COVID-19 Mental health risk assessment for the University of Kent

**Background**

It has been well documented in the press and the media that the Covid-19 crisis has had the capacity to impact adversely on the mental health of all of us who have lived through it. Some people struggle with the fear of catching the disease and the loneliness brought about by lockdown. Others are saying that they have benefitted from the enforced life restrictions; many people are saying that this period has stimulated them to reconsider how they want to structure their lives. For many of those with existing mental health problems the period has brought new anxieties and challenges and caused a worsening of existing symptoms. The University has staff who will fall into all the above categories and more.

In relation to work, employees have suddenly had to cope with setting up processes and equipment to work from home. Many people feel they have benefitted from this and that it has improved their work-life balance; others have found juggling work alongside home-schooling in cramped environments to be very stress-provoking. Some have struggled with having to use new technology to communicate; others have experienced raised levels of stress and physical aches and pains from working in sub-optimal conditions relative to computer work. Those who have remained working on Campus will have found the experience strange and potentially disruptive because of furlough rotas. Some teams have struggled with the pressures of significant staff resource shortages.

The Covid crisis continues as the year progresses and this continues to emphasise the challenges above and create different anxieties and concerns. Against this background employees will share many emotions with their managers related to continuing to work from home versus returning to work on Campus. Managers will need to be open to engaging on any that they are presented with. Staff may feel overworked, underworked, frustrated, worried about a return to working on Campus and the risks involved, worried about being unable to return to working on Campus, anxious about the future for themselves and their family.

Alongside and overshadowing the pressures arising from the pandemic, the University is committed to a restructuring programme in 2020 and this will affect staff employment. It will mean that some jobs will disappear, and staff put at risk will feel stress and pressure as a result. All the support and measures below will help those affected by Organising for Success. A manager may find a staff member wants to discuss the pressure from this when they engage in an interview set up to discuss returning to work on Campus. It is important that the manager deals with such concerns sensitively and sincerely.

The University has many resources in place that management can use, and that staff can access to help them through this difficult time.

**Hazards:**

- Increased levels of poor mental health and wellbeing connected to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Increased levels of poor mental health related to imminent Organising for Success restructuring

**Those at Risk:** University Staff

**Controls:** Provision of mental health and wellbeing guidance and support
1. The COPE framework and Risk Assessment and Concern Conversation

The COPE framework exists specifically to help staff deal with the pressures brought about by the challenging work environment caused by the pandemic. It functions equally well as a tool to explore continuing anxieties about work as the University prepares to bring some staff back onto Campus. This can include worries that individuals face because of the University’s Organising for Success reorganisation.

In and of itself, a COPE discussion acts as an individual mental health and wellbeing risk assessment. The framework focusses on four themes:

• Collaboration: encouraging staff and line managers to talk to each other to determine ways of working that fit the working environment staff find themselves in
• Organising workload: determining what is and is not possible for individuals, exploring ways in which pressure from work can be reduced to allow staff to meet family responsibilities, etc.
• Preparing: looking at new ways of working with practical tips about how to reduce others’ workload by keeping communications focussed and at the right people; looking at new ways, using new technology, to share information
• Enabling: pointing staff to resources that can help with their mental health and wellbeing, including to the EAP

The first point of any staff discussion about working during the coronavirus crisis should start with a COPE discussion. If the manager and individual have already had a COPE interview this can be reviewed at any stage. It should be reviewed when an individual is to return to working on Campus; this is when the manager needs to undertake a Risk Assessment and Concern Conversation. This needs to be recorded in each staff member’s Staff Connect area and any strong anxieties or issues raised need to be acted upon appropriately.

2. Psychological Wellbeing Standard incorporating the Individual Stress Risk Assessment

This University Standard is accessible from the Staff Health and Wellbeing website. It has valuable information on standards and responsibilities for stress management at the University. In addition, it includes information on mental health and wellbeing and links to resources available.

The University’s Individual Work Stress Risk Assessment template is within the Standard. This document can be used in a valuable way to help staff members articulate their worries and fears about returning to their roles on Campus or the changes affecting the University and their role within it

3. The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

The University’s EAP was put in place prior to the onset of the pandemic, but it has been widely advertised as a resource for staff during the crisis.

The EAP provides staff with free information and counselling about a wide variety of issues, including work and non-work related matters. Calls to the service are answered by qualified counsellors who assess the client’s needs. If counselling is assessed to be appropriate then a further assessment is arranged; subsequent counselling can be face-to-face, by telephone or online. Up to 8 face-to-face sessions are available. If the caller has rung for information or advice about a problem they have, then the call will be passed on to the appropriate trained specialist to assist them.
All managers should be able to guide their team members to this resource and should make themselves conversant with what is available through the EAP. All the important facts on the EAP can be found from both the Occupational Health and Staff Health and Wellbeing websites.

The EAP is provided by Sodexo/Care first and the website can be accessed via this link. These are the login details: USERNAME: uokent | PASSWORD: university

The Freephone number for the service is 0808 168 2143

All members of staff who voice incapacitating concerns about contracting coronavirus as a consequence of returning to work on Campus need to be advised to engage with the EAP for counselling support. Managers can undertake an informal management referral by taking the first step for the employee by telephoning the EAP while in a video call with the employee. The call handler can be given the personal number of the employee and call them straight back where that person can continue with the call without the manager present.

In the same way, if a person is worried about the restructuring exercise at the University, they should be encouraged to access the EAP for counselling and support.

4. **Occupational Health (OH)**

The OH team is available for advice on graduated return to work plans, if this is indicated, for a staff member returning to work on Campus. A telephone discussion may help a manager in the first instance but if a return to work plan is required then a Management Referral will be necessary, as indicated in the University’s Return to Campus Guidance for Managers.

The OH team can also provide support for staff members going through restructuring. This can be facilitated through Management or Self-referral processes, depending on the desired outcomes.

5. **Resources to increase knowledge and understanding of aspects of mental health and wellbeing**

Learning and Development have various online courses and modules available which will give managers and individuals insight into aspects of mental health and wellbeing. Access the L&OD pages on the HR website to learn more about these. There are also development courses which could be of use to those involved in the restructuring programme.

In addition, there are resources to be found on the Staff Health and Wellbeing website. These include the Staff Wellbeing Reading List, OH Covid Wellbeing blogs articles and a collation of articles and webinars available from the EAP. There is also access to the Robertson-Cooper i-resilience tool.

6. **HR Support**

Team members may present managers with concerns and questions about their contracts of employment and aspects of conditions of service affected by the coronavirus emergency. The same applies to those affected by restructuring. The experts on this are HR. Accessing their webpages should provide you with the information about who you need to contact. There is also an email address for Covid 19 related queries: hrcovid19@kent.ac.uk

7. **Support for home working**

The University has published a lot of advice on all work aspects of dealing with the coronavirus crisis, including relevant risk assessments; all this can be found on the specific pages of its website.

Resources for psychological support and wellbeing are mentioned above. This document combines information on that with links to useful material on DSE assessment set up and diet and exercise advice available from Kent Sport and external agencies. This document includes more specific advice on home DSE set up.