

11 January 2022

Raj Jethwa
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Via email to R.Jethwa@ucea.ac.uk

Dear Raj,

As students and staff return to campus, I am writing to you to set out UCU's expectations regarding the effective management of health and safety and risks to staff and students in the light of the Omicron variant, which continues to spread rapidly across the UK. While the link between infection rates, hospitalisations and deaths is weakened it is not broken and as teaching recommences, we know that infection and positivity rates have hit record levels, and the long-term impact of Omicron and how this variant could affect long-covid rates remains uncertain.

As education settings re-open there is likely to be a further increase in transmission rates across the UK. I'm aware that by now HEI's will have developed their outbreak plans and worked with both the DfE and local public health leads on these plans. What also needs to take place is that employers engage and work with their local UCU branches on these as well as update risk assessments and the relevant control measures to reduce the risk of disruption for both students and staff. UCEA has an important role in this by encouraging employers to engage with their branches early and often.

Whilst the Covid Joint Principles we agreed last year are a good starting point for local discussions, UCU's view is that employers should continue to go beyond government guidance and take decisive action now to prevent further disruption to education and detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of staff and students.

While the Westminster Government warns employers to prepare for up to 25% staff absences, UCU are aware of the impact staffing shortages could have on the physical and mental health of staff who are already at breaking point due to high workloads and work-related stress. Employers must put in place robust risk assessments and measures to prevent transmission of COVID-19 across workplaces to ensure continuity of education and safe staffing levels. Government responses in the devolved nations and Northern Ireland show that a range of measures should be considered.

Mechanisms to reduce the number of people required to participate in on site activities while transmission rates are high should be negotiated with the local UCU branch. This will allow those who need to work remotely due to increased risk factors, isolation or caring responsibilities to do so, whilst also enabling those who cannot or do not wish to work remotely to access safer working spaces. This is the best way to manage containing the virus, whilst also managing the needs and wellbeing of staff, students, and minimise disruption to education

UCU has developed a set of expectations based on the implementation of effective workplace control measures that we believe provide a basis for effective health and safety of staff and students and anticipate developments based on recent experiences of managing the virus and members feedback. We are encouraging branches to meet with their managements and seek to agree the following:

- Reduce the number of people required on site while transmission rates remain high and implement measures to reduce mixing and close contact transmission in indoor work settings.
- Ensure any workers at increased risk from COVID-19 are not required to undertake in person work at this time and that alternatives are offered to reduce exposure risks.
- Ensure safe staffing levels and a safe working environment for those working in-person and at home which considers the potential risks to their physical and mental health. Workloads must be considered in risk assessments.
- Ensure there is a safety threshold for ventilation of 12-17 litres per second per person in indoor spaces (CO₂ proxy of approximately 800ppm³). Employers can also use HEPA air filtration units to clean the air where appropriate and reduce airborne transmission risks.
- Ensure all workers undertaking in-person work have access to high quality, well-fitting face masks which offer effective levels of respiratory protection from airborne transmission. (FFP2 standard facemasks filter at least 94% of viral particles and FFP3 filter at least 99%).
- Ensure a minimum of 2m social distancing as standard to prevent close contact transmission.
- Ensure effective cleaning and hygiene measures are in place to reduce exposure through contact.
- Ensure access in work time to regular, free testing (PCR and LFD tests) and provide support to those who are asked to self-isolate. Employers should encourage testing uptake and improve COVID-19 reporting systems to quickly identify and control potential outbreaks.
- Ensure all staff have access to vaccinations and boosters in work time without loss of pay.

- Ensure staff who are required to self-isolate or have caring responsibilities for those who are isolating are offered appropriate levels of support and do not suffer detriment to their pay or conditions notwithstanding contract type such as those on atypical or insecure contracts.
- Ensure there is adequate instruction, information and training for all stakeholders on any new safety measures that will be implemented.

These measures are designed to ensure that we do not have a chaotic situation again where students are left isolated because of mass Covid outbreaks, or where staff are overworked, which represented the most significant disruption to education during the last two years.

I look forward to your reply and I would be happy to meet to discuss matters further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PB', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Paul Bridge
Head of Higher Education