

Asbestos guidance for UCU members, activists and safety representatives

Why asbestos still matters in education

Many universities, colleges, and adult education providers occupy buildings constructed or refurbished before the year 2000, when asbestos was finally banned in the UK. As a result, asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) may still be present in:

- lecture theatres, seminar rooms, laboratories, and studios
- libraries, offices, and shared workspaces
- Plant rooms, service ducts, ceiling voids, and risers
- older halls of residence and ancillary buildings
- toilets and washrooms.

Asbestos is low risk if it remains in good condition and undisturbed. However, when damaged or worked on, it can release fibres that cause **serious and often fatal diseases**, including mesothelioma, lung cancer, and asbestosis. These diseases often take decades to develop.

UCU members — academic, academic-related, professional services, researchers, postgraduate teachers, and casualised staff — are routinely present in buildings where asbestos risks are poorly understood or underestimated.

UCU's concern: asbestos is not just an estates issue

Employers often treat asbestos as a problem only for estates or maintenance teams. In practice, UCU members may be exposed through:

- moving furniture, whiteboards, shelving, or lab equipment
- installing teaching, IT, AV, or research equipment
- supervising building, refurbishment, or decant works
- working in older labs, workshops, studios, and offices
- being relocated at short notice to unsuitable spaces
- buildings in states of disrepair due to poor maintenance or age such as roof damage, leaks or wear and tear, impacting the fabric of the building.

Casualised and early-career staff may be at particular risk if they feel unable to challenge unsafe practices.

The legal framework (UK) and UCU policy

Under the **Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012**, the employer or person in control of the premises (the *dutyholder*) must:

- identify whether asbestos is present
- keep an up-to-date asbestos register
- assess and manage risks from asbestos-containing materials (ACMs)
- prevent exposure to asbestos fibres
- provide information to workers and their safety representatives.

Universities, colleges, and adult education providers have the same legal duties as any other employer. Financial pressures, estates backlogs, or complex governance structures do **not** remove these responsibilities.

UCU policy position

UCU policy is clear that:

- no member should be exposed to asbestos through their work
- employers must adopt a **precautionary approach** to asbestos management
- trade unions must be **fully consulted** on asbestos risks, estates strategies, and capital projects
- asbestos management is a **core health and safety issue**, not merely an estates or compliance matter.

UCU has consistently opposed the normalisation of working in deteriorating buildings and has campaigned against the risks posed by under-investment in the education estate. Branches are encouraged to treat asbestos concerns as collective disputes where necessary.

UCU safety representatives have statutory rights to receive relevant information and to be consulted on health and safety matters.

Warning signs UCU reps and members should challenge

Be alert to:

- asbestos registers that are missing, outdated, or difficult to access
- registers that are only held by estates, not shared with staff or reps
- poor labelling or damaged asbestos-containing materials
- drilling, cabling, or refurbishment without clear asbestos checks
- teaching or research continuing next to uncontrolled building works
- staff asked to carry out 'minor works' with no asbestos awareness training.

If something feels wrong, **pause the activity and escalate.**

Know your rights as a UCU member or safety representative

UCU members and reps have legal and union-backed rights when it comes to asbestos risk.

As a UCU member, you have the right to:

- work in an environment where asbestos risks are properly managed
- see relevant health and safety information that affects your work
- refuse to carry out work that puts you at serious and imminent risk
- report concerns without suffering detriment or disciplinary action.

As a UCU safety representative, you have the right to:

- inspect the workplace and investigate health and safety complaints
- access the asbestos register and asbestos management plan
- be consulted in good time on refurbishments, maintenance, and transfer plans
- receive information on incidents, near misses, and suspected exposures
- represent members in discussions with management and regulators (Health and Safety Executive, Environmental Health Officer).

These rights are underpinned by health and safety law. Employers cannot lawfully sideline UCU reps or restrict access to information on asbestos.

What UCU branches should demand

UCU branches and safety reps should collectively press management to:

- maintain and regularly review a robust asbestos management plan
- provide transparent access to the asbestos register for staff and UCU reps
- consult UCU at the earliest stage of estates, refurbishment, or decant plans
- ensure asbestos awareness training is available where relevant
- use licensed and properly supervised contractors
- investigate, record, and report all suspected exposure incidents.

Health and safety is a collective issue and a core trade union concern, not an optional add-on.

What to do if asbestos is suspected or disturbed

If you believe asbestos has been damaged or disturbed:

- stop work immediately

- prevent access to the affected area
- report the issue to management and estates
- inform your UCU safety representative or branch officers
- do **not** attempt any clean-up unless properly trained and equipped.

Any suspected exposure must be taken seriously and investigated with union involvement.

Contact UCU at healthandsafety@ucu.org.uk to ensure any members potentially exposed to asbestos at work have their details formally recorded in **UCU asbestos exposure register** held by Thompsons Solicitors.

Supporting members now and in the future

UCU branches should:

- encourage reporting without fear of blame or detriment
- keep written records of concerns, near misses, and incidents
- support members seeking occupational health advice
- escalate unresolved risks through formal procedures or, where necessary, regulators.

Because asbestos-related diseases have long latency periods, today's failures can become tomorrow's life-changing diagnoses.

A union issue, a collective responsibility

Asbestos is a legacy hazard, but **exposure is a present-day risk**. UCU members have a vital role in challenging complacency, protecting colleagues and students, and holding institutions to account.

Strong UCU organisation, informed members, and active safety reps save lives.

More information is available here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/asbestos>