**AUCU COVID-19 impact report**

*Data reported are accurate on 16 April 2020.*

**Introduction**

COVID-19 has presented us all with a once-in-a-lifetime challenge. AUCU were keen to understand what the real-world impact has been on staff at the University of Aberdeen. We therefore conducted a brief survey to gather information that might inform AUCU's strategy about matters affecting our members and non-members who we represent.

In order to do this, we emailed AUCU members a link to the survey. Additionally, we emailed some members of staff who have access to mailing lists asking if they will help to disseminate, and encouraged sharing of the survey to colleagues to help reach non-members. In total 56 members of staff completed the survey (as of 16 April 2020). Of these, 29 (52%) were on casualised contracts. Therefore, it is likely these data are not fully representative of the entire University of Aberdeen staff population under AUCU's remit, but they do nonetheless represent valid experiences of those who completed the survey.

Key messages:
- Commendation of SMT for their rapid response, clear communications, and empathetic messages regarding workload expectations
- A concern for job security, particularly as contracts are due to come to an end, and the job market has collapsed
- Financial concerns, related to both job security, lost work/pay, and the increased costs of working from home
- Issues surrounding working conditions, equipment, internet connectivity, etc whilst working at home
- The impact on workload (namely that it has increased) combined with lower productivity and more difficult working conditions
- General concern for mental health and wellbeing, in particular related to the abovementioned issues

For brevity, not all themes have been reported in this document, but a full report can be provided on request to AUCU. We asked staff:

1. How the COVID-19 situation has affected their working conditions
2. What they felt the University (SMT) could do to address these points

We also had a third question asking for any other comments, and where appropriate these have been amalgamated in the previous answers.

We appreciate that this is a rapidly evolving situation. The survey has been open since 24th March 2020, and so some concerns may have been addressed/acknowledged already.

Answers have been provided as themes from question 1, followed by proposed solutions from question 2. AUCU’s comments are in purple, and following this, key quotes have been provided where applicable. Some respondents had noted their job role in their response and this was outside of AUCU's remit; in these cases, their job role has been noted after their quote.

**Lost pay/work**

SOLUTION: Pay all work and expected work, regardless of whether it was able to be done

AUCU comment: There is clear concern regarding the prospect of lost pay. It has been appreciated that SMT has guaranteed no detriment to those who had guaranteed work (e.g. marking) cancelled, but there is still concern over things like ‘assumed’ work, i.e. work which may not have been formally offered yet, but would likely to have been. We believe paying this fits the Inclusivity aim of the Aberdeen 2040 plan, as it would be particularly helpful for those on low incomes, or who lack other sources of financial support.
“I have an invigilation contract with up to 50 hours but now that exams will take other formats, I probably won’t get those hours. For my TA contract they have recognised all hours on the offer letter even if cancelled due to covid.”

“I am on a term time contract (32 hours p/w), so during non-term times (Easter, Christmas, or summer breaks), I normally pick up shifts I need to earn money without issue…I don’t know what will happen for the summer, and I will likely have to find a temporary job that will earn me enough to cover my living expenses and to (hopefully) provide me with enough money to be able to help my 70 year old financially unstable parents”

“I don’t have any work. I’ve lost a whole months of shifts i was booked up for. I normally have an 18.5 hour contract during term time, this then reduces to just 7.5 hours out of term time, and the rest i normally make up by booking myself up for non-contracted shifts…I rely heavily on these non-contracted extra shifts, of which i no longer can obtain due to campus services been shut for the foreseeable future…So now I’m basically stuck with a 7.5 hour a week pay, up until when term would normally resume after easter, and it will go back to 18.5, but obviously without any extra shifts being available. It’s quite hard for me because I had organised my finances around getting all those extra shifts this month/next month which i had been booked down for, and now which i cannot work, and will not be getting paid for.” [catering/driver/porter]

“Huge worries about the future job market when my current contract comes to an end. The job markets (academia and others) are dead
Working from home has led to:
- inability to separate work and down-time which has caused difficulties sleeping
- increased my heating bills (double the previous month)”

“I’m concerned about my payment. I only have 7.5 hour contract, but usually work around 32 hours.” [catering/driver/porter]

“I am a PhD out of funding at this moment (in my write up period) and I was relying on working on a cafe or similar to pay rent, etc. Now these possibilities are gone with the lockdown.”

Financial concerns, including (but not limited to) costs of working from home
SOLUTION: Pay work from home expenses
AUCU comment: Staff appear to feel that the SMT has not fully appreciated the financial pressures the situation has added, particularly those who are precariously employed. Paying working from home expenses appears to be an idea that would be appreciated by staff, and AUCU would support this. Additionally, we believe this to fit the Inclusivity aim of the Aberdeen 2040 plan, for reasons described above.

