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Briefing Paper

Working well – during and beyond Covid-19:

*A report into staff health, general wellbeing and remote
working enablement in the HE Sector*

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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 Change and HR leaders in the sector about the ways in which they adapted, at pace, to remote working, whilst putting in place measures to protect staff health and general wellbeing; and learning points - as we progress to a new normal.

Here Felicity Gasparro, SUMS Associate Consultant, and Fola Ikpehai, SUMS Principal Consultant, share original research findings from in-depth interviews, a sector-wide all-staff survey, and general insights from broader research pieces. They have been supported by Paul Sayles, SUMS Group Business Intelligence Manager who has enabled the production of data for the purposes of the report.

Many thanks to the SUMS Change Community of Practice as a whole, and to members of the network who provided material used in the Case Study snippets.

Executive Summary

This report was borne out of discussions during SUMS Change Community Practice Group (CPG)¹ meetings held shortly after the start of the Covid-19 lockdown. Members of the community spoke about initiatives underway in their institutions to support health, wellbeing and remote working enablement - driven by the Covid-19 pandemic.

With the return to campuses for the autumn term now in progress, coupled with the resurgence in Covid-19 cases and related restrictions, the time is right to reflect on initiatives that were put in place during lockdown, and consider learning from these as we move into a new term.

The study, was conducted over the summer during the lockdown months, in three parts:

1. Deployment of a sector staff survey which was shared widely across the SUMS membership and beyond. 77 responses were received from 13 Institutions².
2. Tele-depth interviews and/or information provided by four members of the Change Network.
3. Desk-based research regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the workforce, working from home, health and wellbeing - drawing on insights from a range of studies including the CIPD, McKinsey & Co, and Microsoft.

The study considered three phases of exploration:

- **Phase 1** - The position of health, wellbeing and enablement activities pre Covid-19
- **Phase 2** - Initiatives introduced once lockdown was imminent and into the first few weeks of lockdown
- **Phase 3** - Key learning points for the loosening of lockdown and return to normal

Findings indicate a mainly reactive approach towards remote working pre Covid-19 (i.e. Phase 1), which many respondents felt was mainly due to a lack of trust.

The top three critical enablers for health, wellbeing and remote working during Phase 2 (i.e. lockdown imminent and underway) were line management support, team cohesion and institutional communications.

¹ Chaired by Principal Consultant, Fola Ikpehai the Change CPG meets monthly to review, discuss and progress a range of themes relating to the management of change in the higher education sector. To join the Change Community of Practice, please contact Fola Ikpehai, Principal Consultant - o.o.ikpehai@reading.ac.uk

² See [Appendix A](#) for the composition of survey respondents by gender, employment status, special support needs and roles. There is no attempt in this report, to show variation between responses from different respondent segments due to the significant differences in the proportion of respondents, and the relatively low response to the survey overall.

In all three areas explored in this study (i.e. health, wellbeing and enablement), there was a differential between the perceived level of *importance* and what *actually happened in practice* during lockdown, with responses indicating that actual practice was lower than expectation.

However, when considering perceptions between the initiation of lockdown and the loosening of restrictions, survey responses indicated a significant increase in positive perception. This increase was greatest for enablement of homeworking and lowest for wellbeing.

Responses to the staff survey, and tele-depth interviews with volunteers (members of the Change Community of Practice Network) indicate a need to develop or continue to deploy a number of initiatives introduced during lockdown including: home working arrangements where appropriate; senior leadership briefings and regular, targeted updates; accessibility to confidential listening services; enhanced team connectivity; and regular contact with line managers - to include discussions relating to wellbeing.

Introduction

In the SUMS 'Silver Linings'³ briefing paper, we highlighted the strength of the sector's response under pressure across a range of disciplines, and explored sustainable ways forward beyond Covid-19 including the potential impact on roles and responsibilities of Change Teams. The SUMS Consulting Change Community of Practice has over the last few months engaged in lively and informative discussions about a range of issues affecting change teams in the sector - including initiatives to support staff health and general wellbeing whilst working remotely. Based on these discussions, SUMS saw the value in exploring this topic in more depth with a view to identifying key practices adopted by the sector to safeguard staff health and wellbeing, and ensure effective working through the enablement of remote working.

This study reflects on initiatives put in place driven by the Covid-19 pandemic and poses questions around the potential for these initiatives to be sustained and embedded in the long-term employee experience.

The HE sector is clearly not on its own in having to adapt at pace to changes in work location and practices in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and many of the observations set out in this report transcend industries. However, this paper seeks to tune into the perspectives of those who work in the sector in the UK through a sector staff survey and tele-depth interviews and/or information provided by members of the Change Community of Practice Network.

Phase 1: Health, Wellbeing and Enablement - Pre Covid-19

Pre-existing culture towards staff health, general wellbeing and remote working

Figures a-c show that just over half of survey respondents believed there was a proactive culture towards staff health and general wellbeing pre Covid-19. However, just over

Case Study – Pre Covid-19

There was a focus on early identification of mental ill health such as 'Breathing Space' – a period for people to take time out from their busy schedules to share their thoughts for the day; wellbeing road shows; availability of various clinics – free sports, exercise and health classes; running clubs; and staff social groups where people can access resources and facilities.

In line with the People Strand of the Corporate Strategy (and new People Strategy in development), staff wellbeing, and making sure that staff are given the right tools to 'bring their best selves to work' are key themes. These themes are championed by Senior Leadership. Senior Leadership also talk about their own lived experience ("Challenges that have shaped me") often touching on issues such as mental health.

Focus on Change Management

'Critical Staff Survey' delivered by Change function to emphasise the need to self-manage health and general wellbeing through Change.

³ <https://sums.org.uk/news/silver-linings-how-the-response-to-covid-19-will-change-higher-education-forever/>

one-third of respondents believed there to be a proactive culture towards remote working. More than 42% of respondents stated that their institution was 'strongly or somewhat reactive' to remote working provision. This was higher than both wellbeing (where 32% of respondents judged this as reactive), and health (which 26% of respondents rated as reactive).

