



Professor Debra Humphris
Vice Chancellor
University of Brighton

20th September 2021

Dear Vice Chancellor,

We are writing out of concern over the University's "Covid-aware" approach to the current public health situation, and also because we have some serious issues with the University's consultation with trade unions over safety control measures.

We appreciate that government and Office for Students advice and guidance is based on moving away from significant control measures and toward adopting a system where individuals are supposed to take responsibility for their own personal safety. However, we don't accept that the University of Brighton needs to, or should follow this guidance when it is more than capable of retaining the systems that have been in place up to this point, namely mandatory face-coverings, significant limits on room capacity, maintaining significant and measureable ventilation, home-working where appropriate etc.

Many employees, not just members of the trade unions, have voiced significant concerns over working on-campus with thousands of students, which have only been "strongly advised" to take a test, wear a face-covering or maintain distancing. A meeting open to all members of staff on Friday lunchtime, with over 150 people in attendance, heard many members of staff explain how worried they are about ventilation, air quality monitoring etc.

Whilst we recognise that most students and staff members will do their best, this laid-back advice does not sit well with staff members who will be expected to work in close proximity to others for long periods of time in enclosed spaces. We don't accept that the University can't put more effective control measures in place.

Other universities have adopted more cautious approaches and we feel that Brighton should do the same. It is not merely a question of physical safety and avoiding catching such a dangerous disease, but the psychological effect of people feeling forced to work in what they perceive to be dangerous circumstances, which will add to the stress felt by many members of staff. This is on top of all the issues created by significant reorganisations, closures and changes made to improve efficiency, leaving people overwhelmed with workloads, and worried about the future.

We also need to take issue with the way in which engagement with the trade unions over safety issues has been managed. In the middle of a serious pandemic, discussion is largely limited to SAWC meetings, which take place not much more than termly, with the special August one cancelled at short notice. The recent meeting, rescheduled to 8th September, had papers available just 24 hours before the meeting itself.

This Committee is a joint University-trade unions-Students' Union body and as such is supposed to have oversight of the University's Health, Safety and Wellbeing policy and processes. Increasingly, it is becoming a one-way information delivering committee, where senior managers tell the union reps

what has been agreed in secret by IRT and what is already in the process of being delivered, or dismantled.

Committee members have never seen any minutes, heard reports or been able to comment on what IRT has decided, in relation to safety measures or lack of them. We are merely informed of what's happening and any objections or concerns are "taken away" for consideration by IRT. (Our questions from the last meeting have now been responded to, but SAWC is the appropriate arena for discussion, not emails from the Director of Estates as Chair of SAWC.)

This is a significant variation from what SAWC is supposed to be, and we are losing faith in the University's ability to fulfil its legal obligation to consult with trade union reps appointed and trained to oversee safety issues on behalf of all employees. Since there are some significant differences with what IRT considers appropriate and what union reps would like to see in place with respect to Covid, at the very least, we would expect the opportunity to communicate our thoughts to all university employees with the same facilities afforded to UEB.

In light of this, we are writing to request that the University begins to engage fully and in good faith with the trade unions over its Covid measures and protocols for the autumn term. Such engagement would need to involve those members of senior management responsible for the decisions and would need to take place urgently. Both unions feel that if the University declines this request, it may be appropriate to escalate the situation by entering into formal dispute over the University's failure to implement adequate safety measures for its employees, and its failure to engage in meaningful consultation with the recognised trade unions over safety matters.

We think it's important to note that as Patrick Valance recently pointed out, failure to implement precautionary measures in good time risks the need for more draconian measures including possible campus closures over the winter.

Yours sincerely,

Ivan Bonsell, UNISON Branch Secretary
Mark Abel, Chair UCU Coordinating Committee

Trade Union Health and Safety reps and members of SAWC

Josh Cameron
Richard Clayton
Sheila Cullen
Alan Dilley
Mary Anne Francis
Martin Loftus
Maurizio Valeri
Carl Walker
Dawn Whitaker