“Academics have always subsidised their jobs. In the current situation, those who can afford to buy equipment and access to streaming software are somewhat privileged.”

“Made to work at home in a way that is difficult to calculate an hourly wage claim.”

Facing redundancy/job (in)security
SOLUTION: Contract extensions
AUCU comment: Staff are concerned about their future employment. Those in non-STEM subjects showed concern in case of future cuts to their courses/Schools as a result of COVID-19. A particular emphasis was those facing redundancy at this time, with many permanently employed staff also showing concern for their precariously employed colleagues. The quotes below demonstrate the high impact the prospect of unemployment is having on such staff; employment in this instance is more than having an income, but it is also providing security, aiding mental and physical wellbeing, motivation to work, and helping precariously employed staff feel valued. This is particularly important as many ECRs have moved away from home in order to take up their post at Aberdeen, thus have no support network, nor means of returning home. Respondents believe redundancies during this time will negatively impact the University’s image. AUCU agree with this view and highlight that it goes
against both the Inclusivity and the Sustainability aims in Aberdeen 2040, as it will disproportionately impact lower income staff/staff from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and will not appear the University is taking care of its people. There is a strong will that SMT extend contracts to avoid unemployment during this time, and this is supported by UCU nationally and locally (e.g. https://ucu.org.uk/article/10736/Protecting-precarious-workers). AUCU recognise that SMT are working hard to ensure staff are furloughed where possible, and we are pleased that a no pay detriment policy is being adopted for furloughed staff.

“Getting a redundancy letter at a time like this is horrifically terrifying. It gives the impression the university do not have a care for precariously employed staff's wellbeing. There will be no academic jobs for a while after this crisis, the least you could do is give some assurances of financial security. What kind of university thinks it's acceptable for the best educated to go on benefits during a crisis?”

“I am concerned about the stress that our short-term contract staff are under… I'm not seeing a lot of support from the Uni for these staff and I am worried about them.”

“It will affect the university brand immensely if shown not to support staff during a crisis, who would imagine that a university would make people redundant at a time where it is impossible to get further work?… It's all well and good having "rest days" as a token of good will, but how about ensuring we won't be unemployed during this period. I find it hard to rest when I feel like I don't know how I'll pay for my rent and food in the coming months, and I'm sure others would feel the same.”

“I am concerned however at the longevity of my contract, given that the university has stated that it has stopped hiring new staff for the forseeable future… given that I am working in Arts subject, this is doubly worrying - it being well-known that in times of funding cuts arts, culture and music tend to be cut back on more than STEM subjects… I am worried that when my contract runs out I will be unemployed at a tremendously precarious time for the job market.”

“The university keeps telling us it cares about mental wellbeing. Now it can prove it by granting an extension to our contracts. Our project coordinator told us it would be decided on a case by case basis. This is dividing us, making us fight over resources, keeping us in limbo rather than offering reassurance and support.”

“People in 'leadership' positions seem to be more interested in obeying the commands of the management than in helping their colleagues on non-permanent contracts. Our tutors especially need the money, as they are PhD students.”

“They offered a rest day which I felt slightly insulted by. If I get the next two months off, it will not change anything, unless it also changes the end date of my contract.”

**Mental wellbeing**

**SOLUTION:** Ensure supportive environment

AUCU comment: This is a stressful situation on many fronts; whilst SMT are usually putting out empathy-led messages, some staff appear to be getting mixed messages, adding to their angst. Issues such as job security fed into wellbeing. Mental wellbeing issues are also reflected in comments under other themes in this report.

“Worries about elderly relatives and the crisis more generally makes it hard to concentrate.”

“feeling anxious and less part of a team whilst demands from the uni come thick and fast”

“I would like clarity on why I am classed as an essential worker.”

“I'm not sure that the emotional (as opposed to practical) issues that staff and students will face over the next few weeks are being fully recognised.”

**Children/family/caring responsibilities**

AUCU comment: It is recognised that working from home produces added challenges, particularly for those with caring responsibilities. Comments appreciated that this was outside of the SMT's control. The impact of these issues are reflected in comments under other headings.
Internet access/connectivity, equipment/software/university drives access
SOLUTION: Improved home IT provisions/resources
SOLUTION: Access to office (within reason and when possible)
AUCU comment: We appreciate that SMT has recently put out statements on IT provisions during home working. However, some aspects of home working are still causing difficulties, both financially and logistically. Hopefully as the situation progresses, new software etc will become familiar, however, SMT should perhaps monitor the situation and liaise with line managers and staff to ensure their needs in these areas are being adequately met.

