

UCEA communications checklist for change

This checklist is to assist HE institutions planning staffing reviews, restructuring and redundancies.

Introduction

This is a factual document intended as an aid to higher education (HE) institutions in handling communications issues associated with staffing change. Good communications practices are vital when HE institutions plan staff reviews, restructuring and redundancies. This toolkit is a working document for those HE institutions seeking communications advice and guidance on strategic-level staffing issues at a time when they are facing significant changes and challenges. It aims to provide a good communications practice checklist, background information and key messages. We intend to keep the material under review and particularly to add additional full case studies and any other such useful information for members. The development of this document arose as a result of queries from individual HE institutions and was endorsed following a discussion by the UCEA Communications Strategy Working Group.

UK HE institutions are facing exceptional financial challenges and an unprecedented range of new uncertainties. These are distinctly different testing times, with many HE institutions still responding to recent REF outcomes and dealing with new challenges surrounding the Comprehensive Spending Review. The outlook for funding for institutions both within and beyond 2015-16 will be determined by factors which include uncertain student numbers, undergraduate fee constraint, large cuts to government expenditure and changes to come in funding for research. Major reductions in public funding for HE institutions this year are being managed alongside significant additional cost pressures on institutions' pay bills. These include increases in employer pension contributions required to maintain the attractive schemes available to staff and National Insurance increases resulting from the introduction of the new State Pension and the negotiated base pay uplifts and other pay growth.

Furthermore, the UK Government's employment and workforce plans are pending alongside further cuts to public spending. There is also an increasing diversity of HE providers, heightened levels of global competition and the impact of undergraduate tuition fee and enrolment reform in England. Added to all of this is the ongoing international financial uncertainty and UK HE concerns surrounding international students, and ensuring that visa and immigration rules and procedures are proportionate. Against this backdrop it is no surprise that so many UK HE institutions have, are or are contemplating staffing reviews, restructuring and potential redundancies.

The need for change in an HE institution arises for a range of reasons, including financial, organisational, scientific, technical, market and other factors. Every text book tells us that effective communications are vital in managing change and should be central to our planning. UCEA has long encouraged closer collaboration between 'HR' and 'PR' for better communications in HE institutions when it comes to industrial relations and such collaboration in the planning of internal communications is an absolute necessity when it comes to 'organisational change' issues. HE institutions recognise the significant and central contributions made by their staff in delivering the institution's objectives and meeting students' needs and expectations and do much to convey this. But these messages can be sent off course when institutions' staffing profiles need to evolve and adapt. HE institutions' 'Management of Organisational Change' policies contain detailed HR and management advice and guidance on conducting redundancies and restructuring. These documents also contain information relating to the importance of 'communications' as a key part of planning and process. This briefing does not intend to emulate the range of HR and management advice in existence but rather to provide a generic toolkit to assist in reviewing the approaches to communications in this area.

We intend that the material will function as an evolving and working document and we will be keen to add material, in particular additional examples of practice, over time. UCEA's aim is to assist member organisations in handling their local communications and to provide media support in relation to major employment matters. As with all our material, the intention is that member HE institutions may choose to adopt, adapt and use this checklist to assist with their own internal communications planning according to their own specific needs and circumstances.

UCEA resources on organisational change

Staffing change - reviews, restructuring and redundancies - have always taken place in institutions across the HE sector but the year after the global recession (2009) UCEA and the trade unions, as part of New JNCHES discussions, agreed to a series of facilitated meetings regarding job security in the sector. This followed the trade unions raising joint concerns in their claim for a 'national approach' on the handling of job security within HEIs. UCEA made it clear to the trade unions that it had no mandate to enter into a national agreement in the area of job security and the handling of potential redundancies in individual institutions. UCEA asserted that the management of staffing matters, be it in recruitment, promotion or in the handling of any reductions in staff numbers was a matter for each HE institution as an independent employer. However, UCEA did agree to work with the trade unions on the employers' behalf to produce a reference document relating to sector-specific job security issues. In 2010 the ['Acas digest on job security: a reference document for Higher Education institutions with input from UCEA and the HE Trade Unions'](#) was launched. This document contributed to the resolution of the 2009-10 pay round. Recognising that HE institutions were operating in a difficult and uncertain economic environment, it provided some general guidance in relation to handling workforce change, presenting some of the relevant statutory requirements and outlining additional points for employers and employee representatives to consider as appropriate. It used Acas badging and endorsement as an alternative to a sector-level agreement.

