

UK universities suspend face-to-face teaching Schools ordered to stay open despite government advice to curb social contact

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Most universities across the UK suspended face-to-face teaching on Tuesday, as schools were ordered to stay open despite the government stepping up advice to curb social contact to try to slow the coronavirus outbreak.

After nearly a week of universities scaling back teaching hours, the vast majority have notified students that they will have to move to online learning in the next few days.

Institutions took the decision in the absence of clear government guidance, after prime minister Boris Johnson called on all members of the public to limit interactions with others to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Universities UK said its members were “working hard” to implement social distancing strategies while continuing to teach. It insisted that the majority of universities remained open, and that students would be able to keep living in their halls of residence. Many students are opting to go home.

“Most universities cannot fully close as they have commitments to students who live on campus, to certain research that must run around the clock and to maintaining infrastructure and other systems that cannot simply be switched off or left unattended,” it added.

The closures come as widespread confusion continued in primary and secondary schools when Mr Johnson confirmed that schools would stay open despite ramping up social distancing measures.

Some schools were either forced to close on Tuesday or made a unilateral decision to fully or partially shut because of lack of staff as teachers and assistants observed the government’s self-isolation requirements.

Lucy Elphinstone, the headteacher of the private Francis Holland School in London, wrote to parents to announce that the school would close “until it was deemed safe to reopen”, and warned that it could remain closed for “many weeks”.

She attacked the government’s decision to keep schools open as “confusing” and she said she was “not prepared to endanger” the lives of “teachers and vulnerable members of our families”.

Cardinal Newman School in Brighton and King’s School in Hove were among the state schools to partially close because of staff shortages, with year eight and nine pupils asked to participate in online lessons at home.

Teddington School, in Richmond, London, was closed to all year groups except years 11 and 13 in order to prioritise pupil’s exams. Headteacher Kathy Pacey wrote in a statement that she had “reluctantly reached the conclusion that, as a result of widespread staff illness and self-isolation” she could “no longer safely keep the school open to all students”.

Education unions have warned the government that staff absence and self-isolation would force many schools to close regardless of government guidance and called for plans to deal with exam disruption, and the impact of school closures on safeguarding for vulnerable children and those on free school meals.

The National Education Union, one of the UK’s biggest teachers unions, wrote to the government calling for limited closure of schools to avoid teachers, pupils and family members from being put at heightened risk to coronavirus.

In a video posted to Twitter on Tuesday, education secretary Gavin Williamson defended the government policy to keep schools open.

“The chief medical officer has said the impact of closing schools on children’s education would be substantial, but the benefit to public health would not be,” he said.

Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, said on Tuesday that it was suspending inspections. “It’s clearly the right thing to do when teachers and social workers are under pressure as a result of the coronavirus outbreak,” said Amanda Spielman, head of the watchdog.