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August 20, 2020

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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

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## **The Independent SAGE Report 9**

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### **Independent SAGE-Behaviour Group Consultation Statement on Universities in the context of SARS-CoV-2**

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain  
& Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser,  
UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

## Independent SAGE-Behaviour Group Consultation Statement on Universities in the context of SARS-CoV-2

### Executive Summary

We recommend that to protect the safety of students, staff and prevent community infections all University courses should be offered remotely and online, unless they involve practical training or lab work

1. Universities should focus on providing excellent quality remote learning rather than on opening up campuses that are likely to close again
2. For students who are studying from home the government should provide support through local Covid-safe study hubs and grants for technology and wifi
3. If students have to attend campus a Covid-safe university should be secured through:
  - i. Testing on or before arrival on campus followed up by further regular testing of students and staff
  - ii. Online welcome week and teaching in the first two weeks of term along with restrictions of social activities among students where feasible
  - iii. Mitigations in classrooms including masks, social distancing of two meters as the norm and regular cleaning
  - iv. Residential bubbles
  - v. a social agreement of Covid-safe behaviours on campus. This should cover students, teachers and all university support staff
  - vi. full consultation with University staff, rigorous health and safety procedures and attention to equality and diversity issues

We believe that these measures are essential in order to deliver the best education to students, while also preventing clusters of infection and transmission to local communities of Covid-19. Without these it is unlikely that universities can realistically deliver on their mission to provide the best student educational experience.

### Overview

This autumn will see the mass movement and migration of millions of people to university campuses and towns. This will affect not just university employees and students but also the communities within the towns and cities and hosting these universities. This consultation report sets out recommendations for best practice regarding the behavioural implementation of and adherence to measures for a **Zero Covid University** and a **Covid-Safe Student Experience** ahead of the new university terms across the UK in Sept/Oct 2020.

The risks are tangible. In the last week, two US universities, University of North Carolina and University of Notre Dame have had to shut down on-campus teaching soon after the start of the academic year due to COVID outbreaks. In at least one case, this was due to lack of infection control at social events.

## Key Recommendations for a Zero Covid University and a Covid-Safe Student Experience

Becoming a student involves far more than timetabled hours of teaching and learning. Universities UK (UUK) measures the 'student experience' in terms of the social and cultural dimensions via student societies, facilities, sports, and social life. Many students move to another town to attend university rather than attend their local HEI for multiple reasons. To enable this important rite of passage, we recommend the following:

- Independent SAGE challenges UUK's position that students should be offered "significant in-person teaching" on the basis that in-person modes of delivery carry the most risk of transmission (prolonged interactions in enclosed indoor spaces). They are also the most disruptive for staff and student planning and workload intensity alongside off-on lockdown measures, Covid-19 infection, isolation, and sickness.
- We recommend maximizing the remote delivery of and participation in degree programmes for all but lab-based or practice-based programmes and/or student/staff support services that cannot be delivered online, with semester-by-semester or term-by-term review points, planned well ahead.
- While universities should "be cautious when abandoning conventional, in-person and socializing model"<sup>i</sup>, we also recommend that universities invest in creative, innovative technological solutions for the longer-term. Rather than regarding remote learning as 'reduced quality' by default, research shows the opposite can be the case<sup>ii</sup>. The demonstration of innovative and effective online academic experiences is also led by young researchers<sup>iii</sup> (e.g., PhD students), so online learning modes may involve students directly shaping their learning experiences as well as wider Covid-Safe campus policies.
- For students, enabling remote learning requires extensive government support for digital accessibility and safe remote working. A programme should be implemented via funding from the government through universities to provide equipment, and faster broadband accessibility. In addition, universities should check with their students that they have access to workspaces at home and to equipment. If they do not have workspaces then the government should consider setting up smaller local hubs for University students to study in. We suggest that these should be local libraries, which need to be funded and made safe for study.

