

Safe return to campus:

UCU St Andrews branch committee perspective on the current situation (22.10.20)

Introduction

Significant numbers of members have expressed concern about large-scale return to in-person working, including teaching, to the UCU St Andrews branch committee. Branch negotiators have taken these concerns to meetings of the Joint Negotiation and Consultation Committee (JNCC) since June. The university management's response has been that its approach is safe and in line with Scottish and UK government guidance. Branch negotiators do not feel the university management has adequately addressed our members' concerns, and so the branch declared a failure to agree on 16.9.20. At the JNCC meeting called to address the issues in dispute, and in a letter following this meeting, the university management again restated its position, and did nothing to adapt its approach in the light of members' concerns. The branch remains in dispute with the employer. This post sets out the branch's view on the background of the dispute, and actions the branch and our members are currently taking and can take.

Government guidance

The branch does not consider the university management's response to be fully in line with Scottish Government guidance:

- We are still in phase 3 of the response to the pandemic, in which home-working is encouraged.¹
- Specific guidance for the HE sector notes that blended online/in-person learning will be in place this semester: the purpose of blended learning is significantly to reduce the number and frequency of staff and students on campus.²
- The guidance suggests a subject-specific approach to the use of in-person teaching.³
- Recent ministerial guidance emphasises that universities should facilitate more online working and also points to the importance of listening to staff and student concerns by engaging in high quality dialogue with students' and trade unions.⁴

¹ 'Remote working should remain the default position for those who can do so. [...] employers should take every possible step to facilitate their employees working from home, including providing suitable IT and equipment to enable remote working.' <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-staying-safe-and-protecting-others/pages/workplaces/>

² 'From 22 July, colleges and universities have been able to commence a phased return to on campus learning as part of a blended (or 'hybrid') model with some remote teaching. This blended model will continue. Staff and students will be on campus albeit less frequently and in lower numbers than before the virus.' <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-universities-colleges-and-student-accommodation-providers/pages/health-and-safety/>

³ 'To support physical distancing, colleges and universities will deliver blended learning, using remote teaching and some limited priority on-campus learning.' <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-what-you-can-and-cannot-do/pages/schools-and-childcare-settings/>

⁴ 'As our guidance makes clear, colleges and universities should consider the use of risk and equality assessments to decide what a blended learning model looks like in their own institutions. And institutions should be working with their staff and students to discuss any concerns they have about the use of face to face teaching and enabling more online where that can done. [...] The sectoral guidance states that institutions should continue to make reasonable efforts to facilitate working and studying remotely. Where this is not possible, public health measures (including physical distancing) must be in place and the guidance sets out the risk led approach that institutions and providers should follow to protect the health and safety of staff and students. It is vital that staff and students have confidence in the steps being taken to protect their health and safety and I expect institutions to fully engage with staff and students, through trade union and student association representatives, and to monitor and respond to feedback and concerns about operational

The university management's approach:

- required students to return to campus;⁵
- announced default in-person teaching;⁶
- admitted more new entrants than planned;⁷
- maintains its plan to have all small-group teaching in person from week 7.⁸

This approach takes no account of discipline when reintroducing in-person teaching. It does not significantly reduce the number and frequency of students on campus: halls are at 98% of maximum occupancy and the university has, even after phasing-in of in-person teaching, scheduled 18,000 in-person hours in centrally bookable rooms (that is, in addition to laboratories controlled by Schools).

The university management has justified this approach by saying that in-person teaching 'is strongly in the interests of social mobility, mental health', job retention and the local economy.⁹ The branch has not been shown any evidence that in-person teaching in the current and very unusual circumstances is beneficial for mental health or social mobility. Teaching staff are not routinely trained to provide mental health support. Support for student mental health would be better supported by investing more in dedicated and trained support staff.

The university management's approach has insisted on in-person teaching when remote/online options are available, have been tested and are in many situations pedagogically preferable. This is not encouraging remote working, and it unnecessarily increases the number and frequency of people on campus, increasing risks for those students and colleagues, including estates, technical and professional colleagues, for whom presence on campus is essential.

Consultation

The branch also finds the university management's approach to consultation deficient. It has consisted of informing unions of the major decisions that have been taken (to bring students back to campus, to resume in-person working, including teaching) and to refuse any discussion of changes to its plans in the light of union members' concerns.

arrangements. I am grateful to staff who are working extremely hard to support students in these exceptional times, and we expect institutions to follow fair work practices.' Richard Lochhead, ministerial guidance on restrictions, 7.10.20.