Fig a – proactive culture towards staff health

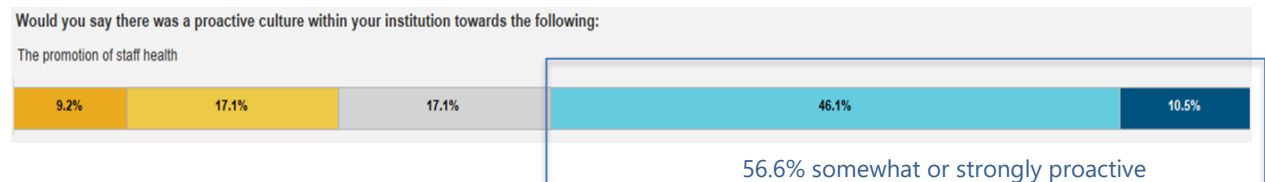


Fig b – proactive culture towards general wellbeing

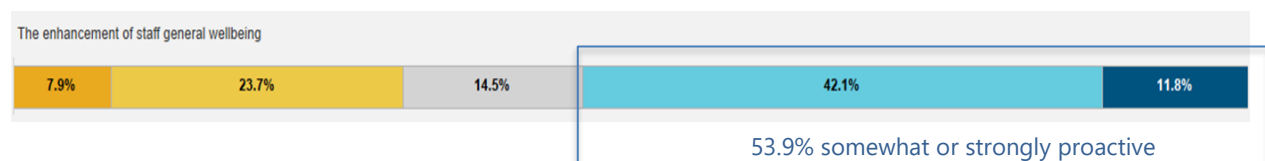
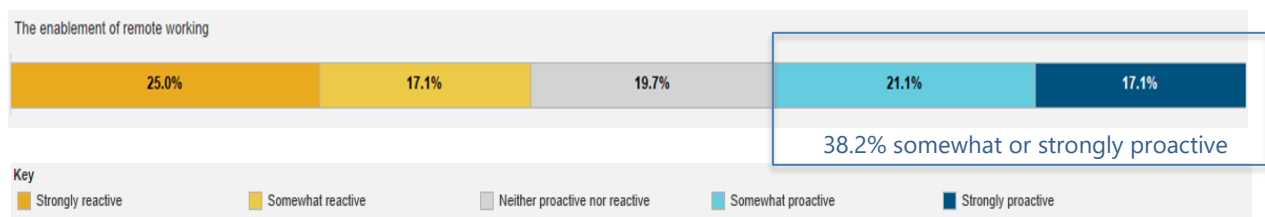


Fig c – proactive culture towards enablement of remote working



The comments supporting these ratings revealed a mixture of views but in general these indicated that before the Covid-19 pandemic:

- There was suspicion towards remote working, suggesting a lack of trust
- 'An old fashioned view of remote working; home-working viewed as a privilege'

In relation to health, comments focused on concerns about the capacity available in Occupational Health to address mental health issues.

There was some degree of ambivalence towards wellbeing initiatives which included comments like -

"[There is] a lot of lip service to wellbeing and some initiatives, but no meaningful action on the serious issues that drive detrimental mental health issues – like workload, didactic leadership, poor communication and [limited] collaboration...."

Responses about ability to assess staff health, wellbeing and remote working pre Covid-19 showed that nearly 40% of respondents felt that their institution was either slightly or extremely capable of monitoring staff health (figure d). This was less than for general wellbeing where 57% of respondents were confident of their institution's capability (figure e). In terms of remote working survey results indicated that 51% of respondents were confident in their institution's capability to implement remote working at pace pre-Covid-19 (figure f).

Case Study – Pre Covid-19

A lot of focus on staff health and general wellbeing. This includes a sub-committee of the UUK Student Mental Health, called "Mental Wealth", and a range of initiatives such as Feel Good February, Sober for October, Walking Groups, and staff networks. The University is signed up to the Wellbeing Charter.

Enablement for remote working pre-Covid 19 was relatively informal and variable. There was an unspoken rule about flexible working from home but quite a bit of debate around 'presenteeism'. The potential to enhance remote working was on the radar, linked closely to effective use of space.

Focus on Change Management

Heavily involved, working closely with the Organisational Development Team. We wanted to drive more of a culture of trying, failing and learning in the University; thinking about our values in a different way.

Figure d – capability of university to remotely monitor staff health prior to CV-19

How able would you say your institution was, prior to lockdown, to remotely assess the following:

Monitor and support staff health

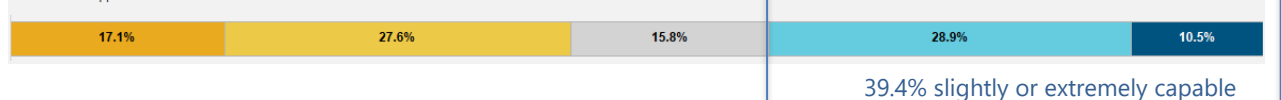


Figure e – capability of university to remotely monitor staff wellbeing prior to CV-19

Promote staff wellbeing

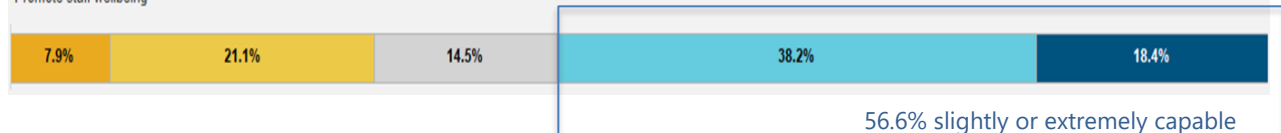


Figure f – capability of university to remotely monitor remote working prior to Covid 19.

Implement, at pace, remote working



Rating scale for universities' capability to remotely assess staff health, general wellbeing and remote working prior to Covid-19.

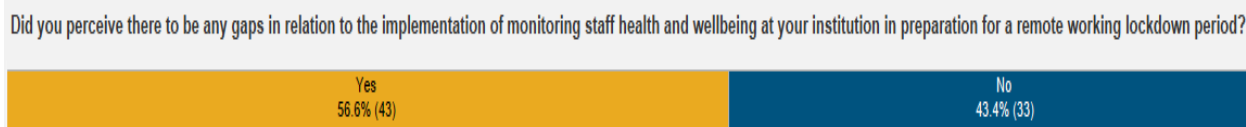
Key

Not at all capable Not very capable Neither incapable nor capable Slightly capable Extremely capable

Phase 2: Lockdown Imminent and Underway

When asked whether they perceived there to be any gaps in relation to the monitoring of staff health and wellbeing in preparation for lockdown and remote working, 56.6% of respondents felt that there were gaps in this area as depicted in figure g.

Fig g – Perception of gaps in the implementation of monitoring staff health and wellbeing in preparation for a remote working lockdown.



While there was positive acknowledgement of the work undertaken by their institutions to prepare for lockdown, respondents perceived the gaps to be caused by differences in line management style, a gap between rhetoric and reality - especially linked to workload, and the impact of specific sector issues.

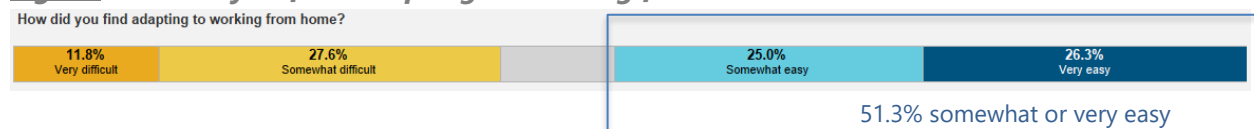
"Suddenly everyone had more workload due to online preparation and teaching, which affected our health and wellbeing."

Reflecting on shifts in approaches to staff health, general wellbeing and remote working enablement as institutions entered lockdown, eight critical success factors were identified to support good change management:

1 - Adapting to working from home

In terms of individual readiness for this change, there was an almost equal split between personal 'readiness' and 'unreadiness', with 51% of respondents finding adapting to remote working 'somewhat or very easy' and only a small proportion (12%) suggesting that this way of working was very difficult (figure h).

Fig h – How did you find adapting to working from home?



