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Rapid Response Briefing Paper

Human impact: how policy, culture and people strategies have guided HE through the Covid-crisis and point to a more agile future

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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.*

*Here, David Becker, SUMS Principal Consultant, shares insight from the community of HR leaders on the sector response to the crisis – and its implications for the future.*

## From the frying pan into the fire

*“Let’s face it, we’ve had a narrative about the ‘unprecedented’ times we’re experiencing in HE for years and years. I’ve lost count of how often some policy or regulatory change has come down the line and we’ve all considered that it will be a game changer. It’s started to feel like the boy who cried wolf. But this time it really is going to be different. You can name almost any responsibility in HR and coronavirus will change it. Recruitment, wellbeing, performance...it’s all going to change”*

HR departments at universities were feeling the squeeze even prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. One senior leader we spoke to commented that *“we were under serious strain anyway but Covid has taken things to a whole new level. Our business-as-usual work hasn’t stopped but a whole new set of pressures around furlough, welfare, organisational change and more has been thrust upon us and we’re barely keeping our heads above water”*. Many HR departments we spoke to had also been deeply involved in the management of major business change programmes prior to the outbreak. Several universities were in the midst of cost reduction initiatives in an effort to ensure that projected levels of expenditure did not exceed income, a difficult ask given the challenges of the external climate in the form of challenging demographics, increased competition and Brexit. The implications of the pandemic have ensured that those cost reduction efforts have simply become more pressing than ever, and the package of support announced by the government in early May does not represent a long-term solution. The latest strike action was also a live issue for several institutions, whilst the demands of ‘business-as-usual’ activity were no less burdensome. One HR Director at a large modern university summed up her own exasperation with the process her university had been through to date, stating that *“we’ve been expected to make staff savings in HR to the same degree as other service areas whilst also being expected to support everybody else – now things are even more serious and we lack the resource to manage it effectively”*, whilst another noted that *“our business partners were in back to back meetings pretty much every day of the week even before the outbreak”*.

Notwithstanding these obvious pressures that Covid-19 has exacerbated, all HR leaders that SUMS spoke to expressed pride and satisfaction at the role their HR departments had played in enabling the transition of university staffing from a largely on-site, face-to-face delivery model to an almost wholly virtual one. For the most part, what had been particularly notable was how few serious issues there had been during the transition. The difficulties were largely ones that could have been anticipated in advance, or which were at any rate easy to respond to: demands for

more remuneration in light of increased stress and/or the intrusion of work into the home; greater expense allowances for increased electricity bills and/or wear and tear to personal IT equipment; a reluctance to put learning materials online. As one HRD told us, *“the amount of effort that staff have put into delivering materials online, as well as their capacity to spend endless time on Teams and Zoom, has been amazing”*.



## Blazing a new trail

The pressure of the pandemic has also revealed, in some departments, hitherto unseen reserves of creativity and innovation. This has manifested itself in different ways in different institutions: the launch of a new secondment scheme whereby staff who have seen a decrease in workload can volunteer their time in other professional service areas where workload has increased, picking up new skills in the process; the swift transition of all learning and development workshops to online platforms, leading to notable increases in staff engagement with training and development opportunities; the launch of online ‘hangouts’ and ‘pub quiz’ activities to encourage continued connection despite the lockdown.

With the occasional exception, HR leaders were quick to laud the impact that the pandemic had also had on the management culture of ‘presenteeism’ with one HRD noting that *“Covid has really helped underline that work is something we do, not somewhere we go”*. The general consensus was that remote working will now be a permanent feature for most universities even beyond the point that a vaccine becomes available and maintaining health at work is no longer the prime

motivation for working remotely: *“My own view is that universities have been behind the curve on remote working anyway, it’s always struck me as strange that places so full of innovation can struggle to modernise”*. A particularly common theme was the vast improvement in the efficiency of meetings with one participant stating that *“lockdown has been great for agile decision-making. Our default style in the past has been to manage through committee, tolerating all manner of diversions and peripheral voices in the process. Since lockdown our decision-making has been brutally efficient and all of the background noise has been cut out. I know there’s a risk that online meetings could slowly creep up in duration and frequency too but, frankly, I’d hate to go back to how it was before”*.

