IN THE UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY

CHAIR: BARONESS HEATHER HALLETT

On behalf of UCU

Jo Grady Statement

First Witness Statement in Module 8

Dated: 11 August 2025

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JO GRADY

I, Jo Grady, am the General Secretary of the University and College Union ("**UCU**"). My office address is Carlow Street, London NW1 7LH.

1. I make this statement on behalf of the UCU in response to a letter dated 28 April 2025, sent on behalf of the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (the "**Inquiry**"). This statement is made for the purposes of Module 8 of the Inquiry, which is examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As requested, this statement focuses on the period of time between 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022.

Introduction

2. The pandemic had a profound impact on learners and staff in further and higher education. However, we believe that not enough was done to minimise this impact. The safety of students and staff was intertwined, and yet union safety representatives struggled to obtain crucial Covid-related information, and inadequate safety measures, such as poor ventilation and lack of PPE, put education staff and learners at significant risk. Education staff faced a sharp rise in workload with little support, particularly in adapting to new working conditions. Additionally, job insecurity worsened as universities, colleges and prison education prioritised financial survival over staff wellbeing, leading to redundancies and uncertainty, especially for casualised workers. A failure to collaborate with unions, inconsistent sector-wide policies, and the government's inconsistent approach contributed

to avoidable outbreaks and confusion. These systemic failures disrupted learning, exacerbated health risks, increased workload pressures, and contributed to mental health struggles for learners and post-16 education staff.

3. This statement seeks to address these fundamental issues, and in doing so, is structured as follows:

   (A) Structure and role of the UCU;
   (B) Learning and education prior to the pandemic;
   (C) Planning for the pandemic response;
   (D) Closures and openings of universities, colleges and other educational settings;
   The UCU's approach to closures and openings
   (E) Keeping educational settings safe – non-pharmaceutical interventions and infection prevention and control;
   (F) Learning during the pandemic;
   Exams and assessments
   Remote learning
   (G) Impact on students and staff;
   (H) Education recovery;
   (I) Reflections and recommendations.

(A) Structure and role of the UCU

4. The UCU is the largest trade union in the post-16 education sector in the UK, representing 120,000 academic and related members across the UK. The UCU represents members in further and higher education across England, Northern Ireland and Wales and is the largest union in the higher education ("**HE**") sector in Scotland with over 8,000 members in Scottish universities. The UCU represents academic workers (including lecturers, researchers, professors, teaching fellows, graduate teaching assistants and other 'early careers' academics), as well as professional services staff (including librarians, administrators, IT staff, student support staff, human resources staff) in HE institutions. In further education ("**FE**"), the UCU represents academic staff in colleges, prison education and adult and community education.

(B) Learning and education prior to the pandemic

5. In HE and FE, the state of learning and education prior to the pandemic was worrying. It consisted of: unsustainable funding models; high workloads and work-related stress; high usage of casualised, insecure contracts; high and increasing numbers of students requiring pastoral and mental health support; a lack of investment in health and safety systems generally; a lack of health and safety competence across organisations with poor safety management arrangements; and a recruitment and retention crisis linked to low pay, work-related stress and de-professionalisation (particularly across FE).

6. In terms of prison education, it is important to note that the Ministry of Justice had responsibility, rather than the Department for Education ("**DfE**"). Over the years leading up to the pandemic, we saw the outsourcing of education, Prison Education Framework ("**PEF**") contract stipulations and regular TUPE transfers following ongoing, periodic tendering processes. Low pay and de-professionalisation of prison educators was an issue, along with poor health and safety, with buildings in a state of disrepair, poor maintenance, poor ventilation, poor hygiene and poor physical working conditions generally (including inadequate access to welfare facilities).

7. There was insufficient funding for special educational needs and disabilities ("**SEND**") and services to support disabled students and those with additional support needs across HE and FE prior to the pandemic. Support needs of all learners were increasing and educators and academic-related staff were more and more required to work beyond contracted duties and outside of professional expertise to support learners in HE and FE [JG/01 - INQ000649288] [JG/02 - INQ000649289].