Where University courses involve lab-based work or courses with practical elements (such as performing arts, sciences, arts courses we recommend the following practices to create a Covid-Safe University:

- A **clear strategy** for testing of students and staff to minimise university-related spread. We recognise that UK universities will vary with regard to on-site testing facilities, and relationships to local health services and public health agencies. Some are within large cities and others on remote campuses. Halls of residence are likely to be a main source of spread. Mindful of this variation, we recommend that there is a low threshold for testing, which could be undertaken routinely, also in conjunction with temperature checks on entering buildings. There needs to be clear clinical and public health oversight to ensure appropriate advice, action and support can be provided for those testing positive. Care is needed to ensure students testing positive are able to quarantine appropriately, and that their educational disadvantage is minimised. Such testing programmes are also being undertaken on university campuses globally.
- UK students should also be asked to restrict face to face activities and social interactions for the first two weeks of term. Interactions should be within residential bubbles and online classes and welcome activities should be offered.

- To achieve a Covid-Safe University, levels, modes, and types of activity on campus should be calibrated to the good/poor TTI practices at local airports/borders; established and functioning TTI locally, and low community transmission (less than 2/1000 on campus and surrounding towns). On this basis, and as of August 2020, universities vary in whether they can plan for, and/or should be enabling or minimizing, on-campus working for its staff and students.
- For university towns and cities, where students represent large proportions of the population, transport authorities should consider laying on increased number of buses and trains to and from campus to support social distancing

## 1. Why are we focusing on Universities rather than any other large organization?

Universities present specific challenges regarding COVID-19 safety in addition to those faced by other large organizations (see Independent SAGE's **COVID-19 Safe Workplace Charter**) and schools for the following reasons:

- Core to university operations is the mass movement and mass migration of a million or more people around the world, at multiple points of the year (at least the start and end of every term, if not more frequently). A report from the Department for Education (DfE) to SAGE in June 2020 included the following implications:
  - a. "Students moving from their family households to set up new, temporary households during term time, and will want to return to their family households at the end of term. This may vary from small shared households with fully mixed living environments, to large scale university accommodation blocks;
  - b. "Additional pressure on public transport infrastructure around universities, particularly if there is a continued need to limit capacity to preserve social distancing;
  - c. "Commuter students, who travel regularly to university from home. About 25% of full-time undergraduate students are now commuter students. In 2018, in 10 universities, including City University London, University of Wolverhampton and University of Bradford, more than 50% of students lived in the parental home.
  - d. "International students arriving from overseas will create a further potential impact on the transmission of the virus, although some students, depending on the country they are arriving from, will have to comply with a 14 day self-isolation expectations upon arrival to the UK"<sup>iv</sup>.
- Universities also vary greatly in their physical organization, from central city to campus locations, connected to large and smaller towns and cities, with larger and smaller international populations, and many or few postgraduate students, making implementation of consistent safe behaviours complex.
- Most students in the UK are under 25 and therefore more likely to be asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19, and thus undetected. There is a concern that the spread may be masked by so-called 'Freshers' flu'. Further, there is increasing evidence of a surge of infections in young people which has led to WHO issuing a specific warning<sup>v</sup>
- Most students are in the age group which the latest data shows has the lowest level of both complete and partial compliance with social distancing rules.
- Around the world, many of our recommendations have been implemented outside of the UK

In addition:

- Unlike school-aged students, university students are adults with more resources and more autonomy to decide where to travel to, where to live, etc., including whether or not to travel to their parental home if they fall ill.
- If campus facilities are closed, this “may prompt staff and students to visit external cafés or travel home to eat, which could lead to higher risk of transmission.” In other words, universities will likely have to consider risks in the community, not just on campus.<sup>viii</sup>
- Local spikes in COVID-19 cases may be attributed (accurately or not) to imported students (including in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, where cases will be readily attributable to English and international students), leading to local resentment, conflict, weakened town/gown relations.
- The heterogeneity of University populations intensifies opportunities for targeted stigma (e.g., against students from China in the first wave), and of difficult relationships between students leading to blame culture.
- Also core to University operations is a particular intensity, variety, number, and duration of (teaching) interactions, with constantly changing populations, in enclosed indoor spaces, increasing the likelihood of ‘superspreader events’.
- Students also socialise together - in each other's rooms, in university bars, at parties, at sports and other clubs, with alcohol.
- Students may be reluctant to get tested if it means they and their friends must isolate for 14 days. There may be further reluctance for contacts to isolate - especially if they are repeatedly contacted for different cases.
- There is potential to make assumptions about what motivates people (e.g., the erroneous concept of ‘behavioural fatigue’) leading to stereotyped assumptions about what students want (hence this consultation, in part) and what they will and will not adhere to mitigating behaviours.

