

# Responding to the COVID-19 crisis at the University of Liverpool.



This consultation paper brings together the findings of an inquiry carried out by the joint trade unions of UCU, UNISON and UNITE into the most pressing issues on our working practices, terms of employment, job security and health and wellbeing. It was completed in consultation with union members across the University between 25th March and 7th April 2020. The joint trade unions have welcomed the move to enter into regular consultation with the University in relation to the crisis and we believe working collaboratively and collegiately to implement these measures will help to protect the interests of staff, students and the wider University community during the COVID-19 crisis.

This paper outlines assurances we would expect the University to provide in four areas:

- 1. Fixed-term contracts and casualised staff**
- 2. Working from home**
- 3. Teaching and student support**
- 4. Research and Postgraduate Research**

In addition to these four areas there are mutually beneficial general principles and measures we would expect to see implemented to the benefit of staff and students during this time.

The joint trade unions seek agreement with the University on the following:

- Acknowledgement that we are in exceptional circumstances. The response to enable the day-to-day running of the University has resulted in fundamental changes to working conditions and practices for many staff. All of these changes must be time-limited specific to the pandemic. Joint trade unions and University must enter into a Memorandum of Understanding that these new working practices are not seen as custom and practice when typical working resumes.
- An understanding of the difficult circumstances all staff are working under. While colleagues are all making huge efforts during these exceptional times, it is not business as usual and the University must be understand that the performance of colleagues will vary as we all adapt to the change in circumstances in differing ways.
- When the period of lockdown ends, the return to working on campus will be a time of anxiety for many. Handling this process to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of staff and students will require meaningful consultation with the joint trade unions.
- All existing terms and conditions related to enhanced pay and

shift allowances remain in place during this period.

- The University has taken a number of positive steps so far including the guarantee that all individuals who had been engaged to carry out work up until 31st July 2020 will still be paid even if the work can no longer go ahead. Even with this positive intervention, because of the lack of intervention and protection from employers in other sectors, particularly for those working in the gig economy and the self-employed, there is a strong possibility that the households of many staff and students may still enter into financial hardship. We call on the University to establish a hardship fund during this period which is open to all staff and students with priority given to casually employed staff and students from low-income families. A practicable way of introducing this fund would be for all senior colleagues to agree to a maximum wage during this period of £100,000 per annum, and to donate their remaining salary to the fund, in recognition of the huge amount of work being carried out across the institution during this difficult time.
- The University commitment to follow ACAS advice that colleagues who self-isolate for a 14 day period will receive full pay and this will not be recorded as a sickness absence is welcomed by the joint trade unions. This should also extend to any member of staff who is hospitalised due to COVID-19.
- Staff who are bereaved will be grieving in difficult circumstances. Flexibility, support and an increase in compassionate leave must be granted to colleagues who lose loved ones during this period.

- Reimbursement of any associated costs for attendances at conferences which have now been cancelled, and where the member of staff has personally paid in advance.

For the small number of staff who remain on campus we are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Regular risk assessments are carried out to ensure the health and safety of colleagues on campus with appropriate measures immediately put in place where required
- Sufficient and appropriate PPE is provided to all staff on campus for as long as is required
- Social distancing is effectively managed for the health and safety of staff on campus
- Where external staff are brought on campus to support university staff ensure appropriate induction training is provided by the University, prior to their deployment, to reduce risk to University staff

# 1. Fixed term contracts and casualised staff

The current crisis has created a climate of uncertainty for many and this is acutely felt by staff on fixed term and casualised contracts at the University.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Confirmation that the position on self-isolation and full pay will also be applicable to hourly paid and other casualised staff.
- The commitment to paying all staff engaged on casual and insecure employment arrangements should continue for the duration of the crisis and go beyond 31st July 2020 if required. Staff should be paid for previously agreed hours at their typical rate of pay. Where hours have yet to be agreed, this should be calculated in consultation with the relevant trade union, with reference to typical hours worked over a similar period, hours worked over the last academic year, or an agreed average over a period of months. No member of staff should suffer financial detriment because of organisational changes in response to the pandemic.
- The change to online teaching and working at home has required staff to carry out additional work, including learning how to use online teaching and conference technology, adapting face-to-face teaching material for online use, and additional pastoral care for students who are struggling to cope with changes to their course and living arrangements. Where this has resulted in an increase in working hours

for staff who are on hourly paid contracts, the University should acknowledge this by setting out clearly how staff can claim pay for this essential additional work.

