

Customer and Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee

Submission on challenges Universities are facing in relation to COVID

At the weekend many of our students returned to York for the start of term, joining students from York St John University, and Askham Bryan and York Colleges who have returned earlier in the month. This term will be unlike any other. In this short note I have set out some of our approaches to the key challenges at the University of York. While the detail may vary, the essence of what is set out below applies also at York St John and the two Colleges.

Teaching and Learning: We have adapted all teaching and learning spaces to accommodate 1m+ social distancing, with a number of additional control measures in place covering seating arrangements, ventilation and - importantly - face coverings, which we require to be used in all indoor spaces including, teaching and learning, corridors and other shared study spaces. We are also running numerous communication campaigns emphasising awareness of symptoms, and key ways to avoid contracting Covid including good hand hygiene. We have installed hand sanitiser stations near all teaching spaces and provided cleaning wipes for surfaces within teaching spaces. And we have increased the frequency of our overall cleaning regimes.

On-line learning: To support face to face teaching in small groups, we have moved all large lectures on-line, freeing up lecture theatres to be used for socially distanced seminar groups, ensuring students can access a good mix of face to face and on-line based teaching. We are also making extensive use of on-line assessment methods.

Encouraging Positive Behaviours: We have developed a [Community Charter](#) - building on the [Together York](#) initiative - outlining what our community can expect from the University, and what the University expects from its staff and students. Our communications campaign - 'Stay Smart, Supportive and Safe' - shares new

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information so students and staff feel well informed, and builds collective responsibility. We have also developed an on-line module for all students to share health and safety guidance and encourage responsible behaviours. The vast majority of students are following Covid guidelines closely and doing all they can to protect others. But we are also making clear the consequences of behaviour on campus or in the community that does not follow Covid guidelines, including a range of disciplinary measures at our disposal, as well as making students aware of legal penalties they could be subject to.

Adapting the Estate: We have made a number of adaptations to our estate to support social distancing and introduced signage to remind everyone on campus of the key covid control measures (Hands - Face - Space). Working with our Students' Unions, we have also developed an innovative set of outside venues to support student activities taking place in a covid-secure manner.

Supporting Isolation: Ensuring that everyone self isolates as soon as they experience covid symptoms is critically important so we have also put in place measures to support students (and their households) in our accommodation who need to self-isolate, including facilitating food deliveries and undertaking regular welfare checks. We are also working closely with private accommodation providers, including helping link them into the City Council's outbreak management plans.

Test and Trace: In addition to ensuring students have access to testing, we have put in place extensive measures - working closely with the City Council and regional Public Health teams - to support contact tracing, including capturing attendance at venues and events as well as using our timetabling and accommodation data. The support the Council has provided for the establishment of a walk-in testing centre in the city has been particularly important.

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Scenario Planning: We are running regular planning exercises - both with the Council and internally - for a range of scenarios including response to clusters of Covid cases and the escalating of restrictions by stages through to full lockdown so as effectively to prepare, interrogate and refine our institutional response.

Continuous Review: Finally, it is important to note that we are constantly keeping all of the above under regular review and adapting our plans as advice and guidance evolves. For example, we are currently refreshing our plans for any escalation of restrictions and aligning these with the Tiers 1-4 in the most recent DfE guidelines. We are also broadening the scope of our policy on face coverings in response to both SAGE and advice from local experts in aerosols resulting in a revised policy that explicitly requires the wearing of face coverings in all indoor situations except in single person offices.

With all these measures we have tried to strike a balance and as we consider that balance it is important to reflect for a moment on what our students are thinking. Both new and returning students have faced huge disruptions in the last six months and are eager to get back to studying and embark on the next phase in their lives.

We owe it to them, after all those disruptions, to harness that enthusiasm through the face to face teaching we can offer with all the safety measures we have in place, and through all the careful thought we've put into designing online teaching. And we want to harness it also by supporting students to follow safe behaviours outside the classroom.

Above all, though, we want to be clear with and through our students that we all share in a collective responsibility. Covid brings risks. We will manage those risks best if we all understand that every individual's risk is minimised the more everyone else follows the rules.