Some of the actions that respondents felt could have been improved within their institutions included:

- more tailored communication
- homeworking equipment (especially in the early stages following lockdown)
- Webinars or seminars on how to work from home effectively and safely.

Case studies developed from tele-depth interviews suggested that many such initiatives were in place, although there was evidence of delays in getting some elements set up early in the lockdown which could account for the perceptions expressed by survey respondents highlighted above.

2 - Line Manager Contact

95% of staff stated that line management contact was 'somewhat or extremely important'. This compared to 73% of staff reporting that actual maintenance of contact between themselves and their line manager was maintained; a difference of 22 percentage points.

Case Study 1 – Lockdown Imminent and underway

Things changed really quickly – the Leadership Team had started having emergency Covid-19 meetings chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, and there were a lot of reassuring messages from the group. There was active liaison with UUK and the OfS to understand what everyone else was doing to ensure provision of core services.

Our narrative was to take care of the people first, and then think of the practicalities [of lockdown].

Quite early in the process the decision was made not to furlough staff, and there was a strong focus on mental health and wellbeing – identifying anyone who was vulnerable. There was close contact with people managers, and members of the Leadership Team made themselves available. Revised policies and guidance were developed quickly, and key messages were collated by the Communications Team with a focus on three areas – staff and student wellbeing; accommodation of students on campus; and communicating with people about assessment.

Regarding enablement for remote working, there had been a lot of investment in IT infrastructure pre-Covid-19 (MS Teams ready to launch, teaching on Blackboard – although not using Blackboard Communicator). There were difficulties where parts of the University were reliant on desktop computers as opposed to laptops. However, an equipment collection scheme was set up and in spite of challenges, the institution was 'Covid-ready' within a few weeks.

Focus on Change Management

The team provided project support across a range of initiatives. The People First Strategy was key to addressing any gaps in readiness.

Fig i – The importance of a line manager keeping in contact with the staff member

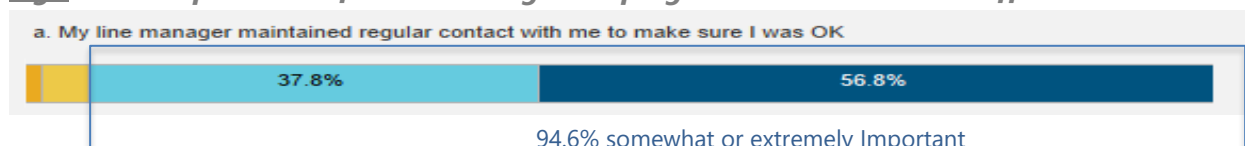
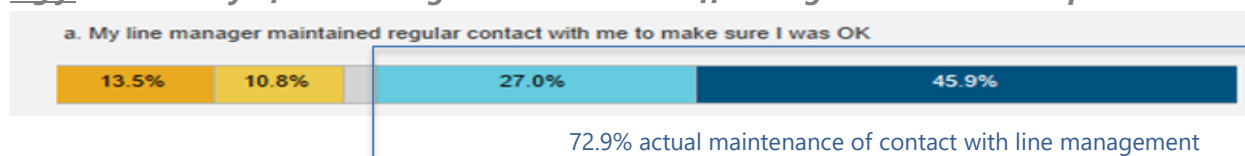


Fig j – The reality of line manager contact with staff throughout the research period



Comments ranged from "Short, weekly meetings with my line manager [were helpful]" to "My line manager did not get in touch - the responsibility was on me."

3 - Institutional Communications

In relation to institutional communications, survey respondents produced very similar scores to the line manager contact questions. 95% felt this was 'somewhat or extremely important', while 76% of respondents reported that their university was achieving this goal (a difference of 19

percentage points). There was, however, a greater shift towards respondents reporting their institution was delivering communication '**somewhat** effectively' by 42% of respondents (with 'very effective' responses at 34% of the 76%). This represents a lower perception overall when compared to line manager contact.

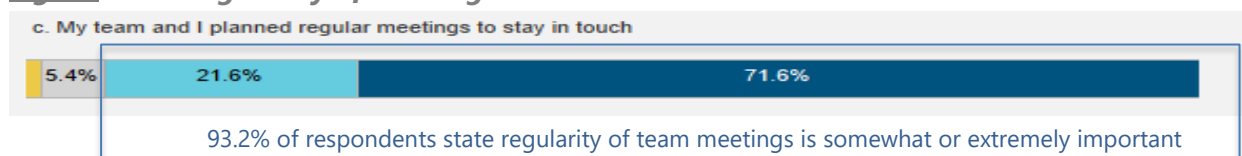
One respondent summarised how important it is to keep managers in the 'know' on developments (and this comment is also relevant for Line Management Contact above) -

"[We need to] include middle managers in the discussions and decisions being made that directly impact on staff, as managers were the first port of call for staff queries and were, for the most part, as much in the dark as the staff."

4 - Team Connectivity

Team connectivity through the establishment of regular team meetings was another element recognised as being an important component for managing the change experience, and survey responses showed 93% of respondents stating this was 'somewhat or extremely important'. The actual achievement reported in this category was relatively close at 88% of respondents stating that regular meetings were achieved.

Fig k – Team regularity of meetings



5 - Provision of homeworking kit to enable staff to carry out their roles

It is worth highlighting that institutions that had already taken steps to build a paper-light, work-anywhere 'Digital Workplace' for staff, were ahead of the game when Covid-19 struck.

Provision of the right equipment to deliver the tasks required in the role, is a question which will feature on most staff surveys across most sectors. This is well recognised as a tangible measurement of enabling people to do their jobs; and a demonstration of the employers' commitment to enabling staff output and generating staff satisfaction.

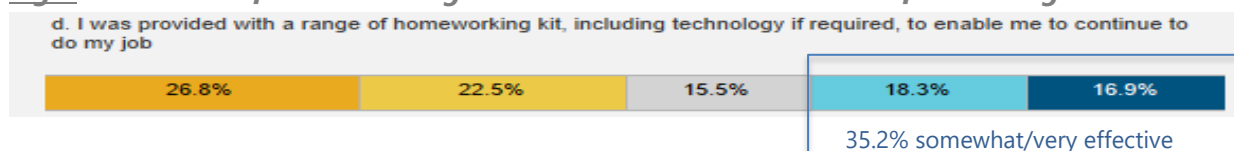


76% of respondents stated that it was 'somewhat or extremely important' to have the right equipment to do the job. However, only 35% of respondents stated that provision of equipment

was somewhat or very effective (figure I). This indicates a difference in importance, to actual practice of over 40 percentage points.

Perhaps noteworthy, 6.6% of respondents marked their response as 'not applicable'- possibly indicating that some respondents were already set up for homeworking prior to the pandemic.

Fig I – Provision of homeworking kit to enable the continuation of delivering role



Generally speaking, comments from the survey indicated some issues with home working equipment, with several variations on the comment below:

"... More could have been done to prepare for the inevitability of home working, like ensuring colleagues had access to the right tech..."