- All fixed-term contracts that are set to expire before 31st July 2020 should be renewed for a minimum of six months, subject to further review with the joint trade unions as the situation develops and with the agreement of the staff member. Any member of staff whose employment ends during this period will be entering a job-market that is essentially non-existent and will almost certainly be plunged into financial hardship. The University can prevent this hardship and mitigate against the increased anxiety fixed term staff will be experiencing by taking a proactive decision to extend contracts now. The additional work that is created through the move to working from home needs the retention of colleagues for the University to continue to function effectively.
- Staff on fixed term contracts that are set to expire, and where it may be difficult to identify work at present must be 'furloughed' under the Job Retention Scheme. Similar to permanent colleagues who are to be furloughed, this will be done in consultation with the joint trade unions, is subject to the staff member's agreement and the University will remain committed to providing the extra 20% to make up 100% of salary.
- The University has provided dedicated web pages to inform staff about changes in arrangements, but limited information

has been provided for staff on temporary contracts. A section dedicated to fixed term and casualised staff with specific advice on self-isolation, sick pay, claiming for hourly paid work and other information which is regularly updated with any changes agreed as a result of ongoing consultation, would be a welcome resource.



## 2. Working from home

The move to working from home has created a unique working situation for staff. While many staff often work from home, the situation in the context of the crisis is unique. This brings to the fore a number of health and safety and equality issues that need to be resolved.

### ***2.1 Display screen equipment and reasonable adjustments***

Working from home has led to an increase in screen time often in working conditions that risk causing long-term health problems. Disabled staff may be particularly affected as it can be difficult to put reasonable adjustments in place when working from home.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- An institutional audit of the working equipment and furniture all staff currently have.
- Continue to promote the display screen equipment risk assessment and encourage all staff to complete it.
- Where the assessment identifies the need for reasonable adjustments, including the need for appropriate furniture or equipment then it is to be supplied as soon as possible.
- Regular communication from line managers to staff that they should be taking regular breaks away from their display screen for their health and safety.

- Clear guidance that staff are not expected to put in excessive screen time and compromise their health and safety to meet deadlines.

## **2.2 Workload**

The sudden change to working conditions has resulted in an increase in workloads for staff. Many have reported that they feel they are expected to be available all the time due to there no longer being a clear separation between work and home.

The move to working from home has, for many colleagues, led to an increase in the number of meetings being held. A considerable number of colleagues have also reported unreasonable and arbitrary deadlines being set by line managers who have failed to take the current situation into consideration.

The message from the University to ‘do what you can’ is a welcome one that shows a recognition of the unique situation we are in. However, there needs to be more clarity for colleagues with childcare and caring responsibilities who are disproportionately impacted by the move to working from home. Mutually agreed adjustments to deadlines, work duties and workloads must be implemented for the period of the crisis for all staff who require it. Homeworking has particularly impacted staff with childcare and caring responsibilities.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- For all of the reasons set out above, levels of stress are likely to have increased for a large number of colleagues. The University must conduct an institutional stress risk

assessment to directly address issues relating to homeworking.

- Communication to line managers to acknowledge the situation and understand that deadlines may not be met in a typical manner.
- Regular communication to staff on the importance of separating home and work life which includes reminders to log out of emails, Microsoft Teams and other associated software. An agreement not to call staff on personal phones unless it is an emergency.

### ***2.3 Extra costs associated with working from home***

Working from home has brought about an increase in energy usage and the potential for an increase in the costs of utilities as our homes become our workplace. There are also colleagues who do not currently have broadband who may have paid for installation to enable them to continue to work.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Reimbursement for any colleagues who have had broadband installed or purchased equipment to enable them to work from home.
- The University to cover the cost of the installation of broadband for any colleagues who need to have it installed.
- A commitment from the University to contribute toward utilities and other associated costs for staff who see an increase in costs while working from home.

