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**Rapid Response Briefing Paper**  
**Harnessing the Winds of Change: Transformation during**  
**Covid-19**

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SUMS is a membership-based higher education consultancy, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation that provides expert consulting to universities across all professional service areas. We have been talking to university leaders about managing the Covid-19 crisis and their visions for the future. With views gathered from a series of one-to-one interviews, SUMS' Community of Practice Groups meeting virtually, along with student surveys, SUMS is able to take a service-by-service review of university operations. It has found a sector eager to change and seeing positives in adversity.

Fola Ikpehai Principal Consultant, shares insight from her research into the implications of the pandemic on change management and transformation.

## The traditional change pathway versus the Covid-19 change pathway

Programmes of change can be triggered in a number of ways:

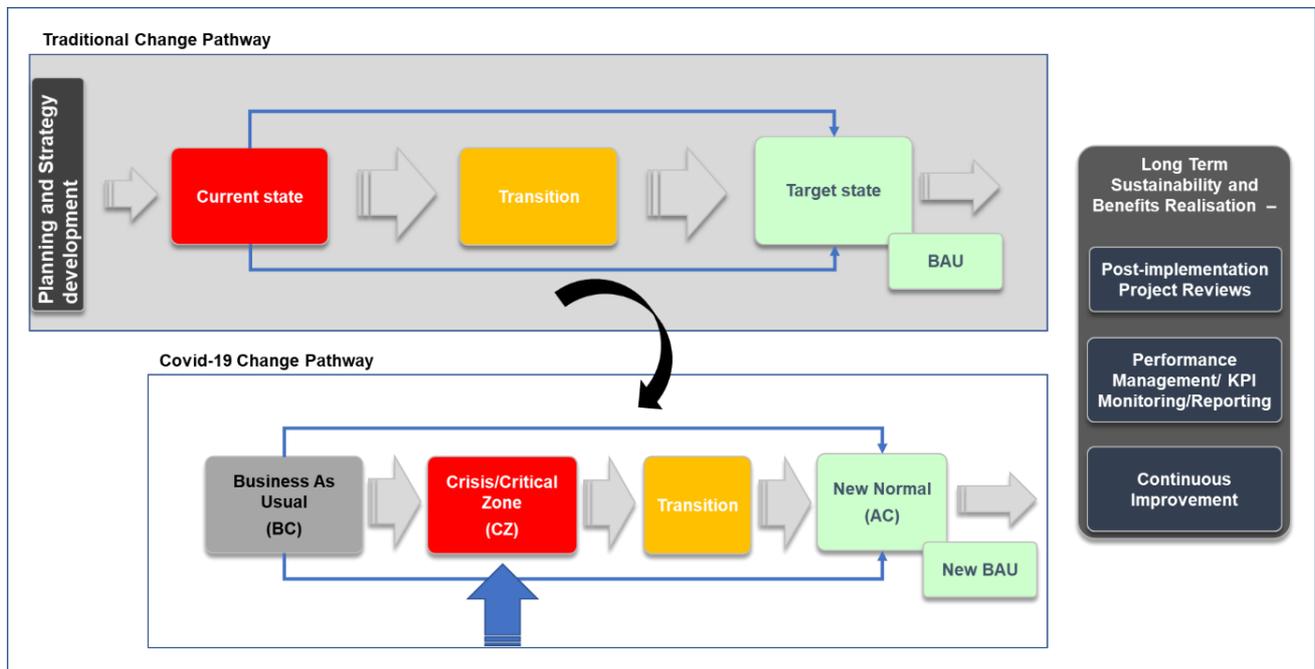
- **Vision-led**, developed to deliver a clearly defined leadership vision, top-down in approach, and with cross-cutting implications across the university;
- **Emergent**, developed from a realisation that the coordination and streamlining of projects is necessary to deliver sustainable change and required benefits – ultimately evolving into a 'vision-led' Programme; and
- **Compliance-driven**, resulting in 'must do' programmes that are initiated in response to an external event, where benefits tend to be expressed in terms of avoidance of negative implications. In compliance programmes, stakeholders of the change have limited ability to control or influence the pace of the shift.

The Higher Education sector, like all other sectors across the UK and beyond, is going through unprecedented change as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In effect, each university is in the middle of a massive and intense compliance programme that is driven by the need to change societal values, lifestyles and behaviour with an impact on practically all operations and elements of service:

- Relationships with stakeholders (with a specific focus students, academic and professional staff)
- Work patterns
- IT systems

- Business processes
- Roles and responsibilities of individuals
- Organisational structures
- Supply chain
- Vendor relationships
- Culture

Even in a traditional change journey, with a clearly identified target state, compliance programmes are the most challenging in terms of the user experience. The Covid-19 change journey is in no way traditional; it is a crisis management response to an extraordinary event, as depicted in the diagram below:



However, whether traditional or brought on by crisis, the ultimate goal of any change programme is to achieve long-term transformation and ensure that expected benefits are realised. The transition from the red – the ‘current state’ in the traditional pathway and the ‘crisis/critical zone (CZ)’ in the Covid-19 Pathway - require the same change management tools, and the same level of change leadership.