In short, what happens on campus has direct implications for the wider populations in the town, city, regional, and (inter)national communities that Universities operate within.

## **2. Policy, practice, and procedural challenges**

The Chief Executive of Universities UK, Alistair Jarvis, stated that “most students can expect significant in-person teaching and a wide range of social activities and support services [with] an engaging academic and social experience”<sup>vii</sup>.

At the same time, “the National Union of Students (NUS) says a third of students are worried about safety, staff are inevitably starting to raise concerns, and there are growing worries about the ability of Estates Directors to actually create COVID-secure campuses as our understanding of viral transmission improves.”<sup>viii</sup> Media reports from the UK and overseas are already reporting ‘blame and shame’ stories about student and policy U-turns<sup>ix</sup>.

The UUK commitment to the provision of in-person teaching is driving the need to address complex logistical and behavioural practices and mitigations. In England, where students pay fees<sup>x</sup>, market forces have resulted in a focus on maintaining quality of ‘student experience’ in terms of teaching and learning (rather than other aspects such as social life, or sports). This has produced a mixed picture of teaching and learning and with universities in different positions with regards to what they are able to offer. While some have stated that, for example, all lectures will be online-only<sup>xi</sup>, others are adopting hybrid models, increasing the likelihood of constant disruption as cases increase and decrease alongside on-off local and national lockdowns.

With the drive to ensure students take up places, use campus facilities and accommodation, there is a strong drive to operate 'business as usual', in contrast to many universities elsewhere. This means that there is potential to focus less on the health and safety of staff required to deliver the student experience: academic / research staff, professional services (including frontline student-facing services), estates & facilities, IT, and contracted staff (e.g., cleaners). Thus, Independent SAGE recommends minimizing in-person teaching to essential lab- and practice-based teaching and student support services, where online is not practical, unless COVID-19 cases are established as less than 2/1000 on campus and surrounding towns.

Currently, there is significant variation in approaches by regional public health authorities causing confusion and cumulative imprecision, which hinders behavioural implementation. For example:

1. There is a lack of clarity and consistency around testing and containment, particularly for Universities that have campuses that cross boundaries or have campuses in multiple regions.
2. There is variation across the UK in how Universities are planning for core activities such as in-person teaching in enclosed indoor spaces.
3. There is no consistent guidance about likely maximum numbers that can gather in COVID secure premises, including student societies, sports fixtures, drama, music, debating, and so on.
4. Universities often comprise tens or hundreds of separate buildings which vary enormously in their affordances or constraints for physical distancing and reducing aerosol transmission via inconsistent ventilation abilities.
5. What counts as a household, a bubble, and a gathering, is complex and varied<sup>xii</sup>. For instance, a 'hall' or 'household' bubble is unlikely to overlap with multiple seminar or tutorial group bubbles.
6. Segmentation is not possible as in schools as students take courses in different departments and any such division would require a drastic change in course requirements and structure that cannot be made at short notice.
7. Like elsewhere in the population, there is a need to balance the risk of student mental health linked to isolation versus risk of transmission.

### **3. Recommendations for a Zero Covid University**

The aims of the measures suggested below are to mitigate risk and create strong social norms; that is, a collective sense of responsibility and personal agency to avoid university closures. It is crucial to have clear and consistent messaging about policies, practices, and procedures, across all channels (see Appendix B for an exemplar strategy). There must also be clear procedures for implementation in behaviourally specific terms – who needs to do what, where, and when, rather than agentless information 'dumps' or emails.

