

UCU tests for safe returns to on-campus working in HE

Test 1: Sustained reduction in numbers of Covid-19 cases and infection rates

New cases of Covid-19 need to be low and falling, with a sustained downward trend and confidence that all new cases can be identified and responded to promptly. This applies at regional level, with reduced cases and a falling reproduction number or R value (below 1), confirmed region by region before decisions regarding reopening of university campuses are considered. There need to be extensive, reliable, and transparent systems operating for testing, contact tracing, and isolating those with Covid-19 symptoms, managed by appropriate level public health authorities.

Test 2: Coherent planning for social distancing

The relevant authorities (UK; Scottish; Welsh; and Northern Irish) must have coherent plans which include parameters for appropriate physical distancing and safe levels of social mixing, applicable to HE campuses/workplaces as well as travel to and from them. To help ensure physical distancing, all HE staff and students who can work and study from home should continue to do so.

Test 3: Comprehensive testing and contact tracing

To avoid HE institutions becoming centres for Covid-19 transmission there need to be comprehensive testing systems in place, providing for regular testing of staff and students attending university premises, with isolation and comprehensive contact tracing for all suspected cases. In addition to routine testing, protocols are needed to ensure full coverage testing occurs promptly across university and other worksites following any case of Covid-19 being confirmed.

Test 4: University-wide strategies for safe returns and continuing health and safety

Risk assessments should be completed in consultation with recognised staff unions, and safe ways of working established in advance for all activities and spaces within universities. These should anticipate phased/staged returns to workplace presence, differentiating between activities/subject disciplines where attendance is necessary (e.g. some research laboratories/workshops) and where it is not; and hazards present in

different settings (e.g. large lecture theatres/auditoria or small group teaching rooms, where risks may differ but be no lower).

Hazards must be assessed, appropriate control measures identified and introduced, and adjusted where necessary, all in light of current evidence regarding Covid-19 transmission routes and risk.

Equality impact assessments should be completed to ensure that all workers are fully protected and the differential risks relating to BAME staff, disabled staff, older staff and staff in other categories who may be more vulnerable to Covid-19 are fully considered. These should also consider whether safety measures might present particular challenges for certain groups and where additional support (e.g. reasonable adjustments for disabled staff) may be required so they can undertake their work effectively.

In planning for phased returns to onsite working, priority consideration should be given to students who struggle to access teaching remotely and whose studies would therefore suffer disproportionately from continued off-campus working.

Plans must be in place for regular cleaning and stringent hygiene measures for all workplaces where staff are scheduled to return. Where risk assessments identify that PPE is required, sustainable supplies of appropriate PPE must be available before re-opening of affected areas.

Risk assessments, including identified hazards and associated control measures, must be communicated to affected staff and more widely (e.g. on institutional websites).

Plans, including effective communications strategies, must be in place for prompt and effective site/campus closure in the event of a local spike in Covid-19 cases.

Test 5: Protection for those most vulnerable to Covid-19

Staff who are themselves more vulnerable to Covid-19, and staff who live with people at heightened risk, must not be required to work on campus. Plans must explicitly address measures for the protection of staff, students, and members of their households, who are in groups identified as facing heightened risk of contracting and/or are more vulnerable to the worst effects of Covid-19, recognising that BAME groups are particularly affected and are likely to be over-represented amongst staff groups undertaking essential on-campus work such as cleaning and security work.