

British government and universities pursue reckless return to higher education under pandemic conditions

By Simon Whelan
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More than 1 million students are returning to Higher Education (HE) campuses across the UK, including hundreds of thousands from abroad. This migration is occurring under conditions where the COVID-19 virus is resurgent, following the forced return to workplaces and schools under the government's herd immunity policy.

The return to campus will accelerate the R (reproduction) value, which last week rose to between 1.0 and 1.2. In major cities and conurbations such as London, Greater Manchester and Liverpool, the R rate rose to between 1.1 and 1.3, higher than other UK regions. These last two urban areas alone are home to eight universities with a combined student population exceeding 120,000.

Campuses have been closed since March and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) said earlier this month that the mass return of students posed a "significant risk" and "could amplify local and national transmission." "It is highly likely that there will be significant outbreaks associated with higher education, and asymptomatic transmission may make these harder to detect," their report added.

COVID-19 is now spreading amongst the younger population. Leading epidemiologist, Dame Anne Johnson, of University College London (UCL), warned of a "critical moment" in the pandemic, stating "We are now seeing the highest number of infections or at least detected infections in younger people aged 20 to 29 and also going up to 45-year-olds."

Dr Mike Tildesley, an associate professor at the University of Warwick and expert in infection modelling, told BBC Breakfast that the UK was mostly dealing with "really local" outbreaks, but the

movement of students across the country could cause a wave of infection, especially at holidays and Christmas.

Students now face a limit on socialising under the government's arbitrary limiting of gatherings to six, yet can go to work and to campuses. Government guidance states that universities should only switch to full online learning as a very last resort in a local coronavirus outbreak. Department for Education (DfE) guidance also maintains that universities should use a "blend" of face-to-face and online learning, stating that there is no evidence face-to-face teaching is unsafe, so long as pandemic precautions are "maintained."

These cannot be maintained, however, as the government is aware. Not only under conditions of a mass migration of students across the country, and their subsequent coalescing in campuses. The ban on groups of more than six does not apply to face-to-face seminar teaching nor on shared student accommodation. In some purpose-built student accommodation this can mean sharing facilities with hundreds of others.

Universities claim they are minimising the risk by moving small face-to-face group teaching to large lecture theatres, but many HE establishments do not have the facilities.

The real reason for pushing students and educators into unsafe conditions is the same as in workplaces and schools: profitability. The so-called "free market" in HE means that universities are dependent on enormous tuition and accommodation fees. Every city centre in the country is also largely reliant on the so-called student economy for survival.

In addition, should an HE institution decide of its own accord not to provide face-to-face teaching, it could face action from the Office for Students for

failing to deliver “product” to consumers, meaning having to return tuition fees in full or part.

Dr Eric Lybeck, University of Manchester, explained, “I don’t think anyone would have chosen [blended] learning if it wasn’t necessary to get funding via student fees.”

“If the [online only] Open University charges £6,000 for their course, you can’t really charge £9,000.” Universities were offering face-to-face teaching, he said, to legitimise their high student fees. Consequently, universities are having to handle a surge in undergraduate applicants due to rising unemployment and job insecurity, while saying they will maintain safety. Some universities are facing up to a 200 percent increase in new student numbers.

Writing anonymously on *Open Democracy*, a university staff member described how they were “recently in a meeting in which a member of Senior Management at my institution stated explicitly that the university would be in serious financial trouble if the students did not return. Incredibly, this person also admitted that it was ‘inevitable’ that there would be an outbreak of Covid-19 as a result of campus reopening. It was made clear in the meeting that this information was confidential and should not be shared with the public. The position of universities is publicly to claim that they are safe, but privately to acknowledge that this is impossible.”

Perversely, if a university is forced to close due to a local lockdown, it will not have to reimburse funds. And, if students are locked down after they have returned to campus, they will at least have to pay for their accommodation. In other words, financialisation means it is better for the HE sector if COVID-19 *does* spread.

In the face of these reckless actions, the University and College Union (UCU) has made only mealy-mouthed statements decrying the health risks, while doing nothing to mobilise its sizable membership in opposition. Indeed, the UCU utilised the pandemic to sell out opposition by HE staff to its rotten deal on pay and pensions. Up to 50,000 lecturers, technicians, librarians and other academic and support staff at more than 70 universities took 14 days of strike action, staggered through February and March, ending just before lockdown. The priority for the UCU is to prevent a resumption of this fight.

The UCU said a statement issued Wednesday that “The evidence suggests that colleges and universities will be hit with further Covid outbreaks...” but offered no more than to “name and shame colleges or universities that were not doing enough to keep staff, students and the wider community safe. Responsibility for this would be down to individual members, with union leader Jo Grady declaring, “We will be monitoring what comes in from members and will name and shame institutions that are not up to scratch.” No mobilization of the union’s 120,000 members to fight the unsafe return to campus is proposed. Instead it declares “*if* our members are concerned with how their college or university is behaving we will back them if they vote to move into dispute, which *could* result in ballots for industrial action.” [emphasis added].

Labour’s shadow universities minister, Emma Hardy, has requested only that her government counterpart Michelle Donelan explore the possibility of introducing mass testing on campus to “build confidence in universities and their communities that students are able to return safely.” Labour leader Sir Kier Starmer has been Boris Johnson’s main supporter in insisting on the reopening of schools. While he warns that the government’s “track-and-trace system” is collapsing, he is a willing partner in the charade that schools and HE are COVID-safe.

The fight against this reckless endangerment of lives requires uniting and mobilising workers, students and educators. New forms of working class resistance must be established, including rank-and-file safety committees, to stop the sacrificing of public health to private profit. This requires a conscious political fight against the Johnson government, the Labour Party and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

To take this fight forward, the Socialist Equality Party calls on all educators, teachers and students to attend the next meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee on Saturday, September 19, 2–4 p.m.

To attend please register [here](#).

To contact the WSWs and the
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