

UPDATE

for UCU members in the

North West Region



University and College Union

Issue 3

May 2020

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The five tests

No return until it is safe

- **UCU & Unions set out five tests government and colleges must meet before staff and students can return**
- **The BMA and North West Councils support the joint union position**

UCU, the GMB, UNISON, Unite, and the National Education Union (NEU) have called for stringent hygiene measures, protection for vulnerable people, and isolation for all suspected cases to avoid colleges becoming Covid-19 hotspots.

The unions outlined [five tests](#) which set out a clear roadmap to reopening at a time when the health and safety of all staff, students and others can be assured. The unions said that social distancing plans had to extend beyond the classroom to cover things like travelling to and from college and socialising. To help deal with those challenges, they said that staff and students who can work from home should continue to do so.

The unions were responding to [government guidance](#) released on the evening of Tuesday 12 May setting out how some students, including year 12, may return to face-to-face teaching in colleges from 1 June.

UCU general secretary Jo Grady said: 'Staff and student health is the number one priority and nobody should be going back to college until it is safe to do so. The government needs to work us to address the national challenges, while individual colleges should work with their local union reps to address the unique challenges they will face.'

The unions have received support from a number of prominent sources. The UK largest doctors' union—the [BMA](#) - stated that teaching unions had been "absolutely right" to urge caution and prioritise testing before reopening schools on 1 June. Meanwhile [Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, denounced](#) the Government's plans as a [number of councils](#) across the North West, including [Liverpool City council](#), declared that it was not safe to reopen schools on 1 June. FE colleges do not fall under local council controls. Your UCU reps and Regional Officials are working to ensure that safety is assured if and when any college reopens. **If you are contacted about reopening by a line manager, please seek advice from your local UCU branch.**

Test 1: Much lower numbers of Covid-19 cases

The new case count must be much lower than it is now, with a sustained downward trend and confidence that new cases are known and counted promptly. This includes open and transparent arrangements in place for testing, contact tracing and isolating those with Covid-19 symptoms.

Test 2: A national plan for social distancing

The Government must have a national plan in place which includes parameters for both appropriate physical distancing and safe levels of social mixing in all further education settings.

Test 3: Comprehensive testing

Comprehensive access to regular testing for students and staff, with isolation for all suspected cases, to ensure colleges don't become hotspots for Covid-19.

Test 4: A whole college strategy for health and safety

Risk assessments and safe ways of working for all tasks and spaces within a college should be established with relevant staff and unions in advance.

Test 5: Protection for the vulnerable

Vulnerable staff, and staff who live with vulnerable people, must work from home, fulfilling their professional duties to the extent that is possible.



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Online survey reminder

• Your participation is vital for UCU's response

UCU's survey of working conditions under Covid-19 is now live with the deadline for responses is 5pm on Friday 22 May. You should have received an email with a unique link over the past week.

The survey covers a lot of questions that are crucial for shaping our response to Covid-19, but it should take you no more than 10-15 minutes. It is very important that you complete it. Your answers will be hugely valuable to us in our efforts to protect you and your colleagues in your workplaces and challenge any detrimental changes employers are imposing on you as a result of the pandemic.

We have added questions that give you a chance to respond to the government's recent announcements about the lifting of lockdown restrictions. Your answers will help us make sure that any lifting of lockdown in tertiary education is managed in a way that puts staff and students first.

This survey covers all the sectors and institutions we represent, but we would particularly urge you to use the free-text answer boxes to give as much information as you can about what's happening on the ground in your institution.

UCU head office will make the responses by members in your branch available (in anonymised form) to your branch committee. This will help your branch decide what approach to take when it consults or negotiates with your employer over things like health and safety, working from home arrangements, or adjustments and protections for vulnerable groups of staff.

Your answers will also help us in our campaigning across the UK. The first survey we conducted on Covid-19, for members in prison education, had a 50% response rate within a week of launching. This helped us pressure employers and the government to shut down face to face activities in that sector as a matter of urgency.

The more information you give your union, the greater our ability to represent you and act in your interests. Please fill in the survey before it closes at 5pm on Friday 22 May.



Working at home

• Reimbursements for household expenses updated

From 6 April 2020 employers can agree to make a payment of £6 per week or £26 per month for monthly paid employees to an employee working regularly at home without the employer having to justify the amount paid.

If the £6 guideline rate is paid the employee does not have to keep any records to demonstrate the additional expenditure. The Government and HMRC expect that £6 per week would be sufficient for most cases, particularly where the additional costs are only for heating and lighting the work area. However, the £6 per week guideline rate (£4 per week before 6 April 2020) is not a maximum. Greater amounts can be paid where the employer provides evidence to justify them.

Further details can be found [here](#).

Branch meetings: have your say and support the union

• Branch activity is more vital than ever

As reported in issue 2, UCU's membership in the North West has grown since the lockdown began. Our annual recruitment rate is now at 20%. Today more than ever, people are recognising the importance of trade union membership.

UCU branches across the North West are reporting huge turnout and participation in online meetings. Digital communication tools have helped reps to reach and engage members in new ways during the lockdown.



In the coming weeks, UCU branches will be holding more online meetings to provide updates on negotiations with employers over the five tests and the risk assessments that are taking place regarding plans for new working practices. At this time it is vital for members to participate. Your ideas and feedback will provide your UCU negotiators and reps with the information they need to ensure that your work place is safe. To find your local branch contact, follow the link [here](#). See you at your next branch meeting.