“I had to purchase a more expensive internet plan, which I expect to be reimbursed by the university. Video conferences instead of face-to-face meetings eat up a lot of gigabytes”

“IT were fantastic”

“Being forced to work with technology with which I have had no training”

“My contract ends in August and I’m going to move away. I would like to take the possessions I have in my office with me, but my line manager cannot even give me the guarantee that I will be allowed to enter the building to take everything with me.”

Workspace set-up
AUCU comment: There were concerns regarding the appropriateness of the workplace set-up at home, and the (potential) impact this might have on work-related injuries. Respondents had noted that it is appreciated that the SMT cannot always action such an issue. However, it appears this issue is prevalent and does not appear to have been adequately addressed.

“I don't have broadband at home, and I don't have the office furniture I need to avoid backpain.”

“Because I don't have an appropriate desk setup at home, I've been noticing strain on my neck and shoulders from using DSE…”

Workload, productivity
SOLUTION: Expect lower productivity
SOLUTION: Ensure reasonable workload
AUCU comment: Respondents generally acknowledged an increase in their workload. Whilst messages of empathy have been communicated from SMT, some feel there is still added pressure from their School/line managers to perform with high output under atypical circumstances. There is also concern for returning to work, particularly if there is a recruitment freeze. SMT should ensure staff are informed regarding their expectations upon returning to work and emphasise expectations to heads of schools/line managers.

“There is a hiring freeze but we are being, and will be, asked to deliver more teaching with fewer staff.”

“Deadline for marking assessments. I hope those can be extended too”

Other comments:
What can the University do to help: they've done a good job
AUCU comment: We commend SMT on their rapid response, and we believe that staff have appreciated this too. Respondents appeared empathetic to the fact that SMT had to make decisions fast and so understood that not everything could be done smoothly.
“The university, in my opinion has done a phenomenal job at dealing with extraordinary circumstances. The support I’ve seen in my school for both staff and students has been outstanding. Communication has been excellent and everyone pitched in to help others.”

Communications
AUCU comment: AUCU recognise the appreciation from staff regarding the excellent communication SMT have been putting out. Some concerns still remain regarding how genuine the messages are and how they may appear to contradict the Universities actions, or the reality of the situation for certain people.

“Being included in the emails being sent out would be nice. As of now they are only addressed to full-time workers and PhDs, and I am neither.”

“Keep up the good flow of communication: it is useful, helpful and reassuring.”

“I’m impressed by the way the Uni has been handling this situation. It came up quite a lot faster than expected, and we’re having to deal with technical problems, but for long-term contract staff, they have been incredibly understanding that nothings going to be working right or on time. The Uni has been better prepared and more concerned for the lives of staff and students than either the UK or Scottish Governments.”

“…constantly getting emails about how the University is supporting us, giving us twee tips on how to adjust to home working such as ‘take breaks’ or ‘go into the garden’ (I live on the fourth floor of a flat and dont have one, or even a desk to work on), and being told not to worry because their ‘putting jobs first’ when I’m going to be unemployed…”

“It’s been a very fast transition but the University handled everything extremely well. I feel lucky to work here and not Durham, or Goldsmiths at the moment.”

“I think the university is doing a fantastic job, and leading the sector in this regard”

“The University of Aberdeen was ahead of others in changing practices and should be congratulated.”

“About exams: when face to face teaching stopped we first got an email saying “do not write to students just yet!!!”. Then, two days after, on Sunday, we got another email saying "you have until tomorrow at 3PM to write your students about how will you continue teaching and until the end of the week to tell them how will the exam be!", where in fact the university still did not decide up to this point exactly how some of the exams will take place. I think a fewer hysterical deadlines would have make the entire situation easier for us all.”

Conclusion
Overall, it is clear that the SMT have taken a notably pro-active role in addressing the current circumstances and this has been appreciated by staff. Some issues still remain though. Of these, certain issues are somewhat outside of SMT’s control, such as access to offices during the lockdown, and home workspace set-up. It is appreciated that SMT are working through solutions to some of these problems where possible, such as delivery of equipment. Other concerns could be more feasibly addressed though, such as offering financial support to cover working from home costs, providing staff facing redundancy contract extensions, and making sure communication from line managers and heads of schools is consistent with the empathetic messages staff are receiving from SMT.

This report was written by Dr Harriet Carroll (AUCU Anti-Casualisation Officer) and approved by AUCU committee and AUCU Anti-Casualisation Working Group