

David Hughes
Chief Executive
Association of Colleges
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Via email: David.Hughes@aoc.co.uk

11 January 2022

Dear David,

I am writing to you to set out UCU's expectations regarding the effective management of health and safety 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. 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 was pleased to read your December article in FE Week urging college leaders to develop contingency plans for the New Year in light of the new variant. I am hopeful that leaders will have followed your advice, developed their outbreak plans and worked with stakeholders and local public health leads on these plans.

Colleges also need to engage and work with their local UCU branches on these outbreak plans as well as reviewing and updating risk assessments and the relevant control measures to reduce the risk of disruption for both students and staff. The Association of Colleges have an important role in this by encouraging its members to engage with their UCU branches early and often.

In further education, I believe we can be rightly proud of the joint working between the unions, colleges and the AoC throughout the pandemic. UCU's view is that employers must continue to go beyond government guidance to prevent further disruption to education and to prevent the potential detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of staff and students.

The Westminster Government is warning employers to prepare for up to 25% staff absences. UCU are aware of the negative impact staffing shortages have on the physical and mental health of staff who are already at breaking point due to high workloads and work-related stress. Colleges 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.

UCU has developed a set of expectations based on implementing control measures that we believe provide the basis for protecting the health and safety of staff and students. These expectations anticipate developments based on recent experiences of managing the virus and UCU member feedback. We will be encouraging UCU branches to meet with their managements and seek to agree the following:

- Reducing 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.

I look forward to your reply and I am happy to meet with you or colleagues to discuss matters further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Harden', with a stylized, cursive script.

Andrew Harden
Head of Further Education
University and College Union