⁵ 'All students who are able to travel safely should plan to be with us in St Andrews for the start of the semester.' Principal's e-mail to staff and students 19.6.20.

⁶ 'Wherever possible, we will default to traditional in-person teaching with remote delivery as back-up support for those students who require it. [...] Our teaching staff will be expected to provide small-group teaching on site under physical distancing regimens' Principal's e-mail to staff and students 19.6.20.

⁷ 'a larger number of students than was expected will be with us in St Andrews at the start of term [...] the number of students who will arrive to study with us in St Andrews is likely to be greater than anyone had forecast [...] We now estimate that up to 9000 undergraduates and postgraduates plan to be in St Andrews during this first semester, whereas our early modelling had suggested a community of only 7000 would return or enroll.' Principal's e-mail to staff and students 31.8.20.

⁸ 'in week 7 we intend to deliver all small group tutorials, seminars and classes smaller than 35 students in person for those students who are in St Andrews', Principal's e-mail to staff and students 31.8.20.

⁹ Principal's e-mail to staff and students 28.8.20.

Caution

The branch has consistently asked for a more cautious approach to in-person teaching, and also emphasised the disproportionate risks faced by some members - BAME members, members with a disability, with caring responsibilities, precariously employed members. (A further post on [issues faced by PGR tutors can be found here](#).) The committee does not feel the individualised risk assessment process for staff members takes adequate account of these factors. The vast majority of staff with concerns are being recommended to return to in-person working: of 379 academic and professional staff assessed through Occupational Health, only 10 were found not fit to work in person,.

The branch's call for caution is supported by scientific advice issued throughout the summer:

- ISAGE urged the move to default online teaching in August;¹⁰
- SAGE noted that halls of residence and in-person teaching have a high risk of transmission and that moving online was the most effective mitigation of the risk of transmission through in-person teaching;¹¹
- SAGE has recently recommended moving all teaching online other than that for which in-person delivery is essential.¹²

The university management has pointed to relatively low case numbers in St Andrews as a reason to persist in its policy of large-scale in-person working, including teaching. It is a great relief that St Andrews has not had outbreaks on the scale of other universities and university towns. But students and staff are being infected and as an institution we have a responsibility to minimise transmission locally, across Scotland and globally. A more cautious approach to in-person teaching can help achieve that aim, and especially reduce risks for commuting students and staff, and vulnerable students and staff. That approach can be adopted without damaging the work of the university or the experience of its students.

What we can do and will do

- The branch continues to ask for negotiations with the university management to address members' concerns. We will consult members about the action they want the branch to take.

¹⁰ 'Universities should focus on providing excellent quality remote learning rather than on opening up campuses that are likely to close again. [...] Independent SAGE challenges UUK's position that students should be offered "significant inperson teaching" on the basis that in-person modes of delivery carry the most risk of transmission (prolonged interactions in enclosed indoor spaces). [...] We recommend maximizing the remote delivery of and participation in degree programmes for all but lab-based or practice-based programmes and/or student/staff support services that cannot be delivered online, with semester-by-semester or term-by-term review points, planned well ahead.'

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3Aascds%3AUS%3A5e2e1350-dcdc-49db-83eb-91f470afee1a#pageNum=3>

¹¹ 'reducing in-person interaction is an effective way to limit transmission and so delivery of activities online, especially for larger groups is a key mitigation (high confidence). [...] A clear principle from the hierarchy of risk control is that elimination (e.g. removing in-person activities) is the most effective approach to control transmission, followed by substitution (e.g. changing the activity to substantially reduce interaction'.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/914978/S0728_Principles_for_Managing_SARS-CoV-2_Transmission_Associated_with_Higher_Education_.pdf

¹² 'A package of interventions will need to be adopted to prevent this exponential rise in cases. [Including] All university and college teaching to be online unless absolutely essential.' SAGE minutes, 21.9.20

- Members can use the [template letters](#) (login required) provided by UCU to set out their concerns about in-person working.
- Members can contact the branch if they are unhappy with any aspect of the individual risk assessment process managed by Occupation Health, Human Resources and line managers.
- The branch will support any member whose work can reasonably be carried out remotely if they decide to continue to work remotely.