Despite the broadly positive reception that the transition to remote working had received, several HR leaders also expressed a note of caution about its longer-term usefulness, particularly within the context of staff wellbeing. Some reported a steady increase in concerns that Teams was resulting in *‘staff starting to feel like they’re on call 24/7’* whilst others were worried about management cultures in particular departments; one HRD cited an instance where *‘one of my senior management colleagues seems to be calling his staff for no reason other than to check they’re at their computer’*. Indeed, the pandemic has worked to underline the view that projects to improve ‘organisational culture’ aren’t always that helpful when conducted in isolation, or when they aren’t also allied to ‘harder’ actions around the reconfiguration of job descriptions and the adoption- and follow through - of performance measures relating to behaviours. Whilst there’s little doubt that leadership behaviours heavily influence university culture, HRDs also pointed to their view that universities actually have multiple cultures across different teams which vary extensively and need to be tackled on their own terms. Some HRDs are thinking proactively about how to tackle cultures as part of a broader programme of creating a fit-for-the-future operating model for the university – something that’s almost unavoidable in the post-Covid world and an approach that SUMS would strongly endorse.

## The human factor: supporting the university workforce

Perhaps unsurprisingly, HR teams are at the heart of managing the human implications of the lockdown. Particular concerns raised across multiple institutions included the point that much informal business used to get done between meetings whilst walking with colleagues to the coffee shop, or otherwise by chatting in the corridor or informally at lunchtime. Some respondents also reported that staff were finding it energy-sapping and demoralising to be in Teams and Zoom meetings so extensively. This particularly seemed to be the case when universities hadn’t made a point of rationalising meetings and had simply replaced all the committees and meetings that would have taken place anyway with online sessions for the same duration. In a similar vein, SUMS heard frustration on more than one occasion that the sudden use of platforms like Teams had led to people neglecting alternative forms of communication including telephone, email or instant messaging. A key principle in striking the right balance was felt to be recognition and acceptance that everyone has individual circumstances that need to be accommodated in different ways during this period of uncertainty: *“Everyone has their own challenges to deal with and it’s our responsibility to ensure we support them through those challenges in a way that works for them and for us. It’s quite right that we should agree different and more flexible working patterns for staff*

*with children, or those with caring responsibilities*". A notable additional challenge that was cited by respondents include the volume of queries from staff who have specific DSE requirements or disabilities, and who want to attend site to pick up specialist kit or require support at home. Good engagement with Occupational Health, combined with strong, flexible line management were seen as key components in meeting this challenge (albeit with recognition that line management in some teams wasn't always as strong and flexible as it could be – a point that relates back to the presence of multiple different cultures within universities, some more beneficial than others).

The issue of furloughing staff was at the forefront of many HR leaders' minds when SUMS spoke with them - but thoughts about how to engage with the Job Retention Scheme varied quite substantially across institutions. All HRDs expressed some reservation about the lack of clarity around the scheme, particularly within the context of where you draw the line between university staff who are and aren't publicly funded: *"It's messy and really quite complicated. It's also highlighted some serious problems with the way our processes and systems across HR and Finance work together – some of the data has been a nightmare – but we have to work through it. If we don't furlough then we're putting ourselves at a disadvantage if our competitors do - but that has to be weighed against the potential harm universities will do to themselves if we don't play nicely during this period"*.

Another HRD told us that *"the debate about furloughing has been quite helpful because it's led to an increased focus on where our income comes from and where we're spending it. That's previously been the domain of Finance but this time we've been forced to confront the figures as an entire leadership group. In the past we've relied on telling a story about how we need to change but we've not always considered that colleagues digest information in many different ways. Now we have the figures, the need for change is almost impossible to contest - and in terms of having a burning platform that's a very positive thing for creating a vastly improved workforce"*.

