

16 March 2020

Dear Mr Williamson,

The University and College Union (UCU) has written to universities and further education colleges asking them to take immediate steps to shut down their core functions, particularly those which involve face-to-face interaction or bring large numbers of people into close contact. In light of the continuing rapid spread of coronavirus across the UK, and the Prime Minister's most recent statement calling for avoidance of all social contact, I am writing to urge the government to adopt this as an official directive covering all colleges and universities across the UK as a matter of urgency.

The health and safety of staff and students should be the top priority for both the government and further and higher education providers as we respond to the spread of the virus. UCU recognises that it is not possible to simply shut down all university and college infrastructure – for example student accommodation and medical research facilities will, in many instances, need to remain open. However, our members are concerned that the UK's decision not to close educational establishments or limit physical presence on campuses presents an unnecessary risk to the health of staff and students, as well as their families and communities.

UCU is therefore asking all institutions to work with us to identify which functions it is possible to shut down in the short term, and put in place appropriate social distancing measures for any staff who must continue to work. We are also calling on institutions to:

- provide clear guidance for staff on working from home
- allow staff adequate time and technical support to enable them to move relevant activity online where it is useful, and
- provide guarantees that staff – particularly those on casualised contracts - will not face any financial detriment due to cancellation of teaching or research activity linked to the coronavirus response.

The current outbreak presents a significant challenge for our further and higher education sector, but UCU is keen to work with the government and education providers to develop a proactive approach which safeguards the health and wellbeing of all staff and students. I would welcome the chance to discuss this matter further at your earliest convenience.

Yours,

Jo Grady
UCU general secretary