### Higher Education change teams: form, function and role in Covid-19 planning

Evidence from the SUMS Change Management Community of Practice indicates that the remit of change teams differs across the sector – more so than some of the more fundamental functions within higher education. With a few exceptions, change teams have shown a stronger focus on strategy development, and programme and project management (the technical elements of change). This is as opposed to the people-side of change management (such as communication and engagement, change impact, skills audits and re-skilling, business readiness, culture change and continuous improvement).

As a result of this diversity in form and function - as well as the fact that traditional change management has gone out of the window - the role of change teams in response to the current Covid-19 Pandemic also differs from one university to another. Teams appear to fit into two camps in relation to change leadership and influencing: teams that are *active* during this time and those that are *passive*.

**Active** change teams are those that have been involved in working with their strategic leadership teams to define and implement the strategy-for-change adopted by their institutions during the pandemic. These teams are involved in Covid-19 planning, major incident and business continuity groups, and in coordinating and/or informing the messages for internal communications delivered by university leaders. They are also involved in facilitating management development during this period to enhance the skills needed to manage remotely, and through uncertainty.

**Passive** change teams on the other hand are those who, in the current crisis, are the recipients of change – along with all other stakeholders. Most universities we spoke with operate at various points along this spectrum, but in the main, towards the *passive* end. This suggests that the sector is not currently geared towards getting the best out of their change teams.



## Current impact of Covid-19 on change management

### Communication and engagement

It is perhaps understandable that institutions went into Covid-19 planning largely without formal consultation, engagement and involvement, with operational decisions made and changes deployed quite

quickly in response to the crisis. As a result, it is also not surprising that there have been some issues to overcome as people have adjusted to the short-term measures put in place. Members of the SUMS Change Network have noted that while many people are excited and adapting well to the new ways of working, others are either not complying or struggling to adapt.

*“Actions taken as a Leadership Team (positives and negatives) will be remembered long after the Covid-19 crisis.”*, said one university change manager.

A positive attribute of this imposed change in ways of working is the enhanced communication from strategic leaders highlighted by all change managers. Strategic leaders are communicating the rationale for all decisions, and providing updates on progress and developments on a regular basis. This has been critical in building transparency and trust, managing expectations, and driving positive behaviours and compliance.

As members of the SUMS Change Network put it:

*“The coordination and integration of our communication has been revelatory. We have integrated messages around people, process and technology. We have focused communication on ‘the business’ rather than here’s a finance message, here’s a HR message etc., and we have deployed these messages on a regular basis.”*

*“People have responded to this streamlined communication. We’ve had over 80% click-to-open rate on daily Corona-update emails – increased from between 10% to 15% for any email communications before Covid-19.”*

*“An important element of the ‘senior leadership’ live stream briefings was that staff were able to pose live questions and vote for those that they wanted answers to. This was very useful and important in terms of staff engagement and providing reassurance.”*

There are other examples of good practice where change teams have launched staff surveys to see how people have adapted to the new online environment and outcome-focused work environment. There is also one example of a change team who have deployed resources to meet (virtually) with representatives from each team across their university as part of a deep-dive into current thoughts and feelings. This is in order to begin planning the ‘After Covid-19 (AC) Digital Transformation Road Map’. Results from these conversations are being fed into Human Resources, Internal Communications and the senior leadership – a great example of a university seeking to capitalise on the learnings it has experienced from the crisis response. In addition to gaining intelligence for future planning, feedback also suggests that these conversations have helped staff to feel *‘less disconnected from the university environment during this period’*.

### **Covid-19-driven reprioritisation of portfolios, programmes and projects**

The ‘new normal’ will inevitably mean the use of more digital tools, enhanced flexible working, promoting results/outcomes focused leadership, and enhanced communication. This has meant a reprioritisation of pre-Covid-19 portfolios-of-change. Change managers highlight the use of MoSCoW or similar analysis of programmes and projects in order to define the priority of their existing portfolio (*Must Do – in the short,*

*medium or long-term, Should Do, Could Do and Will not do (or Will only do against a specific scenario, or as part of a review linked to a future need).*

While programmes and projects that change teams have been involved in during the Covid-19 crisis zone vary from institution to institution, there has been a clear redirection of resources towards addressing critical success factors. This has led to 'must do' programmes and projects relating to:

- Implementation of digital tools and associated capabilities
- Enhancing the student experience – with a focus on teaching and learning, assessment, and research
- Developing processes and approaches for assessment and graduation in 2019/20, including coordinating communication with students
- Promoting staff and student wellbeing
- Maximising income and reducing costs
- Collaborative working (including with the NHS and industry)

The scope of Covid-19-driven programmes will be adjusted as ambiguities are clarified and preparation is made for the 'new normal'. There is a responsibility on change leads to coordinate input from, and liaise closely with, a number of other service areas to reflect the wide range of areas covered by their teams – in particular, Human Resources and Organisational Development, Internal Communications, and IT.

Change leaders recognise that establishing these cross-functional working groups and creating the right environment for change during the current crisis are critical to longer-term success. Each university's approach to this will make the difference between successfully re-building leadership capabilities and high performing teams on the back of the forced new ways of working; or falling back into old ways and not taking advantages of opportunities after the crisis ends.