In 2011 the New JNCHES Sustainability Issues Working Group published ['Workforce Planning and Organisational Change: Case Studies of Practice in Higher Education Institutions'](#). This publication contains a series of case studies on workforce planning and organisational change aimed at assisting both managers and trade union representatives. The research project focused on examples of change in a variety of institutions, with case studies exploring the practical realities of planning, consulting, negotiating, managing and implementing organisational change. The anonymous case studies were conducted to discover how managers and trade unions in HE institutions can work together to avoid, or mitigate the effects of, compulsory redundancies in the context of organisational change. It is noteworthy that communications played a vital role in all of the case studies with the generic findings placing the need for an emphasis on communications planning from the outset.

This material remains valid and useful. There are, of course, numerous other resources and sources of advice about the handling of change and managing potential redundancies. This briefing does not aim to identify these but to focus particularly on communications within a change programme.

Communications and consultations

It is important that communication is not conflated with consultation; the latter being (often) a legal requirement which perhaps at times can become a focus at the expense of the former. Communication is concerned with the interchange of information and ideas, generally within an organisation. Consultation will be a procedural and probably a legal requirement where more than 20 or more posts are at risk and involves managers actively seeking and giving consideration to the views of employees before making a decision. HE institutions may also

have established consultation procedures, perhaps agreed with trade unions, which go beyond statutory requirements.

Regardless of the process for organisational change, internal rumours and often external media coverage of programme or campus closures or potential redundancies will quickly spread, with social media platforms such as Twitter accelerating this. Local trade union branches are likely to begin communications and campaigning from the first indication or announcement even suggesting possible restructuring. UCU's own material, a [Challenging Redundancies](#) briefing and [Redundancy Handling Guidance](#), are just two examples to illustrate this.

Employer planning and preparations are vital and normal communication activities will need to be geared-up accordingly from the outset. This will be on multiple levels, for example with line managers ready and able to be visible and talk through issues with individuals so that affected members of staff receive access to the deserved high degree of attention, compassion and consideration. Careful planning and structure in meetings will go a long way towards ensuring that an employee is treated with dignity and respect. It is crucial that both HR staff and line managers fully understand the reasons for the restructuring and redundancies. They also need to know that the decision has the support of senior management and has had the necessary input of legal advisers. These times of change – redundancies in particular – are difficult and unpleasant experiences for everyone directly and indirectly involved. There is a responsibility for employers to provide well planned and thorough, fair and professional treatment backed with clear advice and communications throughout.

A communications checklist

Every HE institution's HR team will have its own detailed management processes in place for handling organisational change and re-organisations for if/when the time comes. However, the planning, preparation and execution of communications goes beyond HR and we present here some points for consideration:

Planning and Preparation

- 1.** Establish from the outset who leads on communications for the exercise and ensure that the appropriate team is established to guide and agree this (including HR, communications and the relevant senior managers).
- 2.** Ensure the person who will be identified as the 'leader' of the change is fully prepared for specific challenges and reactions to an announcement as well as the general turbulence that will arise.
- 3.** Convene the team from the outset to begin planning, both for internal and external communications.
- 4.** Think about the language that will be used for the exercise. A consistent set of messages will be assisted by a consistent title for the exercise, agreed upon and used throughout.
- 5.** Develop an internal and external communications strategy or plan. This should be thorough and structured. One tip is to apply W5H1 (Who, What, Why, When, Where, How) through each phase: before, during and at the end of the process.
- 6.** Ensure the strategy includes specific communication plans to address issues such as rumours, social media stories/storms and press interest.
- 7.** Identify any individuals and groups – inside and outside the institution - who may contribute to friction and include them in your strategy and stakeholder management plans.
- 8.** Identify media contacts you will want to brief pro-actively, and develop your social media plan, with the aim for the employer messages to lead on coverage.
- 9.** Act on facts. Collect as much information from the internal stakeholders as possible to inform the planning stage.

