

Covid-19 Physics Focus Groups – Report 2

This is a summary of two focus groups that have been run virtually in the week beginning 11 May 2020. One focus group was run with postgraduate students, and 23 students attended, and the other with school staff, where 26 people attended and one person sent their thoughts by email.

Summary of postgraduate focus group

Students were keen to say that they were very happy with how the school had handled the shut down, and with the level and clarity of communication. They were all also happy with the level of contact and support they were getting from their supervisors, with many saying they were now having more contact with their supervisors than before the shutdown.

The biggest issue that was raised in the meeting was for UKRI funded students in their final year who have been asked to fill in a university form to 'quantify' the effect that the pandemic and shutdown has had on them, and to justify their request for an extension. Students had many practical questions about how to fill in the form, but also there was a lot of anxiety that impacts on mental health, and other more intangible effects on productivity, wouldn't be considered good reasons for an extension because they were so difficult to quantify. There was also a degree of frustration and confusion about why they were being asked to justify a request for an extension now, when the situation is still ongoing.

[CB: I talked to Omar Almaini, as PG tutor, about this. We have re-advertised to students a Town Hall meeting run by the graduate school, which should answer many of their questions, and reminded students that they can get in touch with Omar if they have further questions.]

A number of students talked more about these mental health impacts, and their difficulties in concentrating and being productive. Generally, they felt that their supervisors and the school were supportive and understanding about this.

Some students are finding it difficult to judge the 'etiquette' of virtual meetings, especially as it will differ depending on the type of meeting, and asked that this be made clear before meetings.

Experimental students were generally happy with their new work, whether that was computational, or writing up of papers / end-of-year-reports / theses. There are naturally some challenges, particularly in transitioning to computational work, and these students in particular were missing having an office full of colleagues to discuss with.

There were some questions about our return to work, but generally the students were confident that the school would handle this well (based on their opinion of how we have been doing so far). Experimental students were keen to get back in the office, but very aware of the pressure this will put on technical, facilities and support staff. There was a request that we ensure these staff are well supported during this time.

Students were generally happy with their workspaces at home, and their access to the resources they need for their work. Phil Parry was mentioned by a number of students as providing excellent support to those in CAPT. Some students mentioned getting RSI and

other worries about the longer-term effects of not having appropriately designed workstations and spaces at home.

There was a request that we not forget the impact that this will have had on the students not currently in their final year.

Suggested Actions

- Set up a Team for PG students so that they have a place to easily talk to each other [This is already being done by OA]
- Continue to provide support and resources to students, including around mental health, and how to set up ergonomic workstations at home (where possible).
- Encourage those running meetings to be explicit about the meeting etiquette either in advance, or at the start of the meeting.

Summary of focus group with school staff

Communication from the school was said to be good and clear. It was felt that colleagues had been very supportive and helpful, including volunteering to help others in the school.

Staff were understanding about the furlough scheme, they felt the university had been slow, but implementation had been done well.

Research operation at the university level has been really slow and is causing problems for some.

There was some discussion about issues related to return to work. Questions were raised about whether masks and visors would be provided and how we would try to avoid overwork of key staff during the return to work phase. There was understanding of the need to balance keenness to return to work, particularly amongst experimental colleagues, against making sure we can all work safely.

The proposed changes to teaching hours were discussed, in particular the impact on staff with caring responsibilities. It was mentioned that remote teaching in the evenings and on weekends would be much easier to manage than in person teaching. Also, how to make sure that this does not mean that staff do not end up working very long days, if they have eg other meetings scheduled.

[CB: I have fed these comments into the consultation being run by Sarah Sharples, as PVC for EDI, on the EDI implications of the proposed changes.]

There was a question about the new rules for carrying over holiday from this year to next. There was also a discussion of how to manage the distribution of staff holidays next year, so that we avoid too many people being away at once. Also, how do we encourage people to continue to use holiday to get a break from work during the shutdown.

A point was raised about how to ensure virtual meetings are not dominated by a few people, so that this doesn't exacerbate existing biases in which voices are heard. Teams was felt to be worse for large group meetings than alternatives like Zoom, because of the limited number of people you can see at any one time.

In light of this comment, it was noticeable that only one female member of staff spoke without prompting during the meeting, but many female staff members wrote their comments into the chat window.

Suggested Actions

- Discuss what PPE might be needed, and by who, for return to work.
- Discuss how to balance workloads if teaching hours are extended, and how to provide the flexibility where needed for staff.
- Encourage staff to take holiday this year. Discuss whether problems with timing of holidays are expected next year.
- Remind colleagues running virtual meetings to be more aware than usual of imbalances in who is speaking up during meetings, and the ways this could bias discussion.