



***Our newsletter is free to all members.***

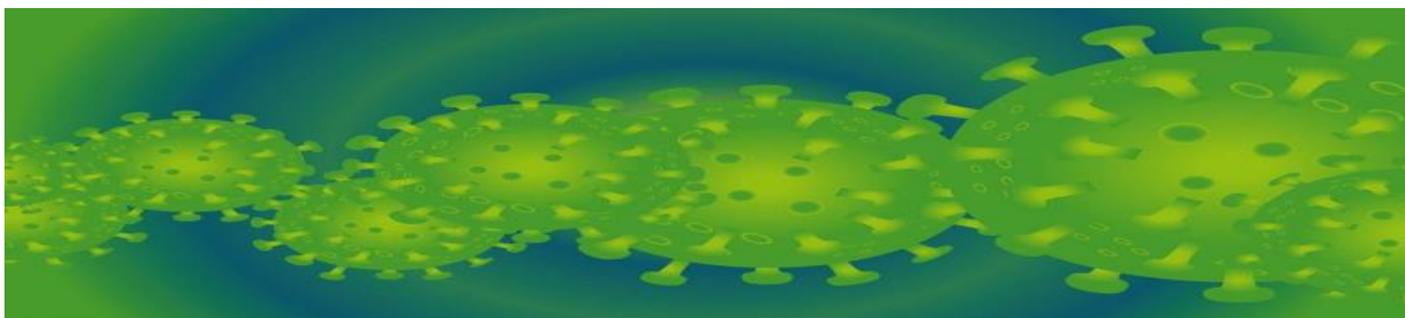
*If you're not a member, we want you to join us.*

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## **University of Brighton Branch Newsletter**

# **April 2020**



**There's one subject that's going to dominate this month's newsletter, as it has done our lives over the last few weeks.**

We're living through extraordinary times and experiencing how a university tries to manage during a whole load of very significant practical problems.

The pace of change has been so fast that some things happening today would have been unthinkable a few days ago. Many of us are getting used to, but still finding difficult, the concept of not actually going in to work every day, but sitting at home trying to keep working with all the obvious distractions.

Many are also contending with childcare, irritable and noisy flatmates and neighbours, and coping on a day to day basis rather than thinking what happens if this goes on for months, as it may do.

We would say this, but there's never been a better time to be a member of a trade union. Working people still need to stick up for our rights and this crisis should not be used as a reason for ignoring the safety and welfare of us all.

**Please stay safe and look after yourselves.**

*Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary*

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# Coronavirus: Practical Guidance

At times such as these, it's crucial that we're all aware of what we need to do to keep us all as safe as possible. If you have any concerns, about your own safety or that of others than please make sure you're carrying out your responsibilities and raising them.

## *Still working on site?*

There are still a few hundred students living in halls and the University has a duty of care and a contractual obligation to make sure these students are looked after, fed and kept as comfortable as possible within the obvious constraints of social distancing.

For workers still on site, security teams, hospitality and caretaking teams and those carrying out essential maintenance and work which cannot be done remotely i.e. Payroll, it's important that all health and safety practices are followed. Even though it's difficult, people should try to remain physically apart and contact with students should be maintained, but at a distance.

Even during the Christmas and New Year "closure period", the University is never really closed. While most of us are having a break, there's a small army of people working on a voluntary basis to maintain the buildings and keep them safe and secure. These people are often overlooked, especially those working while most of us are asleep, often dealing with the most challenging of student problems and anti-social behaviour from outside the University.

The changed circumstances don't mean that normal safety procedures should be ignored. Fatigue and stress are still important factors to consider and no member of staff should be put in a situation which they don't feel comfortable about.

If you are still on site, please be careful, don't take risks and if you have any safety concerns then please make sure you raise them with UNISON and/or the University.

