

Covid-19 Critical Response Group

15th March 2020

Anna Dodridge (General Manager)

Background & Context

Covid-19 has been declared a pandemic and a public health emergency, with the UK risk rated as moderate.

As of 11.03.20 SOAS has one confirmed case of Covid-19. The government & Chief Medical Officer have raised the risk to the UK to high.

Anyone with symptoms (temperature & continuous cough) has been asked to self-isolate for 7 days. If the symptoms continue after 7 days the advice is to contact NHS 111. Testing to confirm covid-19 is being [restricted to serious cases only](#), meaning it's very difficult to know how many cases there are within an organisation, and we don't have the information needed to risk assess. The likely scenario is that the government will soon close schools and universities.

SOAS Students' Union has responsibilities as representatives, advice and support providers, services provider and as an employer.

Over the past 4 weeks we have been responding to industrial action, which has included closure of our offices, working from home, and closure of some of our commercial services for 14 days. We have already been running on a business continuity plan for this period. These decisions were taken a month ago, the situation has now significantly changed. The combined impact of these two events must be considered in decisions we're now making.

Updates

The sabbatical officers and I have been attending SOAS' Critical Incident Response group, and involved in the school's planning and decision making. This group is meeting twice a day. We held a planning meeting on 13.03.20 to put together a set of recommendations for Trustee approval.

The Trustee Board approved a **Covid-19 critical response group**, with delegated authority to make decisions on behalf of the Trustee Board.¹

14 out of 25 trustees responded (including the 4 sabbatical officers who responded in person) and unanimously approved the formation of the group.

¹ The Trustee Board has the power to delegate to powers to a committee under s.52 of the constitution "*The Trustees may delegate any of their powers or functions to any committee or the implementation of any of their resolutions and day-to-day management of the affairs of the Union to any person or committee in accordance with the conditions set out in this Constitution.*" The conditions for delegations are in the Constitution s.53

"53. In the case of delegation to committees:

53.1 the resolution making that delegation shall specify those who shall serve or be asked to serve on such committee (though the resolution may allow the committee to make co-options up to a specified number);

Terms of Reference of Covid-19 critical response group

Purpose In accordance with Section 52 of the SOAS Students' Union Constitution, the SOAS SU Trustee Board has established a committee called the **Covid-19 critical response group** to support them in their responsibilities for responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, assessing and mitigating risk, and ensuring that SOAS SU decisions and their implementation are appropriate.

Remit

- To advise the Trustee Board on the actions of SOAS SU to respond to critical incidents.
- To monitor and review arrangements for governance, staffing, facilities, finances, communications and planning in relation to critical incidents.
- To oversee operational actions taken by the General Manager in response to critical incidents
- To receive reports from SOAS Critical Incident Response group
- To regularly report to the Trustee Board on the decisions made and actions taken.
- To communicate with student and non-student staff representatives and take consideration of the needs and views of our employees

Responsibility & Authority

- The committee will appoint one of its members to be the chair, who must be a Trustee
- The quorum shall be at least 3 Trustees, one of whom must be the Chair of the committee.
- The committee may ask any other student, staff member of SOAS SU or SOAS, Trustee or external organisation to attend any meeting or part of a meeting so as to assist the Committee with its discussions.
- The minutes and recommendations from the committee will be recorded and submitted to the Trustee Board.

Membership

- Chair of the SOAS SU Trustee Board
- At least three other Trustees (appointed by the Trustee Board) which must include at least one Sabbatical Officer Trustee, one Student Trustee

The Committee Adviser and Clerk will be the General Manager

53.2 subject to Clause 59, the composition of any such committee shall be entirely in the discretion of the Trustees and may comprise such of their number (if any) as the resolution may specify;

53.3 the deliberations of any such committee shall be reported regularly to the Trustees and any resolution passed or decision taken by any such committee shall be reported forthwith to the Trustees and for that purpose every committee shall appoint a secretary;

53.4 all delegations under this Clause shall be revocable at any time; and

53.5 the Trustees may make such regulations and impose such terms and conditions and give such mandates to any such committee or committees as they may from time to time think fit."

Resources

- Any financial and/or management resources necessary to achieve the Committee's objectives.

Regularity of Meetings

- Once a week, with urgent decisions being made via email or online if necessary

Report

The group membership is

Anna (General Manager, adviser and clerk to the group)

Youssra, Maxine, Peadar, Valeria (Sabbatical Officers)

Nidah (PGT officer), Oscar (Accommodation officer), Hasan (LGBTQIA+ officer), Katie (Working Class officer)

All meetings of the group will be carried out online, and the group will meet weekly over the relevant period, with decisions made over email or online meeting if required in an emergency (defined as any decision which is required before the next weekly meeting). Any decisions made outside the weekly meeting must be unanimous.

Any Trustees who wish to join this group at any time can be approved through a decision of the Trustee Board. As the group requires quick decision making, and regular meetings it should be a small & agile group, with members that are able to commit the relevant time.

Decisions of the Covid-19 Critical Response Group (CRG)

13.03.20 The following recommendations from the General Manager & Sabbatical Officers were approved by the CRG

Our recommendation is for the following changes to normal operations of the Students' Union. These will be recommendations to be in place from now until the beginning of Term 3, with regular (weekly or more frequently if necessary) reviews, carried out by the CRG.

1. We close the bar completely.
2. We continue to pay bar staff at the same rate as we have been throughout the strike period, up until the Easter Vacation, when shifts and pay usually changes and their contracted hours change. I will ask Khaled to send me a recommendation on reduced vacation hours, so that we can make a decision on what pay we will offer over the vacation.
3. We open the shop again, during the day on reduced hours. I will ask Khaled to confirm the hours. Khaled has already stopped us from taking any cash. We will also put into place sanitising and cleaning support for staff in the shop.
4. As per the decision of SOAS, we cancel all non-essential events during this period (up until term 3) with weekly reviews. This means all SU run events and student society events. We allow small student society events for 20 people or under, with no external attendees, students only.

The recommendation was also made to the CRG that decisions about the timing of elections could only be taken by Yousra & myself, as there is a clear conflict of interest for all other trustees, who have already nominated or could nominate themselves to run in the elections.

These recommendations were approved by 6 out of 8 members of the group (1 member hasn't responded yet, and 1 member had not yet joined the group at the time these recommendations were sent), with no objections to the recommendations.

Elections

No decision was made to postpone elections at this stage. The elections have already been postponed and rearranged around the industrial action. Suitable time for elections is extremely limited, as this is the final week before the Easter Vacation & assessment deadlines have been postponed due to industrial action. The time between deadlines and exams has been significantly reduced. For many students (particularly students with additional needs who have assessment extensions) there is no gap between assessment deadline and exams beginning. The additional risk of postponing elections is that the pandemic situation is likely to get worse, and this may be the only opportunity for some time to run the elections. The risk of not being able to hold elections means that there will be no Officers or Trustees of the Union after July 31st.

The following decisions were made in order to ensure elections can go ahead, including

- Setting up the mandatory Candidate Briefing as an online meeting, with written briefings so that all candidates can access the briefing
- Cancelling the hustings event (in line with the School decision to cancel all non-essential events) and setting up additional online opportunities and support for candidates to campaign. Candidates will be supported to put together a short video or transcript, and for students to pose questions to candidates.

Update 15.03.20

Since the original decisions of the CRG the following decisions have been made in light of changing government advice and SOAS CIR communications

- To postpone opening the shop until there has been an update from the SOAS CIR group, and we have had an opportunity to discuss with our shop staff and properly assess the risk and financial impact.