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

Background

The Covid-19 global pandemic has presented psychological challenges to all of us. The nature and impact of these emotional and mental health challenges differ between individuals. For some people this has resulted in increased levels of anxiety. Others are voicing and demonstrating behaviours indicative of increased levels of emotional and physical vulnerability.

The University is working within Government guidelines to reopen its campuses fully. It is still putting in place mitigations to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. The protections provided by the national vaccine programme means that those mitigations are less stringent than before.

All staff are expected to be working on Campus from the start of the new Academic Year in September 2021, although introduction of the Hybrid Working Scheme will allow some staff to work some of their week from home. This is happening while case numbers are still rising, inevitably making some people more anxious.

Against this background employees will have many thoughts and emotions that they may wish to share with their managers. 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 or continuing to work on a campus that is now busier than they have been used to, or anxious about the future for themselves and their family.

Alongside the pressures of society opening up while the virus is still active, the new academic year will see a more complete appreciation of the effects of the University’s restructuring programme.

The University has many resources in place that management can use, and that staff can access to help them through this difficult time. These are detailed in the risk assessment below.

Hazards:

- Increased levels of poor mental health and wellbeing connected to working on Campus during the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Increased levels of poor mental health related to Organising for Success restructuring

Those at Risk: University Staff

Controls: Provision of mental health and wellbeing guidance and support

1. The COPE framework

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.

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, 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

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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.

The EAP also runs webinars daily. With the anticipated normalising of working practices over the next few months, some of these will focus on the anxieties about society opening up. The schedule for the webinars is advertised weekly via Comms and on the University’s Health and Wellbeing website. Past webinars are also available from the website.

4. **University Mental Health Support**

The University has a great deal in place that staff can access to get help with mental health issues. Information on this can be found on the University Mental Health Support website.

5. **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.

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

Talent and Organisational Development have various online courses and modules available which will give managers and individuals insight into aspects of mental health and wellbeing. Access the T&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.

7. **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
8. **Support for home working**

As stated previously, the University has introduced a [Hybrid Working Scheme](#) where staff can apply to work part of their week from home. All applications will be considered locally by their management line.

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.