Clear policies and practices will make it easier for students from different countries to come to the UK knowing that these are in place to protect them both from COVID-19 (and other SARS) and from attacks by those who blame them if there is a spike due to a lack of planning and implementation.

#### **a. For staff who cannot work from home and before students arrive on campus:**

Note: 'Staff' refers to all job families including academic and research staff, professional services, estates and facilities, IT, contracted staff (e.g., cleaners) and 'students' refers to UG, PGT, PGR.

- Survey all staff to assess their needs, concerns, and preferences around working on campus and teaching in person, where in-person contact (e.g., lab and practice-based courses; some student services) is necessary to deliver programmes.

- Conduct mandatory testing of UK students either before they come to campus or as soon as they arrive on campus. All university staff should also be tested at the start of term. This process should utilise university based, community, health service or public health led testing initiatives. We recommend regular testing to capture asymptomatic infections, and also as a mechanism to identify potential outbreaks. The precise details of the testing and monitoring regime should be determined in advance of campus opening, and considering local testing facilities, and risk assessment. There needs to be clear clinical and public health oversight to ensure appropriate advice, action and support can be provided for those testing positive.
- All students, including UK students, should also be asked to restrict social interactions for two weeks maintaining residential bubbles and they should attend online classes and welcome events to prevent infection
- Include a statement on adhering to quarantine in student codes of conduct (including disciplinary procedures if breaking of quarantine after a positive test result).
- Make pre-registration (for students) online training and information mandatory for all. Advise students for the two weeks before they come onto campus how they can practice safer Covid-19 behaviours in the lead up to their attendance at University.
- Include a 'Social Agreement for a Safer Campus' pledge (see example in Appendix A) in pre-registration and online training. The contract, of mutual responsibility for each other's health and well-being, should focus on support and respect rather than shame and blame, but include how to intervene if people are behaving irresponsibly and possible disciplinary measures.

#### **b. Implementation on campus for students and staff:**

- Monitor students daily during quarantine and provide support to self-isolating students (e.g., delivering meals on campus and to other accommodation; conduct well-being checks via phone or video chat).
- Provide regular check-in support to self-isolating staff in all job families.
- Align mandatory use of face coverings on university sites with mandatory use of face coverings in public transport/shops.
- Publish and publicize consistent guidance on 2m distancing practices.
- Identify flows of students and staff around campus which ensure that social distancing can be maintained
- Ensure clear information and implementation of hygiene/disinfection guidance for lecture theatres, residential buildings, offices, restaurants (e.g., Use booking systems in libraries and ensure cleaning takes place at the end of each time slot).
- "SPIMO is working on the assumption that as part of efforts to manage social distancing effectively, universities should be planning to "timetable effectively in a way that staggers arrival and departure times in a way that will also reduce pressure on public transport to an extent."<sup>xiii</sup>
- Establish clear guidance for how to configure new households in halls and other shared accommodation.
- Ensure a clear strategy and implementation regarding "bubbles", households, and gatherings. On bubbles, SAGE has "consistently advised caution" around the application of bubbles, but for universities recommends that the term "bubble" is not used – instead, where it can be done, referring to "segmenting of the population" instead.<sup>xiv</sup>
- For catering outlets, follow national guidance, but maximize takeaway and eating outside.
- Follow individual risk assessments mutually agreed with each member of staff to the direct implications for individual shared or sole-occupied offices and related working environments (e.g., kitchens, bathrooms).
- For all measures, including risk assessments, take Equality and Diversity issues into account so as to protect and support students and employees.

### **c. Planning for essential in-person teaching (e.g., lab- and practice-based subjects) and other in-person contact with students:**

Minimal in-person teaching will reduce the likely ramifications of in-person and hybrid models for staff and students who may develop symptoms and need to self-isolate or may at any point be subject to local lockdown, requiring a constant reorganizing of whatever face-to-face teaching has been organized, including last-minute personnel and room changes. It would mitigate the intensification of work for staff by removing unnecessary duplication of (largely teaching) effort that risks burnout. Some of the rhetoric about the need for in-person teaching rests on incorrect assumptions about the reduced quality of online communication.<sup>xv</sup>.

