



UCUBAN/AB25 V4 Updated 14 September 2021

University and College Union *All Branch Action Note*

To	All Branch Secretaries and Chairs
Topic	Update of risk assessments
ACTION:	Branches are asked to review and update COVID-19 risk assessments
Summary	This action note gathers together information on the emerging health and safety risks and other relevant information to support branches consulting on employer risk assessments
Contact	HealthandSafety@ucu.org.uk

Dear colleagues,

Branches are advised to review and update risk assessments given the change in operational delivery, increasing in person work, and rise in infection rates, hospital admissions and deaths. As the colder winter months draw in there will be a need to ensure risk assessment controls remain fit for purpose and continue to control risks to the lowest level practicable, as required by health and safety legislation.

The government guidance produced for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has been published and there is an expectation on employers to review and update their risk assessments accordingly, in consultation with trade unions.

UCU branch reps, safety reps and members have a key role to play in ensuring employers control covid risks to the lowest level practicable by implementing effective mitigations that have been proven to reduce transmission of covid-19.

This action note gathers together information relevant to branch reps and safety reps who will be consulting on risk management arrangements in their workplaces.

Previous guidance on Covid-19 related risk assessments and control measures remain valid and can be found here [\[UCU coronavirus advice\]](#)

1. **UCU's post-16 education recovery principles**
2. **UCU position on relaxation of national restrictions (published July 2021)**
3. **Risk assessments – advice to branches**
4. **UCEA publishes updated guidance '*managing the return of staff to campus*' (August 2021)**
5. **Raising a H&S concern**
6. **Independent SAGE update and release of guidance/ reports for workplaces and education (September 2021)**

1. UCU's post-16 education recovery principles (published July 2021)

- UCU's approach to framing national and local demands regarding Coronavirus and Covid are based on five 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.
- Underpinning the principles are a menu of demands for branches to consider and apply as needed within their own local contexts. See: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/recovery-principles>

2. UCU position on relaxation of national restrictions (published July 2021)

- UCU have outlined our position that robust health and safety measures must remain in place following the relaxation of public health measures across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Here we outline the health and safety duties on employers and the key mitigations that have been effective in reducing the spread of covid-19. Employers must continue to risk assess and control the risks of workplace transmission to prevent further disruptions to education and to protect the health of staff and students. See: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11673/Covid-health-and-safety-update-July-2021/pdf/Covid_health_and_safety_update_16_July_2021_version_2.pdf

3. Risk assessments – advice to branches

Previous guidance on Covid-19 related risk assessments and control measures remain valid and can be found here [UCU coronavirus advice]

a. Ventilation

- Employers should have in place a ventilation strategy in place for their workplaces with a clear approach to risk assessment and safe systems of work for spaces with manual or mechanical ventilation.
- Where CO2 monitors are in use, staff should be given appropriate levels of information instruction and training in their usage. Protocols to improve ventilation should be in place should poor ventilation be identified or suspected.
- The HSE expects employers to have audited the ventilation systems in use across workplaces and to have assessed the risks to building occupants. Risk assessments should be reviewed regularly in consultation with safety reps.
- Ventilation rates need to be monitored to ensure a sufficient supply of fresh air into a space at a rate that will mitigate against airborne transmission risk.
- UCU Reps should look to agree a ventilation rate of 12-17 litres per second per person (l/p/s) with employers to mitigate against covid-19 transmission in indoor spaces. Where CO2 monitors are being used as a proxy measure we would expect CO2 levels to be maintained at or below 800ppm.
- Poorly ventilated spaces should not be used and ventilation should be increased as much as possible to mitigate the increased risk of more transmissible Covid-19 variant(s).
- Control measures do not need to be costly. Rooms with windows should be aired/purged regularly throughout the day and between different users/classes. This prevents build-up of covid-19 particles in the indoor space. Ventilation rates can be improved by reducing the numbers occupying or frequenting indoor spaces (including those people who may come and go throughout the day) and by reducing time spent indoors, particularly in multi-occupant spaces.
- The HSE have updated guidance on how employers should identify, assess and improve ventilation in workplaces to reduce airborne transmission of covid-19 <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/air-conditioning-and-ventilation/assessment-of-fresh-air.htm>
- UCU breakfast briefing on ventilation can be accessed here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/hs-breakfast-briefings>
- The latest UCU guidance on ventilation can be found here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus>