All participants, however, recognised the reputational risk that would be attached to any missteps when it came to use of the Job Retention Scheme. Whilst some universities had already moved to furlough staff in obvious areas like cleaning and catering, there was general acceptance of the ambiguity surrounding whether this was an appropriate decision or not. Several HRDs had pored over the government guidelines and were feeling increasingly nervous about whether the decision to furlough had been made too early, fearing that the government was rowing back from its original commitment. One HRD told us his view that *"those who've already moved to furlough may well have gone too far. The National Audit Office is clearly going to monitor the use of the furlough scheme in HE and we can expect them to seek repayment in due course"*. The reputational risk was also felt by one HRD to be a significant part of the reason not to furlough, noting that *"apart from anything else, universities have already been sitting targets in recent times because of 'fat cat' VC pay and perceived greed. We won't get any sympathy from the media if the government adopts a firm line with us going forward"*. Several universities that had made the decision to furlough were topping up staff salaries by the additional 20% but one noted some pressure from their Finance Director on this point: *"The view of our FD is that the 20% we're topping salaries off with is coming from student fees so the OfS could take a dim view of that in due course"*.

In the immediate term, virtually all universities have put the brakes on staff recruitment with several having moved to a position where they are not following through with appointments even when interviews have been held and a leading candidate has emerged. This is largely a consequence of

the severe financial implications that university leaders are fully expecting to see as a consequence of the pandemic – and the role that HR has to play in managing many of those implications as they relate to the workforce. To set that in context, most HRDs had been told to expect a reduction in income of between 15% and 30% and that it was therefore impossible not to think that the pay budget would need to be reduced given it generally represents well over half of each university's expenditure.



## Changing the face of universities

For the most part, HR departments have continued with casework and are simply conducting it remotely where it has already started: *“Our stance has been that grievances and disciplinaries should continue, we can’t allow them to go cold and be forgotten about”*. One HRD told us that the exception to this was in casework relating to performance, stating that *“the bottom line is that where we have performance issues they’ve generally been around for a while already. They’re not going to go away in a couple of months - and you can’t create and monitor a performance improvement plan effectively through remote working anyway”*. There was a recognition from several participants, however, that there may come a point where this approach is no longer feasible, with dismissal hearings in particular being cited as an example. Others were more bullish, arguing that whilst it would come with challenges, there shouldn’t ultimately be any in-person session that couldn’t equally be resourced virtually for as long as staff had the right tools and training. One participant raised the view that *“the current closure of the tribunals may make staff*

*think twice before embarking on a grievance or claim against their employer and we'll be watching that closely following lockdown'.*

The impact of Covid-19 on the workforce was felt to be far more significant than simply becoming accustomed to a change in working environment and practices. Amongst the concerns expressed by HR leaders – sometimes because they were experiencing this pressure themselves – was that employees might legitimately struggle to keep their 'eye on the ball' because of the sure and certain knowledge that cutbacks will be needed - and the *"associated fear that they could end up as one of 'the fallen'"*. One respondent noted that the scale of cuts could be so severe that *"it risks becoming like the Hunger Games"* whilst another was focused on the impact that cuts to the pay budget could have on those staff left behind and their survivors guilt: *"We've probably all got used to seeing friends and colleagues leave through VR in recent years but this time it could be far more severe and as well as trying to support those who are leaving the organisation we mustn't forget to support those that remain"*.

There was an almost complete acceptance amongst participants that coronavirus would change the face of universities, as it would most organisations, for good. However, the success with which HR has responded to the immediate implications of the pandemic has not necessarily bred confidence about its ability to meet the future needs of the university when it comes to leading the sophisticated organisation design and business change activity that virtually all participants agreed would be a necessity in the period ahead:

*"I was always confident that we had the skills to manage the immediate fallout and I'm proud of the speed with which HR has adapted – we've done a great job. What I think Covid might expose, though, is that the university as whole is lacking the capability it needs to build the new world that lies ahead and that's not just a problem for HR either. We have business change teams in other parts of the university but without meaning any disrespect they are usually project managers or business analysts. We're moving beyond managing restructures or digitising processes here, we're going to need organisation design and business configuration capability. We just don't have this, even if we like to think we do"*.

