

22 July 2021

Gavin Williamson  
Secretary of State  
Department for Education  
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Dear Secretary of State

In just over two months, around 1.5 million students and over one hundred thousand staff in post-16 education will be back on campuses in England for work and study. It should be a time when minds are focused on overcoming the disruption suffered last year – however, we are deeply concerned that the actions of the Westminster government could see the same disruption return, putting the health of students and staff at risk and throwing the new academic year into chaos.

Last year, ministers green-lit the mass movement of students across the country and failed to recognise the effect this would have on infections, on those working and studying in the sector, and on the wider communities of which they become a part. Owing to a lack of leadership from government, indecision over a return to campus and in-person teaching, and a refusal to listen to warnings from UCU and the government's own scientific advisors, outbreaks were reported across the entire sector.

In December last year, at least 45 universities in the UK reported covid-19 outbreaks with almost 4,000 students self-isolating at one time. Thousands of students were forced to self-isolate in unfamiliar accommodation where many needlessly contracted the virus. Similar instances of outbreaks were reported in colleges and in adult education settings, such as prisons.

As the Westminster government removes all restrictions and the associated public health guidance, 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, doing great harm to the provision of post-16 education.

With the UK hitting the highest number of Covid fatalities since March, Independent SAGE warning 1,000 – 2,000 hospitalisations a day is the 'central scenario', and 1,200 scientists across the world urging the government not to remove restrictions, it is clear that the recovery of post-16 education in England is at a critical juncture. 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 in post-16 education worse than during earlier waves.

The government and employers have a duty to protect the health of students and staff, and to deliver a consistent, high-quality education. And so UCU is writing to urge you in your role as Secretary of State for Education, to commit to following UCU's post-16 Education Recovery Principles ahead of the new academic year in England, which at the end of this letter you can read in full:

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 offered the opportunity 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 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, however the challenge is ensuring *all* students are able to receive their vaccinations before September. The government and employers should work together alongside local and regional NHS providers to make this a reality. And in further education we call for all students 16 and over to also be offered the opportunity to be fully vaccinated, as soon as approved by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

Rather than remove public health and workplace guidance, the government must commit to developing comprehensive, timely, and appropriate guidance for post-16 education providers ahead of the start of the academic year, including that to be used in the event of rising infections. This will ensure health and safety measures are consistent across post-16 education settings in England and help prevent a repeat of last year, during which interventions by government were too late, and insufficient when they were made.

Employers should provide and mandate the wearing of face masks whilst on-site, and under their legal obligations must produce robust health and safety risk assessments in consultation with trade union representatives. 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 regular reporting of case numbers on campus.

Employers must also take urgent steps to improve the level of mental health provision, which last year failed students, leaving many in crisis and with lecturers and other

academic-related staff being required to step in and provide support. This cannot be allowed to happen again.

Finally, we are asking that as Secretary of State 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 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 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 government 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 to prevent post-16 education being plunged into chaos all over again.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Dr Jo Grady  
General Secretary

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## **UCU's post-16 Education Recovery Principles**

UCU's approach to framing national and local demands regarding Coronavirus and Covid are based on 5 core 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**

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

- 1. There should be a clear 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 and wearing 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 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

- o 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**

- o Must ensure an effective system of *Test, Track, and Trace* is in place
- o Must ensure full sick pay and support is available for those self-isolating in all sectors
- o 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**

- o Must ensure free PCR testing is available for all staff and students
- o Must ensure effective monitoring systems are in place to identify workplace infections and to alert staff and students to any need to self-isolate
- o 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
- o Provision and mandated wearing of high-quality masks on site and making the necessary modifications that improve ventilation and allow for effective social distancing

#### **5. Adequate funding must be made available**

- **Governments**

- o Must ensure an appropriate settlement is forthcoming for post-16 education in the next Spending Review
- o Must ensure adequate funding is in place to ensure the health & safety of staff and students in all educational settings

- **Employers**

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