



VICE-CHANCELLOR'S REPORT TO SENATE

Professor R. Van de Noort

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COVID-19: THE UNIVERSITY RESPONSE

THE MAJOR INCIDENT TEAM: MANAGING OUR RESPONSE

As I have made clear in my communications to staff and in my termly all staff talks which took place last week, I am enormously proud of how as an organisation we have responded, and how agile we have been in responding, to the crisis.

Our Major Incident Team (MIT), currently jointly chaired by Professor Parveen Yaqoob or Professor Julian Park, and before that by Professor Dominik Zaum, has operated very successfully over the past weeks dealing with the immediate response to the crisis. There are four sub-groups, which focus on student welfare, staff welfare, infrastructure and estates, and support to NHS. Approximately 1,000 students remain on campus for various reasons (such as being unable to return home, protecting vulnerable family members, being dependent on local medical support or being estranged from family) and Estates, Campus Commerce and Student Services continue to provide support and services to them.

The MIT is now planning the details of a phased return once lockdown begins to be relaxed. It is important to appreciate that there will be building maintenance issues to address, and that external contractors required for statutory testing will likely be in demand; therefore campus will not re-open immediately. A phased return will be based on resumption of key activities rather than on access to buildings. Any return will need to take ongoing social distancing into account, and consider protection of vulnerable individuals and those with underlying conditions. Colleagues who are fully able to work from home should continue to do so for as long as possible; it will be important to capture any benefits arising from the new ways of working to inform a renewed approach to our core business in the year ahead.

EDUCATION

Senate approved by correspondence our move to online exam periods for both the current exam period and August examination period. We have had to work at pace, and sometimes at a speed quicker than many of us would have liked, but I am confident that we made the best decisions we could, putting the interests of students and our colleagues at the heart of our decision making.

We have received some strong and challenging feedback both from our internal community and from our students regarding the approach we have taken towards online exams. We chose to mitigate the disadvantage at the level of impact rather than to implement a blanket approach. We have been careful to maintain academic standards, something that may prove wise in the face of the potential conditions that may be put in place on the any financial bailout to the sector which may well include as grade inflation.

It is, however, interesting to note that many of the institutions claiming to have introduced an approach with no detriment to students have in fact adopted a very similar approach to ours when their policies are examined in detail.

The May exam period has now begun and the initial impression is that the process is working and that take-home exams have improved accessibility for the majority of students with disabilities. Clearly, these changes have created significant additional workload for both academic and professional colleagues, not least as a result of the number of Circumstances Impact Process (CIP) submitted for extenuating circumstances. Additional or different workloads will continue for the summer examination period and for implementing plans for the next academic year (which is the subject of another paper and Senate discussion). We are mindful that this can create additional pressure for colleagues who are juggling work and home life often with additional caring responsibilities. HR has created a range of pages on our staff portal signposting many tools and resources to support our people at this most difficult of times.

UNIVERSITY OF READING MALAYSIA

For our colleagues in the University of Reading Malaysia, the lockdown is extended until at least 12 May with conditions tighter than in the UK. Our Provost Wing-Lam and team are doing an excellent job of supporting our staff and students in challenging circumstances. All teaching for the summer term is going online and preparations are also complete for take home exams much like in the UK. This week the QAA published a report on TNE in Malaysia, which was very positive. Highlights included staff development opportunities and engagement with students. This is a significant achievement not least because the QAA activity took place during the restructuring of the University of Reading Malaysia campus.

SUPPORT FOR NHS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

Many of our academic colleagues continue to play an important role in contributing to the response to the pandemic in the UK and worldwide. More broadly, colleagues and students have also [volunteered](#) to support our local communities or indeed the [NHS directly](#). In terms of supporting the NHS and others, there has been a huge amount of activity with at least 50 requests to the University. You can read a useful summary of all our work with partners [here](#). We will continue to share information about our efforts to support the NHS and community through the UUK #wearetogether campaign'

Earlier this month we celebrated Earth Day which provided us with an opportunity to showcase some of our academic research as well as our organisation's commitment to reducing our carbon footprint in these exceptional times. We were very active via various media discussing the positive environmental benefits of the lockdown for the [University of Reading](#) and asking people to [pledge a commitment](#) to actions that they will continue once we return to key activities and more familiar ways of working. This #LockdownClimateChange activity was picked up by various media outlets.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

In my start of term messages as well as the all-staff talks. I have been very clear there will be very significant financial implications of the pandemic on our organization. A [report](#) commissioned from London Economics (LE) by UCU provides an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 as being £2.5bn for the sector compared with the UUK analysis of £6.5bn. Key differences are that the LE report only addresses first year undergraduates whereas the UUK report also considers impact on continuation into second and third years. The LE report also does not include PGT international students which for

us represents 80% of our PGT intake. My view is that the LE report therefore considerably underestimates the impact of the pandemic on the sector.

