

Durham UCU Position on Covid-19

We note the FAQs made available on the University website at <https://www.dur.ac.uk/notices/coronavirus/> and also that University management has been engaging with the campus trade unions on the developing Covid-19 situation. We ask that proactive engagement continues, and that the views of the trade unions be considered seriously and incorporated into planning decisions.

Health and Safety

Covid-19 is a direct threat to health of staff and students, especially those with underlying conditions which make them more vulnerable. DUCU is pleased that the University's first priority is to protect the health and well-being of staff and students. We welcome the University's guidance that staff will be paid if they made an informed decision to self-isolate and it is imperative that management decisions in this regard are applied consistently across the University and across all staff, irrespective of contractual status and including the hourly-paid.

Where a member of staff has already taken sick leave for other reasons and Covid-19 leads to an additional period of sick leave, this should not be subject to the usual time limitations for payments. The University needs also to ensure that normal health and safety is not undermined by absence of staff from work. We are glad to hear that post-offer visit days have been cancelled. Although we appreciate the need to ensure healthy recruitment for the new academic year, this must be balanced against the risks to staff, students and visitors alike, and we ask to see evidence demonstrating the safety of the activity.

Loss of Income

If there are changes to work planned for hourly-paid staff, for example if some teaching or assessment is cancelled or alternative arrangements are made, there is a possibility that they may lose pay. DUCU calls on the University to guarantee that there will be no loss of income in such cases.

Caring duties

For some staff, the Covid-19 pandemic will mean an increase in caring duties, for example to look after relatives who are ill or in isolation or to look after children who may not be able to attend nursery or school as usual. The University needs to guarantee that staff will be able to prioritise caring where needed without financial or other penalty.

Workload

DUCU recognises that Covid-19 poses a real threat to the University's ability to provide education to students and to conduct assessments and that there is a need for some flexibility in relation to these areas of work. However, UCU nationally is in dispute with UCEA over workload and other issues and DUCU members are currently taking industrial action as part of this dispute and the dispute with UUK over the USS pension scheme. Excessive workload leads to stress which increases susceptibility to infection. Therefore, adjustments to working patterns must not significantly increase workload in the short term and any increase in workload in relation to Covid-19 must be compensated for by a reduction in workload in other areas.

We feel that the University must also recognise that working at home often poses additional challenges in terms of technology, lack of access to items held in offices at work, availability of suitable spaces for working and freedom to concentrate on work

tasks. Therefore the University must not expect that staff will be able to carry out their usual work, or an adjusted version of it, in the same amount of time. We note that staff may not have access to high-speed broadband or may incur additional costs for increased use; all such costs should be met by the University. Furthermore, if large-scale changes to teaching and other service delivery are anticipated for the new academic year, concrete assurance must be given that adequate time for all staff affected will be made available, bearing in mind that there may be large numbers of staff unavailable because of illness and that it is imperative for other aspects of staff well-being that annual leave is taken. Thus, there must be significant changes to normal bureaucracy and administrative duties, and expectations surrounding research must be tempered, with the University taking proactive steps to do so, such as negotiating with funding bodies for extensions.

Consultation

DUCU calls on University management to continue to engage with DUCU in relation to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and for frequent meetings to monitor and assess workload and other working conditions. In addition, as a sign to staff that the University understands and values their commitment and willingness to be flexible in order to protect the education of students, we call on the University to express direct and public support to UCEA and UUK for a negotiated settlement with UCU for the current disputes.

Francis Pritchard
Hon. Secretary
Durham UCU

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