

Higher education in Scotland

UCU Scotland tests for safe returns to on-campus working in HE

The global Covid-19 pandemic has impacted upon every aspect of life, the economy, society and the way we operate. Scotland's higher education sector responded very quickly to the Coronavirus threat, and in mid-March transitioned its teaching, learning, student support, research, and knowledge exchange to virtual platforms where possible. The Covid-19 lockdown meant that the majority of staff and students were no longer required to be on campus. However, it is important to note that there are many students – undergraduate and postgraduate – for whom university accommodation is their home and many of these students have remained on campus. This inevitably required support staff to continue to work on campus, particularly in facilities and estates services. Therefore, it is impossible to describe all university campuses as 'closed' during the lockdown. In wider terms, it should be noted how university work certainly has not stopped, and the homes of university staff is where the vast majority of 'campus' activity is at the moment and set to be for some time.

As we move out of lockdown and consider the next stages on from this isolationist phase of the pandemic, there are a number of issues that the University and College Union in Scotland is urging government and employers to take into account.

Experience of other economies shows that when earlier and more decisive action is taken in closing down, the quicker a return to opening up and the less disruption occurs. In the case of higher education our reputation for students and staff safety must be paramount if we are to counter the damage being done by the UK being identified as a centre for covid-19 deaths in Europe. Staff, students and their parents will not have confidence in on-site provision unless we can demonstrate we follow the highest standards, including those that go above and beyond that set by official government advice.

First, in line with the Scottish government's commitment, it is vital that 'fair work' is at the heart of the sector's Scotland-wide and local institutional strategies for moving out of lockdown. Fair work drives success, wellbeing and prosperity for individuals, businesses, organisations and society, and given the health and wellbeing implications of the pandemic, fair work must underpin our strategy. The key principles within the framework of effective voice, security and respect for workers, are fundamental to organisations moving out of lockdown in a safe manner which has the confidence and support of all workers.

UCU, along with all campus unions, would wish to see an agreed Fair Work agreement at sector level, as a strategic framework under which institutions and unions at local level can take forward the next steps. A strategic sector-wide strategy should underpin and inform local implementation at institution level, where we expect senior management to be consulting and negotiating with campus unions on their own strategies for moving out of lockdown. This approach should ensure for the provision of additional facility time for trade union reps to enable them to operate effectively.

The sector will only be able to contemplate safe returns to on-campus working for staff and students in HE if the circumstances allow.

Fundamental to this are five key tests proposed by UCU Scotland:

Test 1: Sustained reduction in numbers of Covid-19 cases and infection rates

New cases of Covid-19 need to be low and falling, with a sustained downward trend and confidence that all new cases can be identified and responded to promptly. This applies in Scotland, with reduced cases and a falling reproduction number or R value (below 1), confirmed before decisions regarding reopening of university campuses are considered. There need to be extensive, reliable, and transparent systems operating for testing, contact tracing, and isolating those with Covid-19 symptoms, managed by appropriate level public health authorities.

Test 2: Coherent planning for social distancing

The Scottish government must have a coherent plan in place which includes parameters for both appropriate physical distancing and safe levels of social mixing in all higher education settings. This must include physical distancing during travel to and from campuses, as well as implementation locally of social distancing on campuses/workplaces. To help ensure physical distancing, the plan must include the continuation of safe working and studying from home for staff and students.

Test 3: Comprehensive testing and contact tracing

To avoid HE institutions becoming centres for Covid-19 transmission, there needs to be comprehensive testing systems in place, providing for regular testing of staff and students attending university premises, with isolation and comprehensive contact tracing for all suspected cases. In addition to routine testing, protocols are needed to ensure full coverage testing occurs promptly across university and other worksites following any case of Covid-19 being confirmed.

Where cases do arise universities must be transparent and report as soon as possible on the number of positive cases and locations/schools which are particular centres for outbreaks of the virus to enable effective action to be taken to minimise further spreading

of the virus. This is necessary given that universities are hub destinations with many staff and students travelling there nationally and internationally.

Test 4: University-wide strategies for safe returns and continuing health, safety and wellbeing

Risk assessments should be completed in consultation with staff unions, and safe ways of working established in advance for all activities and spaces within universities. These should anticipate phased/staged returns to workplace presence, differentiating between activities/subject disciplines where attendance is required (e.g. some research laboratories/workshops) and where it is not.

Hazards must be assessed, appropriate control measures identified and introduced, and adjusted where necessary, all in light of current evidence regarding Covid-19 transmission routes and risk.

Equality impact assessments should be undertaken and regularly reviewed and updated at all stages of the moves out of lockdown, returning to and re-opening of campuses, and in the introduction of new working arrangements. This is to ensure that all workers and students are fully protected and the differential risks relating to BME, disabled, older people, pregnant staff/students and others in vulnerable groups are fully considered and addressed.

