

COVID-19: Mass Testing at UK Universities Is Haphazard and Unscientific: British Medical Journal (BMJ) Investigation

The rollout of lateral flow tests across campuses has slipped off the radar. How is it working, and what lessons can be learnt, asks Gareth Iacobucci

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The costly rollout of screening for covid-19 among asymptomatic students at UK universities has found very few positive cases since its launch in December, an investigation by The BMJ has found.

Its research shows a mass testing system across UK campuses that is inconsistent and shrouded in secrecy. Almost two thirds of higher education institutions are not collecting data on numbers of students being tested, and a third are not logging how many test positive.

Experts have described campus testing as haphazard and messy, with an “outrageous” price tag. One said that the scheme was putting political ambitions above the goals of science or health.

Among 69 institutions that disclosed three months’ worth of data to *The BMJ* under the Freedom of Information Act, 1649 positive results were reported from 335 383 tests carried out, a rate of 0.5%.

The BMJ’s research found widespread reluctance among universities and colleges to share information about the costs of testing and its effect on containing the virus. More than three quarters of institutions refused to disclose how much money they had received from the government to set up mass testing. Some cited confidentiality agreements with the Department of Health and Social Care for England as the reason for the non-disclosure.

Experts said the findings—revealed as many universities are poised to welcome students back to campuses after the Easter holidays—cast major doubts on the cost effectiveness, the ethics, and the scientific rigour behind mass screening and called for the programme to be halted.

Covid-19: Mass testing at UK universities is haphazard and unscientific, finds *BMJ* investigation

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Allyson Pollock, professor of public health at Newcastle University, and a vocal critic of the testing programme, said, “The clear message from the data is that the mass testing is haphazard, fragmented, disjointed, and absolutely the antithesis of public health. What we have got is a very fine illustration of why we need this programme to go to the [national] screening committee and to be properly evaluated before any more rollouts of tests happen.”

Box 1

How does mass testing of students work?

After numerous outbreaks of covid-19 on UK university campuses last autumn, the government invited universities to test asymptomatic students from December 2020, with the aim of containing the virus before students returned home for Christmas. Most universities taught online only in January and February but continued to offer asymptomatic testing to students who were on campus.

Students are tested under supervised conditions with rapid lateral flow devices, which do not require laboratory processing, such as the Innova tests, which the UK government has spent over £1.3bn on purchasing.¹

Two tests a week are recommended, followed by a PCR confirmatory test after a positive result. Government guidance says that twice weekly testing should continue indefinitely, although where this was not possible testing once a week “may be appropriate where students only visit campus once a week.”²

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