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Briefing Paper

Business Continuity in a Changed World

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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.

Here, Jerry Niman, SUMS Associate Consultant, shares some thoughts on why planning for Business Continuity is as important as ever in these unprecedented times.

Introduction

So far, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have managed through Covid-19-induced disruption and are continuing to deal with the implications from Brexit. It has been tough. The challenges are far from over, and there is not much spare capacity for new initiatives. So why would now be a good time for HEIs to think about what they would do in the event of further disruption?

This paper explores:

- Why now is the time to revisit institutional business continuity plans
- How to get started
- What assistance is available.

What is Business Continuity?

Without getting bogged down in too much detail, business continuity is about an institution's ability to deliver critical aspects of services at acceptable levels following a disruptive incident. The disruptive incident could be anything: a terrorist alert in a building adjacent to campus, a flood or major fire affecting halls of residence, a cyber-attack or industrial action.

In any of these instances, organisations need to consider the services that they would need to carry on delivering. These services would almost certainly include safeguarding students and staff, providing food and shelter, and depending on the time of year, might also include examinations or student registration. Business continuity considers how institutions would deliver these services, despite being excluded from the facilities they would normally use, possibly for an extended period.

Business continuity sits alongside related areas like business recovery (getting back to normal as soon as possible), emergency management (dealing with the immediate impact, often under the leadership of the emergency services) and risk reduction (processes to identify future risks and minimise their impact and likelihood). All are part of risk management; the overall approach to dealing with the unknown.

While the exact names used might vary from institution to institution, the key point is to consider what services are critical for the institution to deliver, then the facilities that it depends on to deliver these services and plans for disruptions to those facilities that could result from a disruptive incident.

Why Now?

There are many reasons why institutions might find it tempting to put business continuity on the back burner right now:

- The institution already has business continuity plans

- The institution has (quite literally) just survived one of the most disruptive events imaginable

- There are plenty of other priorities to keep institutions occupied at this time.

However, this would be a high-risk strategy for several reasons:

- Existing business continuity plans are likely to be written around the way things were done before Covid-19. *Things must be done differently now, and post-Covid-19 plans need to reflect this shift.*

- Covid-19 affects everyone. There is guidance[1] and support from Government, extensive sharing of best practice between institutions, and rapid, helpful responses from key suppliers. SUMS Consulting has produced a report reflecting how the sector has risen to the challenge[2], and how there are silver linings even to this dark cloud. Above all, there has been a sense of everyone being in the same boat and an expectation that things are going to be choppy for a while. *It's important to note now that a major incident affecting a single institution will not come with the same Covid-19 community spirit – institutions are going to have to deal with these on their own.*

- Teams in HEIs are still in 'adapting' mode and have had to implement new ways of doing things. They may have used the existing business continuity plans, and they will know what worked well, what could be improved, and what did not work at all. New procedures may not yet be documented. *This knowledge needs to be captured while it is still fresh in the mind.*

- As institutions emerge from the Covid-19 critical phase, finances are likely to be fragile to say the least. *Institutions cannot afford the knock-on effects of a major incident on top of everything else.*

- The operating environment has been significantly altered, leading to changes in risk patterns. Anecdotal evidence suggests that home working exposes institutions to a greater cyber security risk[3,4,5]. Changed patterns of building occupancy might affect the likelihood of early detection of fire or flood. New learning patterns could lead to student dissatisfaction. *The pandemic has altered the threats.*

- The detailed work required to review the criticality of business processes, and the facilities they depend on, could stimulate thoughts on how things can be done better in future. *Business continuity planning can result in better business processes.*

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/further-and-higher-education-coronavirus-covid-19
[2] https://sums.org.uk/news/silver-linings-how-the-response-to-covid-19-will-change-higher-education-forever/
[3] https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/guidance/home-working
[4] https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/news/alert-targeted-ransomware-attacks-on-uk-education-sector
[5] https://www.economist.com/international/2020/08/17/during-the-pandemic-a-digital-crimewave-has-flooded-the-internet

What Should Institutions be Doing?

Institutions are not starting from a blank sheet; almost all institutions will already have some level of business continuity planning in place. However, there may never be a better opportunity to gauge how effective existing plans were in the light of a major disruption. Therefore, the most urgent thing to be doing right now, is to capture the experiences of the last few months.

Institutions need to ask themselves the following questions:

- What did we have to do, and why?

- Were our existing business continuity plans used, and if not, why not?

- If our business continuity plans were used, did they work? If not, what needs to be changed?

- If something similar were to happen again, would we have to start from scratch, or have we documented our response?

These questions need to be asked at all levels in the institution. Staff at the 'coal face' may have better information and insights than senior managers.

A cascade approach is probably the best way to go about this. However, rather than add yet another burden to colleagues' workloads, institutions need to seek opportunities to integrate these discussions into existing meetings (physical or virtual). After all, business continuity considerations should be part and parcel of any change process - not an occasional box-ticking exercise.

Having collated answers to these questions, leadership teams need to consider what the responses tell them about the institution's *process* for business continuity planning. Leadership teams should then

think of ways to improve the institution's approach to writing and updating these plans, so that they are more likely to be of practical use in a future scenario.

Finally, most institutions have good contacts with their peers. Experiences should be shared; peer groups should find out what approaches others have used, what worked well for them, what they struggled with, and how approaches in each institution differ from one another.

Next Steps

There is no shortage of expertise on business continuity within the Higher Education sector. Each institution will no doubt have a named individual responsible for co-ordination of business continuity, and they may well be the university's representative at the Higher Education Business Continuity Network, HEBCoN[6]. The named responsible officer should be the first port of call.

UCISA, the higher education sector's association for information services professionals, in collaboration with AHUA, AMOSSHE, ARC, AUDE, BUFDG, SCONUL and Jisc, has published guidance on approaches to business continuity in universities[7]. Some universities may find that their insurers or loss adjusters can provide valuable assistance on business continuity topics.

With expertise covering almost all areas involved in business continuity planning, the team at SUMS Consulting would be happy to help in developing the institution's approach to business continuity.

In summary

Given everything that the sector has been through, more business continuity planning might be low on the list of priorities. However, not looking at these plans now would represent a failure to learn from the Covid-19 experience as well as run the risk of the institution sleepwalking into the next disruptive incident.

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[6] https://www.hebcon.org/
[7] https://www.ucisa.ac.uk/groups/exec/News/approaches%20to%20business%20continuity

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