INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year we invited all staff to complete the Future of Work Staff Survey. We were keen to hear about your experiences of work since March 2020: what you had learnt and what was (or may have become) important to you.

The survey was open to all staff, whether working on campus, working from home or a combination of the two.

With your input, we hoped to capture the best parts of what’s happened over the past year and find out more about what you feel would support you most for the ‘Future of Work’ at Kent.

Feedback from the survey (anonymised and non-attributable) is now informing discussions at EG and the JSNCC about how we work in the future and the infrastructure and support we will need.

We’d like to share with you the main themes from the feedback received, and give you a flavour of some of the work underway to continue to support staff.

We designed the survey under three headings: ‘Physical Space and Working Environment’, ‘Technology’ and ‘Culture’, all of which reflect the changes to the way in which we work and how we each experience our connection with the University and its community.

SURVEY RESPONSE

Thanks to everyone who took the time to complete the survey, which required some considerable thought and reflection. There were opportunities to provide free text commentary as well as rating the extent to which various statements resonated with you.

We had a particularly encouraging flurry of responses in the first 48 hours after the survey opened, with others completing it over the course of the spring vacation period.

The feedback included:

- Specific commentary from those whose primary role is teaching and learning or research
- The extent to which you found University guidance and support helpful (on topics such as staff wellbeing, working from home and technical support)
Opportunities to capture successes, achievements and what you think has worked well

Most of the responses (over 70%) were from full-time Professional Services staff who have been working remotely from home and would like to continue doing so, for at least part of the working week if their roles allow for it. A sizeable majority (68%) said they’d been carrying out home schooling and shared their experiences of the challenges (and rewards) this had brought. Fewer than a third of the responses were from colleagues in academic roles.

So although we didn’t hear from all staff, there was a lot of helpful and insightful commentary and some strong themes coming through.

WHAT DID YOU TELL US ABOUT THE PLACE(S) YOU’VE BEEN WORKING?

We invited you to share your experiences of your working environment since March 2020. In particular, we were keen to find out what you most valued about working on campus and about working from home.

If working on campus, you told us it’s important to:

- Have a comfortable, ergonomically suitable working environment, with access to fast, reliable internet access if you need it for your job
- Have somewhere to use as a workspace and to store your things
- Be able to engage and collaborate with colleagues
- Be more able to disconnect from work when you leave campus and go home

Those who have been working from home said they’ve most appreciated:

- Being able to work effectively, with the necessary equipment being made available
- Being able to plan time to devote to personal health and wellbeing, through eating healthily and exercising (often during what would have been commuting time)
- Having fewer distractions (for most, although not all, working from home)
- Being more able to combine work with responsibilities outside work

The majority of respondents expressed a keen appetite for exploring the options of a hybrid working pattern, with some days being spent working from campus and others from home.

YOUR EXPERIENCES OF TECHNOLOGY

Throughout the feedback there was a very strong theme around technology being an enabler for richer connection with colleagues and being able to work productively from home, if the role allows for it.

We received many positive comments about Microsoft Teams opening up opportunities in teaching & learning, research & innovation, meetings and conferences. A significant proportion of respondents felt that these new and unexpected changes to the way we work gave them opportunities to review and refresh their existing practice.

The technical support provided by our colleagues in IS, and the regular updates and guidance from Staff Communications were particularly well appreciated.
Encouragingly, we had very few reports of technical skills (once learnt) holding people back in their jobs.

Equally positively, many of you shared your stories about stronger collaboration between Canterbury and Medway colleagues since connecting virtually.

By contrast, we know that there have been many difficult and challenging times since March 2020. Although the majority of respondents reported improvements to their mental health and wellbeing, the feedback also included references to:

- The potential adverse impact of long-term digital engagement, leading to poor mental health and feelings of isolation for some
- Staff missing seeing colleagues in person, catching up informally and sharing ideas and insights
- The effort involved in overcoming the challenges of engaging with students in an online setting
- Time needed to prepare resources after the sudden switch to online teaching
- Some working from home set ups being fine for a short period but inadequate for the longer term
- Too much screen time and ‘Zoom fatigue’ being experienced by some
- A feeling from some that digital meetings ‘always need to have a purpose’ – you emphasised that it’s important to create opportunities for social interaction

GENERAL FEEDBACK ABOUT OUR UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Many of you felt that because of what we have all been through in the past year, as a University community we will be able to adapt well to what comes next. People felt proud of how teams had pulled together to find viable and productive ways of operating. There were encouraging comments about better and swifter problem solving abilities. Some of you also felt your planning and organisational skills had by necessity got stronger.

It was gratifying to see messages of support and appreciation for colleagues who have continued to provide essential services on campus, during all or part of the time since March 2020.

There were many examples shared of line managers and staff having open and honest conversations about how they and their teams could work together to ensure a supportive, productive working environment, building in time for virtual coffee breaks and even socially-distant lunchtime walks.

However this was not consistent across the board. There was a strong call for line managers to ensure they take time to have meaningful and regular conversations with their staff, and equally for staff to prompt their line managers if this is not happening.

WORK NOW UNDERWAY

As we’ve said, the key findings from the survey have already been shared with and discussed by EG and the JSNCC. The findings will continue to inform these discussions as we prepare for the new academic year.
Follow-up work is already underway across the University, with key stakeholders incorporating the feedback from the survey into their planning for 2021/22. This includes education, student experience, technology, space planning, staff training and development, and further opportunities for collaborative working.

In addition work is underway on:

- Continuing to develop Information and guidance from our Occupational Health colleagues on staff wellbeing and mental health, including how to access the Employee Assistance Programme
- Updating our COPE Framework, developed in response to the first lockdown and currently being refreshed to include practical tips on managing and working in a hybrid team
- Continuation of regular staff comms (for example after government announcements) and – in response to positive feedback though this survey and other channels – developing an ongoing programme of all-staff web chats where staff can ask questions and share their views
- Celebrating all that our campuses have to offer
- Developing the Hybrid Working Scheme and exploring options for new and different working patterns
- Ensuring that the EDI implications of post-pandemic working practices across Kent communities are reflected in our work (and welcoming our new central EDI team in August)
- Developing supporting resources and guides for staff and managers
- Continuing to identify and implement improvements to our processes at University and local level – the benefits of virtual meetings, even after a return to campus - being a great example of this

AND FINALLY

Thank you again to all those who fed back their thoughts, insights and suggestions about the future of Work at Kent. We hope this overview is helpful and we’ll continue to share developments with you.

Do take time, if you can, to join the all-staff web chat on 15 July which will touch on the themes highlighted in the feedback. The session will be recorded for those who are unable to join on the day.