It is important to note that homeworking facilitation goes beyond just hardware and software, and extends to chairs, desks, a quiet space to work, printing facilities etc. In conversation with university staff over the past few months, various arrangements have been made, and people were generally established in their homeworking arrangements within a few weeks of lockdown.

Case Study 2 – Lockdown Imminent and underway

Check-in sessions with line managers during lock down showed that staff had adapted 'surprisingly well'. There were however, lots of questions about what was going to happen longer term – especially in relation to improving home working. On reflection, there was some delay in formalising policies on people matters such as for staff with caring responsibilities while working from home, and dealing with school closures and home schooling – quite a lot of local decisions were made.

Some delay where staff needed reasonable adjustments to work from home (e.g. specialist chairs). This was not resolved until after Easter.

Focus on Change Management

'Outcome-based Work Management Sessions' and facilitated discussions delivered by the Head of Change and available online.

There was a perception by some respondents that universities focused their efforts on the practical business of remote working enablement rather than staff health and wellbeing.

"We completed an IT audit, but we should have had an emotional audit too."

"There was no monitoring of staff health and wellbeing. A series of tips and advice to stay healthy were issued, and suggestions on how to stay connected virtually. But the implementation was left to individuals. There was no team-level or wider strategy for implementation, risk assessment and monitoring."

Many comments reflected issues around how the crisis was initially handled - demonstrating the importance of 'people-related considerations', and the need for these to be embedded into future business continuity planning.

6 - Institutional provision of tools and resources to enable staff to stay well during Covid-19

70% of respondents felt that it was 'somewhat or very important' for their university to have assets available for usage in the wellbeing space, while 52% of respondents felt that this happened in practice, a differential of 18 percentage points (figures m and n). At 70%, the importance rating in this area was lower than line manager contact, and communication (both 95% importance), and team connectivity (93% importance).

Comments Included:

"[There should be] check-ups with staff known to be vulnerable to poor mental health."

"[There should be] an anonymous survey to ask about wellbeing."

"Make someone like a psychologist available for staff to discuss confidentially, their stress or anxiety."

Fig m – Importance of the provision of wellbeing resources to staff

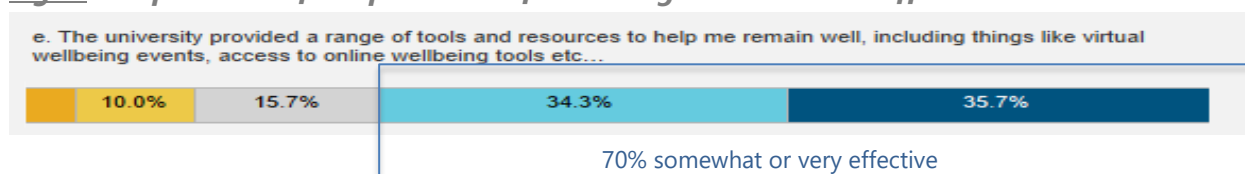
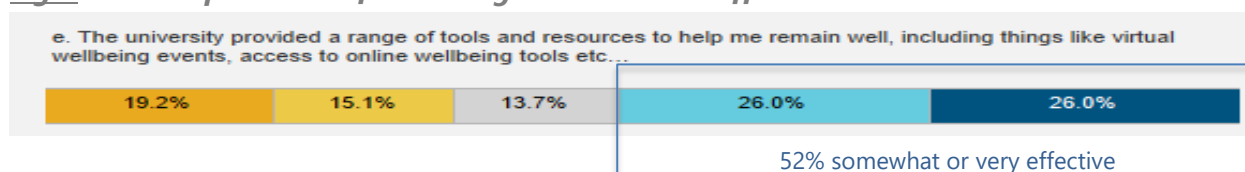


Fig n – Actual provision of wellbeing resources to staff



Survey results indicated that often health and wellbeing initiatives are simply about human contact. Therefore, we come back round to the importance of the role of the line manager, as well as the emphasis on team connectivity. Taking account of an individual's personal circumstances is also considered crucial to enabling health and wellbeing. In spite of the lower importance rating given to this theme, commentary was extensive and focused on a range of issues:

"[We had] space to speak about the challenges we were facing openly and discuss how to improve them. Check-in with supervisor - specifically regarding wellbeing working from home"

"[Requirement for] proper risk assessment on individual basis; increased OH provision; regularly checking on staff to see they are OK; serious scientific evidence-based strategy to tackle mental health issues that might have emerged during lockdown."

"[Needed] a personal touch and indication that my health and wellbeing, as well as my family's, was of some importance."

"Online wellbeing events and better working from home guides events [would have been useful]..."

We also asked staff specifically what they considered to be the most important factors for successfully implementing staff health and wellbeing initiatives during lockdown and comments included:

"Training of leaders and managers at all levels; empathetic leaders and managers with high emotional intelligence"

"HR specialists who are adept at assessing the impact of change on staff, and responding appropriately rather than being enforcers of policy and regulations."

"Trust between staff and managers, and between staff and senior university management."

"An ability to accept that our regular workload couldn't just be transposed into the home environment (taking into account caring responsibilities and variable IT setup); regular one-to-ones with line manager very important."

"Keeping in contact with colleagues both on a professional basis and more informally."

Case Study Summaries: Activities during Lockdown

Case Study 1

- Undertook two Pulse Surveys and two Wellbeing Surveys
- Kept track of anyone infected with Corona Virus
- Mandatory two-week holiday enforced over the Easter Break
- Non work-related staff engagement was encouraged
- Flexible approaches to working around specific needs
- Senior managers and Trade Unions available and involved
- Weekly Q&A Sessions and speedy decision-making

Case Study Summaries: Activities during Lockdown

Case Study 2

- Communication enhanced with weekly Leadership updates.
- Check-in sessions with line managers
- 10 days parents and carers paid leave
- Breathing Space sessions moved online
- 'Their Stories', recordings of Senior Management Team meetings, every other month – demonstrating a culture of openness
- Online wellbeing hubs, including free therapy
- Sports, Exercise and Health Team focused on forward planning, linking exercise and wellbeing - and working towards the Autumn term when staff and students are back on campus but not able to use the facilities in the normal way
- Active engagement with existing networks who were quite active in raising specialist concerns (e.g. Parents & Carers Network, Yammer, Neuro-Diversity Network)
- Covid-19 was the catalyst for the Office 365 Programme – people who were previously resistant got on board
- The University pushed through governance processes rapidly, relinquishing some of the power and handing responsibility to the experts

It is perhaps worth noting that some basic routes to wellbeing were not mentioned by any of the respondents. For example:

- Getting good quality sleep
- Instilling a clear line between work time and home time
- Eating well
- Watching alcohol intake and drug usage
- Exercising
- Instilling good working practice for remote working by encouraging regular screen and stretch breaks

Another point worth highlighting relates to the uptake of wellbeing initiatives. Survey responses indicated a small element of cynicism relating to these initiatives, and it is clear that making the initiatives credible is important. However, there is also a need for staff to take some responsibility for their own wellbeing and ensure that they access the help/support available. Case studies indicate that universities make good provision in the areas of health and wellbeing and they should not be afraid to encourage collaborative working with staff and unions - setting joint responsibility for outcomes in this area.