Furthermore, while measures to reduce all modes of transmission in teaching spaces may be in place, reviews of evidence from Independent SAGE strongly suggest that online delivery should be the norm rather than the exception (with exceptions as above: lab-based sciences, drama, practice based learning like medicine or teacher training) with termly review points.

Where sustained contact between staff and students is essential, including student support provision.

- Provide information (per-room risk assessments) about safe ventilation, equipment (e.g. PPE), and so on, to staff and students to ensure that key health and safety measures are not left to individual interpretation, assessment, or choice.
- Publish thresholds of infection within certain subjects/labs which would require closing of that facility, or a stop to face-to-face teaching and moving online (but what are implications for this acting as a disincentive to get tested if you are close to threshold?)

### **d. Equality and Diversity Impact Assessments**

- Ensure that all measures introduced to deal with COVID-19 on campus are viewed through an Equality and Diversity perspective by conducting regular EDI assessments, including the implications for caring responsibilities/gender, and are systematically embedded in Return to Campus processes.
- Regularly survey staff across all job families and career stages to elicit and act upon concerns, preferences, personal risk situation, caring responsibilities leading to an individual risk assessment mutually agreed with each relevant member of staff.
- Implement an explicit COVID social agreement in the campus community, which makes everyone responsible for each other's health but at the same time counteracts blame narratives. There may also need to be targeted comms led by University comms teams to prevent and counteract any blame narratives that emerge
- Ensure a social media code of conduct is in place to mitigate conspiracy theories online leading to offline attacks.

### **e. Ensuring an Equal Learning Environment for Non-Campus Based Students**

For the students who are not attending university there needs to be a joined-up policy initiative between government and educational institutions. This would assure access to technology, study materials and safe spaces for students not on campus. Lack of these will particularly affect the most disadvantaged students who may live in cramped homes, or areas that do not have access to fast broadband and cannot afford technologies. We recommend:

- The Government makes available a means tested student-at-home fund to which students can apply for grants to support home learning

- The University surveys its students who are studying at home to check they have adequate provision and encourages students who do not have these to apply for government funds
- The Government makes it a priority to fund and make Covid-safe local libraries in which at home students can study safely. Local libraries have been decimated in funding cuts over the past ten years and now need immediate large-scale investment. If this is not possible other 'study-hubs' created within the large amounts of empty offices and retail space in high streets should be provided. These can be used as long as infection rates remain low in the local area.
- The Government should immediately invest in and deliver on digital inclusion strategies and a nationally standard subsidised or free-to-students fast broadband service.

### Caveat

In this paper we have not discussed the situation of further education colleges as these do not involve such large-scale movements of people as for Universities. However, they merit further discussion especially as they provide education for disadvantaged young adults. We will consider this in the future.

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## Appendix A

### Social Contract for a Safer Campus

Professor Laura Bear, Dr Claire Gordon and Nyssa Lee-Woolf, L.S.E

We the [Insert University/College name here] Community in order to form a safer union, establish care for each other, ensure a supportive learning environment and keep ourselves well consent to this agreement.

- We will recognize the rights of everyone to a caring environment that supports their physical and mental well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond
- You will consent to the guidelines below to ensure this
- Together we will join with all LSE employees and students to create a safer campus
- While this preserves the rights of all of us, it will especially protect groups and individuals who face particular risk of contracting Covid-19.
- We will at all times prioritise support for each other and help individuals and groups to overcome any disadvantages they may face

We agree this union founded on the following principles and practices:

#### **Caring for each other**

- Recognising everyone is an equal member of the community whether teacher, student, administrator, cleaner or security worker. Everyone should be extended the same respect and support
- Not being judgemental about each other. We agree not to blame or stigmatise groups or individuals. For example if they become unwell with Covid-19 or are not able to follow all protective behaviours due to reasons of disability or medical exemption.
- Helping your fellow students whether on campus, online or in halls, especially if they are in difficulties or don't understand procedures.

