



21 Sep 2021

UCU Newcastle University Branch statement on health and safety concerns over return to campus

UCU at Newcastle University are concerned about the approach being taken by the Newcastle University management in preparation for the full return to in-person teaching en masse on 27 Sep 2021. We have concerns over a number of measures the university has taken or rather is not taking. These include:

- Abandoning Covid-secure occupancy limits
- Abandoning of social distancing
- Abandoning one-way systems and Covid aware notices
- Creation of potential bottlenecks due to volume of students, sign-in measures and hygiene measures
- Weak enforcement of mask wearing in lectures and other teaching spaces
- Inadequate evidence provided of adequate ventilation due to no updated building risk assessments likely to be available for start of teaching and a shortage of adequate room and activity specific risk assessments
- Reduction of gaps between classes to allow periods of no occupancy when virus can dissipate

The Independent SAGE group published a statement on universities and colleges on 09 Sep 2021 ¹ with the following:

- The transmission risks of the virus are as high or higher than at this time last year
- In Scotland where teaching at universities has already started, cases are doubling every week. In the US universities are already switching to online teaching due to rising case numbers
- There are over 106,000 under 25s living with Long Covid
- Only 15% of students don't want any online delivery this academic year

They recommend:

- Requiring the use of face coverings in all multi-occupancy indoors teaching and learning spaces and shared workspaces
- Easy availability of face coverings
- Ensuring adequate ventilation in indoor spaces
- Time off for vaccination, testing and isolating for all staff including hourly paid staff and PGRs
- A policy to support students and staff with Long Covid
- Maintaining a rigorous find, test, trace, isolate and support system on campus
- Promoting strongly the use of physical distancing and hand and respiratory hygiene

¹ <https://www.independentsage.org/statement-on-universities-and-colleges-autumn-2021-in-the-context-of-sars-cov-2/>

- Planning for maximising online teaching and learning in a timely rather than last minute fashion
- Identifying flexible ways of working, support rather than coercion
- Clear communication of what symptoms are and strong reinforcement of the requirement to not attend work or study on campus with symptoms

Several Universities in England, including the universities of Essex and Liverpool and the LSE are mandating face mask wearing.² In Scotland mandatory mask wearing with statutory exemptions is the policy at universities (see for example University of Edinburgh³).

UCU asks the University management to implement Independent SAGE's recommendations. These were put together by academics across the UK who are not influenced by UK government policy towards opening up the economy.

To ensure our members' safety we specifically demand at a minimum the following:

- To mandate mask wearing for staff, students and visitors when indoors on campus including in all teaching spaces except in cases of people not being able to wear face coverings due to medical conditions, work requirements, or where other mitigating measures apply. We find the guidance issued by the University of Edinburgh to reflect a good balance between caution and individual responsibility³
- The reinstatement of COVID secure room occupancy limits based on adequate social distancing
- Maximum office occupancy limits of 50%
- Specific building risk assessment checklists to be in place before full-scale teaching commences on 27 Sep 2021
- Activity based risk assessments which acknowledge that different teaching activities carry different types and levels of risk
- Social distancing rules to be reintroduced along with one-way systems and signage
- Clear instructions that windows should be open at all times in all shared offices and teaching spaces in buildings without mechanical ventilation
- Copies of all ventilation audits for all spaces including all rooms, corridors, toilets, congregational areas and canteens
- Evidence that air flow measurements in each space are at least 12 - 17 litres per second per person; that air changes per hour are more than 6 per hour and ideally between 10 and 12 per hour; and that filter efficiency is at least Merv13 but ideally Merv17⁴
- Ventilation systems to be switched on or windows opened at least two hours before occupation
- A list of all rooms which have been identified as being poorly ventilated and those which have been taken out of use
- Evidence that all desk fans, ceiling and pedestal fans have been shut down in multi-occupancy workspaces

² https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TxUjDran8kTkfCXwlhlyNR2_ylUidg1oY6lhPdOoPg8/edit

³ <https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/covid-19/hygiene-and-health>

⁴ https://ucu.org.uk/media/11758/Covid-19-Ventilation-at-work-September-2021/pdf/covid19_ventilation-guidance-202109.pdf