## *Working from home?*

The majority of University employees are now working at home and we've written elsewhere about the implications of this. As many of us have rapidly discovered, there are always things we didn't fully consider until we started trying to do this. The average workplace office can have distractions - noisy workmates or building work, but often this is nothing compared to the difficulties of trying to carry on as normal with unsuitable work spaces and very significant practical obstacles.

What we've said, and what's important to remember is that no reasonable manager is going to expect you to carry on as normal and be as productive as you were. The day to day functioning of the University, as with most aspects of public services and education provision is going to take a massive reduction in productivity.

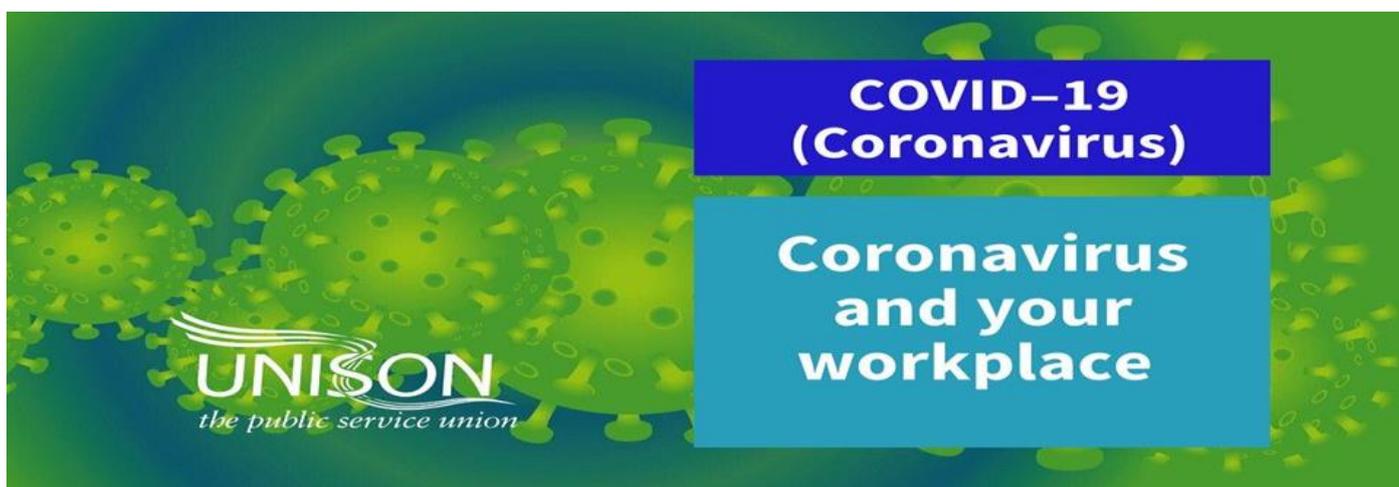
It's crucial at this time for us all to recognise that you can only do what you can reasonably do. This is the case anyway, but the changes that have been imposed on us mean that most of us will only be able to do some of what we were doing a few weeks ago.

It's important that you don't feel guilty about this or allow yourself to suffer stress as a result of the feeling that you should be doing more. We are all aware of our personal limitations and if you have other things to worry about (childcare or other caring responsibilities etc.) or are just constrained by the physical and practical limitations then just try to do whatever you can. Your manager should appreciate that, but please let us know if they don't.

There are a load of practical things to consider when working at home and a DSE assessment should be done. You can now do these yourself and there's training available, which the University is currently promoting.

Your home working environment should be close to what you have at work and any difference could be a problem. You need to check your posture and take regular breaks with fresh air if that's possible.

If there's any aspect of home-working which you are not comfortable with, please make sure you raise it with your line manager as soon as possible. Managers have a habit of assuming everything is ok unless told otherwise.



Your manager also has a responsibility to make sure you have appropriate equipment (chair, desk, pc/laptop, screen, phone etc.). If you're missing anything that's required for you to do your job properly or safely, then it should be provided. In the chaos of the last "normal" week at the University, many of us did not have the foresight or opportunity to ransack our offices. (Mithras House on the afternoon of Friday 20th March looked like it was being looted by its own workforce.)

