

UCU Statement on reopening of the University in September 2020

Since Oxford Brookes University moved teaching and professional services online in March 2020, UCU branch has been in negotiations and attempted negotiations with University management regarding the means of safely re-opening for teaching in the autumn. However, in light of recent scientific evidence and the increasing national incidence of Covid-19 we now believe that the University's currently advertised plans are inadequate to ensure a safe reopening.

In agreeing the following statement we have been especially guided by the Independent SAGE report on universities (20 August), the BMJ editorial 'Re-opening universities is high risk' (1 September) and the SAGE paper on SARS-CoV-2 transmission in higher education (4 September).

We are also guided by Warwick UCU's call to move teaching online (18 August), UCU's national call on reopening campuses (29 August), the UCU event on reopening universities and colleges (1 September), and internal statements we have seen from other unions.

We have also taken account of moves towards all-online teaching provision next term at other universities, including St Andrews, QMUL, UCL and Birkbeck.

To ensure the safety of students, staff, and wider community, we call on the University to adopt the principle for the autumn semester that anything that can be done off campus, should be done off campus. The quality of the student experience that can be offered in the classroom given the current social distancing requirements will not enable the levels of interaction between students necessary to build effective learning communities. As the Independent SAGE report makes clear, online provision is not sub-standard by default and we welcome the investments made by the University in the software packages necessary to enable staff to provide a quality online provision.

In addition, planning for online provision now makes more sense for both staff and students than having to make a sudden pivot mid-semester if there is a spike in cases, which both the independent SAGE report and SAGE paper suggest is likely.

Every unnecessary footfall on campus, and in travelling to and from campus, increases the danger of an outbreak in the university community and endangers the continuation of those activities that need to be done on campus.

We also call on the University:

(1) To move all teaching online for the autumn term, with the exception of any necessary lab-based and practice-based teaching.

This is the recommendation of the Independent SAGE report and the UCU national call. In the case of lab-based and practice-based teaching the teaching mode should be decided by the teaching and technical staff involved.

(2) To allow students to cancel or defer accommodation contracts with the University without penalties if they wish to.

This will demonstrate that the University is not prioritising financial concerns over the health of students and staff.

(3) To continue to welcome to campus and provide support for those students who feel they cannot study effectively at home.

(4) To ensure that students who decide not to move to campus or the Oxford area are properly supported to undertake their studies from home.

In particular, the University needs to ensure that students studying from home have adequate Wi-Fi connections, equipment to access teaching, and pastoral support.

(5) To confirm in writing to staff and line managers that return to work on campus this term will be on a voluntary basis.

Wherever possible, any roles deemed essential to be performed on campus will be filled by members of staff who are happy to volunteer to be on campus and returning staff should complete a form to confirm that their return is voluntary.

Arrangements should be made that, subject to individual risk assessments alongside building risk assessments, those staff who may wish to work on campus are utilised to perform necessary roles that can only be done on campus.

(6) To guarantee that staff who do not opt to work on campus and who can work from home will not suffer any loss of income, job security or detriment to career progression.

(7) To establish arrangements to carefully monitor the mental health and stress levels of all staff and to ensure action is taken in case of any concerns.

The Health and Safety Executive Management Standards set out 'six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health, lower productivity and increased accident and sickness absence rates'. All six of these are in flux in the current context, and thus require active and consistent risk assessment.

(8) To adopt the principle that all interactions that need to take place on campus will be done with mitigations to ensure the lowest level of risk as assessed by the recent BMJ article 'Two metres or one: what is the evidence for physical distancing in Covid-19?' (25 August).

Please see figure 3 of this article. In particular, it requires that for all prolonged indoor interactions such as teaching there should be all three of: a well-ventilated space, social distancing of 2 metres, and the wearing of face coverings. By 'well ventilated' we understand the six air changes per hour recommended as a minimum by the US CDC in their Guidelines for environmental infection control in health-care facilities (July 2019), p.50, whether this is achieved by ventilation systems or by window opening.

(9) To test all students for Covid-19 on or before arrival and thereafter regularly throughout the term, or else to take measures that will be similarly effective in preventing outbreaks in the university community

It is now generally accepted that comprehensive and regular testing is the only way to prevent outbreaks at universities. Cardiff, Portsmouth and UEA are taking steps in this direction.
<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/cardiff-university-saliva-test-covid-18861157>

(10) To commit to publishing a daily dashboard showing the numbers of tests, cases, hospital admissions, and deaths among students and staff.

A large number of universities in the US publish daily dashboards, and the BMJ editorial referred to above rightly says that they are needed for both transparency and accountability.

Branch Executive

Oxford Brookes UCU

10 September 2020

RESULTS OF SURVEY MONKEY

230 responses, which is about 57% of the membership.

195 (85%) in support of the statement.

35 (15%) not in support of the statement.