#### **Supporting each other**

- Remember that there are lots of people who want to support you. If you are a student reach out and access support from your department, Student Wellbeing, halls of residences and across LSE when you need it. Keep in touch with mentors, join peer study groups and house systems so you can look out for each other. If you are an employee do reach out to colleagues, your line manager and Wellbeing services.
- Identify a workplace, or if you are student a class/seminar, buddy. Offer them help if they cannot attend work or class and agree to check in with each other if they are absent from online or face to face sessions. Help your buddy to catch up on any missed work and stay in touch with them

## **Ensuring Health for All**

### **If I experience Covid-19 symptoms I will:**

- Immediately contact the NHS, the [Insert University/College name here] testing service
- Contact if I am a student my mentor, class teachers and class/seminar buddy even if my symptoms are mild (bearing in mind that younger people often have less severe symptoms). Or if I am an employee contact my line manager and work buddy
- Isolate myself from contact with others even if I am only experiencing minor symptoms
- Only participate in teaching or work remotely and online
- Follow LSE guidance on its current test, track and trace programme
- Follow all the current UK Government and LSE instructions on quarantine, isolation and contact tracing
- Cooperate with messages and calls from contact tracers and answer questions about contacts completely and honestly

### **To ensure the safety of myself and others I will:**

- Wear masks in all University facilities, including classrooms, departments, workplaces, places of worship, dining facilities (unless eating), and residential halls (except in assigned room) and on University premises
- Physically distance, maintaining at least two meters separation between myself and others in all University premises at all times that this is possible
- Follow all guidelines for dining safely including distancing both inside and outside
- Agree to follow current guidelines on socialising issued by the UK government
- Receive a flu vaccine from [Insert University/College name here] or my doctor
- Follow all health and safety practices required or recommended by the University, such as hand-washing often
- Consult and follow current UK government guidance about quarantine or testing requirements if I leave campus once I return from my travel
- Seek accommodations from the Disability and Well-being Service if I am unable to follow the University's procedures

### **To ensure mutual respect I will:**

- Report the Covid-19 illness of others if, and only if, I have their explicit permission
- Not spread rumours about the illness of others
- Support others if they are unwell with Covid-19, as I would hope to be supported by them in turn

**Addendum:** Clause to be added in for relations between Students/ Class Seminar Teachers.  
This contract can be discussed and signed in the first online or in person teaching session.

### **Learning safely and with equality**

In order to create a safer learning environment, I agree to:

- Observe all safety guidelines and following safe practices in classes and seminars
- Follow campus guidance on distancing, one-way systems, queues etc
- Support my class/seminar leaders to help everybody stay safe in the classroom
- Agree to arrive on time to classes/seminar whether face to face or online
- Prepare before classes/seminars with reading and/or online activities
- Ensure that no one dominates discussions and listens with care to fellow students
- Follow instructions for the use of technology in the classroom and online including rules on using chat and break-out rooms
- No use of mobile phones and/or laptops unless needed for learning activities in face to face class/seminar
- Contributing in each class/seminar
- Valuing all contributions in and out of the classroom
- Ending class discussions on time
- Talking to my class/seminar teacher if I do not feel safe for any reason

## **Principles for organisational communication for universities and related organisations in the context of Covid-19**

### **Overview**

This document provides and explains key principles to direct organisation-wide communications strategies during Covid-19. The principles apply for communication with all staff groups and students. The principles articulate an overarching strategy along with best practice recommendations.

The reduction of transmission of Covid-19 is multi-factorial. New behavioural norms are needed to minimize transmission and establish 'Zero Covid' whilst also keeping people working together safely and without unnecessary concerns. The effectiveness of all strategies aimed at establishing these new behavioural norms depends upon messaging that is strong, clear, and consistent.

However, messaging never merely provides factual information<sup>i</sup>. Along with what is directly stated, communications unavoidably convey all sorts of assumptions (the subtext, indirect meanings, implications, etc.) and so these principles recommend that content creators focus on both direct and tacit messaging. They are underpinned by research evidence about what constitutes effective communication<sup>ii</sup>.

