

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY REPORT 2021

4. COVID – 19 PANDEMIC**4.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUALITY GROUPS**

The equality implications of the Covid-19 pandemic became apparent very early on. There were concerns nationally and locally about how the pandemic would impact on people from different groups. In the University the swift move to remote working and blended learning was appropriate and essential, but the University was alert to the challenges such extreme change to work, study and life would pose. Examples of the key issues identified and reported in the early weeks of the pandemic included:

- Impact on mental health and wellbeing of staff and students – exacerbation of existing mental health conditions and/or the development of mental health conditions related to stress and anxiety
- Digital accessibility in the home environment
- Parents and carers home-schooling while working and studying with particular concerns raised regarding workload
- Concerns related to increased time spent in the home environment where gender-based violence was present
- Staff and students facing increased harassment/discrimination if required to move in with family members who were not supportive of their LGBT+ identity
- The impact of data on the prevalence of the virus on groups e.g. certain age groups and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

4.2 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK REGISTER

The Blended Learning Implementation Task and Finish Group (BLITFG) swiftly began working on an [Equality Impact Assessment](#) (EQIA) in partnership with the Staff Equality Networks and the Student Equality Forums. The EQIA captured and highlighted the impact of blended learning and remote working for staff and students. This has been reviewed by the Dean for Student Support and the Equality and Diversity Adviser with the Networks and Forums on a monthly basis, with the document being considered by BLITFG and EDIC. This has very much been a 'live' document which has informed decision-making. Coronavirus support [pages](#) have been regularly updated with information to address the issues raised in the EQIA. The EQIA has also fed into the University's Risk Register – initially a stand-alone risk register related to the pandemic was created, in 2021 the coronavirus risks were embedded into the University's overall Risk Register. EDIC has fed into the development of this, ensuring that the equality implications of the pandemic were and are fully recognised and addressed.

4.3 KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

The key actions which have been taken to support EDI during the pandemic include the following:

BLENDED LEARNING AND STUDENT WELLBEING

- Early communication of the move to off-campus learning and regular communications thereafter providing guidance, reiterating Scottish Government guidelines including how to keep safe in the pandemic
- Development and launch of the Accessibility Checklist, with guidance on captioning of lectures, delivery of teaching, PowerPoint presentations and learning materials as well as how to adapt assessment methods to accommodate the move on online learning
- 'No detriment' policy implemented for session 2019/20 to provide an opportunity for students undertaking assessments to have their personal circumstances in the pandemic recognised.

Further discussions on this are ongoing (March 2021) with a view to implementing approaches which ensure students are not negatively impacted in their final grades due to the pandemic.

- Online orientations for students with a range of staff on hand to answer queries in real time
- Food parcels and phone calls provided to self-isolating students to ensure they were safe and to offer support and guidance
- Enhanced mental health and wellbeing support e.g. [Winter Wellbeing Toolkit](#), Wellbeing Wednesdays, Wellbeing Advice Clinics, polls to ascertain levels of knowledge of mental health support mechanisms and action taken to address findings, establishment of [Student Helpline](#), [BeWell Podcasts](#)
- Student Money Week events in February 2021
- Promotion and extension of the Hardship Fund and the Digital Poverty Fund to support students who were unable to purchase the equipment required to study effectively
- To further address digital inequity, funding has been provided for students to purchase IT devices, with this enhanced for widening access students by a 525-fundraising campaign. Later in 2020, devices were available to students on loan. Dongles have also been provided to students and to staff to assist with connection problems. Portable devices have been made available to staff to facilitate home working.
- ASK sessions, particularly on disability in the context of Blended Learning, were held, providing an open virtual forum for students to ask questions about disability provision during the pandemic
- Increased capacity within the Student Advice and Support Office, including the provision of a Duty Adviser service and increased specialist mentoring capacity for students with mental health conditions, ADD/ADHD and Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC)
- Frequent review of student support mechanisms and very regular updating of the Coronavirus Support web page
- Delivery of an online induction course available to all new students in session 2020/21 to support the transition to University.

REMOTE WORKING AND STAFF WELLBEING

- All staff moved to remote working in advance of the announcement of a national lockdown in March 2020
- Regular communications to staff on the work of the Campus Planning Group which had a remit to interpret and implement Scottish Government announcements and legislation
- Development and launch of the Workload Reduction Toolkit and template for discussions between managers and staff regarding the impact of circumstances e.g. childcare/home-schooling/caring responsibilities on capacity to deliver work. This was developed in partnership with the Parents and Carers Network.
- Delivery of office equipment to staff, particularly disabled members of staff who required specific chairs/desks to work effectively at home
- Increased activity by the Staff Equality Networks and the Student Equality Forums to support the University response to the pandemic
- Robust workplace and individual risk management procedures in place to assess the suitability of the return to campus for staff, when Scottish Government guidance permitted across the pandemic
- Homeworking guidance issued to staff
- Introduction and extension of a hardship fund for those whose contracts could not be extended and payment of hours for casual work that was no longer required
- Analysing with the University's Women's Development Network, the Parents and Carers Network and EDIC, the recommendations of the WHEN report *Sharing the Caring 2020* which highlighted the impact of the pandemic on women and carers
- Two sets of 'rest days' offered to staff
- University Student Counselling Service extended to cover staff from March 2020.

4.4 To assess the effectiveness of the support provided to staff, a 'Covid-19 Pulse Survey' was issued in June 2020, receiving a 39% response rate. Overall, respondents reported being content with the support offered to colleagues and expressed appreciation for the flexibility afforded to staff which took account of childcare/caring responsibilities.



- 4.5 Areas of improvements were highlighted in the open comments and included:
- Excessive numbers of virtual meetings/emails
 - Concerns about career progression
 - Increased workload due to blended learning
 - Sense of isolation due to homeworking
 - Difficulties in balancing work and caring responsibilities
- 4.6 In response to the feedback, the University established the 'Workload Planning Review Group' which agreed a set of guidelines regarding reducing meeting frequency, e-mail etiquette including reducing the number of e-mails and the times they are sent. In addition, based on feedback the University adapted proposals concerning pay (incremental progression) and reinstated promotions and regrading procedures.
- 4.7 The main concerns which arose from the Covid-19 survey were followed up in the University's Staff Survey 2020 (see Section 5.3.32 for further details).