Safe ways of working for all tasks and spaces within a higher education institution should be established with relevant staff and unions in advance. Plans must be in place for regular deep cleaning and stringent hygiene measures for all workplaces where staff are scheduled to return, as well as agreeing rules around timetabling and use of common areas across campus. Where PPE is identified as required by risk assessments, sustainable supplies of PPE must be secured before re-opening of affected areas. This should include the provision of face masks and other appropriate PPE for staff and students to enable them to work safely.

Risk assessments should address workload issues, work intensification, and the challenges of working remotely and delivering learning, teaching and student support remotely. This should include assessments of mental health and wellbeing considerations for staff and students. Risk assessments, including identified hazards and associated control measures, must be communicated to affected staff.

Importantly the health and safety strategy, once agreed with unions, must include communication plans to all stakeholders – staff, students, contractors and visitors. Indeed, for staff and students returning to campus for the first time or following a significant period of absence, serious consideration should be given to induction-style training and development activities, webinars and workshops, to properly support the successful reintroduction to the workplace and the new ways of working and learning. The sector should be encouraged to share best practice on the effective return to campus.

Test 5: Protection for the vulnerable

Vulnerable staff and students, and staff/students who live with vulnerable people, must continue to work/study from home, fulfilling their professional duties to the extent that is possible. Plans must explicitly address the protection of all staff, students and members of their households who are vulnerable to Covid-19.

Employers must continue to pay and support those vulnerable staff who are not able to undertake their normal duties due to health, wellbeing or caring responsibilities – which are likely to continue until schools and care provision returns to pre-pandemic levels. As noted above, equality impact assessments should be undertaken to consider and address the differential risks facing different groups of workers and students. Given the risks known to certain groups of people, including BME people, older people, disabled people, pregnant staff/students, and others, specific consideration must be given to the hazards and actions to be taken to minimise health risks.

Key issues for consideration:

Beneath these five high-level criteria, we expect local discussions between employers and unions to take into account the following issues:

- a clear commitment that staff and students will not be required to work/study on campus until the 'R' number has fallen, in line with scientific advice
- a commitment to Fair Work including a commitment to protect workers' incomes when they are shielding, have caring responsibilities or are self-isolating in line with public health advice
- a requirement to agree Covid-19 risk assessments with union health and safety reps before staff and students return to the physical workplace, with facility time built-in to allow this process to take place
- employer commitment to supporting health and safety reps – including Covid-19 wellbeing reps – as a means to promote best practice on health, safety and wellbeing in the workplace, and for staff and unions to engage fully in the universities Covid-19 health and safety strategy. Universities should also ensure that the balance on health and safety committees between trade union and management positions is in line with HSE guidance
- availability of PPE for university campuses so staff and students receive appropriate protective equipment from the employer/Scottish government, including face masks, to enable them to work and study safely
- clear commitments to health and safety and physical distancing – particularly in campus shared spaces such as corridors, class rooms, lecture theatres and laboratories, where we know many spaces were operating at full capacity prior to lockdown
- guidance for employers and unions to consider how working patterns, lecture and tutorial timetables, or laboratory sessions, and breaks are organised and any variations that are required to support physical distancing

- employers should also be required to set out how shared space can be used safely, including open plan offices, corridors, common rooms / staff spaces, libraries, learning hubs, labs, cafes / food and drink outlets, toilets, and changing areas, ensuring physical distancing is maintained
- clear protocols agreed with campus unions preventing the use of shared equipment, hot-desks and other facilities, and that this is communicated clearly to all staff and students prior to their return to campus. Particular consideration given to safe usage of laboratories and other shared workspaces
- a requirement for high levels of cleanliness within workplaces, including access to hand washing stations, hand sanitizer and antiviral wipes, and the need for cleaning between classes / lectures, and enhanced cleaning of shared areas and frequent touch points, including shared books, keyboards, and resources in university libraries
- specific consideration given to the safe use, hygiene and regular deep cleaning for toilet facilities on campuses, and for shower and changing facilities
- a requirement that air quality is examined in enclosed spaces to reduce the potential for airborne spreading of the virus. Attention should be given to ensure windows can be opened and air conditioning that recirculates air is altered to ensure it vents externally
- consideration given to issues of voice projection and social distancing in lecture theatres and tutorials, and appropriate provision of amplification where necessary.
- a requirement for employers to plan how workers get to and from work within a wider government led transport strategy
- a clear reference to enforcement and the wider national enforcement strategy;
- provision for additional mental health and wellbeing support for staff and students, in recognition of the challenging circumstances, increasing mental health and anxiety generally, and the impact on workload and wellbeing of the pandemic
- risk assessments undertaken of virtual and remote working and learning, and the impact on health and wellbeing of virtual and blended learning approaches
- the employers' duties to support the Test, Trace, Isolate strategy, including support for workers to isolate with no loss of income, and their duties around data collection for public health reasons
- the continued recognition that childcare, schools and care for vulnerable dependents is unlikely to return to pre-Covid-19 levels in the near future, therefore employers will need to support employees to manage their ongoing caring / home schooling responsibilities
- a recognition that this is an iterative process with a requirement for guidance to be reviewed and updated. Unions should be fully involved and consulted at all stages in this process.

UCU Scotland
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