For our part, based on the UUK assumptions of a 50% reduction in international students and 10% reduction in domestic students, we are likely to be facing a financial deficit of the order of £40-60m for next year with ongoing impacts for the next two years. Members will be aware that the [UUK proposal](#) seeking government support for the sector, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, was submitted just before Easter. There are fifteen detailed requests, with the most significant being requests for: a doubling in QR funding (Quality-Related research funding, which is based in significant part on the outcome of the Research Excellence Framework 2014); an increase of UKRI-funded projects to 100% of their full Economic Costing; and a student number control for home students, the number to be based on forecast student numbers for this year with an uplift of no more than 5%.

In terms of impact on the University of Reading, the UUK proposal could bring an additional £18m in QR funding, and the full Economic Costing another £2m. The student number control may equate to an additional £2.5m, subject to a successful recruitment round. We are also close to submitting our bid to furlough some staff, which will benefit the current financial year.

There has to date been no response to the UUK proposal from Government with media reports indicating that, while there is support from DfE, BEISS and No 10, the Treasury is concerned about value for money, not least in providing substantial sums of money to financial sustainable institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge. In the meantime, the moratorium on offer making continues until 4 May.

While there remains uncertainty about the scale of the financial challenges we face, we know that these are significant in the short and medium term and that we need everyone in the organisation to work together to meet these challenges. To preserve cash in the short term, Samantha Foley, our Chief Financial Officer, has written to all Heads of Schools and Functions as major budget holders to re-emphasize financial prudence. We have also reviewed our capital projects and are putting on hold or delaying those projects which are not essential in the short term.

OTHER UNIVERSITY NEWS

UNIVERSITY RECEIVES SILVER LEVEL ATHENA SWAN AWARD

Last month, we announced that we have received a Silver level Athena SWAN award from the Equality Challenge Unit. We are now amongst a small group of universities who have achieved this fantastic accolade. The Athena SWAN Charter promotes gender equality, representation, progression and success for all with a specific focus on the advancement of women's careers across higher education. The Charter also promotes and recognises work that supports trans staff and students. The University's application highlighted the progress we have made in many areas – including increased job-sharing at all levels, a reduction in Grade-9 gender pay gap, increased number of female professors, stronger female representation in the University Executive Board and our first female Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Parveen Yaqoob.

RESEARCH NEWS

Senate members can keep up to date with the most recent stories in research via our [connecting research blog](#). However, there are a few other major highlights to bring to members' attention including

- Colleagues have secured over £17 million in research grant funding in the first two quarters of 2019/20, higher than in three of the last four years, and with Quarter 3 looking strong as well. Highlights include a Programme Grant from the British Heart Foundation for £1.2 million.
- A number of colleagues are conducting research supporting the national efforts to counter COVID-19. This includes research supporting vaccine development by Prof Ian Jones, and research supporting diagnostic testing by Dr Al Edwards.
- Prof Federico Faloppa, one of the winners of the 2019 University Research Impact and Engagement Awards, has been appointed to the Council of Europe's Committee of Experts on Combatting Hate Speech.

RUSU EXCELLENCE AWARDS

The annual Partnership in T&L Showcase, hosted by Reading University Students' Union (RUSU) in celebration of the RUSU Excellence Awards, is a highlight in the calendar for both students and colleagues. The initiative was inspired by the true spirit of collaboration between students and staff, coming together to solve issues creatively and improve the teaching and learning experience. Although this year the Showcase itself has been postponed, together with RUSU we would like to take a moment to celebrate the achievements of the colleagues nominated by students for these awards. All winners and nominees will receive signed certificates and will be able to collect their trophies in due course. A full list of the awards winners is below

Award	Winner
Academic Tutor Excellence Award	Prof. Simon Mortimer
Diverse and Inclusive Teaching Excellence Award	Wendy McLean
Graduate Teaching Assistant Excellence Award	Sophie Oduyale
Outstanding Student/Staff Partnership Excellence Award	Amanda Millmore
Support Staff Excellence Award	Sue Wallace
Technology Enhanced Learning Excellence Award	Dr. Nicola Abram
Teaching Excellence Award for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	Ilan Dwek
Teaching Excellence Award for Business	Edel Byrne
Teaching Excellence Award for Life Sciences	Prof. Bob Rastall

Teaching Excellence Award for Science	Dr. Rob Hosfield
Course Rep of the Year	Leah Logan
School Rep of the Year	Sara Dahash

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENTS

In February we announced a proposal to work with a commercial partner to build a new £150m film studio at Thames Valley Science Park, bringing significant financial return for the University, direct benefits for our academic staff and students in FTT creating up to 3,000 jobs locally. Work continues in this area apace and we remain optimistic that, COVID-19 notwithstanding, we can reach agreement on a deal that will have significant benefit for the University, the town and the region.

PROFESSOR ROBERT VAN DE NOORT

Vice-Chancellor

30 April 2020