

THE UNIVERSITY OF READING

STAFFING COMMITTEE

20/10 A meeting of the Staffing Committee was held on Wednesday 17 June 2020 at 2.00 pm via Microsoft Teams

Present:

Dr R J Messer (Chair)
Professor A Bell
Mr J J Brady
Miss M Cleaver
Professor C Harty
Dr K Henderson
Mr S Hunt
Dr A Laville
Mrs C Rolstone
Mrs J Rowe
Mrs S Thornton
Professor C Tissot

Mr A J Twyford (Secretary)

Apologies were received from Professor D C Berry and Professor O Kennedy.

The Committee welcomed Mrs Dawn Grout, Occupational Health Manager, and Ms Jude Brindley, Health & Safety Co-ordinator to the meeting for the item on staff wellbeing.

20/11 The minutes of the meeting held on 11 February 2020 were approved

20/12 Staff Survey update

The Assistant Director of Human Resources (People and Talent) reported that the University had asked Capita Surveys and Research to undertake a short survey on behalf of the University of Reading, to explore staff experiences of working during the COVID-19 outbreak. A communication will be sent to staff later this week with a closing date of the 6th July.

She confirmed that the survey is being conducted in the same way as previous staff surveys, and would make clear that staff views would remain confidential and anonymous. She confirmed that staff who have been furloughed would be eligible to complete the survey, and would receive a letter sent to their home address.

The results would be considered by the UEB and would enable the University's Leadership Group to plan for the future with staff experience in mind. She confirmed that the results would also be shared with staff via the Staff portal.

20/13 Staff Wellbeing

At the last meeting it was agreed that the Committee would discuss staff wellbeing. Dawn Grout, Occupational Health Manager and Jude Brindley, Health & Safety Coordinator were in attendance for this item. A paper had been circulated to prompt discussion regarding staff wellbeing and Mrs Grout summarised the main thrust of the paper. This included:

- the wellbeing related activities / initiatives currently offered by the University;
- examples of good practice and themes emerging from the Schools / Functions 5 year plan submissions;
- the challenges we face in light of the current pandemic, including the University's response and the impact on staff;

The Committee was asked to consider what additional activities / support the University might need in the future.

Jude Brindley shared her experience as one of the University's Wellbeing Peer Support (WPS) volunteers. She reported that the WPS network was launched in October 2019 and provides confidential support and information to staff members who are experiencing a mental health issue, poor wellbeing or emotional distress and need the support of someone to talk to but are unable to approach a colleague or line manager.

She said that all 29 volunteers undertook a comprehensive two day Mental Health awareness and skills course (MHFA training) that provided them with a deeper understanding of the issues that impact on and relate to people's mental health.

A comprehensive discussion took place in respect of staff wellbeing where the following points were made:

- There was widespread agreement that the University has a broad suite of wellbeing support that staff can access – in particular the WPS network and the Employee Assistance Programme were well regarded. The Committee agreed that the University should continue to promote the wellbeing offerings available;
- Some Schools and Functions have developed local initiatives to improve staff wellbeing (as detailed in the 5 year plan submissions). Whilst this local ownership and development of activities was seen

as positive, there was recognition that this has led to some disparity in wellbeing provision across the University;

- Workload issues are identified by a number of Schools and Functions as impacting on staff wellbeing;
- There is evidence (from the contacts made with the WPS network, from the referrals received by Occupational Health, and from the feedback from the HR Advisory team) to suggest that mental health / wellbeing is an important area of concern for some staff and line managers and there was support for more activity in this area. It was recognised that managers have a fundamental role in wellbeing and training them in mental health awareness would be beneficial. It was noted that People Development currently delivers such sessions and that Dawn Grout is trained to deliver Mental Health awareness training sessions (*Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)*) for managers and staff at the University. The Committee understood that as this is not a core part of her role the number of sessions she can deliver would be limited;
- Agreement that developing a working environment and culture where staff feel supported and valued is more likely to improve staff wellbeing;

Given the wider challenges we face as a result of the pandemic, the Committee agreed that it is even more important to maintain a focus on wellbeing support. They also acknowledged the key role played by Heads of School and Function in ensuring regular contact is made with all their staff.

It was agreed that a note of the Committee's discussion should go to the UEB to include the following:

- The Committee recognised the importance of both institutional wide support and training, as well as local support and training;
- The Committee agreed the importance of training Heads of School and Function, and sharing what worked locally;
- The Committee would encourage more Mental Health awareness sessions (recognising that there would be a cost involved);
- The Committee asked HR to consider what measures could be put in place to assess the impacts of delivering different wellbeing initiatives.