### 3. Teaching and student support

The shift to providing teaching as online content has been extremely demanding for a variety of reasons relating to time, resources, skills and technology quality, with impacts unevenly experienced amongst different groups. Online teaching infrastructure is there to supplement traditional means of teaching delivery and was never designed for assuming the whole burden. The feeling amongst staff is that online teaching is not, on the whole, successful or an adequate alternative, producing poorer quality content and engagement and that there are serious equality impacts.

Teaching the term out as normal online is not tenable. The current approach is unnecessarily burdensome and many of our members feel that it is not working in the mutual interests of staff or students.

The issues raised and proposed measures have also been discussed extensively with the Guild of Students.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Consultation around general teaching provision given the possibility of the crisis meaning online teaching is to continue into the next academic year
- The immediate end of first year teaching and consultation over other options for year two and three.
- Consultation on alternative options for assessment.

### ***3.1 Work creation and increased workload***

The move to online teaching has intensified workloads. This includes: learning new systems; systems such as Vital not working properly; time spent recording lectures; writing lengthy instructions to students and responding to increased student enquires. Staff report an uneven access to platforms which acts as a barrier as some students report they can't access platforms such as Zoom or Google Hangout which also causes additional work. This has disproportionality impacted some members of staff such as Early Career Academics who often coordinate large core modules and have heavy teaching loads.

All of this work is at the expense of research or scholarship time which has the potential to impact on promotion and confirmation in post further down the line.

There are concerns about the lack of training in delivering online teaching. Staff are not comfortable using technology they are not familiar with to deliver teaching.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Reimbursement for this additional time. Other institutions have granted additional annual leave to provide this and hourly paid teaching staff should receive extra payment as outlined in the section on fixed term contracts and casualised staff.
- Additional support should be provided to those disproportionately impacted – namely parents, carers or those suffering from bereavement.

- Staff are supported to use existing technology they are familiar working with. Staff must not be forced to use new technologies. Training must be delivered in order to support the delivery of a high-quality learning experience.

### **3.2 Equality Impacts**

The biggest issue raised by staff is how to teach at home while having childcare, home schooling and caring responsibilities. The current University position, although well-intentioned is vague and more concrete information is required.

Other questions related to how expectations could actually be reduced if staff have large core modules and heavy teaching loads given the hours of work involved and what additional support would be provided i.e. redistribution of teaching, or additional teaching support. Female staff members often face the additional burden of dealing with student issues over senior male colleagues. There are also particular issues facing disabled members of staff and additional equipment and resources will be needed in some cases. The mental health impacts of stress created by online teaching, dealing with distressed students, poor management communication are intensified.

Meeting marking deadlines and deadlines in general is hard to fulfil particularly for single parents. In addition, those with children of different ages face different challenges. Those with younger children need to be present for children who might have difficulty understanding the current situation and consequently get frustrated about not being able to have access to the social and physical environments. Colleagues with older children have the

extra pressure of continuing education at home. These colleagues are also receiving new information, learning resources and targets from schools which creates further pressure.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Conduct an Equality Impact Assessment on online teaching as per its public sector equality duty.
- Failing this, demonstrate there has been a proportionate amount of time given to considering these equality impacts via an audit trail which shows due regard has been given.
- Adjustments to marking workloads and deadlines to be made for parents and carers.
- Clear guidance and assurances related to workload, research expectations and teaching and marking for those for those with caring responsibilities and home-schooling children.

### **3.3 Online assessments**

UCU raised the lack of risk assessment on the introduction of online marking at a Consultative Committee for Health and Safety meeting in March 2019 and still have not had an appropriate response.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- An institutional risk assessment for online marking should be carried out.
- Extension to deadlines to return marking.

