

Over 600 students at Australian National University test COVID-positive one week after return to campus

Eric Ludlow
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An outbreak at Australian National University (ANU) last month saw 12 percent—around 660—of the 5,500 students residing on campus contract COVID-19. The outbreak spiralled out of control after opening-week orientation events with students returning to campus from summer break.

Situated in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), which hosts the nation's capital Canberra, ANU is one of Australia's largest universities. Many of its over 21,000 enrolled students travel from around the country and internationally to study at the institution, living in cramped student accommodation.

Over 200 cases had been recorded across 12 ANU residence halls over the weekend of February 19–20. By February 25, the number of positive cases had surged past 600. Throughout the outbreak, ANU management refused to give an accurate figure for the number of positive cases.

ANU Chief Operating Officer Paul Duldig said face-to-face classes would continue despite the outbreak. “We don't see any reason why case numbers in the halls will impact on us being able to teach on campus. It would really be a much broader community concern to make us reconsider that,” he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

After initially being moved to a dedicated quarantining facility on campus, COVID-positive students were required to self-isolate in their rooms. The university indicated that students in self-isolation would be provided with meals, medical and wellbeing support, and would attend classes online.

However, reports soon emerged that isolating students were struggling to get meals delivered and have their rubbish disposed of.

Third-year student Lily Hassett told the ABC during the outbreak that she was still at the residence hall and had to ask friends to bring her food. “I don't know where I'm supposed to be or what I'm supposed to be doing,” she said, adding, “Ever since I've tested positive I've tried calling the office, I've emailed them and got no response.”

Charlotte Carnes, a senior resident at ANU's Wamburyn Hall, told the *Canberra Times* there was confusion over the meal deliveries process at her self-catered hall. After being told

isolating students had received dinner at the same time as lunch, Carnes received calls and texts from residents at dinner time asking when meals would be delivered.

The ANU Students Association reported that quarantining students struggled to find spaces in online classes and recording equipment in some classrooms was inadequate for studying remotely.

Students, academics and other members of the community have come out on social media to express their anger at the outbreak at ANU.

Twitter user @telesoritas tweeted that classes were continuing “Because we have to learn to ‘live’ with covid; which means spreading illness and death.”

On February 21, Professor Meghan Miller, ANU Research School of Earth Sciences, tweeted: “Day 1 of our academic year and less than a week since new incoming students arrived on campus: Over 200 COVID cases linked to outbreak in ANU residential halls. So many things I could say...”

Dr. Katie Freund, an education researcher at ANU, wrote on Twitter: “Is the ‘vibrant on campus experience’ worth the health of the #ourANU community? It's only Day 2 of semester! We are not meeting our duty of care for students.”

Echoing these sentiments, @gary_williams tweeted “Look folks—sure 200+ students at ANU have COVID following orientation week, and are now isolating in one of the colleges (reported in The Australian). However, what's important is the campus is/was VIBRANT! That is what is essential—vibrancy and profit, before health.”

Another Twitter user, @JonesHowdareyou, said that her “Granddaughter is at ANU, triple vaxed and now has Covid for the 2nd time in 6 weeks.”

Scientist and former teacher Dr. Henry Madison tweeted: “On top of the total radio silence on actual details of Covid in schools, is the vacuum of reporting on what's happening on university campuses right now, with infection. Particularly residential colleges.” In response, Twitter user @JaniceB72627796 wrote: “Other unis management are ruthlessly directing older academics back to the campus with threats of breach of contract if they don't return. Even those

with health issues. Shocking. NTEU [National Tertiary Education Union] is in on it too. Set it up so any opposition is shut down. Many academics frightened of covid.”

Despite ANU case numbers reportedly dropping to single figures by the beginning of March, the outbreak is an indictment of the pro-business reopening of universities around the country to in-person teaching. As hundreds of thousands of students nationwide are forced back into lecture theatres, classrooms, and overcrowded accommodation, the surge of COVID-19 which has already seen mass infection and death in Australia since the beginning of 2022 will only worsen.

The majority of universities around the country have remained tight-lipped about infections resulting from the return to campus. But, on February 22, the University of Canberra reported six active cases among the 1,560 students living on-campus. As of February 21, there were a total of 939 positive cases reported at Western Sydney University. Of those, 549 were students, 340 staff and 50 unspecified. The University of Sydney, while not reporting case numbers, published 170 confirmed COVID case locations on campus between 22 February and 1 March. Across the Tasman Sea, New Zealand’s Victoria University Wellington has seen 850 students in its halls of residence—about 30 percent—test positive for COVID.

Completely behind the murderous drive to reopen universities for in-person teaching has been the NTEU. The pro-business union has made the issue of mass infection on university campuses one of individual choice.

NTEU ACT division secretary, Dr Lachlan Clohesy, and ANU Branch president, Millan Pintos-Lopez, penned a statement on February 25 in which they wrote that the NTEU has placed “pressure on management to facilitate working from home for those who wish to,” and that requests by staff to work from home “will be assessed on a case by case basis, looking at factors including the requirements of the work.”

The return to campus is bound up with the broader profit-driven junking of all public health and safety measures by governments across Australia and internationally. And the disastrous outcome was entirely predictable and preventable.

An ACT Health spokesperson said, “It is not unexpected that there has been an increase in COVID-19 cases with the return to university after the summer break.” In a statement to ANU campus newspaper *Woroni*, a university spokesperson said COVID outbreaks are “now part of life for a campus the size of a small town in the midst of a pandemic—particularly as our young population returns and wider restrictions begin to lift.”

In comments to the *CanberraTimes*, University of South Australia professor of biostatistics Adrian Esterman warned of the consequences of reopening universities. “There’ll be a certain percentage, and it will be somewhere between 10 and 30 percent, who end up with long term health problems,” Esterman said. “You don’t really want that.”

The ACT has suffered over 400 new COVID-19 infections every day for the last two weeks. For the first time in six weeks,

the ACT recorded over 1,000 new cases last Tuesday. The territory’s Labor Party Chief Minister Andrew Barr said the spike in cases was “very strongly driven” by the outbreak at ANU.

However, Barr, in line with other Liberal-National Coalition and Labor state and federal governments, has continued with the territory’s removal of any safety restrictions to stem the virus’s spread and sought to blame outbreaks on young people.

Barr also echoed the unscientific use of the term “endemic” by politicians and the media around the world to justify the homicidal “live with the virus” program of the ruling elite. “We’re in the phase of the pandemic,” he said, “where there is clearly a transition to COVID becoming an endemic disease.”

Even as the outbreak at ANU was spiralling out of control, the territory’s Labor government moved to end indoor mask mandates at most venues.

The ANU outbreak also came amid a spike in COVID infections in schools, with 981 cases reported in 122 ACT public and private schools in the last week of February. There were 1001 cases of COVID-19 reported across 120 ACT primary and high schools for the week ending February 22.

The sudden rise in cases at ANU, at other universities, and in schools vindicates the International Youth and Students for Social Equality’s call for students and youth to oppose this homicidal drive. The push to reopen universities has nothing to do with the mental health or education of students. It has everything to do with the profit interests of the tiny, wealthy minority in society. The consequences of the drive will be further illness, misery and death. Students and young people must take up a fight for scientifically-determined public health measures to end COVID and save lives.



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