b. Face masks and face coverings

- Employers should continue to apply the principles of prevention as outlined under regulation 4 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations and continue to implement multi-layered controls to prevent the spread of Covid-19. It is clear that good quality face masks and face coverings will continue to play a key role in controlling the spread of COVID-19.
- Employers should ensure that workers are aware of the different levels of protection offered by different types of face covering or face mask and the reason for their usage in the workplace. Type IIR masks and face coverings do not offer adequate protection to the user from airborne transmission of Covid-19. They are not considered PPE. FFP3 face masks filter 99% of virus particles and FFP2 masks filter 95% of viral particles, they are considered PPE and fall under The Personal Protective Equipment Regulations 2002.
- Employers should provide the highest level of respiratory protection for workers such as FFP2 or FFP3 standard face masks while the COVID-19 virus continues to spread in community and workplace settings. Given there is no longer a PPE supply issue it is vital that employers reduce airborne transmission risks to the lowest level practicable by improving ventilation and by providing suitable PPE.
- Employers should ensure that staff and learners wear face coverings or face masks in line with local risk assessments, local agreements, government policy or public health advice.
- Employers should ensure that where face coverings are used, they are of a high standard, are well fitted and have a minimum of three layers protection.
- For more information on face coverings/face masks see:
<https://www.bsigroup.com/globalassets/localfiles/en-gb/product-certification/personal-safety/bsi-guide-for-personal-safety-equipment-0520.pdf>

c. Social distancing

Employers should continue to ensure social distancing and reduced occupancy levels in indoor spaces to reduce aerosol transmission risks.

Not all activities will need to take place 'in person' and the past year has shown it is possible to deliver lectures, tutorials and student support virtually.

Independent SAGE explain here why the 2 metre rule is so important:

<https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2m-vs-1m-guidance-Independent-SAGE-statement-June-21.pdf>

d. Cleaning and hygiene

- Employers should continue to ensure regular cleaning throughout the working day and ensure appropriate resources are in place which includes additional paid hours and hiring of additional staff where necessary.
 - COSHH risk assessments should be in place following consultation with UCU

safety reps and there should be clear safe systems of work and suitable PPE for all staff undertaking cleaning.

- Employers should recognise that cleaning is a skilled role and should not expect staff who are not employed as cleaners to undertake cleaning roles.
- Staff who are expected to undertake general cleaning of personal work stations or equipment should be given an appropriate level of instruction, information and training in line with COSHH risk assessments.

e. Testing and self-isolation

PCR testing and LFD testing should continue for those people who are symptomatic or asymptomatic. However workplace risk assessments need to identify the limits of testing as a control measure given the low uptake of testing and the lack of support available to those self-isolating.

f. Disproportionate impact - protecting higher risk groups

Covid has not impacted on everyone equally, and employers must consider the equality impact of any relaxation in controls on those at increased risk of contracting covid and those who could have severe and long term health outcomes.

There are a number of unknowns about the risk factors for long covid and this must be considered in workplace risk assessments to protect people from the short and long term impact of covid infection. Individual risk assessments must also be undertaken to ensure individual risk factors are identified and appropriate measures put in place to protect people from harm.

g. Long-covid

- Long-Covid is the name given to the continuing symptoms people experience as a result of being infected by Covid-19. Symptoms are specific to each individual but someone who had mild symptoms from Covid-19 can experience continuing and serious ill health.
- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated 970,000 people living in private households in the UK (1.5% of the population) were experiencing self-reported "long COVID" (symptoms persisting for more than four weeks after the first suspected COVID-19 infection that were not explained by something else) at 1 August - 2021. See:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/prevalenceofongoingsymptomsfollowingcoronaviruscovid19infectionintheuk/latest>
- [UCU safety reps and equality reps briefing: long Covid](#) gives an overview of some of the key considerations for branches and actions they can take to support members.
- ACAS have also produced guidance for employers and employees on long covid: <https://www.acas.org.uk/long-covid>

- Branches should ensure long-covid is identified in risk assessments as another potential, long term risk arising from infection. Additional measures could include reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act and workplace support mechanisms for those experiencing ongoing ill health.

