

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO UCU MEMBERS AT BROOKES – Report from last Joint Staff Committee meeting

Owing to the serious situation in terms of the number of Covid-19 cases recorded at Oxford Brookes, the Joint Staff Committee (JSC) of 30 November did focus primarily on this issue. The management were asked for a formal response to UCU Brookes' proposal regarding online teaching (as set out in the motion below which was agreed by the Branch by Survey Monkey Poll). They made it clear, at the outset, that they would not be making any changes to current arrangements in terms of safety measures nor reducing face to face teaching to a minimum. They were keeping to Public Health England (PHE) guidelines (not those of Independent Sage) and their advice from PHE, with which they are required to be in close contact, was that no additional safety measures needed to be implemented.

We had asked at the previous JSC for information in the split between Face-to-Face and Online teaching and were promised a response at this meeting. As a result, the Registrar revealed that 67% of teaching is face to face and 33% online - which is the opposite of what we had been told at the previous JSC, which was that most teaching is online.

The Registrar added that there are currently 88 cases at Brookes - all students - and altogether there have been 125 cases at Brookes since the beginning of the pandemic. However, given there is no testing is taking place, Brookes is unlikely to how many asymptomatic cases there are. He claimed that this was low compared with many other institutions and dismissed the advice, given by UCU nationally, that Brookes is high in the institutions with Covid 19 cases.

The Registrar claimed Brookes is on Tier 2 of the DEF risk scale, so no action was needed. The fact that the PHE level of risk has increased from 3 to 4 seems to mean that the only thing Brookes will do differently is to advise staff deemed to be at 'Very High Risk' not to come on to any of the sites, at least until assessed. However all other staff at risk are expected to continue to come in, but will again be assessed at some point in the future.

The Registrar said that the university will not be setting out a a SID (Serious and Imminent danger) policy, but that could draft one if we want to and share it with HR.

He said he didn't think there was an issue with staff carrying forward leave, since only a couple of people had raised this with their line managers or with HR. He suggested that the onus is on us is to find the staff so affected and dismissed our assertion that there was a general problem, claiming the evidence to be merely anecdotal.

We were criticised for bringing the same issues back to the JSC even when it was pointed out that this was because they are important and the management has failed to resolve them. Although we had approached the VC subsequent to the previous JSC, we were told, somewhat dismissively, to take the matter back to JSC. Of course, when we did, this raised the ire of the management side. Clearly the procedures for negotiation are ragged to say the least.

Our colleagues from Unison asked that we have daily briefings as at some other institutions in the local region. The response was that the management capacity is not there for such an arrangement but there was agreement that management would provide a weekly written précis of any updates in the situation.

The issue of safe working was raised. There have been a number of reports back to UCU representatives at Brookes of inadequate social distancing for staff in classrooms, casual attitudes to wearing face coverings and inadequate ventilation, due to broken window opening mechanisms. It was put to the Director of HR that if any of the mitigating factors were not in place, then, colleagues should report this and immediately cancel the class - and we have advised members that this would not be unreasonable. The Director of HR was not at all happy with this suggestion claiming that what

matters is 'the whole package of measures' not just one, and it would be unreasonable just to cancel a class.

We are extremely concerned that – as reported in the latest Covid Secure meeting – only 10% of Brookes' teaching rooms, based on the capacity the university is claiming to be safe, can accommodate a 2m box for teaching colleagues. This is a key mitigation for staff deemed by the university to be at moderate or higher risk. An assessment of the 'fit' between staff's mitigation needs and rooms does not seem to have been undertaken. Consequently, staff can turn up to each face to face, only to find that their particular needs are not being accommodated. The university's advice seems to be simply to report this, and – if possible – find another room, but there has been no instruction to cancel a class in these circumstances. This clearly leaves colleagues with a serious dilemma – to potentially compromise their own health, or risk the disappointment or worse of students who would be sent away, untaught.

Finally, Jo Grady – the General Secretary – has today issued a letter to all VCs urging them in the strongest terms to move online all teaching that can be delivered online. We await the VCs response, but we will let you know.

In conclusion, it remains our view that teaching in many of the rooms and public areas is not still not safe and, whatever you chose to do individually, we cannot endorse the management's current position on health and safety at work during this pandemic.