This document is intended to be Covid-19 specific, but is also applicable to other large-scale and disruptive challenges that organisations may encounter and must deal with.

## Principles – in summary

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### A: OVERARCHING STRATEGY

Develop and implement an overarching strategy that is consistent and that avoids bundling very different messages from different leaders within the organisation.

A coordinated and mutually reinforcing strategy with a clear accountability structure should:

- Avoid conflicting messages or messages that bundle contrastive kinds of news or information.
- Ensure that core messaging runs consistently through the different modalities for different audiences.
- Be role-modelled by staff and student leaders.

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### B: EXPLICITLY AND TACITLY CONVEY WHAT THE ORGANISATION KNOWS, ASSUMES, AND EXPECTS OF ITS STAFF AND STUDENTS

Design messaging and guidance that explicitly and tacitly conveys what the organisation does - or should – know, assume, and expect of its staff and students.

Convey:

- That the organisation wants and expects staff and students to have agency and be in control of, and responsible for, their working life.
- The organisation's position on whether and how staff and students are working.
- The organisation's stance on staff and student psychological states and responses: avoid implying that people are disproportionate or irrational when their responses are grounded in scientific evidence about actual risk.

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### C: EXPLICITLY AND TACITLY CONVEY THE ORGANISATION'S CHARACTER, IDENTITY AND CORE STANCE ON COVID-19

Design messaging and guidance that explicitly and tacitly conveys what is, or should be, the organisation's character and identity, and its core stance on Covid-19.

Convey that the organisation:

- Recognises that Covid-19 presents an actual medical risk to staff, students, their loved ones, and the local community, and that the risks vary across individuals.
- Is proactive, decisive, independent, in control, and accountable.
- Is open and honest about the nature of the news it communicates.
- Is fully aware of, and is proactively planning for, the evolving and fluctuating nature of Covid-19 risks.

## Detailed recommendations

### ***A. Develop and implement an overarching strategy that is consistent and that avoids bundling very different messages from different leaders within the organisation***

- 1. Develop a coordinated and mutually reinforcing strategy, with a clear accountability structure. The strategy should avoid conflicting messages, and avoid messages that bundle contrastive types of tone, news, and information:**
  - a. Do not broadcast information about individuals' or the organisation's successes and support measures (including for particularly affected staff/students) on the same day, nor in same bundle as information likely to be perceived as bad news, such as about financial shortfalls or redundancies. Doing so is likely to be perceived as dishonest, and as trying to 'bury bad news'.
  - b. Given there are multiple and diverse staff and student groups, produce separate guidance and messaging for different audiences whilst keeping core messaging clear and consistent.
  - c. Ensure that all high-level messages are accompanied by a Q&A opportunity led by the content creator or their colleagues (ideally via a remote video platform which can be recorded, and which affords multi-channel communication via video-on, video-off, chat, etc.) so that immediate queries can be addressed.
  - d. Do not send important messages on a Friday: send on a Monday.

### ***B. Design messaging and guidance that explicitly and tacitly conveys what the organisation does - or should – know, assume, and expect of its staff and students***

- 2. Explicitly convey and tacitly imply the organisations' knowledge, assumptions, and expectations about its staff and students:**
  - a. Compose messaging for the majority, not the minority.
    - i. Shape communications to both implicitly assume and explicitly convey that staff/students are competent, trustworthy, have the best intentions, are trying their best, and will act in good faith.
  - b. Where messaging or guidance is intended to address, or to support those who are addressing staff or students whose competence, behaviour, good will, or performance is at issue, make it clear that the organisations sees them as exceptions and as a small minority.
- 3. Convey that the organisation wants and expects staff and students to exercise control and responsibility for themselves and their working life, and will support them in doing so:**
  - a. This is likely to be the most effective way of maximising the number of staff/students committing to in-person work/study on campus.
  - b. Avoid paternalism, infantilization, and blanket orders.

