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## Covid-19 Staff Survey

### Responses and Actions

The following contains the executive summary of the Staff Survey report and provides a commentary on responses and actions taken as a result of the survey.

#### Section 1: Positive actions taken by the University during the Covid-19 crisis

- **Communication:** A large number of staff felt that communication during the crisis was timely, empathetic, and informative. The frequency of communication from senior management was praised, particularly the honesty and clarity provided.
- **Taking action:** Many staff commented on the University's quick response to the pandemic, moving teaching online and staff off campus swiftly and effectively.
- **Support:** Some staff felt the support provided at a University level was multifaceted (including several strands such as mental health and practical measures including blended learning support) and prioritised staff and student wellbeing.
- **Remote work:** Numerous staff reported that the University had taken steps to provide IT support and facilitate remote working following lockdown.

#### Response and actions:

The general approach to communications has continued. While messages to the whole community are now less frequent, timely communications will continue to be issued in response to changing circumstances (e.g. the recent local travel restrictions). Emphasis will continue to be placed on staff wellbeing as well as support with home working or working on campus, including communications about safe return to campus. An open session will be held on Teams in the first half of September to discuss the return to teaching on campus.

#### Section 2: General issues and concerns raised by working arrangements

- **Issues relevant to communication**
  - **Excessive:** The primary issue, raised by a proportion of staff, was an excessive number of online meetings (usually using Teams). Staff felt this led to work progress being halted and a feeling of 'living online'.
  - **Ineffective:** A small proportion of staff indicated that some aspects of communication during the pandemic could be made more effective via streamlining and further management oversight.
  - **Management:** Issues raised around communication management included the timing of emails, a need for increased flexibility and aspects such as recording meetings / taking minutes.

- **Acknowledgement:** Some staff raised the issue that their managers were not always compassionate or empathetic to individual circumstances. A proportion of staff also indicated that it was difficult to know how to give feedback or raise concerns.

### **Response and actions:**

The University has issued [guidance on the use of Teams as well as email](#) in order to try to reduce the overall burden of work and relieve the stress of back to back meetings. While the guidance to finish Teams meetings 5 minutes before the scheduled end time has been welcomed and had some impact, it is now recommended that Teams meetings are generally scheduled to start at 5 minutes past the hour or half hour, as well as finishing 5 minutes before the hour or half hour. Heads of School, Directors and Line Managers continue to keep under review the frequency and timing of meetings.

While it was at times necessary to issue all staff emails after 5pm during the early phase of the pandemic, this is being avoided if at all possible.

Heads of School and Directors have been reminded of the need to remain in close and sympathetic touch with staff and to ensure that all staff have the opportunity to discuss any concerns they have with their line manager. We have also communicated to staff that if they are unhappy with those discussions then they can escalate their concerns either within their unit or directly with HR.

- **Lack of progression and security**
  - **Career progression:** A proportion of staff raised the issue of career progression within the pandemic. This had two main aspects: concerns around the promotions exercise being halted / cancelled, and issues accessing training (request for increased online training sessions).
  - **Financial and job security:** A high proportion of staff raised concerns about long-term job security – in some cases this was linked to being furloughed. There were also several concerns about conducting research and securing grants during the pandemic, and the impact this might have in terms of both security and progression.

### **Response and actions:**

In response to staff feedback from the survey and through the consultation on the proposed approach to savings, the pause on promotions will be lifted. Cases for promotion submitted in 19/20 will now be considered, with all decisions to award promotion being effective from 1 August 2021. Further details on the resumption of promotion for those affected will follow in due course.

Additionally, the regrading process for staff within Professional Services will open for applications at the same time.

Online training has continued to be provided by the [Centre for Academic Development](#) and Staff Development throughout the summer. Requests for further training should be addressed to [cad@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:cad@abdn.ac.uk) or for other training needs to [hr@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:hr@abdn.ac.uk).

The approach to savings that led to the collective agreement with the Campus Trade Unions was designed to protect jobs, and that will continue to be a key concern as we navigate through the pandemic.

