



The three campus trade unions are deeply concerned by a crisis in leadership shaping the working, learning, and living conditions at the University of Manchester. This crisis follows from a number of misguided, miscommunicated, and mismanaged policies, related particularly to conditions in residential halls during the pandemic. Staff and students are struggling to carry on their jobs and studies and achieve something like normal life in circumstances that make both impossible. Students have found it necessary to form a number of activist groups and take the extreme step of a building occupation in an effort to communicate the difficulties of their living and learning situations to university management. Staff such as cleaners and security are shut out of policy decisions concerning their work, yet daily bear the burden and brunt of dissatisfaction with centralized, reactive management directives. Staff, students and community members have all raised serious concerns about deteriorating physical safety.

Something has gone badly wrong in Fallowfield. The responsibility for this situation lies with the university's senior leadership. Our current situation was predictable and avoidable. Yet the leadership issued an unremitting series of decisions – from promising the full campus experience before the start of the academic year to re-opening accommodation without sufficient measures to prevent a spike in Covid-19 infections; to substituting student support in the event of local and national lockdowns with chain-link fences; to reckoning too slowly and insubstantially with the demands of students now in occupation; to proposing cuts to terms and conditions and job losses when the demands facing staff are higher than ever – that has turned the University of Manchester into an international pariah. The resulting reputational damage – to both our own university and the higher-education sector more widely - is tangible and ongoing. While this public focus is shining a much-needed light on the shortcomings of university leadership decisions, it is also aggravating the impact of poor management on the physical wellbeing and mental health of the university's students and workers.

The University Leadership must develop an approach to managing pandemic operations that shows a capacity to acknowledge mistakes, learn from past errors, and adopt new approaches – including closer consultation with on-the-ground staff. A frank and sincere reckoning with the limitations, logistical impracticalities, and dangers of policies thus far is necessary. The university trade unions are eager to work meaningfully and collaboratively with management in this task.