Emergency General Meeting Motion – University of Bristol COVID-19 Institutional Response

Monday, 28th September 2020

This Branch Notes:

1. The rapid increase in Covid-19 cases in the past month.

2. The nationwide COVID-19 testing backlog and the marked failings of the NHS track-and-trace system.

3. The government’s SAGE subcommittee report on HE, the more recent Independent SAGE reports on HE and UCU’s public position that the only safe way to offer HE teaching in a pandemic is online wherever possible.

4. Increasing confirmed reports of COVID-19 cases at universities across the UK.

5. Reports from Bristol UCU members and University staff that some facilities for face-to-face teaching are unsafe, are in unventilated rooms, and room capacities have less than 1-metre in their side-to-side seating setups.

6. While health and safety guidance has been developed on our campus in dialogue with the University of Bristol trade unions on improving existing measures, inconsistency of approach has emerged across Faculties and Schools, with some opting almost entirely for online teaching and others for a hybrid approach or allowing staff to teach online when they request to.

7. The following risk factors: (a) the high rates of infection amongst young people, who are typically asymptomatic; and (b) the enhanced health risks of infection to older staff, BAME staff and students, those who are medically vulnerable, and their families and communities.

8. UCU is calling on ‘government and universities to switch to fully online teaching as the default for the duration of next term’ to mitigate the deadly and avoidable spread of the virus.

9. Birkbeck College and University College London have moved core teaching online.

10. University of Bristol staff are not required to work on the physical campus if it is not necessary to do so and can be done online and remotely.

11. The hard work of our Estates colleagues over the last months, and the ongoing identification of rooms unsuitable for in-person teaching and working.
This Branch Resolves:

a. To demand an immediate cessation of unnecessary face-to-face, in-person teaching at the University of Bristol, with an immediate transition to online learning in all possible areas, for at least Teaching Block 1 of 2020-21, guided by individual disciplinary needs and practical teaching delivery considerations.

b. To demand that the University changes its current institutional policy and allows staff to teach online, where they do not feel safe teaching in-person, to do so.

c. To demand that the University of Bristol immediately publish risk assessments relating to face-to-face teaching and other forms of on-campus working, its individual risk assessments for all rooms in which staff will be asked to teach, and its methodology and principles used when making these risk assessments, as well as COVID-19 institutional data such as infection rates and the locality of cases, on SharePoint or an appropriate information portal.

d. To receive confirmation from the University that where staff request to teach online, it is not grounds to reassign their in-person teaching to another member of staff, nor for them to lose teaching hours and pay as a result.

e. The University continue to provide high levels of support and training for staff in online teaching, while ensuring that workload allocation models and other means of allocating work recognises the time needed to undertake this training.

f. If the University fails to safeguard our Bristol UCU members by meeting the demands detailed in (a) AND (b) AND (c) above, this branch reserves the right of using any and all action available to us under Trade Union and Health and Safety legislation. In this eventuality, Branch Officers on behalf of the Executive Committee would immediately consult with our UCU Regional and National Offices and Officials, and with our membership, on an appropriate way to proceed and, if necessary, to initiate a dispute on behalf of members.

Proposer: Bristol UCU Executive Committee