The potential impact of the pandemic on staff progression / performance is fully recognised. A commitment has been made that staff will be able to provide evidence of the impact of the pandemic on their work when applying for promotion in any future exercises. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, in discussing this matter, also noted that the impacts will not only be on those e.g. with caring responsibilities, but also on those who have taken on extra tasks in order to cover for other colleagues with such responsibilities. We are committed to addressing the complex impacts of the pandemic on staff in the medium as well as the short term.

### **Section 3: Work-life balance**

- **Workload and mental health:**
  - **Workload:** A proportion of staff reported that they were experiencing increased workload, often related to the online pivot (teaching). Staff also expressed feelings of unfairness in relation to workload allocation.
  - **Well-being:** A large number of staff raised the issue of excessive workloads impacting mental health and well-being. This was worsened by feelings of social isolation and linked to increased stress and anxiety.
- **Caring responsibilities**
  - **Work-care impact:** Several staff indicated that their workload and caring responsibilities were difficult to balance. They emphasised that recognition of increased care pressures, alongside an adjusted workload for those with caring responsibilities, would be appreciated.
  - **Meetings-care impact:** The main issue reported here was the lack of flexibility associated with meeting attendance – which infringed on caring responsibilities.

### **Response and actions:**

It is recognised that workload is an issue at this University, and across the sector, and that the Covid situation has increased the risk of isolation for some staff. The University has tried to

provide [support to staff](#) through online means, within the restrictions imposed upon us since the “lockdown”. We have also increased counselling support by temporarily restoring staff access to our own counselling service, and lists of Mental Health First Aiders have recently been published. More details on the range of Mental Health Support that is available to staff and students is available [on the website](#).

Going forward stress management is priority, and a major theme running through the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Plan for academic year 2020/21. One part of this has started with the convening of the new Workload Planning Review Group, chaired by the Senior Vice-Principal. In the short term it aims to review current working arrangements and demands arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and their impact on workload for staff both in the Schools and Directorates, and put in place appropriate interventions. In the longer term, it will develop a framework which is fair and transparent in its approach to workload allocation and planning.

#### **Section 4: Suggestions for improvements**

- **Improvements to workload, task management and training:**
  - **Work pressures:** The key issues were a need for generally reduced workloads, a reduction in the number of meetings, alongside consideration of flexible deadlines.
  - **Teaching changes:** It was suggested that teaching staff should have more input into the approach to blended learning, including the development of guidelines for staff implementing teaching changes.
  - **Decision-making:** Some staff suggested the need for a more inclusive decision-making process, with further staff consultations.
  - **Productivity and promotion:** Staff highlighted that any reductions in productivity caused through the pandemic and additional caring responsibilities should be considered in future promotions exercises.
- **Additional support:**
  - **Carer support:** Staff with caring responsibilities felt that additional practical support would be helpful, including adjusted workloads. A survey devoted to staff with caring responsibilities to delve into the issue further was suggested.
  - **Mental health support:** Staff acknowledged that current activities to support mental health (such as mindfulness exercises) were appreciated, and suggested that the range of activities could be extended further, including provision of staff counselling services.

- **PhD support:** Concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the progression of PhD students was raised, with the suggestion that funded extensions and additional support would be helpful.

### **Response and actions:**

The Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG) has worked hard to ensure good consultation with staff. It has representation from all Schools, relevant Professional Services and expanded membership from Senate and UCU. The Group has consulted widely on areas such as the Principles for Blended Learning, and the Timetabling Principles. In addition, short life working groups across a range of areas (e.g. fieldwork and practical learning, the Guidance for Blended Learning) have involved colleagues from outside of BLITFG. All these inputs have influenced the work of the overall BLITFG. Extraordinary meetings of UCTL and its associated sub-committees have taken place and an additional meeting of Senate was held on 25 August to discuss and agree changes to regulations necessitated by blended learning. In addition, all staff sessions have been held by the Vice-Principal Education.

We have engaged positively with the Parents' Network, including discussion at the last meeting of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee of responses to the informal consultation conducted by the Network on staff with caring responsibilities. As the situation of those with caring responsibilities continues to evolve, we have encouraged those with such responsibilities to liaise closely with their line manager, and asked Heads of School and Directors to ensure that individual circumstances are addressed.

The issues of workload and promotions have been covered above.

