

COVID19 - Issues and opportunities that might emerge as College restarts research

The Government measures in place to restrict the spread of Covid19 which have led to the current College campus closure has resulted in the halting of most lab-based research projects requiring campus access (with the exception of Covid19 related projects). There will be a range of challenges related to restarting research on campus which will require a considered, pragmatic and fair approach, and a balance must be struck between the need and desire to restart research, while ensuring the safety and wellbeing of staff and students is prioritised. The principles and issues identified in this paper are specifically related to the ramping-up of research. They will need to be considered alongside issues relating to the ramping-up of College activities more generally and allowing increased access to campus, such as managing social distancing requirements across campus.

There will need to be a degree of consistency across the College, which will be achieved through a set of central principles, which can then be applied locally by Faculties and Departments. It is worth noting that the College had to move to remote working within 48 hours and for this reason the process was driven centrally. However, through considering the restarting of research at this stage, this allows time for necessary consultations with HoDs, those who will be implementing the frameworks, and those who will be impacted. It is also important to be aware when considering the approach to ramping-up research that the future research landscape may be different to the landscape prior to the Covid19 outbreak in a number of ways.

Approach to restarting guidance

Overarching principles

The following overarching principles should inform any decisions relating to restarting research. These can be applied locally by Faculties and Departments with respect to their specific requirements;

- **The safety and wellbeing of staff is paramount.** Government guidelines for social distancing must be central to planning.
- **Remote working remains the preferred option for those that are able to do so.** Access to College will be restricted to ensure low building occupancy, driven by the need to protect colleagues.
- **No one should feel pressured to return to work on campus.** There are a number of circumstances that can affect individual decisions about when to return to campus, including personal risk or risk to other household members, or due to caring responsibilities relating to the current situation (*e.g.* continued home schooling or elderly care). Staff should feel supported to make this decision based on their personal circumstances. It should be clear to staff that nobody will be penalised for not returning to campus when their colleagues are able to do so.
- **Clear guidelines for prioritising who can return should be articulated.** They should be both pragmatic and fair, taking into account a number of factors, for example; finalising work (final year PhD students, projects with close end date for where there is no extension), the importance of the work (*e.g.* if it is directly related to COVID-19), and the ease of establishing safety and social distancing requirements.

Criteria for prioritising restarting research

- Priority should be given to PhDs students and research staff who require access to laboratories over those can reasonably conduct work remotely (*e.g.* computing based

projects). Within this group phased access will be arranged locally by application of fair criteria (as described in the overarching principles).

- Those staff who cannot work at home due to the nature of their work, or (secondly) due to the nature of their home arrangements.
- Management of open plan offices and work spaces needs to be implemented, with possible rearrangement and limited access to these spaces.

Issues relating to restarting research

A range of issues have been identified relating to the restart of research and allowing access back to campus. The issues have been categorised into 4 groups; 1. Health & Safety, Wellbeing, 2. Lab-Based activity, 3. Clinical Trial Activity, and 4. General/Other. This list is intended as initial thinking and will require further consideration and consultation as issues emerge.

It should be noted that these have been based on assumptions: that a) We do not envisage any undergraduate or postgraduate teaching taking place on campus for the remainder of this academic year; and b) we anticipate some form of government advice on social distancing to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

These issues have been considered with regard to the impacts on research. The Faculty Operating Officers are considering restarting research from an operational perspective, and these two workstreams will be complementary.

1. Health & Safety, Wellbeing

- **Requirements for social distancing once at work.** The achievement of social distancing in labs may be achieved through a number of routes, such as demarcation of work-zones, effective shift working etc. Note that Departments must be cognisant of the need for balance between distancing and not lone working. There will need to be sufficient routine scrutiny, usually achieved through regular lab supervision, to ensure all research is meeting relevant regulatory requirements. The timings of College opening should be reviewed in line with shift-work if that is an option and safety and security reviewed.
- **Health & Safety requirements relating to the restart of laboratories which have been shut for a period of time** – see below.
- **Any additional PPE requirements on campus** (in addition to the availability of standard lab-based PPE – see below). Note that availability may be a limiting factor.
- **Wellbeing support for staff and levels of working capacity.** The experience of the lockdown period for research staff will have varied significantly. For example, Clinical fellows coming back from frontline support will be returning from an intense period of pressurised work, and may have a degree of PTSD. Some staff may not be working at full strength on their return and may feel anxious about the disruption to their research projects. It needs to be clear that we understand this and will support them in working towards normalisation. Encouragement should be given to seek support *via* the mechanisms set up by the College, and in the case of Clinical fellows the NHS Trust.
- **Availability of local First Aiders and Fire Wardens.** Consider retraining staff / creating dual roles so that individual staff are not overloaded.
- **Use of the Safezone App**

2. Lab-based Activity

- **Health and Safety processes.** Before commencing experimental laboratory work, the local Health & Safety representative should visit the laboratories to review the arrangements put in place. A check-list should be to be generated for the Local Responsible Person to include general issues (e.g. equipment PAT dates, fume hood operation, ventilation issues, cooling units, vacuum systems, status of the H&S control measures in place etc).
- **Availability and supply chains for basic lab supplies.** This includes supplies such as PPE, ethanol etc. There may need to be a mechanism for sharing across Departments and Faculties if possible.
- **Pressures on resources across all aspects of research.** This includes animals, reviving lines from liquid nitrogen, molecular reagents. These are likely to be in high demand and short supply.
- **Processes for dealing with potential high equipment failure rate due to lack of use or rapid shutdown.** In some labs equipment (such PCR machines) or materials may have been removed and will need to be re-sourced.

3. Clinical Trial Activity

- **Effects of extensive delays to restarting clinical trial activity.** Clinical trial activity will take far longer to get back up and running than other laboratory work. National infrastructure will dictate many of the new start dates. The NHS Trusts may not be able to re-start trial activity until the very last Covid-19 patient has been treated and the hospitals returning back to some level of normality.
- **Ceasing of patient recruitment due to Covid-19.** This will have impacted studies that have had to cease recruitment in the middle. Discussions of how and when to start up again will be needed (and have already begun with the Faculty of Medicine).

4. General/Other

- **Means of travel to campus.** We must be aware that limitations in the transport network may impact ability to resume work for many.
- **Backlog of annual leave.** A College policy needed as many projects are likely to be attempting to restart during the summer break when staff are more likely to request annual leave.
- **Projects that include animals.** There are a number of specific issues relating to restarting research that uses animals which should be handled locally. Researchers will want to start *in-vivo* programmes urgently and there are a number of time-critical factors that influence the need restart this research as soon as possible. These include aligning with current or imminent breeding seasons, and animal welfare issues such as where there are currently animals in research facilities. It was recognised that these activities could also take longer to get back to normal operations.
- **International students unable to return to the UK.** There will be individuals who returned to their home country during the College closure and may face challenges returning to the UK to complete their research, such as due to visa restrictions.