

22 July 2021

Mr Jamie Hepburn MSP
Minister for Higher Education & Further Education, Youth Employment &
Training,
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

By email - MinisterHEFEYET@gov.scot

Dear Minister,

In a matter of weeks students and staff in Scottish universities and across the UK will be back on campuses for work and study. It should be a time when minds are focused on overcoming the disruption suffered last year. However, we as a union remain concerned that that we will see disruption return in some areas of the UK, putting the health of students and staff at risk and throwing the new academic year into chaos.

The more collaborative approach followed by the Scottish government in comparison to the UK government is welcome. UCU greatly values our membership of the Covid Recovery Group, and the opportunity to contribute to and comment on draft Covid guidance as it is developed.

In addition, we welcome the more cautious approach to lifting restrictions followed by the Scottish government than that of the Westminster government in removing all restrictions and associated public health guidance. Nevertheless you will be aware from our submissions prior to the publication of the 'beyond level 0' guidance that we remain of the view that there is scope for more caution, and that there is a real danger that unless we learn key lessons from last year, our education settings become incubators for Covid-19 all over again. As is well documented, the Delta variant is the most highly transmissible strain of the disease. If appropriate health and safety measures are not in place, we could witness disruption worse than during earlier waves.

As you know, UCU in Scotland has focused on a safety first approach, emphasising the importance of enhanced ventilation, risk assessments, and the need for caution on returning to campuses while many young people are not yet double vaccinated. These priorities are broadly shared across the campus trade unions and in keeping with a set of principles UCU at a UK level has identified and which are set out below and again, in greater detail, at the end of this letter.

UCU post 16 education recovery principles:

1. There should be a clear focus on consistent high-quality education provision for all in post-16 education, avoiding the disruption experienced last year
2. There should be a clear focus on ensuring the health & safety of all staff in the post-16 sector
3. The physical and mental health of all students in post-16 education is of vital importance
4. Education settings should not become centres of community Covid transmission
5. Adequate funding must be made available

Delivering a consistent, high-quality education during a pandemic is reliant on first keeping students and staff safe from infection. We are therefore urging you to support UCU's calls for all university students to be fully vaccinated before the start of the academic year, as a priority group. We note that vaccines have been approved for those up to three months from their 18th birthday, however the challenge is ensuring all students receive their vaccinations before September. Governments and employers should work together alongside local and regional NHS providers to make this a reality. And we call for all students under the age of 18 to be fully vaccinated as soon as approved by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

While the newly published 'beyond level 0' guidance refers to the 'appropriate' wearing of face coverings, UCU believe that the guidance should be more prescriptive and require the ongoing wearing of face masks while on-site. Capital funding should be used to improve ventilation where necessary and to make other modifications that allow for effective social distancing. Government should communicate to providers that where additional funding is required to make premises safe, that this will be made available.

Government and employers must ensure there is easy access to free PCR testing on-site and in halls of residence, and that a system of test, track and trace is in effective working order. Mitigation measures in the case of rising infections amongst staff and students must also be agreed and communicated clearly, along with daily records of cases.

We recognise that employers have taken positive steps around mental health provision and are engaging with unions on the issue. However, we need to do more and to increase the provision of support to students and staff in the sector urgently before the start of the new academic year.

Finally, we are asking that as Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training you make a clear commitment that the necessary funding will be made available to education providers for the coming academic year, to support the delivery of an effective Covid-19 recovery. For employers, we are urging that additional resources and staffing are made available, and that casualised staff are brought onto permanent contracts to support delivery.

Education will be vital to leading Scotland and the UK's recovery from the pandemic, however this recovery could be held back by rising infections across the post-16 education sector. It is vital, and a matter of urgency, that the governments and employers agree to meet the UCU's post-16 Education Recovery Principles, which overleaf you can read in full.

Time really is of the essence in ensuring that our post-16 education system bounces back safely after last year.

Yours sincerely,



Jo Grady
General Secretary, UCU



Mary Senior
Scotland Official, UCU

UCU's post-16 Education Recovery Principles

UCU's approach to framing national and local demands regarding Coronavirus and Covid-19 are based on 5 core principles.

