by the benefit to their education". Cardiff medical school took this further by repeating the government mantra that students are young and not at risk.

The facts prove otherwise. 54 people under the age of 24 died of COVID in 2020. 134,000 people aged 17-24 were debilitated with Long COVID as of October 2021. That's 2.28 percent of the demographic, or one in 44.

Even if students are lucky enough to get away with mild symptoms, the same cannot be assured for their friends, family and the general public they could infect unknowingly.

An email from the medical faculty revealed the true source of these erroneous claims—government Public Health guidance that clinical placement teaching is exempt from all safety measures and that no further action is required if vague precautions are maintained as students in attendance "are not deemed to be close contacts".

On balance, they'd rather the suffering of the population than the funding of provisions needed for a truly safe environment.

Conditions in accommodation

Mass infection occurred within days of students studying and living in poorly ventilated lecture halls, classrooms and accommodation. The R [virus reproduction] value increased to above 1.0 in all parts of England. With an average of 60 cases a day in Cardiff alone, we went into a local lockdown by September 27, as soon as myself and all other students had moved in.

They'd effectively bound me in a contract paying over £5,000 a year in rent to be stuck in university halls. The university simultaneously abandoned all pretence of "safe blended learning", replacing it with online-only learning for all non-clinical courses.

It was a win-win situation for universities—they could reap thousands of pounds from students trapped in university halls and profit further by switching to low-cost online learning.

In contrast, 80 percent of students were worried about coping financially, as a National Union of Students survey found.

I learnt of the distressing situation my peers were in as my course involves speaking to many different groups of students. The extent of the spread of the virus was otherwise actively concealed. Hundreds were isolating in a neighbouring accommodation block, but the University Residences didn't share any information. The record numbers of Cardiff University infections, including 96 cases on a single day in October 2020, were only published in November, after the peak.

The government and media spun the story right on its head, blaming *us* for the peak caused by *their* reckless reopening policies.

After carrying out Boris Johnson's criminal policy to "let the bodies pile high in their thousands", universities had the nerve to threaten us with expulsions, suspensions and fines if we broke COVID rules.

Cardiff University worked hand in glove with South Wales Police to intimidate us and create a prison-like atmosphere within our halls of residence. Our loans were used to increase CCTV presence and close off gaps in fences to prevent us leaving. We could only enter or leave after security checked our ID. Security even had powers to invade the one place we could retreat to—our flats. They'd conduct spot checks and turn cameras on students at any "wrongdoing". Students were encouraged to report on others.

A petition that gained over 650 signatures put it well saying, "These policies are an infringement of student privacy; and have been drawn up without any consideration of the wellbeing and mental health of Cardiff's student population."

Students across the UK faced similar mistreatment.

Isolation in December 2020

While universities eagerly funded new policing measures, they avoided spending any extra money on mental health and quarantine support. Under these isolating circumstances, there has been a marked increase in youth suicides and mental health disorders. In October 2020 it was reported that "Eight university students have died since the beginning of term one, meaning that at least one student has died every single week for the past month." One of these was a second year student at Cardiff University.

I felt the full force of isolation when my flatmate tested positive for COVID in December, 2020. But the failed track and trace system didn't warn me of this until 9 days later! If she hadn't warned me as soon as she was confirmed to have COVID, I would have been on the way back home for Christmas, potentially infecting my parents.

Our flat of five began quarantining in halls with no support from the university. They dropped the full weight of getting through self-isolation onto our shoulders with only an automated email giving basic information. This included making sense of government guidance, cleaning shared areas, organising delivery of food and supporting each other, especially my flatmate with COVID who was completely drained by it.

She was extremely weak and breathless, with no energy to get out of bed. She had to rest and sleep in between lectures from exhaustion. It was traumatising to see her health deteriorate, knowing that I couldn't do much to help as we were isolating, and that I could soon be in the same position. We couldn't even video call each other properly because of the appalling Wi-Fi.

Two days into isolation, we were all running out of fresh food. But our families were too far away to bring us supplies. Neither could our friends as most students had gone home for Christmas. Deliveries from supermarkets were delayed and charged excessive amounts. The only other option the university suggested was to use their Market Place to order food.

They promised us £20 credit for this service, only to exploit us once again, charging extortionate prices for everything on the Market Place. The price of a 500g bag of porridge oats was shamelessly inflated to £4.90! All I could get with the £20 was some fruit, cheese, snacks, eggs and Quorn pieces. This was meant to last 10 days.

Moreover, it only arrived on the eight day of isolation. Until then, I was forced to think of ways to make my supplies last and relied on the kindness of fellow students who delivered me food.

All services were abandoned by December 18 as the university closed for the holiday. I was lucky to end isolation and go home before then, but this wasn't the case for hundreds of students, including one of my flatmates who is an international student. With flights cancelled at the last minute, he was stranded in residences during the whole Christmas period with no food delivery, laundry, rubbish removal, post, or maintenance services. The university offered a useless Christmas hamper in replacement for any support.

Substandard teaching

We also had to navigate through highly disrupted courses alone, away from any support networks. Access to learning materials, contact with lecturers and campus facilities were all cut off. The standard of teaching deteriorated significantly.

In-person teaching was abruptly replaced with vastly inferior and hastily assembled online versions. Universities cut costs in all ways possible, including the medical school providing us pre-recorded lectures from previous years and asynchronous learning packages which were basic PowerPoints. I had to teach myself the whole of the lower limb anatomy from YouTube videos provided. There was very little interaction with staff. In effect, we were teaching ourselves the medicine course.

Zoom sessions were also consistently unreliable. Links to Zoom meetings would be sent out at the last minute or not work altogether.