8. It is worth noting that, prior to the pandemic, remote teaching was not common practice across the majority of institutions. There was also limited IT infrastructure and limited experience of delivering learning remotely across HE, FE, and prison education. In HE there was some technology that could be utilised and students generally had access to IT but access was not consistent across or within education establishments. Students relied heavily on libraries and online resources to engage in study and classroom and lecture-based teaching was the primary mode of delivering teaching. Delivery via online learning platforms was rare in HE, albeit the Open University had more experience of remote delivery of studies and shared expertise with the sector.

9. As with HE, in FE the primary mode of delivery of teaching was classroom based. Any delivery of online learning was virtually non-existent and staff had limited, if any, experience of delivering learning remotely, with a limited infrastructure in place to support this. Student access to suitable technology in the home also varied, and was inconsistent. Equality issues around accessibility and the ability to learn from home were more prominent in FE.

10. In prison education, the lack of any in-cell technology, and technology more generally, was a huge barrier. Classroom delivery was the primary mode of delivery and educators had limited experience of delivering learning remotely in prison education.

(C) Planning for the pandemic response

11. In advance of universities and colleges closing, on 16 March 2020 we wrote to vice chancellors and college principals, urging them to take immediate steps to shut down their core functions [JG/03 - INQ000649290]. However, we acknowledged that the exact pattern of closures would vary depending upon the institution – we requested that the parameters be agreed with the UCU and other staff trade unions to prioritise the safety of students and staff. On the same day, we wrote to Gavin Williamson, the then Secretary of State for Education, urging the government to adopt the avoidance of all social contact as an official directive covering all colleges and universities across the UK [JG/04 - INQ000649291]. We also emphasised that we were keen to work with the government and education providers to develop a proactive approach that safeguarded the health and wellbeing of all staff and students, and asked to discuss the matter further with Mr Williamson. Michelle Donelan, the then Minister of State for Universities, replied, stating that the government's advice was for students remaining at university in England to now stay where they were and not attempt to travel, and those living in student halls, or private rented accommodation, to remain there and stay indoors [JG/05 - INQ000649292].

12. We sent a similar letter to Ian Bickers at HM Prison and Probation Service ("**HMPPS**"), on 18 March 2020, calling for the official directive to be adopted covering all prison education departments [JG/06 - INQ000649293]. Mr Bickers responded on 20 March 2020 [JG/07 - INQ000649294], saying:

"*Whilst I understand your concerns, I have spoken to each of our four PEF providers who have all indicated that as they consider the provision of education to be an essential*

service, they will continue to deliver education to the prisons in their designated lots as contracted. All providers have confirmed that they also have clear procedures in place to assess and manage the situation and to protect their staff during this period. Should the scientific advice from PHE change - or the situation nationally degrades further - then we would immediately liaise fully with the PEF providers to re-evaluate our joint approach should this become necessary.

FE providers have also been asked by the Department for Education (DfE) and local authorities to continue to support provision for students of Key Workers and vulnerable students (EHCP). As such education continues to be supplied, where key or essential services are required in the community, our approach to prison education at this time is not unique."

13. As detailed in a letter on 22 March 2020 to Phil Copple, the acting director general of prisons [JG/08 - INQ000649295], the UCU did not believe Mr Bickers' response adequately addressed the concerns, not least because prison education was fundamentally different to the wider FE sector. Providing supportive learning with a select number of learners at a college site with acceptable standards of hygiene and infection control differs greatly to that of a prison environment. Large numbers of UCU reps had reported health and safety hazards, with the most basic levels of hygiene not being met and government advice regarding social distancing not being followed. For example, the UCU heard of classrooms over capacity at HMP Hull, no access to soap at HMP Lancaster Farms and staff having to share one toilet with learners at HMP Rochester.