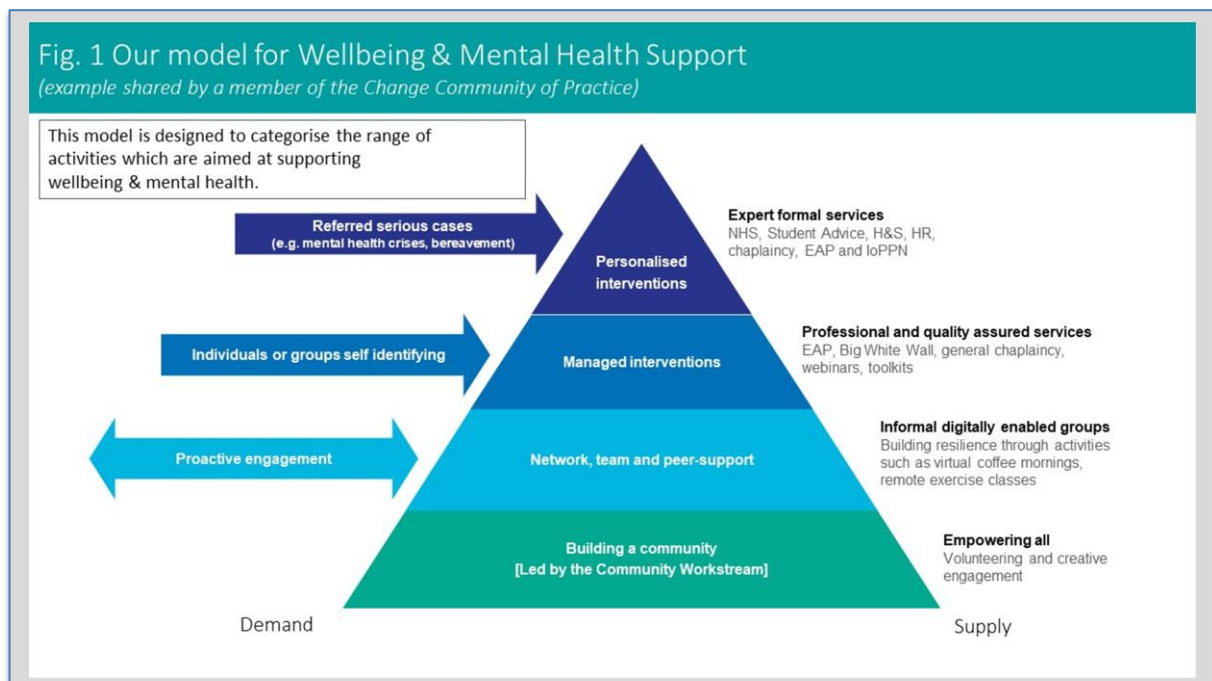
Case Study Summaries: Activities during Lockdown

Case Study 3

- A focus on making sure that people had the specialist equipment required to do their work
- Development of a toolkit 'Remote not distant' to address people's needs, feelings of isolation etc. launched quite quickly during the second week of lock down
- A bereavement and loss toolkit developed for managers – making sure that managers were equipped to have these discussions if the worst should happen
- Daily emails from SMT/Crisis Leadership Team giving an update on positive messages
- Covid-19 was a catalyst to create a community from the 150 trained Mental Health First Aiders
- Weekly wellbeing survey with questions focused on health, wellbeing and thoughts on returning to campus - questions were customised for each week
- Ongoing liaison with all the existing networks
- Launch of a management repository with lots of information and practical advice to support managers

Fig. 1 Our model for Wellbeing & Mental Health Support

(example shared by a member of the Change Community of Practice)



7 - The provision of a confidential route for staff to access if they did not 'feel well' during Covid-19

Interviewees and survey respondents placed a significant emphasis on having confidential routes to report ill health. We found that access to a confidential support route was either 'somewhat or extremely important' to 75% of respondents (figure o).

Fig o – The importance of the university providing a confidential support route for staff should they become unwell because of the lockdown



Comments in this area emphasised the need for a good level of occupational health and availability of wellbeing ambassadors.

And one respondent expressed concern that -

"... [There was] no clear way of how to report suspected Covid-19 cases until after lockdown had started."

8 - Training and skills provision to enable successful home working

Over 80% of staff surveyed stated that training and skills provision was either 'somewhat or extremely important'. However, survey results indicate that only 43% of respondents rated training and skills provision as 'effective or very effective' (figures p and q). At almost 38% points, the differential in this area is significant - second only to provision of homeworking equipment.

Fig p – The level of importance placed by staff on receiving the right skills and training to enable successful home working

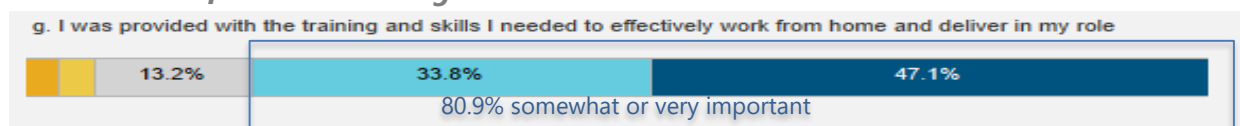
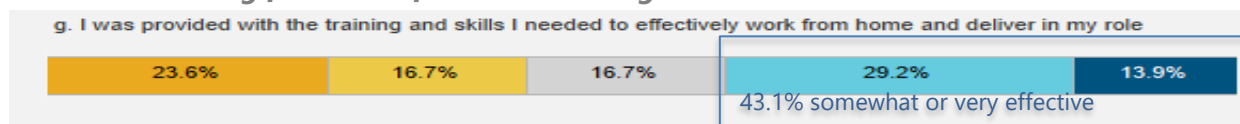


Fig q – Staff perception of skills and training provision by institutions in the provision of skills and training for successful home working



Comments and conversations linked to this rating show that staff wanted the training to enable them to feel competent and confident with working in an online environment, be that in meetings, planning sessions, the delivery of lectures, or just simply engaging differently.

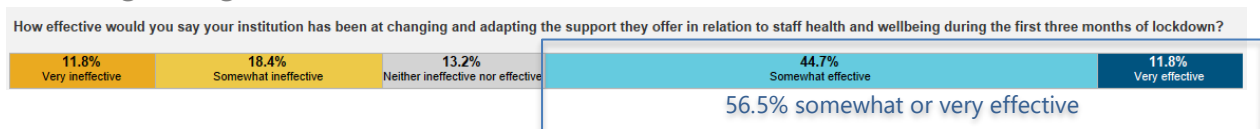
Some comments suggest:

"There did not appear to be any institutional processes in place. Support was initiated and developed by teams."

"[It would have been useful to] use external thought leadership to drive different ways to manage a remote / virtual team. There are significant resources from this perspective, but the university is very inward looking when confronted with a new situation."

Regarding effectiveness overall at changing and adapting the support offered during the three months of lockdown, 56.5% of respondents believed their institution had been effective in its adaptability to the circumstances.