Obstructing the learning experience further were the essentials for any online teaching—a good laptop and stable internet connection. These were never guaranteed. Wi-Fi was appalling in our residences. The signal was so weak that Zoom would close down mid-session, multiple times a day. I had to cope with this for months until they eventually fitted new Wi-Fi routers in January 2021.

It is no wonder that the Office for National Statistics found that 48 percent of students said the pandemic had a major or significant impact on their academic performance.

Reopening and rent strikes in January 2021

Teaching did not get any better in the New Year [2021]. With a typical last-minute announcement on January 4, the government plunged into the third national lockdown, sending students into online teaching once again. The devastating peak in cases meant that they couldn't maintain the lie that campuses are the best place for students' wellbeing, having to tell students to stay at home and study remotely. But this meant students had to pay thousands of pounds for university accommodation that wasn't lived in.

Government guidance notably omitted provision for good quality online learning and funds for rent rebates. There was a well of anger among students. Yet student unions did nothing to take up this widespread opposition.

Overcoming the continuous inaction of the unions, students took on the fight themselves. For example, a petition calling for a refund of tuition fees due to COVID-19 received more than 270,000 signatures. The National Union of Students (NUS) doesn't fight even for this. Neither do they raise any serious safety demands.

The most significant actions were the nationwide rent strikes, which involved over 15,000 students across the UK! Students in at least 55 universities refused to put up with the government's disastrous policies, which not only pushed them into a financial crisis but also compromised their learning, social life, mental and physical health.

This wave of opposition won rent rebates in many universities, including a full rebate for Cardiff University students. The size of the refund and full terms varied widely between universities, however, and was non-existent for students in private accommodation.

The universities minister feigned interest in student welfare by pledging £50 million to support those struggling financially as a result of the pandemic. But this is nothing, considering university students have wasted nearly £1 billion on empty rooms in flat shares and halls of residence that they have been unable to use, let alone all other maintenance costs. To get a better idea, the hardship fund works out at £20 for each of the country's 2.46 million students. In that same announcement, the government stopped short of providing students with rent refunds themselves, "encouraging" providers to offer refunds instead.

Reopening in September 2021 and catching COVID as a result

Two lies paved the way for a full reopening in September 2021. One, that vaccination levels have "broken the link between infections and deaths." And two, that the government was "concerned" about learners' mental health and education.

Cardiff University opened as normal, following the Welsh government's move to alert level zero [with least restrictions]. This meant libraries, cafes, restaurants, accommodation, sports facilities and the Students' Union were fully opened to students. In-person teaching was delivered as normal, including smaller lectures, tutorials, seminars, lab work and workshops. No information was given about the size of the sessions or any protective measures.

With no restrictions and most young people not being fully vaccinated, there was a consistent UK daily death toll of over 100, every day of first term.

The demand to reopen had nothing to do with protecting our mental health or education—it was used to keep drawing tuition and accommodation fees out of students.

This was proved when I caught COVID in October 2021. Instead of financing a safe environment to carry out essential clinical teaching, the medical school pushed us into in-person teaching, the likely source of my infection.

I had to practise clinical skills, which include intimate examinations, without any PPE. I had tutorials with 10 other people, where the tutor reminded us that the guidance says that we don't have to wear masks, our last protection against an airborne disease. The removal of masks was the final step in eliminating all visible signs that there was a deadly virus still at large.

They then even broke their own rules, making around 70 of us sit side by side in a small lecture theatre that had a maximum occupancy of 42. I didn't realise this until I walked in.

To get to these sessions, we had to walk through the teaching hospital full of infections and vulnerable people. This was while it was being reported that there was a sharp rise in the number of people catching COVID in Welsh hospitals.

Despite my housemates being in contact with me before I tested positive, the time when I was most infectious, government guidance said that they shouldn't self-isolate because they didn't have symptoms (yet). They had to go into these hospitals, potentially infecting our peers and our patients.

The government's contempt for our welfare as medical students is indicative of their future treatment of us as frontline workers. The pandemic has only worsened conditions for National Health Service professionals who were already working in extremely understaffed and under resourced environments.

Reopening in January 2022 and "living with the virus"

At the dawn of the New Year, the UK recorded an appalling milestone: 150,000 total COVID deaths, the first European country to record such a figure. It was in this same week that Boris Johnson declared that "we can find a way to live with this virus", meaning that he would do nothing to stop the spread.

Despite the well of anger within the general public against Johnson's criminal herd immunity policies and lockdown parties, Labour advanced no opposition. Despite having the power to call a vote of no confidence in the government, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has only offered "constructive criticism" throughout Johnson's premiership.

Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford's Labour government in Wales has carried out the same policies as Johnson, just over a slightly longer timescale. Wales has been on alert level zero since January 28 and will remove all COVID restrictions, including all mandatory wearing of face masks, routine contact tracing and the requirement to self-isolate, by March 28. This plan is apparently created "with the protection of everyone, especially the most vulnerable, at its heart", although there are consistently around 100 patients a day in acute hospital care in Wales.

"Phased" reopening meant that we had two weeks of online teaching at the start of 2022 and then everything restarted in person. My first ever in-person lecture took place in February 2022. Packing 300 students into a lecture theatre was deemed unsafe until this point, but was allowed from the start of this year when average COVID cases at Cardiff University were the highest they've been since October 2020.

The government and universities' hypocrisy and spread of misinformation throughout the pandemic is astounding. They have had two key objectives in this crisis:

• The government's using universities to push forward their herd immunity claim that everything can continue as "normal", with no money spent on providing high-quality, safe education.

• The universities' private profit interests driven by the marketisation of higher education, where campuses had to be reopened to ensure the flow of cash from tuition and accommodation fees.

Students have suffered the criminality of both agendas.

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