

# **OUR PEOPLE PRACTICES/ Impact of COVID-19 on staff contribution: Policy Statement**



## **Introduction**

We know that the last four months have been a time of great uncertainty due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The University recognises that the exceptional circumstances that have arisen as a result may have had a substantial impact on the ability of staff to perform their job roles as they would wish. This may, for example, be as a result of:

- Being directly affected by the virus either through illness, the need to self-isolate or to shield;
- Being placed on furlough and therefore unable to carry out their work;
- The restrictions on travel and interactions with others, the need to juggle work with caring responsibilities or the imposition of new virtual ways of working – all of which might affect teaching, research, profile-raising activity, or the performance of duties within professional services roles;
- A need to shift focus of activities for a time to support new ways of working and what this means for other plans and development activities;
- The challenges that the current situation may present to mental health and well-being.

We also recognise that a number of colleagues may have found the balance of their workload impacted by a need to prioritise activities related to student recruitment, education and the student experience (in particular); and that the potential impact of COVID-19 on working practices and contribution may continue into the next academic year.

This policy is intended to complement, and enhance, existing obligations, protections and procedures set out in University of Kent HR policies.

## **Policy Statement**

The University will work creatively and actively to ensure that, as far as reasonably possible, no member of staff is subjected to detrimental treatment in relation to their employment as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on them.

The University also commits that its legal and policy obligations to people with legally protected characteristics under equality legislation will be applied with regard to the various potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the University is committed to recognising the considerable efforts of many colleagues to deliver the required University response, or response to national need, as a result of the pandemic.

## **Practical Steps**

In particular, the University recognises that staff have concerns about how the University will

take account of COVID-19 in processes that, by their nature, involve evaluation of individual performance – such as promotion, probation, RPD appraisal, or selection for new positions during restructuring.

Line managers are expected to take active steps to mitigate the impact of any COVID-19-related difficulties shared by staff wherever practicable. Line managers should be guided by the [COPE Framework](#) and all decisions should be taken in consultation with the individual concerned, where necessary with the support of HR (or Occupational Health if relevant). This may mean making adjustments to expectations that had previously been set. Actions include a range of possible options, a few examples of which are<sup>1</sup>:

- agreeing changes to working practices and working patterns; including in relation to working hours;
- arranging for office equipment that would alleviate difficulties to be delivered to an individual's home address where they are working from home;
- arranging for the installation of specialist software on home computers or laptops to help them work more effectively;
- arranging specialist training on new ways of working;
- putting in place additional support in the form of WAM adjustments for academic staff;
- re-prioritising or reassigning duties or individual tasks;
- reviewing the appropriateness and/or relevance of objectives that had been set prior to the pandemic, in view of changed circumstances.

Individuals have a choice about the information they share with line managers and decision-makers about the personal impact of the pandemic on their capacity to work. Information that is shared will be treated confidentially and will not be used in the context of other evaluative processes. In addition, evaluative employment processes will offer staff an opportunity to explain any factors related to COVID-19, broadly defined, which they believe may have negatively impacted on their performance, or to provide a context in which it is important to understand their achievements<sup>2</sup>.

Managers who then need to make recommendations and/or decisions that take into account performance/contribution/organisational participation of staff impacted by the pandemic (including where appropriate University panels and committees) will adopt one or more of a number of possible options, recognising that people may have been impacted in a wide variety of ways that may intersect with existing challenges, personal circumstances and protected characteristics. Relevant actions may include:

- where beneficial, allowing individuals additional time to evidence that they have reached identified performance standards - for example those outlined in the Academic Career Map, or set through RPD objectives;
- reducing the expectations of an individual, where it is possible to do so without compromising overall quality or standards as an institution. In this circumstance the decision-making panels will look at evidence of performance prior to the start of the COVID-19 restrictions<sup>3</sup> and will assess whether individuals had reached, or were close to reaching, identified performance standards, as well as considering the trajectory of

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<sup>1</sup> See the COPE Framework resource pack for more tips and guidance

<sup>2</sup> The University is also currently reviewing its overall guidance on the treatment of mitigating circumstances, of which the impact of COVID-19 is just one example. New guidance and processes will be developed and submitted to JSNCC for consultation [in autumn 2020].

<sup>3</sup> For these purposes we are using the date of 14 March 2020. We have chosen this date because as is when the national guidelines in respect of non-essential contact, restricted travel and social distancing were put in place.

the individual concerned. For example, this may involve considering what the individual might reasonably have been expected to achieve if the pandemic had not occurred;

- highlighting and recognising individual responses to the new challenges that have been created by COVID-19, and individual achievements in relation to these - making sure these receive due credit, and are recorded, in their evaluations of contribution. Academic promotion and probation templates will be amended to facilitate this, but such contributions will be recognised even where other standard templates may not appear to encourage it.