- Provision of iPad and iPad keyboard accessories where needed and any further support equipment.
- Implementation of reasonable adjustments in a timely manner.
- Where individual risk assessments confirm online marking cannot be carried out or a member of staff has an agreement not to carry out online marking due to a health condition, equipment must be provided to these colleagues to carry out paper marking.

### ***3.4 Online teaching content and data***

We welcome the University's flexible response to online teaching. We share the view reflected in University policy that Lecture Capture is not necessarily a viable or useful replacement for face to face teaching. The autonomy of teaching staff to make adjustments to support students, based upon their own judgement is crucial. Moreover, material produced now is not to be confused with carefully designed online teaching based on pedagogical expertise.

Given this, gathering student appraisal of teaching quality provided by individual staff members is not appropriate (although students should be able to feedback their views on the appropriateness of online teaching). This is especially important if the University intends to continue with online teaching in to the next academic year.



We have concerns about the ownership of the online material created and what its future use would be. Staff require assurances that the material will not be used in the future to replace face-to-face teaching.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Students should be made aware of the flexible approach adopted across the University so they understand the difference between emergency response with good quality teaching, and expectations of the limits to the use of Lecture Capture.
- Content created during this period must not be appropriated by third party vendors or sold to them by the University.
- Those delivering online teaching content maintain Intellectual Property rights and performance copyright. None of the material created now can be used during any future industrial action.
- Suspend Evasys while teaching is delivered this way. Create a forum for students to feedback on their experience of online teaching that has no performance implications.

### ***3.5 Management Communications of strategy***

There has been a breakdown in communications over adjustments to teaching. Staff were not consulted over fundamental changes to the University's changes to assessment. This failure to communicate has led to a great deal of unnecessary confusion and stress and placed a burden on numerous staff who have had to

respond to a large number of student enquiries without any knowledge of the University's plans. We should not be kept in the dark about decisions that we are answerable for.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Ensure that consultation mechanisms enable colleagues to feedback on strategy including options to end teaching for first year students in order to focus support on progressing students in third year
- Decisions on teaching and student support strategies to be made in consultation with staff and communicated to staff before students.

## **4. Research and Postgraduate Research**

This crisis will have a fundamental impact on the ability to conduct research while also creating uncertainty for many within research positions – from fixed term researchers both internally and externally funded to postgraduate researchers including Graduate Teaching Assistants. Expectations around research performance will also need serious review during this period. The items below are the most pressing research issues requiring action.

### ***4.1 Research expectations during the COVID-19 crisis.***

There are a wide range of reasons to think that, as long as the crisis, and the aftermath of the crisis lasts, research expectations placed on staff will need to be sharply relaxed. This is due to a need to concentrate on teaching, to sudden changes in the

conditions surrounding funded research, and the growing evidence base that staff are unable to conduct research, for a number of reasons, under current conditions. Those are set out in more detail below.

### ***Working from home***

Not all active researchers work from home under normal conditions. There are a number of reasons to expect that staff will not be able to automatically acclimatise to working from home. Feedback we have received has provided evidence that for many staff members the process of psychological adjustment will not be easy. Staff with children and caring responsibilities are already reporting to us the impossibility of doing any research whilst trying, at the same, time home-school or provide care.

This is compounded by the practical challenges of working from home. This is most obvious in the case of those working in labs or conducting empirical or fieldwork-based research. However, more generally, a lack of access to library resources and inconsistent internet speeds will heavily affect the ability of staff to produce outputs.

### ***A changing institutional environment***

Indefinite postponement of the REF submission deadline has been made by Research England in recognition of the need for university staff to concentrate on responding to the crisis, “without concern for the effect on REF preparations.” A large number of journals have already relaxed or removed deadlines and have indicated that peer-review processes will take significantly longer. This will have a knock on effect on the

ability of staff to produce outputs.

### ***Need to provide student support***

Staff members in a range of different roles are reporting that both pastoral and academic support requirements for both postgraduate and undergraduate students has significantly intensified. Some report that they are doing little else at this moment. This has profound implications for all staff of course, but staff with significant research and student-facing roles such as colleagues on Teaching and Research contracts have been unable to conduct research because of those pressures. This is likely to continue over the summer.