- 1. There should be a focus on consistent high-quality education provision for all in post-16 education, avoiding the disruptions experienced last year**
- 2. There should be a clear focus on ensuring the health & safety of all staff in the post-16 sector**
- 3. The physical and mental health of all students in post-16 education is of vital importance**
- 4. Education settings should not become centres of community Covid transmission**
- 5. Adequate funding must be made available**

To ensure these principles are followed, UCU are making demands nationally and locally:

- 1. There should be a focus on consistent high-quality education provision for all in post-16 education**

- **Governments**

- Must ensure disruption resulting from Covid outbreaks is avoided
- Must ensure a consistent, high-quality appropriately funded recovery with resources made available so that plans can be made to deliver successful remote, blended and in-person learning;
- Must ensure clarity over Covid-related changes to external assessment and accountability

- **Employers**

- Must reach agreement with trade unions over up-to-date risk assessments, including those covering any returns to in-person teaching
- Must ensure additional resources and staffing are identified, bringing casualised staff onto permanent contracts to support delivery
- Must provide staff and students with the right tools for successful remote, blended, and in-person learning
- Must give staff the necessary resources (including time and access to professional development) to develop the range of provision required to provide high-quality education
- Must commit to investing in staff in the short, medium, and long term to deliver an effective recovery

- 2. There should be a clear focus on the health & safety of all staff in the post-16 sector**

- **Governments**

- Must provide comprehensive, timely, and appropriate guidance for post-16 education providers, including that to be used in the event of rising infection rates and staff and/or student self-isolation
- Must ensure a working system of test, track, and trace is in place
- Must ensure more effective regulation and checks on workplace safety measures

- **Employers**

- Must meet legal obligations and ensure workplaces are safe environments
- Must consult recognised unions on all health and safety measures and ensure risk assessments are robust and monitored rigorously
- Must agree with recognised trade unions appropriate mitigations to control and minimise Covid transmission, including the provision of high-quality face masks, good ventilation, hygiene protocols, and social distancing
- Must provide recognised trade unions with regular updates on case numbers amongst staff and students
- Must agree measures with recognised trade unions to prevent excessive workloads and workplace stress
- Must meet their obligations under the Equality Act and take steps to protect those at risk, such as those who are clinically extremely vulnerable and other at-risk categories.

3. The physical and mental health of students in post-16 education is of vital importance

- **Governments**

- Must ensure students aged 18 years or older have the opportunity to be fully vaccinated prior to the start of the next academic year, with the same provision for younger age groups when available

- **Employers**

- Must work with the relevant government and local and regional NHS providers to ensure vaccines can be delivered to students in all over 18s education provision
- Must ensure those self-isolating, or caring for those self-isolating, are fully paid and not discriminated against
- Must ensure there is no discrimination against those clinically vulnerable, vulnerable, or those suffering from Long Covid
- Must ensure the mental health of staff and students is protected, and appropriate measures put in place for those in crisis

4. Education settings should not become centres of community Covid transmission

- **Governments**

- Must ensure an effective system of *Test, Track, and Trace* is in place
- Must ensure adequate sick pay and support is available for those self-isolating in all sectors
- Ensure that public health bodies and health & safety authorities maintain effective communications with education sector employers to ensure that those employers are able to fulfil their requirements under health and safety legislation and public health requirements

- **Employers**

- Must ensure free PCR testing is available for all staff and students

- Must ensure effective monitoring systems are in place to identify workplace infections and to alert staff and students to any need to self-isolate
- Must maintain regular and effective communications with public health bodies and health and safety authorities, sharing the outcomes of such communications with recognised trade unions
- Must agree with recognised trade unions appropriate mitigations to control and minimise Covid transmission, including the provision and wearing of high-quality face masks, good ventilation, hygiene protocols, and social distancing

5. Adequate funding must be made available

- **Governments**

- Must ensure an appropriate financial settlement from the for universities
- Must ensure adequate funding is in place to ensure the health & safety of staff and students in all educational settings

- **Employers**

- Must ensure funding is focused on meeting these principles by delivering adequate staffing and fair agreements on pay and workload
- Must ensure that capital funding is made available where necessary to improve areas such as IT infrastructure and building ventilation.