Action: The Committee Secretary to send a note of the staff wellbeing discussion to the UEB

20/14 Visa Fees

The Director of Human Resources reminded colleagues that the UK immigration system which determines overseas applicants' rights to enter and work in the UK includes charges for Certificates of Sponsorship, and visa applications for the prospective employee and their dependents. He reported that the University currently pays for all Certificates of Sponsorship charges associated with but the visa and associated costs fall on the employee.

He indicated that he had been contacted by _____, on behalf of a number of colleagues requesting a review of the University's current position to allow Schools discretion to pay visa costs on behalf of employees where grant funding is available and allows for this as a legitimate expense.

_____ expressed concern that the current policy might make Reading less attractive to potential colleagues, and cites a number of institutions where such costs are met by the employer (Imperial College London, the University of Oxford and the National Oceanography Centre at Southampton).

The Director of Human Resources reminded the Committee that it had previously agreed a proposal from HR that saw the introduction of an interest-free loan scheme to help relevant colleagues spread the cost of the visa and associated charges. Up to two months' gross salary or £7,500, whichever is the lesser amount, can be borrowed with a choice of repayment periods of either 6, 12 or 24 months.

He reported that Professors Yaqoob and Zaum, in their capacity as PVCs (Research) both expressed some sympathy for the proposal, and would not object to allowing discretion at the School-level.

The Committee was asked to discuss whether a change in our current arrangements, in line with that proposed by _____ has merit and should form the basis of a recommendation to UEB. A useful discussion took place where there was broad support for a change in our current arrangements.

The Director of Human Resources thanked the Committee for its views and said he would now make a recommendation to the UEB to allow Schools discretion to pay visa costs on behalf of employees where grant funding is available and allows for this as a legitimate expense.

Action: The Director of Human Resources to make a recommendation to the UEB to allow Schools discretion to pay visa costs on behalf of employees where grant funding is available and allows for this as a legitimate expense.

The University Secretary left the meeting, and Professor Harty acted as Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

20/15 Access to Work

Professor Tissot informed the Committee that since becoming the Head of the IoE several members of staff in the Institute have required adjustments to be made to the workplace, resulting in the Institute providing financial support. Her understanding was that the relevant School / Function is expected to meet these costs, and felt this may lead to inconsistencies between Schools / Functions that have less discretionary spending (or are smaller and have less income in general).

The Committee was asked to consider whether such costs should continue to be met by Schools / Functions or whether the University should meet these costs or make a contribution.

The Director of Human Resources reminded the Committee that where a statutory responsibility exists it has to be met and said he would be concerned if a School or Function were unable or unwilling to comply with their legal duty, or exhibited a reluctance to appoint a disabled person because of affordability concerns. He said he would be supportive of a shared arrangement whereby any costs are shared between the School / Function and the Centre.

The Director of Legal Services pointed out that the University has considered this issue in the context of the student body. She stated that given the size of the University, costs would not be considered to be a barrier to compliance. She confirmed a process was in place to allow the University to make practical and supportive arrangements for students who may have a disability.

The Committee agreed that where financial support was required the Centre should make a contribution, and felt that it was sensible to align any approach with the arrangements developed for students.

The Director of Human Resources and Director of Legal Services agreed to progress this matter with a view to making a recommendation to the UEB for the Centre to share the costs where a School or Function is required to make practical and supportive arrangements for staff who may have a disability.

Action: The Director of Human Resources and Director of Legal Services to make a recommendation to the UEB

20/16 Overseas Working

The Assistant Director of Human Resources (Advisory Services) made the Committee aware of the implications of staff working remotely overseas. She acknowledged that international working was inevitable given the long tradition of working and engaging internationally, from the development of the overseas campuses, joint programmes with overseas Universities such as NUIST and BIT, research projects conducted overseas and flying faculty.

However, she said that greater awareness and education amongst relevant Heads and Line Managers was needed to enable them to make considered decisions in respect of the appropriateness of staff working remotely overseas.

She highlighted the complex rules on personal tax, social security payments and also corporate tax which are usually based on where an individual does work for their employer, rather than where the employer itself is based or in which country the employee is paid.

She reported on the work undertaken by HR and Tax colleagues in the last 18 months – 2 years to increase the understanding of both Finance and HR colleagues as well as Line Managers and Heads of School/Function. This included the running of a number of briefing sessions from PWC which attracted approx. 50 colleagues across 3 sessions (further sessions are planned).

She indicated that a policy / formal guidance would be developed to make clear when remote working overseas can be facilitated and when staff are required to be based in the UK.

