

8 April 2022

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Building
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Dear Secretary of State

I am writing as general secretary of the University and College Union on behalf of our 130,000 members in post-16 education across the UK to express our deep concern about the UK government decision to end free, universal Covid-19 testing.

Government data shows significant increases in cases, hospitalisations and deaths across the UK and it is clear that the pandemic is not yet over. With Covid infections causing significant disruption to education and posing potential long-term risks to health of staff and students, we expect the government – at the very least – to prioritise post-16 education and ensure ongoing access to free testing in this sector.

The World Health Organisation on 23 March 2022 said that “testing, sequencing and contact tracing, also remain essential, and it’s vital that countries don’t abandon the capacities they have built over the past two years”. In removing free universal access to Covid-19 tests and ending contact tracing regimes, the UK government is doing just that.

Throughout the pandemic, UCU has worked closely with employers in colleges and universities to ensure they do not become hot beds for transmission. The measures implemented through Covid-19 risk assessments have minimised disruption to education and ensured many workers and students, including those at increased risk, have had safer spaces to work and study.

We therefore strongly object to the government’s decision to remove the requirement for employers to undertake Covid-19 risk assessments in their latest guidance. It is likely that many employers will now disregard these essential measures to control the spread of infection in workplaces. Indeed, we have already had reports of employers in post-16 education de-prioritising ventilation, removing CO2 monitors and allowing those who test positive with Covid-19 to enter crowded teaching spaces.

Covid-19 risk assessments are an essential tool to ensure the protective measures that

we know are effective in controlling the spread of the virus continue to be implemented. Apart from anything else, they minimise disruption to teaching.

It is important that the improvements to ventilation, the use of high quality, well-fitting face masks, good hygiene practices and infection control measures continue. A risk assessment approach is the best way to ensure these protective measures continue to be implemented proportionately as Covid-19 transmission risks rise and fall during the course of the pandemic.

We urge the government revisit the decision to end free asymptomatic testing in post-16 education and to ensure government guidance continues to support employers' use of Covid-19 risk assessments which will keep staff and students safe and minimise disruption to education.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a distinct "Grady" following.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary

Copy: Sajid Javid MP, Health Secretary