### ***Flexibility and continuity***

All researchers are able to conduct desk-based research, but such research will be increasingly difficult to conduct for the reasons outlined above. There will need to be a major shift in research expectations to make the necessary adjustments to desk-based research and to protect those researchers most affected.

### ***Commitment to dealing with the crisis***

There are two ways in which research staff may be pulled into a response to the crisis that profoundly affects their working conditions. A number of staff, particularly from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, are being seconded into NHS and public health roles. Others are responding to the general call for research from government to contribute to a COVID-19 Outbreak Expert Database. This may see staff taken away from normal research duties and allowances will need to be made for this diversion.

In short, there are a number of reasons why the University's research expectations cannot be met under these circumstances.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- All expectations to produce research are put on hold until the crisis is finished. This would mean that research active staff are not expected to write-up or produce outputs during this time.
- That these changes are reflected in expectations for both probation and promotion decisions.
- The University adopts a flexible approach to enabling researchers to continue in their work, regardless of the impact that non-lab work and home working has on their research.
- The University must send this message out clearly by ensuring the demands on staff who have major REF responsibilities are significantly relaxed in line with Research England's lead.
- The University sets out its plans to fully support those who are seconded into NHS roles, or who contribute to Covid-19 research agendas, and consults with the campus trade unions on those plans. The University commits to ensuring that those staff are not affected detrimentally on their return to the University.
- To conduct an equality impact assessment on all of the issues raised here, particularly in relation to childcare and other caring responsibilities.

- Existing commitments to scheduled periods of research leave are honoured.

## **4.2 Postgraduate Research Needs**

### **Funding/Deadline extensions**

The University has granted 3 month deadline extensions to all PGR students. There are, however, outstanding concerns remaining in relation to funding and research training support grants (RTSG), particularly:

- Whether external funding bodies will fund this 3 month extension (at the time of writing this, only a limited number of funding bodies have confirmed this)
- Whether RTSG money for PGRs, especially that used for conference funding (given that conferences for this year have mostly now been cancelled) will be honoured/carried over to the following academic year.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Transparency in communications between funding bodies and the University. Regular updates to be provided on what the University is asking of Research Councils.
- Full support from the University that all funding bodies grant a minimum 3 month extension period to be fully funded as an extension to current funding periods.
- Commitment to extend funding for University or GTA-funded studentships during the 3-month extension period.

- The University extends the stipend payment for GTAs and contracts for GTAs over this 3 month period, with the recognition that this commitment may need to be reviewed as the crisis continues.
- Assurance that fees will also be covered by external research funders and the University for all extensions during the crisis.
- Clarity on whether RTSG money will be carried over to the next academic year.
- To conduct an equality impact assessment on all of the issues raised here, particularly in relation to childcare and other caring responsibilities.

### ***Working remotely***

All PGRs have now made the transition to work from home. There are significant issues here with equipment, access to computers and also issues with those who do lab work and the cancellation of face-to-face fieldwork.

There have been delays and miscommunications around what equipment, particularly related to computers that PGRs have access to. Most buildings were closed before any clear communication with PGRs. This has left many PGRs students without computers to work from or unsuitable computers for their project. Many PGRs students have been told they can take their desktop computers home. This is unsuitable for many who only have the space or means to transport smaller laptop computers.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- Any extensions must be cover the full period during which research is put on hold until equipment can be accessed
- PGRs, similar to all staff, should be provided with access to laptops where needed. This provision needs to be coordinated as soon as possible.
- All those homeworking must be guided through the process of risk assessment and DSE assessment, with all reasonable adjustments met swiftly.

### ***Progression***

Uncertainty surrounding a number of processes that PGRs are required to complete in order to allow research to progress is causing undue anxiety and stress.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- The University must allow PGRs to pause or extend the deadline for APRs. The same must apply to pending ethics applications and associated progression processes. Supervisors should be issued with specific guidance which is agreed by UCU and the Guild of Students to relieve the stress and burden of this process on PGRs.

