



Student and Staff Solidarity Statement

The University of Manchester has a long-standing history of student and staff solidarity, and the Coronavirus crisis has further strengthened this commitment to work meaningfully together. It is clear from recent events that as a collective we can no longer stand by and watch the damaging impact which the actions of senior management are having on the health, well-being and safety of students and staff members. As UMUCU has stated elsewhere, *“the responsibility of this situation lies with the university's senior leadership. Our current situation was predictable and avoidable”*. However, it is clear that the university leadership's approach has been to absolve itself of any sort of blame while pointing the finger at other groups. Little to no apology has been provided for the suffering, stress, and uncertainty for which they have been directly responsible over the past seven months. It is for this reason that we feel the need to speak up against the university's approach in handling this crisis.

While the investigation is ongoing, the incident in Fallowfield last weekend is reflective of a wider systemic issue. Racism, inequality and discrimination persist at all levels in Russell Group universities and the University of Manchester. Students and staff from BAME backgrounds remain underrepresented and are more likely to be victims of hate crime. BAME staff are on average paid 9% less than their white colleagues and are vastly underrepresented in senior roles. As an institution, the University of Manchester has become unable to respond to these incidents in a compassionate manner and accept where they have failed both their staff and students. The Vice Chancellor and Head of the Russell Group even failed to keep track of their *own* apology to the student in question. For *any* institution -- this is unacceptable. For an institution which deems itself to be actively anti-racist -- this is unforgivable.

Student Support

Because of this, and other events, student activist groups have formed out of a desperate and imminent need to protect the safety of their peers, wading in where university management and governance have failed. University leadership owe it to these groups to meet and engage in transparent, meaningful discussions -- both to correct the current chaos and to ensure the same mistakes do not happen again at Christmas, the next academic semester, and in the years which follow. As an immediate resolution, we demand the university offers a rent reduction of at least 40% for the remainder of the academic year (not the ~5% proposed last week, which simply covers the two-week window in December during which students will be expected to return home). This needs to be appended by a commitment to a no-penalty early release clause from university-managed tenancy contracts, for both this and the next academic year. In addition, the university must engage with local groups, including local councillors and MPs, to revise and communicate their plans for a safe return home for students at Christmas, as well as similar arrangements for January if needed. Their current strategy, which communicates decisions at the last minute with no meaningful consultation, is disastrous and has led to many of the issues we are seeing unfolding at present. It further illustrates flaws in a governance model which fails to suitably include a broad spread of opinion from within the University when seeking to develop strategies.

Further to this, we are keen to highlight the demands of 9k4What, asking for financial support packages for students, to mitigate against the additional costs incurred by students sold false promises by the university senior leadership, as well as a reduction in tuition fees as a step towards combating the marketisation of higher education more broadly. We also feel that the low income (Manchester Bursary) should be increased for this year, and next, by 50% for low income students whose families are affected the most by the COVID-19 pandemic. These demands are necessary to provide some remedy to what a challenging year for many students, staff and people has been living in the local community, all at the hands of the university's senior leadership.

Staff Support

Students and staff stand united in the fight for better working conditions for University of Manchester staff and demand greater protections for those working on and off-campus. For those continuing to work on campus, we demand a full risk assessment of the areas in which cleaning, catering, maintenance and security staff are asked to work is carried out prior to them being assigned jobs in these areas. We also demand that cleaning staff are notified of which flats/rooms are isolating in university accommodation. By not informing these staff of these circumstances, the university has put them and their families at significant risk. For academic staff, the necessary move to online teaching was welcomed, yet the anxiety-provoking communications surrounding semester 2 have made it clear that the university remains in blind pursuit of this 'Groundhog Day' strategy. We demand there is no forced return to face-to-face teaching in semester 2 to alleviate the pressure for academic staff, and on those working on campus. We recognise the provision of teaching online has intensified already crippling workload demands and call on the university to mitigate these pressures. It is clear that an employment model which heavily relies on a pool of highly casualised workers is buckling under these pressures after successive rounds of redundancies, cuts to GTA budgets and to fixed-term contract staff.

We are now in the midst of a mental and physical health crisis which could have been largely avoided, had the university's policies been a true reflection of an institution with '*social responsibility at its core*'. Instead, current norms and structures of governance remove key responsibilities for leadership and neglect to offer the wide consensus-building that good leadership demands. And while the actions of the senior leadership at the University of Manchester have been largely responsible for this, we recognise it is reflective of a national higher education system which has been crippled by the effects of marketisation over recent years. The system is not working, and we hope this statement, along with others of a similar type, inspire some meaningful change.

Signed by,

UCU, University of Manchester
Fallowfield Labour Councillors
UoM Rent Strike
S.A.F.E.R

Manchester Labour Students
9k4What
Students Before Profit