

# Reopening of university campuses - guidance for HE branches

## 1. Introduction

As the new academic year approaches there is an increasing focus on how campuses within the UK will manage the start of teaching. Since the lockdown in March this year the delivery of higher education teaching in particular has shifted en masse from face-to-face classroom-based provision to various forms of online or 'blended' teaching. This large scale migration is testament to the skill and dedication of staff and the understanding and flexibility of students.

In the next few weeks a mass movement of over a million students, many of them first year undergraduates, will begin. Many thousands will be relocating from one part of the UK and beyond to their place of study. Typically first year undergraduates move into halls of residence.

It is now timely that UCU sets out our position on the reopening of campuses. This new guidance will hopefully help branches negotiate for our position locally. Our position echoes that of the Independent SAGE advice on the reopening of campuses and reflects the divergence within UK higher education.

UCU position is as follows:

- **full consultation with UCU**
- **no default face-to-face teaching**
- **facemasks to be worn in indoor spaces**
- **widely available sanitising stations and facility cleaning regimes**
- **members who are required to work on campus and want to do so must have suitable and sufficient risk assessments**
- **testing, tracing, and quarantine measures**
- **social distancing of two metres, unless otherwise specified and sufficiently risk assessed**
- **infection levels must be stable and not increasing**

These objectives are expanded on below alongside a reminder of UCU's five tests.

## 2. Why new advice?

UCU branches are actively discussing the return to safe working on campus and there are a range of views as to whether, how, and when, members physically return to work in significant numbers following the lengthy period of remote/home-based working, and how a risk assessment led and safety-first approach can fit with the demands expected from university managers.

UCU has provided a wide range of guidance for members and branches throughout the pandemic and it is timely that we now update guidance regarding best practice in campus reopening to establish a set of consistent and necessary measures appropriate for branches to agree with their institutional management.

Education is a devolved matter across the UK and UCU guidance is intended to reflect this, e.g. UCU Scotland recently produced guidance on the basis on which members working in HE in Scotland can consider a return to work and there will be differences of emphasis and detail between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England reflecting differences in official guidance in each jurisdiction

Branches and members are reminded of the range of existing guidance and advice UCU has produced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic:  
<https://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus>

## 3. Independent SAGE

The recent Independent SAGE paper on *Universities in the Context of SARS-CoV-2* <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3Aascds%3AUS%3A5e2e1350-dcdc-49db-83eb-91f470afee1a> provides analysis and recommendations for the management of resumption of activities in the HE sector which, **in UCU's view, provide an authoritative basis for further measures needed to minimise risk of increased transmission and infection rates centred in universities as the new academic year begins.**

They key recommendations highlighted by SAGE are:

*That to protect the safety of students, staff and prevent community infections all university courses should be offered remotely and online, unless they involve practical training or lab work.*

*Universities should focus on providing excellent quality remote learning rather than on opening up campuses that are likely to close again*

*For students who are studying from home the government should provide support through local Covid-safe study hubs and grants for technology and Wi-Fi*

*If students have to attend campus a Covid-safe university should be secured through:*

- i. Testing on or before arrival on campus followed up by further regular testing of students and staff*
- ii. Online welcome week and teaching in the first two weeks of term along with restrictions of social activities among students where feasible*
- iii. Mitigations in classrooms including masks, social distancing of two meters as the norm and regular cleaning*
- iv. Residential bubbles*
- v. a social agreement of Covid-safe behaviours on campus. This should cover students, teachers and all university support staff*
- vi. full consultation with University staff, rigorous health and safety procedures and attention to equality and diversity issues*

*We believe that these measures are essential in order to deliver the best education to students, while also preventing clusters of infection and transmission to local communities of Covid-19. Without these it is unlikely that universities can realistically deliver on their mission to provide the best student educational experience.*

UCU branches are encouraged to press their employers for agreement on these measures before there is any substantial reopening of campus and resumption of any face-to-face teaching.

## **4. Key negotiating objectives for branches**

To assist branches in adopting a common UCU approach when negotiating with employers, we have set out below the key areas you should seek to agree with your employer. The guidance acknowledges there are differences within the UK and that some branches are already making progress on these matters.

### **Full consultation with UCU**

HE employers should take all possible steps to ensure the health and safety of students and staff, and should fully consult with UCU and the other campus trade unions to ensure that policies and practices are in place to that end, and are subject to regular and frequent review.

## **No default face-to-face teaching**

In line with I-Sage recommendations, UCU supports a default position that all HE teaching provision should be through online/remote means except where this is practically impossible (e.g. for laboratory-based teaching and courses with practical elements such as performing arts, sciences, and some arts courses). Where face-to-face teaching is unavoidable measures should be in place to create Covid-safe university settings through the measures set out in the I SAGE report and summarised above.