14. Even when HMPPS took the decision to move to an 'exceptional delivery model' (i.e. lockdown), some Governors were still expecting an education provision to continue with skeleton staffing. On 25 March 2020, the UCU wrote to the Heads of Institutions to seek to agree a framework to allow provision of education remotely, to ensure education could be delivered safely in prisons [JG/09 - INQ000649296].

15. In April 2020, we wrote again to Gavin Williamson, setting out where we identified government action was required to address the pandemic going forward [JG/10 - INQ000649297]. This included ensuring that students who wished to repeat courses or modules that had been significantly disrupted as a result of the pandemic would not be subject to additional fee costs and addressing barriers to access preventing students from engaging effectively with alternative methods of education delivery. We proposed that the government urgently convene a group of representatives from institutions, examination

bodies, practitioner unions and student organisations with the aim of agreeing clear and appropriate pathways for all learners and students.

16. One of the major challenges was the government's unwillingness to work collaboratively with unions, which was a significant barrier to finding effective and workable solutions that could have prevented infections and minimised the disruption to learning. Indeed, prison educators were not classified as key workers during the first lockdown and it was not until the third lockdown, in January 2021, that HE staff were officially recognised as key workers.

(D) <u>Closures and openings of universities, colleges and other educational settings</u>

17. The Westminster Government did not have any clear or consistent modes of consultation with the UCU and we received no invites to joint working groups or consultation on guidance. This is in sharp contrast to the devolved nations, especially Scotland and Wales. The Westminster Government failed to give adequate notice of changes or to understand the many nuances of the FE and HE sectors that guidance was supposed to apply to. The voice of staff and students was missing in decisions on whether to open or close, despite the UCU raising concerns during this period through the many letters to government ministers [JG/04 - INQ000649291] [JG/10 - INQ000649297] [JG/11 - INQ000649298] [JG/12 - INQ000649299] [JG/13 - INQ000649300] [JG/14 - INQ000649301] [JG/15 - INQ000649302], and a number of press statements (see, for example, [JG/16 - INQ000649303] [JG/17 - INQ000649304] [JG/18 - INQ000649305] [JG/19 - INQ000649306] [JG/20 - INQ000649307] [JG/21 - INQ000649308] [JG/22 - INQ000649309] [JG/23 - INQ000649310] [JG/24 - INQ000649311] [JG/25 - INQ000649312] [JG/26 - INQ000649313]).

18. There were significant delays to the release of government guidance at key stages of the pandemic when infections were high across different parts of the UK and decisions were being made with short notice about whether to close or re-open education or whether Covid infection controls would be required. The uncertainty and poor planning created huge levels of anxiety with staff and students. The UCU and employers were often playing catch-up, which clearly affected communications and mental health throughout the period.

19. Guidance that was produced had significant gaps or contradictions that had to be discussed and ironed out with each individual employer. There was a significant variance

across all nations of the UK, which added to the complexity and confusion to the approaches taken across the HE and FE sectors. Furthermore, government guidance did not follow the science or recommendations coming out of advisory bodies such as SAGE. It was often not in line with health and safety legislation and there was confusion between public health measures and health and safety risk assessments at the employer level.

20. SAGE guidance was published but difficult to find and the transparency of SAGE meetings and advice was an issue. The UCU instead relied heavily on the data and information coming from experts linked to Independent SAGE as this was incredibly thorough, accessible and timely.

21. Employers and unions took up the role of interpreting and communicating guidance to members and staff. In HE, the UCU worked with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association and others to produce joint position statements, guides and baselines which would be recommended across the HE sector, in an attempt to obtain consistency across individual employers (see for example [JG/27 - INQ000649314]; [JG/28 - INQ000649315]; [JG/29 - INQ000649316]; [JG/30 - INQ000649317]. In FE, we worked with the Association of Colleges to develop joint safety checklists for the re-opening of colleges, due to the lack of practical sector-specific guidance coming from government [JG/31 - INQ000649318].