The Committee thanked the Assistant Director of Human Resources (Advisory Services) for providing such a comprehensive paper. There was widespread agreement that there needed to be education and training for relevant colleagues and managers on the implications of staff working remotely overseas.

20/17 Safeguarding Policy

The Director of Legal Services informed the Committee that the safeguarding policy has been reviewed and updated. The main changes to the policy were as follows:

- more details on who the policy applies to, and a more succinct and clarified hierarchy of departments and roles who have specific safeguarding responsibilities;

- Greater clarification regarding DBS checks, and specifically to note that HR will now be undertaking international DBS checks (or equivalents) on staff who have lived abroad who are in DBS-required roles;
- Greater clarification regarding the requirements for risk assessments and DBS checks, where required;
- An acknowledgement that further Safeguarding Training needs to be sourced and offered to relevant staff members in addition to the PREVENT Training they currently receive.

The Committee welcomed the changes to the policy, and made the following comments:

The University, as a matter of policy, accepts young people (typically year 10 students) on work experience where Schools/Functions can accommodate them. Does the policy apply to this type of situation?

The Director of Legal Services agreed to investigate this further and would liaise with the Assistant Director of Human Resources (Advisory Services) in the first instance.

Is there a process for out of hours reporting?

The Director of Legal Services confirmed that Student Services / the Wardens have a well-established process in place in respect of out of hours reporting that falls outside the scope of this policy.

The Director of Legal Services thanked the Committee for its comments and confirmed that the policy would now be updated as appropriate. She confirmed that final approval would then be sought from the UEB.

20/18 Pay and Pensions update

The Director of Human Resources updated the Committee on the progress made in respect of the annual national pay bargaining process via the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES).

He reported that earlier this year, and prior to the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the UEB had agreed its participation in this year's JNCHES process and provided initial feedback to UCEA in advance of the planned negotiations.

In recognition of the exceptional circumstances created by the pandemic and lockdown, the JNCHES process has now been paused indefinitely. He confirmed that the University is about to enter into a significant consultation process with staff to address its specific financial challenges –

in this context one option to achieve pay-related savings is to seek agreement to implement a pay freeze for up to three years.

In respect of the USS, the University has recently engaged in the first of two major consultations designed to frame the latest USS valuation (as at 31 March 2020).

The first consultation sought responses to five key questions covering methodology, covenant, investments strategies and risk appetite. The University's response, shared in advance with the President of Council and the Chair of the Remuneration Committee, re-iterated our previous support for a number of measures intended to address the governance of USS and strengthen the employer covenant, but sought better evidence before providing any definitive response to a number of further mooted developments (for example, additional contingent support such as escrow accounts and reservoir trusts).

The second and main consultation is expected later in the summer (July/August) and will seek views on the key technical assumptions and recovery plan.

20/19 UCU Local Claim

The Director of Human Resources reported that at the last meeting of the local University and UCU Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) the substantive discussions in respect of the formal agreement had concluded, subject to a small sub-group agreeing relevant wording in respect of the calculation of a fractional threshold and related worked examples.

As a next step all current G6 Teaching Fellow colleagues will be issued with a jointly-agreed questionnaire to establish the extent to which their current responsibilities match or exceed the agreed role profile for teaching activity at Grade 6. Where it is agreed that colleagues are now exceeding the new profile they will be converted to a Lecturer role, with a teaching-intensive classification.

He reported that joint work on addressing the University's gender pay gap has remained on hold and will follow in due course.

20/20 Closure Days 2023/24

The Committee noted the dates for closure days for the 2023/24 academic leave year approved by Chair's action. The dates are:

Closure Day 1 - Friday 22 December 2023
Public Holiday - Monday 25 December 2023
Public Holiday - Tuesday 26 December 2023
Closure Day 2 - Wednesday 27 December 2023

Closure Day 3 - Thursday 28 December 2023
Closure Day 4 - Friday 29 December 2023
Public Holiday - Monday 2 January 2024

Closure Day 5 - Thursday 28 March 2024
Public Holiday - Friday 29 March 2024
Public Holiday - Monday 1 April 2024
Closure Day 6 - Tuesday 2 April 2024

20/21 Provisional dates of meetings for the 2020/21 Academic Session:

Thursday 8 October 2020 at 2.00 pm
Tuesday 24 November 2020 at 10.00 am (reserve)
Tuesday 9 February 2021 at 2.00 pm
Wednesday 28 April 2021 at 11.00 am (reserve)
Wednesday 16 June 2021 at 2.00 pm