Fig r – Level of effectiveness at changing the support on offer for staff health and wellbeing during lockdown



Areas that respondents would have liked to see more of included:

- Provision of technology, equipment, top tips on how to get the best out of software
- A shift in culture, trust to do their job, less meetings, and a proactive response to effective time management

Phase 3: Lockdown loosening up/Learning for the new normal

A comparison of graphs from before Covid-19 to the loosening of lockdown indicates that respondents' perceptions improved across all three areas - health, wellbeing and remote working enablement. These details are depicted in Appendix B and summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of movement in respondent perceptions

| Theme | Description of movement |
|------------------------|--|
| Staff Health | There was a significant movement in perceptions around the ability of institutions to promote staff health, with ratings in the top two tiers increasing from 39.4% to 54.2% - a movement of 14.8 percentage points. |
| Staff Wellbeing | Minimal movement in the area of staff wellbeing with ratings in the top two tiers remaining essentially the same (increasing from 56.6% to 57%, a movement of 0.4 percentage points). |
| Remote working | From an initial baseline where there was a significant gap between expectations and reality, this theme saw the highest movement with perceptions increasing from 51.3% to 72.2% - a movement of 20.9 percentage points. |

This study did not conduct a deep dive into the reasons for the shift in perception. However, the following points could explain the results:

- **Ability to promote staff health** - Increased awareness and ownership of health promotion during the lockdown phase
- **Enabling remote working** - elements of relief as respondents acknowledged the Institution's ability to react, respond to IT needs and minimise disruption to Institutional continuity.

While the movement of perception in relation to staff wellbeing was minimal, this is probably to be expected, given all the challenges faced, existing uncertainties, and increased focus in this area.

The New Normal - Stop, start and continue

Table 2 below summarises comments around key themes, and elements that respondents feel should be stopped, started or continued as we emerge into a new normal.

Case Study Summaries: From Lockdown to New Normal – Key Learning Points

Case Study 1

- *Continue working to outcomes, not inputs*
- *Maintain the focus on underpinning values*
- *Reflecting on problems that arose during Covid-19 and discussions on how to address such issues in the future*

Case Study 2

- *Don't slip back to slow governance*
- *Continue to empower line managers to make decisions*
- *New focus on business continuity and planning for different scenarios*
- *Make time to access the support available – e.g. mental health support, courses, and managing return to campus working environment etc.*
- *The importance of ongoing staff engagement to understand real thoughts, feelings and issues*

Case Study 3

- *Reach the managers, and use existing networks to engage with people and increase awareness*
- *Our university is one organisation with many sub-organisations; there is no one size fits all*
- *If something doesn't work - change it, scrap it*
- *Keep it simple – especially about avoiding complexity when deploying a return to campus process, in order to avoid people sliding back into their old ways*

Table 2: Learning from Covid-19 - Stop, Start and Continue

| Theme | Start, Stop, Continue |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Adapting to working from home | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue home working arrangements where appropriate following return to campus - Start/continue - linkage to health and safety provision for home workers, and the assurance of that provision by health and safety experts - Start/continue - to develop policies to support home working - Start/continue establishing a rhythm and routine for marking out work and home time more clearly - Stop any identified work overload |
| Line Manager contact | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start/continue - VC groups to brief Heads/middle managers ahead of sending staff-wide emails, so that they can respond to queries |

| Theme | Start, Stop, Continue |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start/continue - regular contact with line manager [including to discuss wellbeing] |
| Institutional Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue with senior leadership briefings and regular updates - Start/continue more targeted messages - Start/continue to show compassion or emotional intelligence in institutional communication - Start - considering ideas setting out expectations around email-free days [e.g. Fridays] |
| Team Connectivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start taking greater local level accountability - Continue - frequent, online team and directorate meetings - Start/continue - having frank conversations about any issues that arise |
| Provision of homeworking equipment to enable staff to carry out their roles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start/continue to adopt some central control of technology and a consistently good IT advisory service so that institutional risk and staff wellbeing are supported. |
| Institutional provision of tools and resources to enable staff to stay well | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start - taking staff voice seriously, specifically around the approach to teaching for the Autumn Term. - Start/continue making speedy decisions to aid staff mental health and/or reduce stress levels |
| Confidential route to report ill health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start/continue to develop more accessibility to confidential listening services, mental health wellbeing routes, and occupational health |
| Training and skills provision to enable successful home working | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue to identify and meet training and development needs to enable home working - Start providing more interactive support, rather than just online links to more text-based materials. Videos or online interactive tools; maybe seminars or webinars - Continue reacting well to converting teaching methods online |

Insights from beyond HE linked to key research findings

When the UK entered lockdown in March 2020, no one thought that they would be held in a 'working from home space' for such a protracted period. Although Covid-19 had been on most people's radars for several weeks, the Government's 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives' policy putting strict measures of social distancing in place, ultimately happened quickly.

In spite of the recent (and ongoing) increase in Covid-19 cases - including on university campuses; and recently imposed Covid-19 restrictions aimed at curtailing a second wave⁴ we are continuing to see a steady return of employees to campuses - into call centres, laboratories and lecture

"The past few months have shown we can make decentralisation and a distributed workforce work. So, if our employees are in a role and situation that enables them to work from home... forever, we will endeavour to make that happen."

Anne Kiely, EMEA HR, Twitter

theatres; and the establishment of a blended approach to learning and teaching. Different institutions have different 'takes' on this direction of travel: in some institutions the decision to return to campus is largely person-centric and dependent on the individual feeling ready; in others, it is dependent on capacity, with some institutions calling out space to work as an issue pre-dating and now compounded by Covid-19; and in others, it seems continuing to work remotely where possible is the favoured approach.

In all cases, institutions are focusing on how they will deliver the best possible student experience and blended learning offer in the autumn. There is also an acknowledgement of the need for a flexible approach to ensure resilience. This is in recognition that plans may need to change in order to reflect the peaks and troughs of the ongoing pandemic.

Looking beyond the sector, organisations are starting to make strategic decisions regarding whether they will continue with remote working long term - beyond current restrictions. Large organisations like Twitter and Barclays, have signalled an intent to keep large proportions of staff, working from home long-term.⁵

Work by the 'CIPD' and 'People Management Magazine' found that 41% of employers would support adopting remote working practices long-term, beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. This weighs up against a LinkedIn Workforce Confidence Index research study (August 2020) which suggests that only a quarter of the sample group of 7,071 people would be willing to return to the workplace once Covid-19 restrictions are removed.⁶

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-52530518>

⁵ **People Management Magazine** – *Do we need to go back to work at all?* (Maggie Baska)

⁶ **LinkedIn Workforce Confidence Index, August 2020** - <https://www.linkedin.com/posts/linkedin-news-workforceconfidenceindex-coronavirus-covid19-activity-6698617129882804224-QvC4/>

In a **Perceptyx article**⁷, they surmise:

*"Improvements in personal productivity when working from home are strongly and inversely related to the desire to return to the physical workplace. For many, the newness of 'working from home' has now shifted to the **familiarity of 'living at work'**. Employees have had the time to create a suitable remote working environment and mastered remote work tools."*

Brett Wells (July 2020)

A specific question for the Higher Education sector in general, and senior leadership teams/change agents in the sector (HR, OD, and Change Teams) in particular, is 'If there is evidence that it has worked (and continues to work during newly imposed restrictions), how can we ensure progression to a more cemented status of home working acceptability in HEIs without compromising on the student, staff or research experience?'