In the current environment, IT services are the key enablers of the changes required. Here again there are two camps that change teams fall into:

- Those who were already driving the delivery of a digital transformation programme *before* the emergence of Covid-19
- Those who are the recipients (along with the rest of their university) of a Covid-19-driven, coordinated push of IT systems in order to work and deliver services within the new environment.

Where digital transformation programmes were already in place pre-Covid-19, evidence suggests that these were primarily focused on professional services, with the result that two different styles of operation had evolved within the institution. With the advent of Covid-19 the roadmap for digital transformation has been accelerated and there is now an understanding from both professional and academic departments of the benefits of adopting digital ways of working. The promotion of online training to support new ways of working and focus on digital behaviours has also been enhanced – although 'digital first' approaches to university operations remain a rarity.

In universities where IT systems are being deployed or flexed in direct response to Covid-19 – change managers report that they have seen “*up to 18 months of change within weeks*”. They are clear that in order to achieve long-term success, this rushed deployment must eventually evolve into a vision-led digital transformation programme in the ‘After Covid-19 (AC)’ phase.



## The role of change teams in transition

*“We can’t plan. We don’t know when the new norm will occur or what the new norm will be. But we still need to be ready for it when it arrives.”*

Conversations with university change teams have highlighted a number of scenarios against which university strategic plans are currently being developed. These include:

1. A return to normal for the Autumn Term of the 2020/21 Academic Year (September 2020); which could include a blend of online and on-site teaching and learning provision
2. A delayed start to the Autumn Term 2020/21 but with some on-site teaching and learning expected this calendar year
3. A delayed return to normal from January 2021
4. Full online provision until the start of the 2021/22 Academic Year

While in the main, change teams have not been at the forefront of the current operational shifts being made in response to Covid-19, they are likely to come into their own as universities transition back to a new normal ‘business as usual’ after Covid-19. Change managers will need to refocus the organisation and the people in the transitional phase and beyond as universities move from uncertainty towards a focus on more traditional planning.

For change managers in the sector this presents an interesting challenge. However, there is a recognition that in some cases, this will require a strong element of re-branding and profile raising to move the change functions from the passive to the active end of the influencing spectrum. There is also a recognition that change teams themselves may need to *change* in order to facilitate this Covid-19-driven transformation, while ensuring that road maps are developed that can be adapted to meet any of the above four scenarios.

*“We can see our roles (as change teams) changing in order to take advantage of the opportunities that will be presented following Covid-19”*

Questions that change leaders expect to be exploring during this phase include:

- What has changed between business as usual (BC) and the crisis zone (CZ) across all areas of change potential?
- How has it changed?
- How do you feel about what has changed?
- How do your stakeholders feel about what has changed?
- What has worked well and what hasn't?
- What do we need to keep from the changes we have undergone in crisis?
- What are the critical success factors for the short, medium and long-term?
- What actions are important to deliver against these critical success factors?

*“We still need to do the transformation – Covid-19 was just a catalyst. The comment ‘That won't work for my team’ has been blown out the window.”*



## Opportunities and long-lasting changes emerging as a result of Covid-19

*“The staff community has shown an interest in exploring how we can work in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way – Covid-19 has shone the light on this potential.”*

Change teams are currently considering how their universities should develop and adopt principles to enable the harnessing of digital tools – hoping that out of this crisis can come some positive learning and accelerated use of tools, ultimately leading to more flexibility and less reliance on office space.

To embed opportunities that have arisen on the back of Covid-19, building digital capability will be critical and will include:

- Fostering an increased confidence in the use of IT and digital tools introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic to enable new ways of working
- Developing and promoting an understanding of digital standards, policies and procedures
- A commitment to continuous process improvements based on digital capabilities
- Adapting to change and understanding stakeholder needs
- For leaders, building an understanding of the need to manage by outcomes – supporting staff to work remotely

Coaching and leadership development will become more critical to enable the establishment of high performing teams in the new working environment that will emerge after Covid-19. There are also good examples of student coaching – not just linked to their academic skills, but also lifestyle coaching, that institutions may want to enhance to help students to cope following the Covid-19 crisis.

As universities move to a new normal, change managers need to build on the strengthened engagement from the Crisis Zone – ensuring empathy, and understanding that people will be at different points in their individual change journey. Change teams will need to deploy appropriate resources to support stakeholders and facilitate movement along the change curve – from resistance to the new normal working environment, through to exploration, acceptance and finally gaining new confidence.

The reality for most universities is that this experience of managing through the crisis has simply been the start of their business transformation and change journey. A combination of financial pressures and the changing expectations of students in the wake of Covid-19 will challenge universities to refocus their businesses, diversify their income, adapt to digital first working and service delivery, and rebalance their workforces to meet their new shape and size requirements. Our sector’s change management community will be busy for some years to come!

SUMS’ consultants are gathering in-depth views from university leaders across the full breadth of university operations. We’ll be publishing their service-by-service findings later this month. **Register [here](#) to receive your copy of our full sector report.**



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