

Paul Givan MLA and Michelle O'Neill MLA
First Minister and deputy First Minister
The Executive Office
Stormont Castle, Stormont Estate
Belfast BT4 3TT

Dear First and deputy First Minister,

23 July 2021

Potential Reopening of Further and Higher Education

Within two months thousands of students and staff in post-16 education may be back on campuses for work and study. In the meantime minds should be focused on ensuring there is no repeat of the disruption suffered last year. UCU are concerned that the actions of the Westminster government, if replicated by the Assembly Executive, could see the same disruption return, putting the health of students and staff at risk and throwing the new academic year into chaos.

Although the situation locally over the last 16 months was better handled in comparison to some other jurisdictions, UCU is firmly of the view that we need to learn from experiences over that period and that any decisions in respect of a return to campus and face to face teaching are taken in line with the most up to date scientific and medical advice, supported by an up to date agreed Risk Assessment. We cannot face a repeat of instances last year where students and staff had to self-isolate, following outbreaks, as a result of an insistence by some institutions that face to face teaching must occur, even when this decision was contrary to public health advice and guidance at the time.

As we witness the Westminster government prematurely removing all restrictions in England there is a real danger that unless the Assembly Executive learns key lessons from last year, our local education establishments could become incubators for Covid-19 all over again, wreaking havoc on the provision of post-16 education. It is worth highlighting that in Britain they have hit the highest number of fatalities since March, Independent SAGE warning that 1,000 - 2,000 hospitalisations is the 'central scenario', and 1,200 scientists across the world warning the UK government that it is making a mistake in removing restrictions, it is clear that the recovery of post-16 education is at a critical juncture. As is well documented, the Delta variant is the most highly transmissible strain of the disease to date. If appropriate health and safety measures are not in place, we could witness disruption worse than during earlier waves.

Government and employers have a duty to protect the health of students and staff, and to deliver a consistent high-quality post-16 education. Consequently UCU is writing to urge you, in your joint roles as First and deputy First Ministers, to commit to the following principles for the provision of post-16 education ahead of the new academic year:

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 encouraged to take up 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 18th birthday, however the challenge is ensuring *all* students can 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 be offered the opportunity to be fully vaccinated as soon as approved by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

The Executive must also commit to developing comprehensive, timely, and appropriate guidance for post-16 education providers ahead of the start of the academic year, including guidance to be used in the event of rising infections. This will ensure health and safety measures are consistent across all post-16 education settings here. This guidance should be developed in consultation with UCU and other recognised Trade Unions in the Sector.

Employers should continue to mandate the wearing of face masks whilst on-site. In line with their legal obligations institutions must produce robust health and safety risk assessments in consultation with trade union representatives. Capital funding should also be used to improve ventilation where necessary and to make other modifications that facilitate effective social distancing. The Assembly Executive should communicate to all education providers that where additional funding is required to make premises safe, this will be made available, without unnecessary delays.

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.

Employers must also take urgent steps to improve the level of supportive mental health provision, which last year failed students in some areas, 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, UCU requests that as First and deputy First Minister you jointly 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 curriculum. 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 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 government and employers agree to meet the UCU's post-16 Education Recovery Principles, which are outlined in the attached document.

Time really is of the essence in ensuring that, when it is appropriate to do so, our post-16 education system bounces back safely after last year. UCU would welcome a joint commitment from you that the Executive is committed to the 5 core principles outlined in this correspondence.

As a matter of courtesy, a copy of this letter has also been issued to the Minister for the Economy.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jo Grady
UCU General Secretary

Katharine Clarke
N Ireland Official, UCU