## **Facemasks to be worn in indoor spaces**

As a consequence of the relatively high potential for virus transmission in university settings UCU's view is that the wearing of masks/face coverings should be required in all enclosed indoor spaces, except for individuals who are unable to wear masks for health reasons / where full two-metre social distancing can be ensured / or where this is rendered impossible by the practical demands of teaching.

Our view is that requirements for masks/face coverings should be the same as in analogous settings outside universities - i.e. that they should be required by default unless two-metre distancing can be ensured, or there are compelling health/practical reasons to the contrary.

## **Widely available sanitising stations and facility cleaning regimes**

Clear hygiene/disinfection routines need to be implemented across all university settings including provision for regular cleaning of lecture theatres and other teaching areas, residential buildings, offices, restaurants; with procedures to manage the use of potentially congested spaces through, for example, use of advance booking systems in libraries with regular cleaning between periods of use.

## **Members who are required to work on campus and want to do so must have suitable and sufficient risk assessments**

In addition to site based risk assessments, there should be individual risk assessments for all staff attending university premises - see guidance on Covid-related H&S, risk assessment and HE return to campus working:

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10960/HE-workplace-return-negotiating-guidance/pdf/ucu\\_covid-19\\_he-return-branch-advice2.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10960/HE-workplace-return-negotiating-guidance/pdf/ucu_covid-19_he-return-branch-advice2.pdf)

## **Testing, tracing, and quarantine measures**

All university staff should also be tested for Covid-19 before the 2020/21 teaching year commences and there should be mandatory testing of all students before, or as soon as, they arrive on campus. Subsequent regular testing should be undertaken to detect asymptomatic infections and identify potential outbreaks.

Ideally testing should be provided through university-based testing facilities, otherwise through existing community-based, health service, or public health agency provided testing facilities. Details of testing and monitoring regimes should be determined in advance of campus opening, subject to consultation with UCU and other recognised trade unions. Processes need to include medical advice and to be consistent with current public health guidance to ensure appropriate action is taken, and support provided for those testing positive.

There need to be processes in place for contact tracing where a student or member of staff tests positive for Covid-19, and provision for isolation/quarantine (on university premises if necessary, in the case of students living in university accommodation).

### **Social distancing of two metres, unless otherwise specified and sufficiently risk assessed**

As previously noted, UCU's position is that teaching provision should continue online except in limited circumstances. Where teaching does take place in person, social distancing with minimum distancing of two metres should be maintained wherever possible. Where this is not possible for reasons outlined above, then face coverings should be required.

### **Infection levels must be stable and not increasing**

Resumption of campus activities, including face to face teaching, must be subject to consideration of levels of infection and transmission prevalent in the local and regional setting of universities. Universities are large institutions with sizeable through flow of staff, students, and visitors, with the consequential risk of becoming Covid-19 hotspots unless care is taken to ensure that all precautionary measures are fully implemented and maintained consistently.

## **5. Other issues to be considered**

As part of a comprehensive approach to campus reopening (UCU guidance available online at <https://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus>), consideration of the following principles should be a feature in any discussions, action planning, and any agreement reached by UCU branches with their employer:

- students should only be on campus where absolutely necessary
- individual risk assessments to support staff and students in vulnerable groups – age, BME, disability, etc.
- need for clear ventilation and hygiene standards
- universities should provide on-site free provision of the flu vaccine for all staff/students to minimise further risks
- care must be taken over GDPR and data protection issues.

## 6. UCU five tests in HE

The five tests provide the basis for a safe return to work with supporting guidance to enable branches to engage with HE employers on matters such as the control and management of hazards and risks, individual and site risk assessments, impacts for vulnerable groups and the protection of staff who continued to work on campus post lockdown.

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10935/UCU-HE-on-campus-return-tests/pdf/ucu\\_covid19\\_hetests.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10935/UCU-HE-on-campus-return-tests/pdf/ucu_covid19_hetests.pdf)

### UCU tests for safe returns to on-campus working in HE

Test 1: Sustained reduction in numbers of Covid-19 cases and infection rates

Test 2: Coherent planning for social distancing

Test 3: Comprehensive testing and contact tracing

Test 4: University-wide strategies for safe returns and continuing health and safety

Test 5: Protection for those most vulnerable to Covid-19

Variations on these principles have been developed for different jurisdictions:

Scotland: [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10937/UCU-Scotland-five-campus-return-tests/pdf/ucus\\_covid19\\_hetests.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10937/UCU-Scotland-five-campus-return-tests/pdf/ucus_covid19_hetests.pdf)

Wales: [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10940/Covid-19-HS-in-Wales/pdf/ucu\\_covid19\\_wales-hs-advice1.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10940/Covid-19-HS-in-Wales/pdf/ucu_covid19_wales-hs-advice1.pdf)