

Views from a Language Centre Director at a UK University

- 1) How are you currently experiencing the global pandemic situation in terms of your staffing, professional development of your staff, staff support and management perspectives?
 - Before the current situation even started in the UK, parts of my School were already busy responding to the coronavirus – e.g. the study abroad team repatriating students, the testing team reporting on online testing solutions, etc. In line with other language school heads, the coronavirus has been the biggest part of my job since early February.
 - We are lucky to have a lot of expertise in both TEL and English testing, which gave us a bit of a head start. However, putting our pre-session courses online is an enormous undertaking for academic staff – who have to write the course more-or-less as they deliver it. A lot of the more senior staff therefore have two jobs (writing and delivery). Some are under a lot of pressure: I and my senior team are doing our very best to spot the issues and resolve them.
 - Normally this University is in a decent position because Heads of School (like me) have a lot of control over budgets, meaning that I can hire additional staff when I need them. In practice this means starting some of our summer teachers a few months earlier if they are available. Unfortunately in the current circumstance this control has been taken away from me and I have to go to senior management for resource. This is doubly difficult – slows things down and I don't always get the answer I wanted.
 - This School has quite a lot of professional staff (in teaching support, study abroad, partnership roles, etc.). Some of these colleagues have found themselves less busy than usual so we have found ways to redeploy them. This is good for two reasons: eases pressures a little bit; and good CPD because it offers opportunities to work in different teams within the School.
 - We have had to cancel all our summer short courses, which has freed up about 2.5 academic staff over the summer, to be redeployed for the pre-session and elsewhere.
- 2) Are there any differences in terms of fixed-term (or summer) tutors and your permanent teaching fellows or lecturers?
 - The only difference really is the end date. However, I should add that, because the summer teachers are here only for 2-3 months, we invest proportionately less time in their CPD. They all have at least two days' induction; we observe their teaching and feedback; and we run a special version of our in-house seminar series of talks on different aspects of T&L and language pedagogy.
- 3) How are staff being supported in this time? (eg CPD, technical, pastoral...)
 - We have our own TEL advisor who also provides some IT support, which is invaluable with everybody suddenly working from home.
 - We work mostly on MS Teams and line managers have been asked to check in with their direct reports at least once a week.
 - We also have a whole-School weekly catch-up meeting on Teams, in which one of the School Leadership Team makes a few announcements and then we open

it up for questions through the chat function. It's just half an hour long and we cannot see everyone's faces but it's nice to bring the School together.

- We have moved our termly 'show and tell' sessions onto Teams as well. These are opportunities for colleagues to talk to others about what they do. Last week the Study Abroad Office gave a presentation with slides on their work and latest developments. This was recorded and shared with people who couldn't make it on the day.
- 4) **How is teaching and educational quality being supported? (eg consider observations, etc.)**
- I have encouraged senior staff to think this through and report back. Teaching observation can be light touch and unobtrusive but temporary staff need to feel supported.
 - The main thing with a new online course, it seems to me, is that we must capture and respond to the student voice throughout. We need to get a sense in real time of how they experience the course and how they learn.
- 5) **What are the greatest challenges or restrictions in the current situation?**
- General background levels of stress, which people don't really notice until they suddenly get cross about small things. I think this is partly being stuck indoors, partly general anxiety about the coronavirus and also the sheer burden of work at the moment. Most of the time we are all still getting along, which is good.
 - One or two technical issues, especially where computer hardware fails and we don't have the option (currently, and we have tried asking) to go back into the building and pick things up. New kit can be delivered but it takes time and then needs setting up.
 - And it would be nice for the senior team for the pre-sessional to be able to work together in a room and feel more like a team.
- 6) **What are the potential benefits or opportunities?**
- A decent quality online pre-sessional course as a reusable asset.
 - New skills learnt. Greater familiarity with online tools.
- 7) **How do the requirements and challenges faced by Language Centres fit with those of their Universities (either individual institutions or the sector)?**
- A lot of the challenges are the same but we tend to encounter them first because we start teaching earlier. For much of the rest of the University, it was more a case of patching together the last two weeks of the spring term, and then following a set of new rules on take-home exams. We on the other hand were designing complete online courses from the word go.
 - And all our students are international students so we are likely to have to stay online for longer, and less likely to move at an early stage to a mixed delivery model.
- 8) **Any other comments?**
- On a personal level I don't get on very well with working from home, although I have carved out a routine that works. I try to stop at 4pm every day and get some exercise or spend time with my child. Working from home is definitely more intensive and so I tend to do shorter hours. There are also more meetings (surprisingly) because they are so easy to schedule on Teams and extra regular meetings are put in the diary, at various levels of management, to make remote working work. This means that I am constantly behind with everything.