

# Students urge Government not to blame young people for 'living their lives'

*By Camilla Turner, Education Editor 21 September 2020 • 7:00pm*

Students have urged the Government not to blame young people for “living their lives”, in a letter to the Health Secretary.

It is unfair to suggest that the national rise in coronavirus is down to young people acting recklessly, leaders of 30 student unions have told Matt Hancock.

“The blame has been placed on young people for the national rise in Covid-19 cases,” they said, adding that this must be “redacted”. The group of student union presidents pointed out that young people were told to get involved with the “Eat Out to Help Out” scheme to help revive the economy.

“You must realise that young people are more likely to be living in houses of multiple occupancy, to be working in the service jobs required to keep [the hospitality] industries open, and to use public transport due to the prohibitive costs of running a car,” the letter said.

“You cannot blame young people for living the lives you, Minister, have instructed them to lead.”

Student union leaders accused ministers of treating universities as an “afterthought” in planning and said the official guidance on how to operate in a Covid-secure way was disappointing.

They said that student unions and universities will now “bear the responsibility” for campus outbreaks which is “unacceptable” as guidance should have been “faster and clearer”.

It comes as vice-Chancellors plea with students to act responsibly following multiple freshers’ week parties at universities across the country which have, in some places, already led to outbreaks.

Four students at St Andrews University have contracted coronavirus after a freshers' week party in a hall of residence.

More than 40 people are now self-isolating following the party, which broke national coronavirus restrictions limiting gatherings to no more than six people from two households.

On Friday, St Andrews asked its students to enter a voluntary weekend lockdown by staying in their rooms and not partying or going to bars.

Prof Sally Mapstone, the university’s principal, told students that the new cases are “all linked to one party in a hall of residence in freshers' week”.

She said: "Quite apart from the fact that the party broke the law, and our own very clear guidelines on socialising and safe behaviour, the ripples from this single incident have consequences for all of us."

Meanwhile, Manchester University has said it is "actively considering" introducing a curfew at halls of residence after police were called in to shut down large gatherings.

The university told students that "despite repeated reminders and warnings" students continued to flout social distancing guidelines over the weekend.

A university spokesperson said that if students do not comply with the rules "they will face disciplinary action...which could lead to expulsion".

The Government's scientific advisors have previously warned that major coronavirus outbreaks at universities are "highly likely" particularly at parties and in halls of residence.

There is a "critical risk" that students will fuel a national surge of Covid-19 cases when they return home at the end of term, according to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage).

They said that students play just as strong a role in transmission as other adults do – but evidence suggests that they are more likely to be asymptomatic.

This means that they pose a heightened threat to transmission levels because "outbreaks are likely to be harder to detect among student populations", Sage said.

Earlier this month, Mr Hancock said the UK could see a second spike in coronavirus cases if young people don't follow social distancing rules, after figures showed that cases are rising sharply among those aged between 20 and 29.

Pointing to France and Spain, he said "where that second wave started largely amongst younger people, it then spreads".