22. The uncertainty around closures and openings of educational settings, along with a lack of focus on providing high quality teaching online, had a significant impact on student mental health and education. There was too much back and forth, with students being in-person, then remote and on occasion being forced to remain in lockdown on university campuses, rather than being able to return home to families. We made joint statements with the National Union of Students UK ("**NUS**") around the closure of HE [JG/20 - INQ000649307] [JG/32 - INQ000649319].

23. In contrast, the timing of decision-making and guidance was better across the devolved nations, with more opportunities to raise concerns or challenge interpretations as appropriate. Nevertheless, there were still issues with poor communication of guidance and differing rules applies to schools, colleges and HE institutions without clear rationale.

24. It was easier for the UCU to flag any concerns with individual employers around the application of rules or concerns about guidance with ministers in Scotland and Wales due to the closer working relationships and structures put in place to support more meaningful consultation with the UCU. We and other education unions were considered key

stakeholders or key partners in developing national responses to the pandemic – see for example the operational protocol for FE colleges in Wales, developed by the FE sector in consultation with unions [JG/33 - INQ000649320].

The UCU's approach to closures and openings

25. The 'R-rate' was a huge factor in UCU's rationale towards the closures and openings of educational settings, which also informed the advice coming from SAGE and Independent SAGE regarding the transmission risks of large numbers of students and staff returning to in-person work in HE and FE. We were always mindful of the disruption, but also the potential impact on spreading Covid to communities across the UK, particularly with the mass movement of students in HE. There was a huge risk to the physical and mental health of students who needed consistency in education delivery, considered approaches and minimal disruption to their studies. In addition, we had to consider staffing shortages, adding pressure to a workforce already at breaking point, and a need to protect vulnerable staff and students.

26. Throughout the summer of 2020 and into September, in light of government plans to force students to stay in their university town or city in the event of a future lockdown, the UCU continued to advocate for teaching to move online and to look to reopen campuses more widely only when that could be done safely, to avoid both disruption to learning and risks of transmission [JG/13 - INQ000649300] [JG/17 - INQ000649304] [JG/18 - INQ000649305] [JG/19 - INQ000649306] [JG/34 - INQ000649321] [JG/35 - INQ000649322]. In October 2020, in response to the Prime Minister's announcement that "*colleges and universities will all remain open…*", the UCU said the Prime Minister was "*gambling with the health of the nation*" by refusing to move teaching online. We also issued a joint statement with the NUS, calling for online working and pointing to the worsening mental health, debt and unnecessary risk to lives being caused by the uncertainty [JG/20 - INQ000649307]. At this point in time, the SAGE advice to government **[JG/20 - INQ000649307]**, and the advice of Independent SAGE [JG/36 - INQ000649325], was that the R-rate was increasing within the FE and HE age group (17-21 years old) – there were, therefore, health and safety concerns and significant transmission risks associated with the travel of students to universities across the UK. We considered it more prudent to invest in high quality online delivery of teaching, to prevent these risks and minimise the disruption of learning [JG/21 - INQ000649308]. In November 2020, we issued another joint statement with the NUS, calling on universities to move online where

possible, highlighting the risks to the health and safety of students, staff and local communities [JG/32 - INQ000649319].

27. The government refused to change their position at the time. Nevertheless, as the R-rate rose rapidly, some employers and regions took the decision to move to online learning anyway. Then, in December 2020, the government told universities to move online from 3 December to allow students to be tested and leave university for the Christmas holidays. The UCU welcomed this as a step forward, albeit we highlighted the need for a joined-up approach and an effective test, trace and isolate programme that linked university and public testing systems [**JG/37** - INQ000649326]. For colleges, the government waited until the day before the Christmas break to announce that there would be a delayed return in January for schools and colleges, and a Covid testing programme, the timing of which created more chaos for staff and students [JG/22 - INQ000649309].