h. Mental health

- Employers should identify a number of measures they can take to improve staff mental health and well-being which has been negatively impacted by the pandemic.
- Employers should undertake institution wide stress risk assessments, ideally following the HSE management standards approach and keep these under regular review in consultation with UCU safety reps and branch officers.
- Employers should identify a range of preventative and protective measures that will avoid or mitigate the impact of various stressors in the workplace.
- Please see resources available from UCU on tackling stress in the workplace including stress toolkit, model stress survey, model stress risk assessment and other branch resources. A UCU webinar on tackling stress in the workplace and the latest 'breakfast briefing' on risk assessments is also available on this page: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/stress>

i. Workload

- Employers should, given the huge pressures on staff and the additional activities required by safety measures, have taken steps to ensure workloads are manageable and reduced to the absolute essentials.
- Employers should ensure that workload demands are understood across the organisation to be a potential cause of work related stress.
- Employers should take actions to prevent and minimise workload stressors through institution wide stress risk assessment and local agreements in consultation with UCU safety reps and branch officers.
- UCU 'Its Your Time' campaign resources can be accessed via the UCU website here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/workloadcampaign>

j. 'Hybrid' working and 'blended' learning

- Branches should ensure that any temporary arrangements for 'hybrid working' and 'blended' learning, are agreed following consultation with UCU. It is clear that many employers are looking to develop more permanent arrangements around this and branches should seek support from regions where proposals have already been tabled for negotiation.
- Any agreements on working arrangements should address issues of health and safety, safeguarding, privacy protections, and staff performance rights;

include ongoing training and IT support; and avoid excessive workloads and performance management measures. UCU guidance on performance rights and lecture capture can be found here:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11173/Guidance-on-GDPR-moral--performance-rights-and-accessibility-in-recorded-lectureslessons/pdf/ucu_lecturecapture_guidance.pdf

UCU breakfast briefing on hybrid/ blended learning is available here:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/hs-breakfast-briefings>

4. UCEA publishes updated guidance 'managing the return of staff to campus' (published August 2021)

- This predominantly geared towards getting staff back on campus, managing change and managing staff anxieties about this. There is a lot of focus on mental health, hybrid working and health and safety with a number of case studies.
- Section 7 of this guidance focuses on health and safety considerations. Although the guidance outlines some differences from September 2020 and September 2021 (greater vaccination levels, better access to asymptomatic testing), it is no longer accurate in reporting a low prevalence of covid. We know from ONS stats that covid-19 infection rates are at least 25 times greater than this time last year with hospitalisations and deaths also greater than this time last year.
- UCU would expect the higher infection rates and long covid risks to be controlled as part of the employers risk assessment process with clear contingency plans in place to prevent or mitigate spread of any outbreaks.
- UCU reps should also note a number of recommendations within this guidance which UCU would support, including the need to regularly update risk assessments as situations change and to have ongoing dialogue with trade unions to keep controls effective.
- UCU are pleased to see the guidance state that '*social distancing and mask wearing may be required for some time*' and that '*Those colleagues working on campus will need to be reminded of the importance of not only social distancing, but the physical controls e.g. the use of ventilations, the role of CO2 monitors, the use of face coverings and face masks etc.*'.
- The guidance can be found here:
<https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/publications/managing-staff-return-to-campus-guidance/>

5. Raising a health and safety concern – escalation template

This escalation template has been developed in partnership with USHA, UCEA, UCU and joint HE trade unions. See:

<https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/publications/principles-for-working-safely-on-campus-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/raising-a-concern>

UCU reps are should consider this approach in consultation with employers. The template for escalating H&S concerns should reflect the existing structures and escalation arrangements and address and gaps in process or communication. Once in place the escalation routes template should be shared widely with staff across the workplace.

- Other joint statements with UCEA can be found here on testing, vaccination and H&S principles during the pandemic – <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/publications/principles-for-working-safely-on-campus-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/>

6. Independent SAGE update and release of guidance/ reports for workplaces and education

- *Independent SAGE report 49: Statement on Universities and Colleges Autumn 2021 in the Context of SARS-CoV-2* - <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/8.-IS-Universities-Autumn-2021-FINAL-v2.pdf>
- *September 2021: Protecting People at Work: The COVID-19 Safe Workplace Charter* - <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Workplace-charter-2021-redux.pdf>

ACTION REQUIRED:

Branches are asked to review and update risk assessments in light of new and emerging risk factors for Covid-19 and the information provided in this update.

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