Physics Staff Consultation Document

Planning for a return to research and KE activities in Physics

The aim of this document is to enable consultation on draft plans for a return to work on campus to undertake or support research and research-related KE activity. The question of the delivery of teaching and learning next session will be handled separately (for now). The principles, practices and proposed assessment criteria outlined below are in draft form. They will be developed, with input from staff via the consultation and in light of guidance and policy to be provided by the University Executive Team. The Department needs to have processes in place, but some of the decisions may be determined at University or Faculty level. A final document outlining the processes to be put in place will be made available in due course.

Principles:

1. Our highest priority is to protect the health, safety and well-being of our staff and students.
2. The University Executive Team will put a phased return to work on campus policy in place (following government guidance) and the Department, in consultation with the Faculty, will put procedures in place to implement that policy.
3. All research that can be done remotely should continue to be, including seminars, group meetings, etc. until otherwise instructed (when it is deemed safe to bring this activity onsite).
4. Constraints will be in place for onsite activities, e.g. limiting the number of people within a building at a given time, specifying the occupancy for each room, social distancing, PPE, need to provide a safe and hygienic working environment.
5. Implement a fair and transparent process for granting access (and for taking it away if regulations are not followed). Establish criteria for prioritising access.
6. Plan in advance of getting access. Need to consider:
    a. Supply chains (for consumables, PPE, hygiene products for local use in laboratories). Need to establish if this will be provided by the University or by individual groups.
    b. Plans for cleaning and sanitising labs and research work spaces prior to restarting work and sustaining this during work. This may require researchers to take responsibility for cleaning and sanitising their own workbenches;
    c. Flexible work schedules to implement social distancing and reduce the density of personnel in laboratory and office spaces; Staggered access, if necessary (e.g. week-on, week-off basis);
    d. Preparation of research facilities and services in advance of need (ramp-up).
    e. PIs to carefully plan which researchers within their group will need access initially.
    f. Communal spaces (e.g. kitchens, meeting rooms) likely to be closed (or have restricted access).
7. For our research activities that take place in buildings other than the John Anderson (e.g. the TIC building and Hamnett & Robertson Wings of SIPBS), our plans need to take account of local access arrangements and procedures in place for those buildings.
8. All return to work plans and activities to be fully coordinated with the Department, the Safety, Health and Wellbeing Service, Estates Services and Security Services. All activities and local arrangements need specific approval by the Department (process to be defined) and must comply with the implemented principles for safe working (to be defined).

Phased return:

There will be a phased return, but the number of phases and timelines are to be determined, following the University policy to be put in place.

One scenario for discussion (note that the phases may be collapsed to a fewer number):

Phase 1 (total ~5-10% of staff and PGRs): Technicians and selected others, to prepare the John Anderson building and laboratories (in JA, TIC and SIPBS) for a return to work. In this phase, limited numbers of researchers may be allowed to come to campus to assess and open labs, or perform minimal, low risk work. This phase may be relatively short, depending on the time needed to initiate services and prepare/condition equipment.

Phase 2 (~10-30% of staff): Access restricted to high priority individuals and activities. Likely to be researchers (mainly experimentalists) who cannot work remotely and are under time constraints (end of project or contract). Academics only on a case-by-case basis.

Phase 3 (~30-50% of staff): An increase in the number of researchers and some academics to a level to be determined on a test and refine basis. This may require defined 'pools' of researchers working on a one week-on, one week-off basis, with thorough cleaning taking place between. This approach limits the numbers of researchers needing to self-isolate should a member of staff or student within one of the defined pools become sick and test positive for Covid-19.

Phase 4: (~50-70% of staff): Increased relaxation of the numbers of staff and PGRs to enable parallel research activities, whilst maintaining social distancing and other restrictions still in place. Restrictions in shared office space (e.g. PGR student offices) maintained.

Phase 5: (~100% of staff): A return to business as usual, full research and KE activity. Access to offices allowed generally, with attention to social distancing and other restrictions if these are still in place.

Proposed process for assessing and approving access requests:

- PIs and group heads to be asked to identify researchers to be considered for early access and labs to be considered for approval for access, completing template documents to provide the required information in support of the application.
- A group of staff, with representation across the four research divisions, will assess and rank applications for individuals to gain access, based on priority criteria (see below) and make recommendations to the HoD.
- A group of staff, including representatives from the Dept. Safety Committee, will assess the readiness of individual labs, against a checklist of criteria (see below) and make recommendations to the HoD.
- HoD to grant approvals, for named researchers and laboratories, based on the recommendations, readiness assessments and following all guidance from the University and Faculty.
- Regular safety inspections to be made to ensure compliance with procedure and regulations, with approval removed from anyone who isn't complying.

Proposed criteria for assigning priority access:

- Researchers working on COVID-19 research (several grants applied for).
- Researchers who cannot work remotely and are under time constraints. For example, and subject to University guidance, PhD students approaching the end of their research project and still needing to make measurements, and postdoctoral researchers approaching the end of contract.
- Deadline-driven research, where a delay would have significant adverse impact on the project (e.g. projects that are due to complete during the lockdown, especially for cases in which the funding agency has not facilitated an extension).
- Early-career academics (e.g. Chancellor's Fellows) at critical career points (probation, promotion)

- Research activity with a significant lead-in time, i.e. where operations need to be ramped up.
- Research laboratory to be used has been assessed and approved for access

Proposed criteria for designating laboratory space as approved for access:

- Researchers using the laboratory must have the required PPE available and any local hygiene cleaning products identified as necessary for frequent sanitising of high touch areas (in addition to the general cleaning services provision). Note that Estates Services, cleaning staff etc. may not able to work to normal capacity. It may be that individuals who want access to particular labs will need to take responsibility for cleaning and sanitising their labs, or wait until cleaning services are up to capacity.
- A 'researcher density' assessment must be performed to determine how many people can work safely in the lab at a given time whilst complying with social distancing. Suitable arrangements to be put in place to ensure that the number of occupants does not exceed the maximum allowed at a given time (e.g. use of a lab rota). The maximum occupancy (and lab rota, if required) to be clearly visible via signage on the outside of the laboratory door and inside the laboratory.
- The laboratory must have sufficient supplies to complete the intended work (e.g. consumables) and arrangements in place for the required support services (e.g. liquid nitrogen, hazardous chemical waste pick-up etc.).
- There must be a process in place to record access and activity in order to enable contact tracing should a researcher using the lab become sick and test positive for COVID-19.
- Laboratory start-up checklist approved.

Considerations for PIs when identifying researchers:

- Some researchers will be at higher risk due to underlying health issues and should therefore not be returning during the early phases of reopening.
- Researchers may have caring responsibilities (particularly if schools are not yet fully open) that may prevent them from returning to laboratory-based activities.
- Only researchers who volunteer willingly to return to the lab should be considered, at least in the early phases, and subject to University and Faculty guidance and policy. Note that some staff and students will be apprehensive about returning whilst there is still risk of infection, particularly if they need to use public transport.
- A period of self-isolation may be required for returning international researchers.
- University and Faculty guidance on any distinctions that apply to research staff and PGR/PhD students.

A note of caution: we should not expect that large numbers of PhD students will be allowed to return to work on campus quickly!

PMcK; 08/05/20