

UCU guidance on working from home and teaching online

Introduction

Working from home and working online have been features of working life for a minority of UCU members in recent years. However the onset of the coronavirus which has shut FE colleges and drastically reduced face to face contact between staff and students in universities has meant dramatic changes in a very short period of time for those who normally have been based at their institution or carried out face-to-face teaching.

While the switch to home and online working has been sudden, the government's public policy of reducing public contact means that it is likely to continue for many months.

This document sets out guidance for members for whom working completely at home and online is a new phenomenon arising from the coronavirus shutdown.

The guide sets out best practice on how to manage your time; keep healthy and safe; what expectations you should have of your employer; and how to interact with your students at what is a very difficult time for everyone.

Working from home

In the very sudden transition towards working from home it is easy to forget that your new place of work should conform to some basic standards. Where possible make sure:

- there is adequate space in the area you are working in to work safely
- the space is well ventilated but at a comfortable temperature
- your working area is free from tripping hazards
- there is adequate lighting
- electrical equipment is in a good condition (use occasional visual checks to confirm this)
- you know how to contact your manager in an emergency
- you have regular online and/or telephone meetings scheduled with colleagues and managers to keep in touch and discuss any problems.

If you have concerns about any of these issues your first step should be to convey this to your immediate line manager with a request that it be logged even if, in the current circumstances, changes are not practical or possible.

You should also make sure that you understand the basis upon which your employer has asked you to work from home. For example:

- are you being paid as normal if you are salaried?
- if you are not salaried what is the basis upon which you are being paid?
- what expectations are there on you, if any, to be present at certain times of the day?
- has your employer made allowance for your other responsibilities such as caring or childcare in any expectations they have of you?
- what equipment, if any, do you require that you do not have access to?
- will your employer be paying or contributing to any work-related bills you receive?
- will your employer ensure that any adjustments you require such as a certain type of seat or desk will be available?
- has your employer issued any fresh guidance as to how you should interact with students and others or about the encouragement or prohibition of certain software or online platforms?
- is your employer able to eavesdrop on/monitor your online teaching?
- do you know what procedure to follow if you fall ill while working from home?

If you have concerns or need clarification about any of these issues you should raise them with your immediate line manager if you are able and if you are not satisfied with the answer you should make contact with your local UCU branch.

UCU branches, alongside national UCU, are working hard to negotiate policies with every institution which protect those who are now working at home. Please support your union by both letting them know if you have a problem AND being patient while they respond because reps are very busy fielding queries.

UCU's general view is that UCU members are professionals who require practical support from their employer in order to work from home effectively but who do NOT require micromanagement or lots of rules and regulations. Particularly in the current climate when many members are effectively housebound with partners or children, the setting of particular 'on duty' hours will be inappropriate as will the expectation that all the work that was done offline can be achieved online.

When you are working

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) recommends that those working for long periods on computer screens should adopt the following positive behaviours:

- breaking up long spells of computer work with rest breaks (at least 5 minutes every hour) or changes in activity
- avoiding awkward, static postures by regularly changing position
- getting up and moving or doing stretching exercises
- avoiding eye fatigue by changing focus or blinking from time to time.

It is important that you are realistic about what you will be able to achieve while home working. For many people in the current crisis work will need to be fitted around other responsibilities. Home working can be lonely and isolating and – counter intuitively – stress inducing. Home workers can feel extra pressure to deliver and show they are working – particularly in a situation where they will be worrying about their students.

You should make sure you look after your mental health in what are unprecedented circumstances. Take plenty of breaks. Maintain regular contact with co-workers and friends and family. Let people know if you need help.