28. The UCU welcomed the government's belated decision in January 2021 to keep the majority of learning at colleges and universities online until mid-February, although we again emphasised the need for consistent, effective and advanced planning rather than last-minute chaos [JG/24 - INQ000649311]. Nevertheless, in February 2021, the Prime Minister indicated that there would be a wider reopening of college and university campuses from 8 March 2021, which we highlighted as irresponsible and risking undoing the country's hard work to get Covid-19 rates down [**JG/38** INQ000649327]. Then, in April 2021, it was announced that remaining HE students would be able to return to in-person teaching from 17 May 2021. Our view was that this made little sense for students and staff as most lessons would have already finished, and that it would be better to wait until the following term for a wider reopening as more people would have been vaccinated. We described the decision as "*a stupid end to a stupid year beset by government mismanagement*" [JG/26 - INQ000649313].

(E) Keeping educational settings safe – non-pharmaceutical interventions ("NPIs") and infection prevention and control

29. The UCU called for consistency in the application of NPIs and for minimal or reduced numbers on site. We also advocated for high quality face masks, improvements to ventilation, social distancing, cleaning and hygiene measures and many other NPIs which employers could take. It is important to note here that the Westminster government did not have a forum for the UCU to feed into the guidance on NPIs to the sectors. This was

in stark contrast to the experience of the UCU in Wales and Scotland, where we had the opportunity to comment on draft guidance on face coverings, social distancing and ventilation [**JG/39** - INQ000649328] [**JG/40**- INQ000649329] and share concerns regarding safety and infection prevention and control in education settings [**JG/41**- INQ000649330].

30. Tertiary education staff continued working on-site to support key worker families, often without adequate safety measures. This exposed them to significant risks, while limited access to digital resources exacerbated educational inequalities.

31. In prison education, there was dialogue with prison education providers and HM Prison and Probation Service.

(F) Learning during the pandemic

Exams and assessments

32. The UCU welcomed the announcement in August 2020 that centre-assessed grades ("**CAGs**") would stand for both A-level and GCSE awards, however the delay in making this decision did lead to some issues. As we set out in a letter to Gavin Williamson on 18 August 2020 [**JG/42** INQ000649331], many students found themselves in a position where their first-choice university was already full and they were unable to take up the offer they would have had if their CAG had been in place from the start. The worst affected were high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds. For those students who were downgraded through the moderation system and missed out on their first-choice university place, we called on the government to fund additional places to take the pressure off universities and staff and to ensure that no student, who now met their original conditional offer, was denied the opportunity to study at their first choice university due to an unfair, unlawful and discriminatory grade assessment system. We also urged the government to provide additional financial support for students who would otherwise have to defer places due to the grading system that was used.

Remote learning

33. We set out above in further detail our approach to remote learning, something that we advocated for throughout the pandemic. It is worth adding here that, in Scotland, in

October 2020, we provided the Scottish Government with our views on and members' experiences of the challenges of remote learning and suggested steps to be taken [**JG/43** - INQ000649332]. These challenges included issues around resources and infrastructure, for both students and staff, and additional workload pressures.

34. Furthermore, in January 2021, we called for government to increase its support for students in post-16 education so that everyone was able to learn remotely [**JG/44** INQ000649333]. We pointed to the experience of the previous lockdown where the 'digital divide' resulted in too many students being unable to learn remotely.

(G) Impact on students and staff

35. Surveys undertaken by UCU during this period indicate an increase in student support required for their mental health and emotional wellbeing [JG/01 - INQ000649288] [JG/02 - INQ000649289].

36. All of the above also served to compound the mental health and wellbeing of post-16 education staff, which was on the increase even before the pandemic began. A major impact on HE and FE staff was the acute increase to an already unacceptable workload caused by the requirement to adapt to new ways of working, with little or no coordinated support [**JG/45** INQ000649334]. Meanwhile educators working in prisons reported some prison governors as part of contingency planning suggesting that our members be asked to undertake other duties such as delivering medication or meals. A UCU survey in 2021 found that more than half (57.5%) of the staff surveyed said their workload had increased a lot. Black, Asian and minority ethnic women, LGBT+ and disabled staff were all more likely to report higher workloads and resulting stress [**JG/46** - INQ000649335].