### ***4.3 Grant-funded researchers and the COVID-19 crisis.***

There are a large number of staff in the University that are on fixed term contracts funded by external and internal research grants. The COVID-19 crisis has raised a number of issues that make funded researchers more vulnerable and render their situation more uncertain. Without those researchers it would not



be possible to conduct a very large proportion of the University's research. The University has a responsibility to protect them.

A large number of funded researchers are profoundly affected by the cessation of all research in labs and all research involving human contact. The funding councils and UKRI have issued guidance on protecting researchers.

<https://www.ukri.org/news/coronavirus-impact-on-ukri-supported-research/>

This advice goes much further in its intention to support Research Council-funded students than other researchers whose incomes are tied to grants.

Our position is that to ensure equal treatment for all in this position Research Councils should provide fully funded extensions to scholarships and fellowships for all PGRs and those on research contracts disadvantaged by the current crisis. It is clear that the University will need to offer assurances to researchers and solutions that allow them to be flexible and to not suffer any detriment.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- All staff working as full time researchers are guaranteed that their contractual conditions will be protected from any detriment due to the changes precipitated by the coronavirus.
- The University has promised to extend the period of postgraduate research by a minimum of three months initially. This commitment should be made for all research supported by all external and internal University funding, no matter the size

of the grant or the type of funder. This should also apply in the event of withdrawal of external funding arising from the crisis.

- Both job opportunities and career progression for funded researchers are likely to be profoundly affected by the likely reduction in research funds prompted by the crisis. The University must develop a strategy in conjunction with UCU that sets out how retention and progression will be prioritised in coming months.
- An equality impact assessment on all of the issues raised here, particularly in relation to childcare and other caring responsibilities.
- To introduce measures to ensure researchers on Tier 2 visas are protected from the disproportionate impact of changes in employment and working arrangements and to ensure no such changes could jeopardise the researcher's leave to remain when visa reporting to UKVI resumes.

#### **4.4 Research ethics**

The pandemic has had a profound impact upon University staff, students, and best practice frameworks. The University has acknowledged that the ban on all face-to-face contact with participants in research approved by a University Research Ethics Committee may have a detrimental impact on ongoing research projects, and is in dialogue with the major funding bodies to clarify their position. There will also be significant disruption to student research projects which will place strain on both the student investigators and the supervisors who are trying to support them

through this process. In order to protect the wellbeing of students, staff and research participants, the University took the decision to ban all face-to-face contact with participants in research approved by a University Research Ethics Committee.

To support the impact of the pandemic restrictions on research, there have been two key developments:

A guidance note on the ethical implications arising from any change in research methods has been created to help staff and students understand the key ethical and best practice considerations for switching research method. The University should ensure that this guidance note is distributed across the institution.

Applicants are asked to submit all amendments which have arisen as a result of a change in research methods in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a minor amendment in the online system. This means that the amendment will be automatically approved, thus relieving pressure on applicants, reviewers, and committee secretaries.

As a result, research ethics amendments which only involve a change in research method in response to the COVID-19 crisis will not be subject to prospective review. There is a heavy reliance upon researchers to meticulously consider the ethical considerations and the impact of changing research methods on potential participants and gatekeeper organisations.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch in research priorities, a heavy strain has been placed on research ethics committee reviewers across the institution. This needs to

be acknowledged as a workload issue.

We are seeking the following assurances from the University:

- In order to safeguard ethical practice, the University must take account of any workload implications associated with re-writing and preparing bids that involve such adjustments.
- This strain will be felt particularly by the chairs of the Central University Research Ethics Committees, as well as by School and Departmental ethics leads. The Chairs of such committees are taking 'Chair's Action' on all COVID-19 related urgent research; which is not only a significant institutional responsibility, but also a significant time commitment which should be recognised institutionally.
- The University ensure that staff – both on campus and overseas - whose research projects have been affected; as well as supervisors who are working with students to amend ongoing or proposed research projects in light of the pandemic should suffer no detriment in working conditions.