- i. Given that the mitigating behaviours to reduce transmission of COVID-19 involve social isolation, avoid messaging that isolates individuals further (e.g., by excluding opportunities for discussion).
- c. Maximize people's sense of agency. For instance, given that universities cannot accommodate all staff or students at the same time on the same day for the same duration, elicit and harness preferences and enable those who want to work/study on campus to do so.
- d. Regularly survey staff and students to encourage feedback and dialogue, and elicit views, preferences, and needs.
- e. Provide an anonymous whistle-blower portal so that staff and students can report concerns – including concerns about risk management and risk-taking practices amongst staff or students.

**4. Explicitly and tacitly convey the organisation's position on whether and how staff and students are working/studying.**

- a. If messaging is to staff and students who the organisation expects to be working/studying when they are at home, avoid messaging that could be read as implying they are not. Hence:
  - i. Avoid 'back to' or 'return to'.
  - ii. Avoid conflating return to campus with return to work.
- b. Communicate positive messages about new norms and practices, including positive news about innovations in remote working and learning.

**5. Explicitly and tacitly convey the organisation's stance on their staff members' and students' psychological/emotional state and responses, be aware that good communications will people's concerns about risks as grounded in facts and evidence about real dangers, avoid implying their concerns are disproportionate, or even irrational.**

- a. Avoid communications that focus on people's responses and concerns in relation to risks that do not acknowledge the reality of risks. This is because doing so could be read as implying that people's worries and concerns do not have a basis in reality. It is not just that the feelings are real, the risks are real.
- b. Ensure messaging to people in particularly affected and at-risk groups does not focus on worries or concerns, but on the real risks they face.
- c. Show that the organisation realises that the risks are not confined to individuals but also affect their loved ones, close family, dependents, and so on.
- d. Avoid communicating a sense of false equivalence or choice. Staff and students with childcare responsibilities may or may not send their children back to school but this is not a 'choice' in the routine sense (as is, for instance, the choice to home educate). Currently, sending children to school requires making an informed decision based on evolving scientific information with substantial uncertainties and knowledge gaps.

**C. Design messaging and guidance that explicitly and tacitly conveys what is, or should be, the organisation's character and identity, and its core stance on the matter at hand (here, Covid-19)**

6. **Convey that the organisation recognises that Covid-19 presents a real risk to staff and students, and that risks vary across individuals.**
  - a. Be upfront and evidence-based about the risks and the uncertainties, and acknowledge they exist.
7. **Convey the organisation as proactive, decisive, in control, and accountable.**
  - a. Avoid passive voice such as "Cost reductions will be necessary" to avoid portraying the organisation as passive and reactive and to generate a sense of collective community; e.g., "*We have* decided" rather than "It was decided".
8. **Be open and honest about the nature of the news the organisation communicates.**
  - a. Avoid wording that implies something is good news when it is not:
    - i. e.g., "We propose a redundancy scheme that some colleagues will be able to *take advantage of*"
    - ii. See also point 1a. on avoiding communications vulnerable to being interpreted as 'burying bad news'
  - b. Avoid sending messages without including immediate opportunities to raise queries or concerns and ensure that these opportunities are, appropriately to the intended audience:
    - i. Multimodal (in person, face-to-face on a remote platform, via telephone, via email).
    - ii. Enabling (for some this will mean one-to-one; for others this will mean as part of a group).
9. **Explicitly tacitly convey that the organisation is fully aware of, and is proactively planning for the evolving and fluctuating nature of COVID-19 risks.**
  - a. Set and report on clear review points.
  - b. Ensure coordinated contingency planning.
  - c. Be clear that the situation is not linear.

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<sup>i</sup> Edwards, D. (1991). Categories are for talking: On the cognitive and discursive bases of categorization. *Theory and Psychology*, 1(4), 515-542.

<sup>ii</sup> For example:

Antaki, C. (Ed.) (2011). *Applied conversation analysis: Intervention and change in institutional talk*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stokoe, E. (2018). *Talk: The science of conversation*. London: Little, Brown.

Toerien, M. (2017). Conversation analysis. In B. Vine (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language in the workplace*. London: Routledge.

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**Following the science**