Your employers' responsibilities

UCU is working hard to make agreements with employers which properly regulate home working. However, ACAS have produced a useful list of your employers' formal legal responsibilities in case you run into real difficulties:

- health and safety for homeworkers can be a little different than for employees at an employer's base, but it should be remembered that employers have a duty of care for all their employees, and the requirements of all of the health and safety legislation apply to homeworkers
- the employer is responsible for the equipment it supplies, but it is the responsibility of the employee to rectify any flaws in the home highlighted by the assessment. It is advisable that the employer should not allow homeworking until any problem has been resolved
- once the home workplace is passed as safe, it is the responsibility of the homeworker to keep it that way and take reasonable care of their health and safety. However, they should tell the employer if any precautions turn out to be inadequate
- employers should be aware that inspectors from the Health and Safety Executive have the right to visit homeworkers in the home, but it is very unlikely to happen.

Finding out more about working from home

Your UCU branch is your best, first port of call for information or advice about home working in your institution. Failing that **contact your regional office** or the national union **via Matt Waddup**.

ACAS have produced an excellent, realistic guide to home working which is useful both in terms of your rights and your employers' responsibilities which you can read here <https://archive.acas.org.uk/media/3905/Homeworking---a-guide-for-employers-and-employees/pdf/Homeworking-a-guide-for-employers-and-employees.pdf>.

The HSE have resources aimed specifically at home working which are useful in terms of your employer's legal responsibilities and can be read here <https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm>.

The HSE's Display screen equipment (DSE) workstation checklist (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ck1.htm>) is also useful to help you try and set up your working equipment in a way to minimise any long term impact on your health.

Moving to online teaching

The last ten days has seen the overwhelming majority of student facing activity in FE and HE moved online. This is a tremendous achievement and is a testament to the commitment that staff have to supporting their students. While it is easy to get caught up in trying to create the perfect learning environment in next to no time for students it will be hugely appreciated at this time that you have made the effort to connect at all. So whatever stage you are at in making the transition online be kind to yourself and avoid perfectionism.

Where do I start?

When you begin moving to online it is crucial to be realistic about what you can achieve. A no frills transition which enables students to review online versions of your lectures; background materials and enables them to communicate with you and with each other is a better target than an all singing all dancing web experience which will require constant maintenance.

Many teachers have quickly realised, for example, that in the current climate it is simply not possible to bring students together at a certain time or times to receive or even discuss a lecture online. Some students are travelling home due to the virus. Others may have varying qualities of internet access or even have other work commitments. Therefore, focus on finding ways for students to view your work at a time when they are able and try to use platforms which enable students to leave comments for others to view if possible.

While providing as flexible a learning environment as possible is great, make sure that it does not lead you to becoming available 24/7. Fix times in your daily schedule when, other commitments allowing, you will be available to review any students' comments or for direct contact if it is required.

Other UCU members have told us that while online learning can make interaction difficult the format can lend itself to quick quizzes and other ways of ensuring that students are getting as much as they can from your teaching.

Your teaching is your intellectual property

It is understandable given the current crisis the staff have moved quickly to provide online access to their lectures and classes. However, it is important that you understand on what basis you are providing this lecture to your students. For example:

- does your institution have an established lecture capture policy negotiated with UCU?
- is there agreement that any material you have made in response to the Corona crisis will not be used once institutions get back to normal?
- does your institution accept that you own the copyright on your lectures or other teaching materials?
- what data does the online platform you are using obtain about you or your students?

If you are in doubt about any of these questions, ask your immediate line manager and if you are concerned at their response raise these issues with your local UCU branch.

Make the most of resources already out there

There are some excellent resources already out there about the transition to online learning.

The Open University has put on a fantastic, short course aimed at those who are now having to put teaching materials online which you can access here:

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/teach-online>

Practitioners have created an excellent and growing list of resources here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1a1357lqs8dOgOQ5AnCnTPVnJwuAYdU5SIurVMOehyJw/htmlview>

UNESCO has produced a useful list of online platforms which educators can use to engage with students here:

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures/solutions>.

#LTHEchat is a practitioner-led community which has been very active in recent weeks in discussing the online challenge, sharing resources and providing mutual support:

<https://lthechat.com/>