Some other issues and concerns raised by participants included:

- In an era where remote working is as commonplace as being office-based, how do we determine our needs for monitoring and responding to attendance and/or sickness absence? *"The early indications here are that sickness absence levels have gone down. You can speculate about the reasons for that but it throws up another question about how we manage performance in future"*
- How important will it be to change existing job descriptions to accommodate 'the new normal' – and at what point does a university seek to do that given several will likely need to reconfigure large swathes of its workforce? *"If we're being bold, can we reconfigure job descriptions to be entirely about deliverables rather than working hours? What will this mean for industrial relations?"*

- A huge number of policies and procedures will need to be rewritten to become relevant for the future instead of the past – and this is something that's going to need to be done in equal partnership with IT, Finance, Strategy and Estates.

A common theme across participants was also that some time needed to be carved out imminently for a period of reflection on learnings from the pandemic, or as one participant put it, *“we need to make sure that we don't let a crisis go to waste. Now's the time to strip back the things we don't need to do and to focus on the value add for students, surely? There is a role for HR in that discussion”*.



## Critical success factors: bespoke tailoring required

During our conversations, SUMS asked HR leaders to reflect on their top three critical success factors for organisations in dealing with the implications of coronavirus. The answers were extensive and varied, adding weight to the fact that it would have been very difficult for any organisation to get everything right during such a time. A selection of the most common components are:

- Try to retain a single, clear decision-making forum at both corporate and departmental levels. Don't over engineer these or turn them into hives of bureaucracy and minute-taking. They should work to support agile and fleet-of-foot management which, after all, is what leaders get paid for

- 'Just Do It'. The pandemic has shown that working at genuine pace is both possible and desirable. *"If someone had said 'why don't we move our teaching online?' previously then there would have been all manner of project hierarchy set up. If you can drop some of the usual kerfuffle then you'll get further, quicker, than you thought possible"*
- Ensure that all managers have contact with their direct reports at least once a day. The pandemic has exposed the advantages and limitations of different management styles but staying connected through remote working is an imperative for staff wellbeing and performance management
- Trusting people to a greater extent than before is a core component of improving performance and some managers are seeing this for the first time. Universities must keep giving genuine autonomy to staff to make decisions and consciously move away from a culture of passing the decision 'up the line' because of nervousness around blame or because of over-engineered business processes: *"As Steve Jobs said, why would we hire great people and then tell them what to do?"*
- Try to encourage a business-focus amongst the staffing base, moving away from the notion that cost reduction measures are somehow borne out of spite or greed instead of necessity. *"Unless our university has hidden plane loads of students due to fly in from Asia, then our finances have to be planned on an entirely different basis for 3-5 years. It's going to challenge the numbers and types of people we can afford and raise constant questions about what we can do more economically and effectively through online platforms".*

Ultimately, our conversations with HR leaders in higher education revealed a group of professionals who were equally tuned in to the perils of the coronavirus for their institution and the needs of their staff for flexible and adaptive leadership, clear messaging and a desire to be 'treated like adults'. There was widespread recognition that the financial implications of Covid-19 will apply a set of pressures upon HR to play a leading role in organisational change, not merely through the legal and technical processes behind cost reduction but through involvement in sophisticated business design and configuration. As one HRD put it, *"the time is swiftly coming where we need to abandon the message about doing more with less, to accept that it's time to do less with less...that's a difficult conversation for the university to have but if not now, when? For some of us, the coming years are going to more about survival than anything else and HR's role is to make sure that we're genuine partners to the business during that process".*

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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