

Covid-19 Briefing 5 – HR and support for staff

Friday 5th June 2020

GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education. Our members include universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions from both the traditional and private sectors. Member institutions include some major providers in professional subject areas including art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture and food; education; law; business and finance; health and sports.

Overview

The purpose of this briefing is to bring together guidance, support and questions which institutions should be considering relating to HR and to support staff as we approach the next academic year. This briefing should be read in conjunction with others in the series, particularly Briefing Note 2 (teaching from September) and Briefing Note 3 (socially distanced campuses).

Institutions will also wish to embed the high level [UUK principles for emerging from lockdown](#).

Key resources to consider

DfE Announcement of [support for higher education](#) (4 May 2020)
DfE letter from Universities Minister Michelle Donelan to [providers](#) and to [students](#) (27 March 2020)

HMRC – Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (26 March 2020)
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

BUFDG – Explanation on the Job Retention Scheme (20 May 2020)
<https://www.bufdg.ac.uk/Resources/News/View?g=bbc15660-9a14-4789-9cf2-ba0ef07307e3&t=Updates%20to%20the%20BUFDG%20JRS%20document>

UCEA Coronavirus links to information and resources
<https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-links-to-information-and-resources/>

UCEA and HE Trade Unions principles for safe staff plans to return to campus (2 June 2020)
<https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/2june20/>

Society of Occupational Medicine [toolkit on returning to the work place](#)

QAA [Covid-19 Support and Guidance](#)
QAA [Preserving quality and standards through a time of rapid change](#) (2 June 2020)

QAA Scotland [Technology Enhanced Learning resources](#)

Advance HE Resources in relation to Covid-19
<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/resources-support-you-during-covid-19-pandemic>

Communication with staff

In the approach to the next academic year it is crucial to maintain open and regular communication with your staff body. Many staff will find themselves with a great deal of questions, and although you will not have answers/final decisions for all eventualities as yet, you should convey the latest plans and where staff can go for further information. Part of your communication with staff should be informed by discussions with on campus unions (where these are recognised).

Just as with students, institutions are trying to combine proactive (emails, FAQs, video messages etc.), reactive (responding to questions and representations) and personalised communication.

Principles for working safely on campus (UCEA and HE Trade Unions)

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) together with the HE trade unions (EIS, GMB, UCU, UNISON and Unite) have agreed a [joint statement of principles](#) (2 June 2020) for the safe return of staff to campus. The 6 areas which the principles cover are as follows:

- Use of government (and public health) guidance for safe workplaces
- Health and safety legislation
- Consultation with campus trade unions
- Risk assessments
- Communication
- Impact on staff

The **Department for Business Energy and Industrial strategy** (BEIS) have created [8 guides for employers and employees to support safe working during the pandemic](#). They have also created webinars on "[working safely during coronavirus](#)".

The detail of establishing a socially distanced campus are covered in Briefing Note 3.

Government guidance on support for staff

Holiday Entitlement and Pay during Covid-19

The government have produced guidance on how [holiday entitlement and pay operate during the coronavirus pandemic](#), and where it differs to entitlement in standard times.

Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme (launched on 26 May 2020)

GuildHE has a range of providers, and the [Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme](#) will apply to some members. The scheme will enable employers with fewer than 250 employees to claim coronavirus-related Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). Tax agents will also be able to make claims on behalf of employers.

You're eligible to use the scheme if:

- you are claiming for an employee who is eligible for sick pay due to coronavirus

- you had a PAYE payroll scheme in operation before 28 February 2020
- you had fewer than 250 employees across all PAYE schemes on 28 February 2020
- you are eligible to receive State Aid under the EU Commission Temporary Framework.

The repayment will cover up to two weeks of the applicable rate of SSP, and is payable if a current or former employee was unable to work on or after 13 March 2020 and entitled to SSP, because they either:

- have coronavirus
- are self-isolating and unable to work from home
- are shielding because they've been advised that they're at high risk of severe illness from coronavirus.

To prepare to make a claim, you should keep records of all the SSP payments you wish to claim for.

Voluntary Pay Cuts

The British University Finance Directors' Group (BUFDG) have provided some information for [staff who wish to take a voluntary pay cut](#), which incorporates HRMC guidance.

Protecting staff at higher risk

It is clear from government and public guidance, that staff at higher risk should be given greater protection until the pandemic is brought under control. For those at greatest risk they will need to continue to stay at home and this will mean remote home working only.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

Protecting people who are at higher risk

Objective: To protect clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals.

Clinically extremely vulnerable individuals have been strongly advised not to work outside the home.

Clinically vulnerable individuals, who are at higher risk of severe illness (for example, people with some pre existing conditions), have been asked to take extra care in observing social distancing and should be helped to work from home, either in their current role or in an alternative role.

If clinically vulnerable (but not extremely clinically vulnerable) individuals cannot work from home, they should be offered the option of the safest available on site roles, enabling them to stay 2m away from others. If they have to spend time within 2m of others, you should carefully assess whether this involves an acceptable level of risk. As for any workplace risk you must take into account specific duties to those with protected characteristics, including, for example, expectant mothers.

Supporting staff to deliver more online/blended provision

The move to increased online teaching has required a collective effort across institutions, and the additional work from staff to deliver this should be recognised. Lessons should be learnt about what went well and what can continue to be improved. Some common reflections include:

- strengthening the interface between IT/learning technology teams and staff (both academic and professional service staff)
- ensuring that central IT/learning technology teams have sufficient resources or are able to identify gaps
- networking staff to support/mentor (by department/across the institution) one another in the delivery of blended provision (e.g. virtual staff rooms, platforms to share good practice)
- seeking further support from Learning Management Systems and other online providers to support staff across the organisation
- ensuring that staff have access to the relevant equipment and internet to deliver remotely
- conducting an institution wide evaluation to ensure feedback is captured, lessons learned and improvements made

Retaining staff IP when delivering online

Given the speed and volume with which institutions moved to transition to remote online teaching over the spring/summer term, the driving force for staff was to act in the interests of their students and the institution to ensure as smooth a transition and to reduce disruption. A number of members have noted questions from staff relating to intellectual property for online teaching. This may be covered in existing academic contracts in many cases, but where it isn't it would be important for institutions to consider working with their staff to put in place agreements.

Embedding long term positive changes

Although the circumstances that have brought about these changes have been challenging, there are some positive changes that have come to the fore and institutions should seek to preserve these for their staff and students. Consideration should be given to how some of these more positive elements may be embedded in the long term:

- in many instances, and for many staff, home and remote working has proven to work well. How might this be encouraged and supported in further?
- Some institutions have reported that attendance (and satisfaction) with online teaching is higher than conventional face to face. Although the impact will need to be considered over a longer period of time, for many staff there is now an opportunity to deliver a more truly blended offer.
- The balance of synchronous and asynchronous is becoming better understood with advantages for both students and staff. Will increased asynchronous delivery give more flexibility to deliver teaching at times more convenient to them?