In many ways, universities should be well suited to distributed ways of working. Academics and researchers have always been highly mobile, travelling for conferences, and collaborating across institutions. They are self-motivated knowledge workers, judged by their outputs (funding grants, papers published). In a sense the challenge for universities is to provide the technology platforms and HR policies which catch up with the way in which academics have always worked, and to provide the same benefits for their professional services staff.

Thinking about working proximity in the Higher Education sector, also includes a consideration of the use of space. A separate (but linked) topic leads to the question of how current university staff space could be used if some level of home working becomes the norm. It is interesting to note that The John Lewis Partnership is starting to talk about turning over eight department stores into social housing⁸. This highlights another change theme and opportunity - how university space could be released to free up some much-needed capital or repurposed to better reflect the new student experience⁹. *Is it possible that institutions can turn this current conundrum into a positive by making well-formed judgements about balancing the utilisation of space and the requirement of the workforce to either be on campus or work from home?*

With many universities bringing their civic and social responsibilities into the heart of their strategies, how can the strategists, with the expertise of the change professionals, achieve the right balance for all:

- People working from home some of the time
- Healthier and more productive workforce
- Lower carbon footprint by increasing working at home policy
- Physical space freed up – sold / rented / gifted / repurposed

⁷ **Perceptyx: - As employees become more productive working from home, they are less likely to want to return to the physical workplace after Covid-19** - Brett Wells, July 2020

⁸ **BBC News - Your chance to live in a John Lewis store...sort of** – (Dearbail Jordan)

⁹ <https://sums.org.uk/app/uploads/2020/05/SUMS-Briefing-Paper-The-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Timetabling-and-Space-Management-May-2020.pdf>

- Capital released
- Buildings and space released into the community for social benefit...

There are clearly some big decisions to be made in the future.

Research conducted by McKinsey, which reflects on how organisations can come out of the Covid-19 pandemic in better shape, shows a strong focus on four employee engagement themes¹⁰:

- Stable, secure work experience
- Trusting relationships
- **Social cohesion and inclusion**
- Individual purpose and contribution

Under the heading of social cohesion and inclusion, the McKinsey research suggests that having supportive co-workers (linked to employee experience factors of 'Respect' and 'Equality') results in a number of areas of improvement as detailed in Table 3¹¹

Table 3: Research by McKinsey - Links between supportive co-workers and improvements

| Theme | Experience factors | Percentage improvements in the following areas | | |
|--|--------------------|--|-------------------|-------------------|
| | | Work effectiveness | Engagement | Wellbeing |
| Social Cohesion and Inclusion (having supportive co-workers) | Respect | 15.7% improvement | 51.8% improvement | 49.8% improvement |
| | Equality | 16.2% improvement | 50.8% improvement | 50.9% improvement |

These figures reinforce results in the current study where 93% of respondents emphasised the importance of team connectivity in managing the change experience.

Regarding the high expectations of leadership contact from survey respondents, a report by Microsoft¹² which appraised its own ability to convert to home working, underlines the importance of the line manager saying '*Managers get soaked but they also carry the life preservers [jackets].*' They noted a doubling in their management populations' time on MS Teams from an average of 7 hours per week to 14. And they state – "*Working to support employees, nurture connections, and manage dispersed teams from home, managers sent 115% more instant messages*

¹⁰ **McKinsey & Company: Covid-19 and the employee experience (June 2020)** Jonathan Emmett, Gunnar Sctah, Matt Schrimper & Alexandra Wood

¹¹ In the McKinsey study, work effectiveness was measured by asking employees whether their daily work had been positively affected, negatively affected or not affected at all by the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹² **Microsoft - 'Microsoft analyzed data on its newly remote workforce'** – By Natalie Singer-Welush, Kevin Sherman and Erik Anderson

in March. Microsoft was also able to highlight how manager one-to-one collaboration drove down working hours stating those with high manager time worked an average of an additional 1.75 hours, whereas those with low manager one-to-one time worked nearly 3.75 hours extra per week.

A point to end on around mental health. Mental Health First Aid England, prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, was already highlighting key statistics such as:

- One in four of us will suffer from a mental health issue in any given year
- 75% of people with diagnosable mental health issues receive no treatment at all. An NHS Commissioning body is expecting that the number of people seeking help for mental health issues will rise by 20% in the coming months
- Mental health issues account for almost 70million sick days in the UK per year - the most of any health condition. This figure is set to rise throughout the pandemic
- 85% of managers feel that employee wellbeing is their responsibility but only 30% have taken part in mental health training.¹³

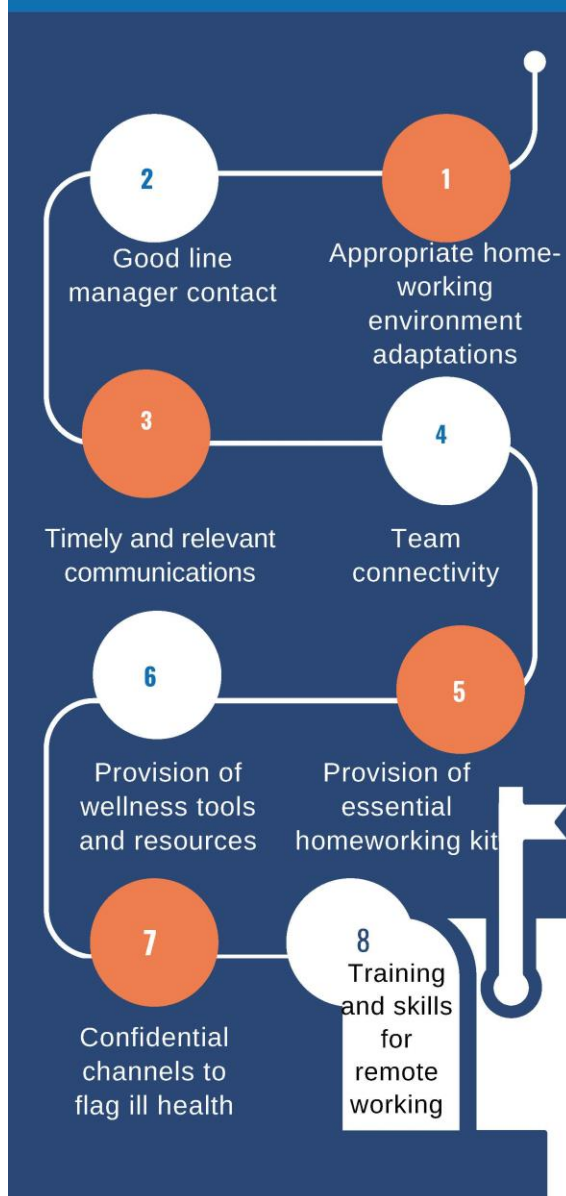
Clearly there is a particular need for line managers to have an eye on the mental wellbeing of their staff as we emerge into 'normality.'