A range of mental health support activities are planned in the year ahead and it is hoped face to face activities and events can be offered as restrictions are lifted. These will support the Healthy Working Lives agenda and support the theme of Stress Management and many others. More details on the range of Mental Health Support that is available to staff and students is available [on the website](#).

The Postgraduate Research School increased online support networks/training and developed a [policy](#) to Minimise the Impact of Covid-19 on Research Degrees. A funded extension application process for on-campus PhD students in their final year of supervised study was conducted. Around 70 PhD students who experienced exceptional disruption will now receive extended funding for up to 6 months. Further information gathering will commence shortly to fully understanding the effect on PhD students at earlier points in their academic journey.

## Section 5: Practical actions to enhance working conditions and safety

- **Actions to improve current working conditions:**
  - **Equipment / IT:** Staff highlighted the need for further IT support and equipment provision to avoid the use of personal laptops and subsequent reductions in productivity.
  - **Access:** Linked to the point above was the expressed need to access offices and labs to collect important equipment.
  - **Remote working guidelines:** Some staff felt that a roadmap for the future of remote working, and the return to campus, is needed.
  - **Support:** A number of staff highlighted the need for more inclusive support, including support for members of staff currently on campus, in addition to those remote working.
- **Actions to enhance safety:** Issues around safety primarily involved the return to campus, with the need for PPE, cleaning materials and appropriate health and safety precautions highlighted.

### Response and actions:

During the course of the pandemic we have followed national guidance and permitted some limited access to buildings for all staff to collect items and equipment. Following the recent easing of the local lockdown another period of open days for staff will be arranged to allow them to return to campus. We continue to follow guidance to manage a sequenced return of staff to working on campus. Additionally, in recognition that there may be exceptional circumstances meaning it is more appropriate for some members of staff to work on campus, a process has been introduced to oversee requests whilst ensuring Covid-19 secure working practices on campus can be maintained.

We also continue to follow national guidance and good practice with regard to appropriate support to staff already working on campus, continuing to work from home and for those where a return to campus is being considered. This includes adopting use of the Covid age questionnaire as recommended recently by the Scottish Government. We have also launched the elearning pack for anyone who is working on campus to review and, for those returning to campus, in advance of doing so.

## Section 6: Changes that should be adopted moving forward

- **Remote working:** A high proportion of staff indicated that working from home had proved productive, and that retaining the ability to work from home, ideally with some regularity (such as 2 days per week) would be appreciated. Many people

referred to the enhanced flexibility working from home provides, particularly when balancing caring responsibilities.

- **Greener University:** Numerous staff highlighted that several of the measures introduced during the pandemic, including working from home, online meetings and paperless admin, could all benefit the environment (e.g. lower carbon footprint).
- **Staff socialisation and wellbeing:** Several staff indicated that the social activities promoted during the pandemic – such as online quizzes, mindfulness sessions, and group activities, had helped to promote a greater sense of community. They felt it was important to carry on these actions in the future, both for building community and to enhance wellbeing.
- **Online teaching:** Some aspects of online teaching were highlighted as being very effective, particularly online assessments. Staff suggested that these aspects could remain online permanently, beyond the pandemic.

### **Response and actions:**

We recognise that the pandemic has illustrated the University needs to have a formal Homeworking Policy. The development of this is underway and it will enable staff for example to apply for elements of their working week to be conducted from home beyond the end of current phase of home working required by the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is hoped that some of the changes that have been required due to the pandemic, such as a better understanding of virtual meeting technology, will help reduce our reliance of travel and carbon heavy modes of transport in the longer term. Other changes, such as a removal of many paper based processes, will also hopefully bring longer term changes to processes across the University. The University's new [Sustainability Steering Group](#), chaired by the Senior Vice-Principal, will meet for the first time in September and begin to take this agenda forward in line with our commitments to sustainability in Aberdeen 2040.

The innovations brought about through the work that our staff have done to develop good online teaching will no doubt have a lasting impact on the way we do things. We are committed to ensuring that we learn from the experience of blended learning in the context of Covid-19 in ways that will enable us to continually enhance the learning experience for our students. As part of the work of Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group an evaluation of blended learning will be undertaken which will aim to identify and share good practice.