10. Keep the objectives for change simple. The compelling case for change (saving money/improving student experience) should be strategic, academic and financial and talk pounds and posts, not people.
11. Put the necessary resourcing into preparation. Trade unions, student representatives, academics in other institutions and famous alumni may all have views about – and may challenge - course and department closures and potential subsequent redundancies.
12. Decide on timescales (for consultations in particular) and aim to adhere to these.
13. Consider the timing of a launch of the change programme/consultation i.e. will it impact on other initiatives taking place in the organisation at the same time.

Messaging and Management

14. Inform trade union representatives (local and perhaps regional officers – and adhering to legalities), student union senior officers and other key staff or governors of the issue and potential for redundancies time - before a first announcement or public communication - using appropriate internal channels, and make designated managers available for continued dialogue throughout the process.
15. An intranet posting or presentation may be a good vehicle to make information available more widely, to all staff and students.
16. Consider how best to communicate well with any affected staff (in particular) who do not have access to or make intermittent use of the internet.
17. Supply reliable and timely information and produce a platform for an active and ongoing two-way communication, for example include Q&As, for staff and perhaps students, that can be added to over time.
18. Provide clear direction and management on messages: senior staff such as Pro Vice-Chancellors and Deans may need to be provided with their own material (such as Q&As) to address questions that may be directed at them in person.
19. Ensure that each potential redundancy issue is handled with sensitivity and integrity from start to finish – listen, record and consider all comments and feedback.
20. Provide regular reminders regarding the reasons for the change. It may help to explain that across the sector other HE institutions have faced or are facing change; change that is necessary for the benefit of students and the institutions' futures.
21. Emphasise that the process is about the institution needing to change and the job or role no longer existing (or a reduction in the requirement), not about the individuals employed in the post or posts.
22. Keep messages consistent across all channels.
23. Date all your communications material: during change programmes circumstances can change quickly.
24. Make good use of and monitor social and digital communications channels; they can be accessible, flexible, and assist two-way communications.
25. Scan, monitor and address (when appropriate) all forms of campaign, internal communications and media – social media in particular as things can soon spin out of control and even turn viral.

Change and Considerations

26. Be open to consideration of a new or enhanced policy to generate the desired change; a change may be worth the price or a better solution. Acknowledge the ideas and contributions of others, including staff and their representatives, in achieving the desired outcomes.
27. Demonstrate any achievements and relay positive news (often via social media) in relation to the required cost reductions or job changes, before moving to make redundancy selections; for example explain how use of voluntary and other non-

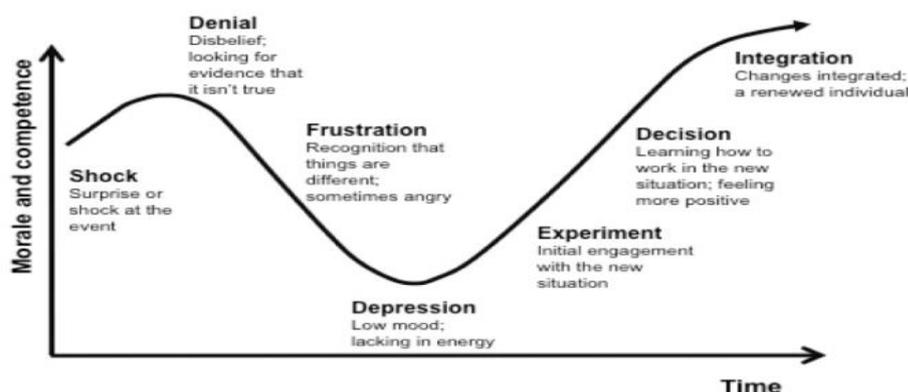
compulsory means has been explored and communicate how any redundancies are being handled in line with the institution's redundancy policy.

