

Professor Trevor J McMillan
Vice-Chancellor

14 March 2020

Dear Trevor,

I hope this finds you well. I am writing to relay to you the grave concerns expressed by students and staff regarding Keele's response to Covid-19. We do not believe that the Government's response and that of the University are robust enough to protect the health and safety of our staff and students. Whilst our members welcome the cancellation of the March 14th Offer Holder Day, we were disappointed that colleagues were asked to attend the event on a just-in-case basis. We are concerned, more fundamentally, about the 'business as usual' approach which the University seems to be adopting in relation to its activities. This stands in stark contrast to the far-reaching measures which many institutions have already implemented in response to the pandemic. As of this morning, the following Universities have already declared some measures of social distancing:

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| - Aberdeen | - London School of Economics |
| - Birkbeck | - LSBU |
| - Birmingham | - Manchester |
| - Bristol | - Manchester Metropolitan |
| - Brunel | - Northumbria |
| - Cambridge | - Nottingham |
| - Central Lancashire | - Open University |
| - Durham | - Oxford |
| - Edinburgh | - Portsmouth |
| - Essex | - QMUL |
| - Institute of Development Studies | - Regents University London |
| - Glasgow | - Royal Holloway |
| - Glasgow Caledonian | - Salford |
| - Hertfordshire | - Sheffield |
| - Kings College London | - Southampton |
| - Lancaster | - Stirling |
| - Leicester | - Swansea |
| - Liverpool | - UCL |
| - Loughborough | - UEA |
| - London Met | - University of West of Scotland |

Social distancing measures implemented in those institutions include closing campuses, ending term early, moving teaching online and cancelling exams. Not all universities are doing all of these things but it has become abundantly clear that the sector is moving swiftly in response to the situation and that most institutions will end face-to-face teaching.

Student facing staff - some of whom may be immunodeficient or with chronic medical conditions - are on the front line of Keele operations and are routinely in close contact with hundreds of students in relatively enclosed spaces. From large lectures to tutorials, individual meetings or laboratories, academic and professional support staff are among the most at risk categories for contracting an infection during a pandemic. They are in close contact with students, and regularly have to handle equipment and hard surfaces that have been in frequent contact with large numbers of individuals. While so far there hasn't been a *confirmed* Covid-19 case at Keele, we know of several staff and students who have already been placed in isolation. Keele is also at particular risk as a campus university. In any event, experts believe the real number of infections to vastly outnumber confirmed cases. It is also the case that, having entered into the 'delay' phase of the Government's action plan, contact tracing and testing of suspected cases has now effectively been stopped and, short of serious hospital cases, no agency will know the real extent of the Covid-19 infection in any given University. **We therefore urge the University to abandon its 'business as usual' approach and join the growing number of institutions in the sector suspending face-to-face teaching and other campus activities.**

Relatedly, we are gravely concerned that the Unions have so far not been included in the planning of the University's response to Covid-19, especially given the legal requirement for employers to consult with us on all matters concerning health and safety of employees. We are calling on Keele's management to work with UCU and other campus Unions on their plans for managing this crisis, in terms of the full range of teaching and non-teaching activities, including contact time activities, assessment activities, interviewing, personal tutoring, open days, research networking, outreach activities and so on. Although we have ongoing industrial action, we have consistently indicated a willingness to talk to and work with senior management. This remains our position.

The situation is evolving rapidly and UCU is in the process of developing its own position. At this point in time, we would like to seek assurances on the following issues, with due regard to the fact that different staff groups will be differently affected and may need different forms of support:

- The University should actively encourage staff and students who are symptomatic to self-isolate and take time off work, without fear of disciplinary, capability processes, or triggering sickness absence sanctions. This may involve relaxing sickness absence triggers where necessary.
- Ensure sufficient supplies of soap, hand gels, antibacterial cleaning wipes etc.
- Assurances that staff who need to self-isolate remain on full pay, and that this is treated as special leave, not sickness absence.
- The University should provide sick pay for casual or hourly paid staff who have to self-isolate or are unable to work due to a diagnosis of coronavirus, to ensure they do not feel compelled to come to work to make ends meet.

- Consideration must be given to staff who are more vulnerable by virtue of either their own underlying health conditions or those of their dependents. Preventative self-isolation should be allowed in those cases.
- Advice should be provided to international staff and students about different visa types, with details of how the university will seek to avoid detriment to them.
- Encourage working from home for all staff groups, wherever possible.

We have concerns about the differential impact this is likely to have on different staff groups, and would require that particular attention is paid to supporting those staff on lower grades and/or atypical contracts.

We recognise that this is an emergency situation and that measures in place to protect the health and safety of staff and students are *ad hoc* and might raise matters of principle that may need to be further discussed in due course. But whatever plan the University chooses to implement as we move forward will rely on the effective cooperation of all staff groups, in a context where trust and goodwill are in very short supply. We urge you to address the issues raised in this letter with the utmost urgency, in the interest of all parties and of the University.

With kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mario Prost', is positioned above the printed name.

Mario Prost – on behalf of Keele UCU