The University are currently trying to supply necessary equipment to people who need it. Please make sure you have indicated your needs as soon as you can.

Some people have taken the initiative and bought equipment themselves. You should be able, within reason, to claim this back from the University if you can convince your line manager and/or Head of School/Department that this makes sense. If you can't we'll be taking up these cases where we think there's been an injustice. The cost of this crisis to the University is going to be much more than the price of a dozen laptops and we think the normal rules need to be amended.

It's also worth remembering that it's entirely possible to take paid special leave of up to 12 weeks if you need to. You need to discuss this with your manager, but again, they should be sensible about what your limitations are. Please let us know if you're having problems.

## ***Not Working?***

There are some people who are currently not required to work since the jobs they do are just not happening as a result of the situation. As I write, details are still unclear, but we expect the University to make sure all members of staff are paid in full. It is possible that some people will be furloughed, that is, formally given notice that they will not be required for a specific period, which would allow the University to recover 80% of its costs of paying people to be at home under the government's job retention scheme. If and when that happens, we will be fully involved in discussions with the University as to the details of how this process works.

# ***COVID-19 and the Future of Higher Education***

As we all get used to this “new normal”, social commentators are starting to think about the future and what it’s going to look like. As I write, events planned for June (e.g. Glastonbury and UNISON’s national conference) are already being cancelled or postponed, and this could extend further into the Autumn, hitting the next student intake. It’s probable that if normal face-to-face teaching is not likely to be restored by October, then a whole load of 2020-21 students will defer their place for a year. Also, the international market for higher education is going to take a massive drop in numbers, putting some universities in severe crisis.

The University of Brighton is perhaps better placed than most to weather this, given the vocational courses we deliver and the fact that international students make up a smaller proportion of the overall student population than elsewhere, but in a generalised fight for students, our league table place and disappointing NSS scores are a major problem if student numbers plummet, as most expect they will.

The reaction to the crisis, to re-introduce some control on student numbers is welcome, but it all depends on how that’s done and no number controls will be able to introduce more potential students into the system if they just don’t want to start university with no guarantee of a decent experience. Talk of a January academic year is becoming louder and there are many scenarios possible, but nobody has an easy solution to all this.

The crisis is going to be significant and happen soon and unless there’s a rapid change in the global struggle against coronavirus, many universities will require some very large cash bailouts from the government to remain going concerns. This crisis will affect all aspect of society, but the uniquely different features of higher education, with it’s ideologically driven funding system, will be following some of the retail sector into an existential crisis.

Of course all this would arguably have happened anyway at some institutions as Russell Group institutions like Bristol take the opportunity to expand, hoovering up the most able students and taking advantage of the higher education market, introduced and encouraged by successive governments.

What’s necessary, apart from government intervention to secure university jobs and the future of the sector, is to carry out a full nationalisation of higher education, recognising it as an integral part of the education service. Some of this was hinted at by the manifesto of Corbyn, with the proposed abolition of fees, but we’d like to have seen higher education democratised, with genuine decision-making and involvement of students, staff and the wider community.

All governing bodies should be fully elected and accountable and universities should work together to deliver a fully integrated service, free to all who would benefit from it. The current need to fight to the death for students has created a colossal overhead of wasted talent, when all this could be focussed on cooperation between institutions for research and best teaching practice. Competition between public institutions only makes sense to those who see an opportunity of making money by running services on the cheap, as we’ve seen starkly with the semi-privatised NHS, struggling to cope after years of cuts and privatisation.

As we come out of this crisis, many will recognise the value of all public services and how they enrich society without the need for anybody to make a fast buck. Those whose primary motive is to make a profit have been shown up for the dead weight they are on society. We can easily manage without them, but the trade unions will need to fight to save the sector from a partial collapse sooner rather than later, probably before all this is over.