Conclusion

In spite of the significant challenges experienced, in the main the HE sector responded well in relation to health, wellbeing and enablement of home working in the wake of Covid-19. There is now a need to maintain this momentum as campuses return to a new normal.

While findings suggest that during the crisis reality lagged behind the respondents' desired state across all three themes, survey results also show that perceptions improved when compared with pre Covid-19 perceptions of preparedness; the highest change seen in relation to remote working and lowest in relation to wellbeing.

8 Factors of enabling remote working through positive staff health provision and general wellbeing initiatives



¹³ **Mental Health First Aid England** - <https://mhfaengland.org/>

Findings suggest that adapting to working from home and provision of home working equipment are both largely resolved, following initial challenges, and most remaining concerns are around the 'people change elements'. It is believed there could be a number of initiatives and policies which universities could focus on to make more impactful provision for staff wellness, particularly in the realms of mental health. Universities are aware of this need and they are acting on championing wellbeing, however, there is the perception that resources in this area are challenging. Developing the right blend of occupational health and self-help tools for staff is a conundrum for institutions to work out further.

Training and skills provision to enable successful homeworking is likely to continue to bubble away as new platforms, social media outlets and software packages became available. However, most staff are probably well equipped to manage Zoom and MS Teams and similar platforms, as well as grasping the skills needed to work and collaborate remotely.

A flexible approach is essential to provide resilience. Rather than thinking about 'on campus' or 'off campus', institutions will need to adopt an approach that continues to ensure that staff can work, and students can study where-ever they happen to be.

Throughout the lockdown and ongoing plans to transition to 'a version of normality', we have all been made aware of the challenges that have been, and are being faced by employees. One of the key take-aways from this study is that this way of working, has made us *more* human, and *more* accessible. It has enabled different, and perhaps deeper human connections to form between colleagues. This should not be lost as institutions aim to return to a form of normality, and as we deal with the uncertainties ahead.



Appendix

Appendix A - Composition of respondents

Fig i – Gender of respondents

What is your sex:

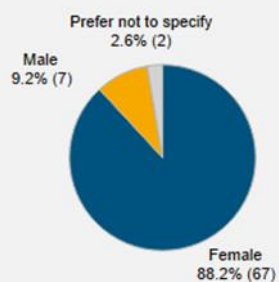


Fig ii – employment status during lockdown

Please select the option that best describes your employment status during the Covid-19 lockdown:

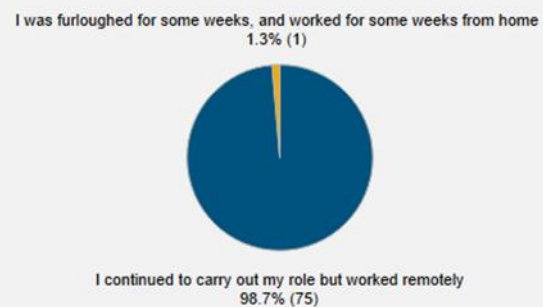


Fig iii – special support needs

Do you consider yourself as having any specialist support needs from your employer to carry out your job effectively?

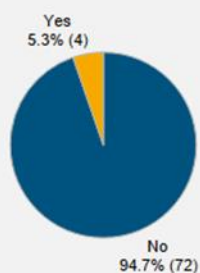
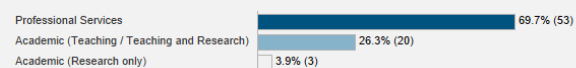


Fig iv – role description

Please select the most appropriate description of the type of role you currently undertake:



Appendix B

Fig s & Fig t – Pre Covid (figure s), and post lockdown (figure t) - monitoring and assessing staff health

Fig s

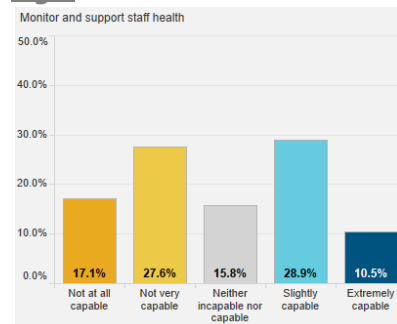


Fig t

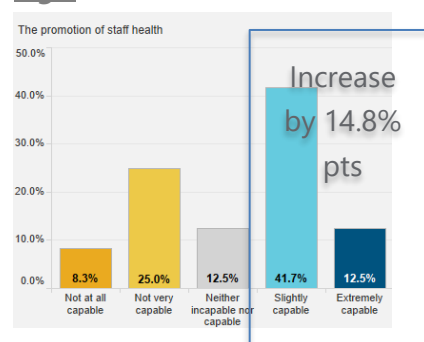


Fig u and v – Pre Covid (figure u), and post lockdown (figure v) - promoting and enhancing general staff wellbeing

Fig u

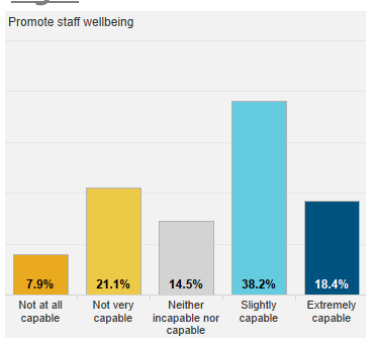


Fig v

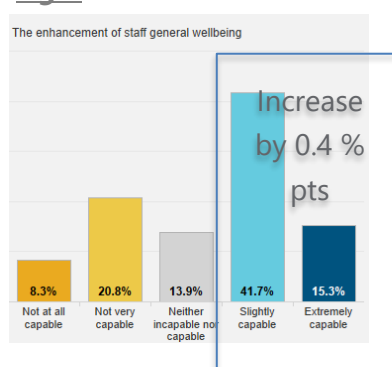


Fig w and x – Pre Covid (figure w), and post lockdown (figure x) - implementing and enabling remote working.

Fig w

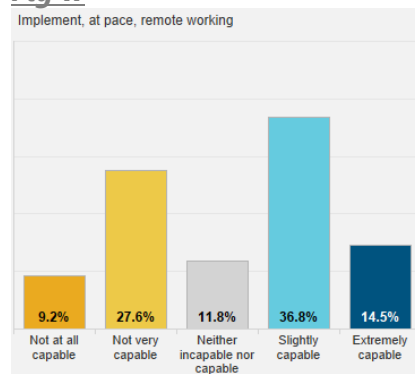
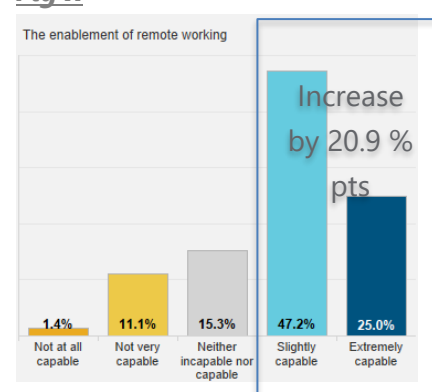


Fig x





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