

Higher Education Joint statement on Covid-19

UCEA and the EIS, GMB, UNISON and Unite have come together to agree this joint statement for the HE sector regarding staffing issues associated with Covid-19. We are aware that this is a fast-moving situation. The overarching approach in this statement is that institutions and unions seek to work together to help the sector navigate the staffing issues created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The parties to this joint statement are aware that HEIs have been working extremely hard to respond effectively to the risks posed by Covid-19. Given the diversity in the sector, it will be important for individual HEIs to develop their own local responses, tailored to their unique staff, student and operational profiles; however, we believe that all HEIs will benefit from partnership working between the employers and their recognised local trade union representatives.

In developing this joint statement, we have sought to collate the key issues that HEIs should consider, with reference to their local trade union partners, as well as relevant sources of information. The situation is changing on a rapid basis, and we understand that HEIs will want to be fully prepared to engage their staff.

In developing local plans in response to Covid-19, employers should continue consulting and following the latest guidance and advice issued by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Public Health England (PHE), Health Protection Scotland (HPS), Health Protection Wales (HPW) and the Health and Social Care Public Health agency in Northern Ireland (PHA), as appropriate, alongside advice from local infection prevention and control specialists.

The issues for consideration below are subject to the availability of the relevant staff and may be revised in the light of developments or changes in Government advice.

Key issues for consideration

- Ensuring that any communication channels that HEIs have established in respect Covid-19 reach all staff groups, including any workers employed by an outsourced services provider.
- Ensuring that all staff and representatives are aware of procedures for the care of, and response to, suspected or confirmed cases of Covid-19.
- Ensuring that relevant risks and Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) assessments have been reviewed to identify who may be at risk of harm, how this may arise and identifying what measures can be put in place to control the risks with reference to PHE (or devolved equivalent) guidelines. This should include, where necessary, the provision of gender-sensitive personal protective equipment.
- Ensuring adequate provision of soap, paper towels, hand sanitiser, tissues and bins.
- Organising an enhanced programme of cleaning, concentrating on “touch points”.
- Ensuring effective procedures are in place to allow staff and representatives to raise any concerns at the earliest opportunity in relation to facilities, policies and processes for managing Covid-19. Ensuring staff feel able to raise concerns without detriment, and that feedback is given to staff on the outcome. While the expectation is that staff should raise their concerns with their line managers / supervisors in the first instance, they should be made aware of alternative local routes for raising concerns.
- Where staff are being asked to work from home, or in other alternative locations, in response to changes in the way that the HEI’s operations are conducted due to Covid-19, appropriate consideration should be given to risk assessment, the provision of equipment, and the mental and physical health of staff working in alternative locations. Consideration should also be given to how staff can remain connected with each other, with regular opportunities for virtual contact.

- Where staff are parents or carers, consideration should be given to how staff can work from home when schools are closed. In addition to the ability to work from home, consideration may also need to be given to flexibility in working hours. This should be balanced against the need to ensure the delivery of operations and services.
- In line with Government guidance, identifying business critical roles to ensure only essential services are operating. Where staff working in those roles have underlying health conditions, ensuring risk assessments are carried out and official guidelines are followed accordingly.
- Where staff are suspected or confirmed to have contracted Covid-19, ensuring their personal details are treated as confidential, and that staff are reminded of their duty to protect the confidentiality of other members of staff.
- Ensuring Government advice on staff travel is communicated widely.
- Where staff or members of their household are required to self-isolate, clearly communicating pay arrangements during this period of absence. Where staff are being paid under contractual sick pay arrangements, consideration should be given to treating any absence as related to compliance with national infection control guidance, rather than counting towards any sickness absence policy triggers.