37. Universities needed financial support to prevent job losses and economic instability. However, a lack of coordinated strategy meant they were forced to compete for student numbers rather than prioritise safety. While some universities provided assurances to casualised staff, others made redundancies, particularly affecting those on fixed-term and insecure contracts. A fairer system must be implemented to protect these workers in future crises.

38. For migrant students and staff, particular pressures arose. We wrote to the then Home Secretary, Priti Patel, on 8 April 2020, highlighting the logistical and financial concerns for

migrant students and staff as a result of the pandemic [**JG/47** - INQ000649336]. We asked that the automatic one-year extension of visas, being applied to NHS workers at the time, be applied to all visa-holders; that all institutions sponsoring Tier 2, Tier 4 and Tier 5 visa-holders cease their normal visa monitoring activity; and that the 180-days rule of absence for international staff and students who had left the country be suspended.

(H) Education recovery

39. In July 2020, we published '*Reconstructing Further and Adult Education in a Post Coronavirus World*' [**JG/48** - INQ000649337]. This report set out the kind of changes needed within further and adult education to educate and reskill our communities in a post-coronavirus world. This included increased funding, a more diverse curriculum, a new approach to exams and increased access to online learning. It is worth noting that, according to UCU surveys, in HE around 50% of the sector were likely to move temporarily to 'blended learning' models, with around a quarter moving to blended learning more long-term [**JG/49** - INQ000649338]. Teaching is now mostly delivered in person, though many elements of work that can be undertaken from home continue to be undertaken from home. Whilst in FE, 35% of the sector were likely to take a temporary approach to blended learning with around 15% considering this more long-term [**JG/50** - INQ000649339]. However, the majority of FE is delivering teaching and other duties in-person/on site.

40. Similarly, in our response to the Prisons Strategy White Paper, in February 2022 [**JG/51** - INQ000649340], we set out how increased funding was required to improve infrastructure in the prison education sector, alongside digital innovation and changes to the curriculum.

41. In June 2022, we published what we considered the five core principles for education recovery [**JG/52** INQ000649341]:

    41.1. there should be a clear focus on consistent high-quality education provision for all in post-16 education, avoiding the disruption experienced the previous year;

    41.2. there should be a clear focus on ensuring the health and safety of all staff in the post-16 sector;

    41.3. the physical and mental health of all students in post-16 education is of vital importance;

    41.4. education settings should not become centres of community Covid transmission; and

41.5. adequate funding must be made available.

(I) Reflections and recommendations

42. Based on our members' experiences, we recommend the following:

42.1. **Make unions integral to preparedness planning**. This can be ensured by strengthening requirements on employers to consult with unions, developing positive industrial relationships which can drive improvements and ultimately save lives.

42.2. **Address the vulnerability of the FE and HE sectors to exogenous shocks,** extant due to years of underfunding and endemic casualised employment practices. Job insecurity, lack of access to paid sick leave and other related issues magnify health and safety risks in general, and especially in times of crisis.

42.3. **Improve workplace regulation and re-invest in the HSE**, following decades of cuts, including strengthening HSE enforcement in order to protect key workers in any future public health crises.

42.4. **Invest in the built environment across post-16 education** to ensure clean indoor air, effective ventilation and improved health outcomes for all. Better ventilation and air filtration systems would have inhibited spread of pathogens and protected key workers. There should also be wider availability of proper protective respiratory equipment (such as FFP3 masks).

42.5. **Emergency funding mechanisms should also be devised**; the government must allocate sufficient funds to implement safety measures in times of crisis.

42.6. **The education sector must be better prepared** to transition to online learning effectively.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Jo Grady

Dated: 11 August 2025