28. Communicate all that has been done to avoid compulsory redundancy and all that is being done to support staff at risk, including for example redeployment procedures and use of career counselling.
29. Ensure each affected individual feels well supported and interactions are handled with sensitivity and integrity; examples may be ensuring a good understanding of the redeployment procedure and consideration of a named contact for individuals who are under threat of redundancy.
30. Consider how to address and acknowledge the effect of change or redundancies on all employees, also known as 'survivor syndrome' (see below).
31. Consider the level of support required for line managers, particularly any new managers, involved in the process, before during and after change; they will be at the 'sharp' end of staff interactions and how they are feeling will impact on how they handle this.
32. Remember that marking as 'confidential' does not assure confidentiality, especially in an emotive situation; plans and communications may be leaked. Consider a plan or policy to keep non-personal communications open or using this as a 'test' for tone and content when writing.

The Kubler-Ross change model and 'survivor syndrome'

In considering and planning for change HE institutions may choose to make use of a model such as the change curve model (below) during communications preparations. The model was first developed in the 1960s by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to explain the grieving process and has since been widely utilised as a method of helping people think about reactions to significant change or upheaval, including restructuring in the workplace. The 'change curve' can be used to predict how the performance of individuals and organisations is likely to be affected by significant change. There are a number of models used to depict or explain change but the change curve is referenced for its simplicity, and because it is a very useful tool when managing individual, team or institutional change. Thinking about where individuals may be on the curve can help in deciding on how and when to communicate information, what level of support is required, and when is best to implement changes. Furnishing individuals with the knowledge that others understand and indeed experience similar emotions can also be a help in returning, with as little disruption as possible, to optimal performance.

The Kübler-Ross change curve



Employees who remain in the organisation following a restructure or redundancy selection may experience what is referred to as 'survivor syndrome'. This is observed when initial relief can turn into guilt at having kept their post while others did not or perhaps regret over colleagues' severance packages and new jobs. Employers should prepare for some of the employee 'survivors' exhibiting symptoms of this syndrome, which can include reduced morale and motivation, lack of trust and a sense that their job is vulnerable. By understanding that change and redundancies may affect all employees, employers can make sure that all employees are treated with consideration during the process. Making the communications as open as possible - so that staff understand the reasons for change and can express their own issues and concerns - is key to this.

Communications content: Some quick questions to (re)consider

Who will be (most) affected by this change, directly and indirectly?

Who are our audiences (staff, students, parents, alumni, etc.)?

What key facts behind the situation to convey? What is the aim or outcome for this change?

What are the key issues that necessitate change being proposed?

What is happening in the wider environment (perhaps beyond the institution's control) that is shaping this situation?

What would the repercussions be of not changing?

What will the positive outcomes be (for staff, students, stakeholders)?

Who will be the principal (and not necessarily the 'Principal') spokesperson for this change?

When will this change take place and what is the timeframe for communicating about it?

What communications tools/channels are required for different components and/or audiences of the communications?

Have the key managers involved (e.g. deans and department heads) got a clear and consistent briefing?

How are HR and communications team members liaising and agreeing over the content of their respective communications?

Who will lead on internal communications channels and who will be 'gatekeeper' for content?

What language might best be used to convey, or accompany, more formal, legal elements (such as the issue of a Section 188 notice)?

Case studies

Gathering case studies on the handling of communications issues involving redundancies and restructuring is testing but UCEA has found institutions, sometimes wishing to remain anonymous, who have been willing to provide examples of their positive, proactive communications describing their planning and execution, alongside any lessons learnt. The intention is to provide additional case studies to accompany this briefing and that these be built upon so that this continues to be a working document. Please contact the UCEA regarding this (*details below*).

Key messages

In recent years UCEA has issued 'key messages', with some of these addressing job security issues and uncertain financial futures for HE institutions. These are possible messages for institutions to use surrounding planning reviews, restructuring and redundancies. These messages that can be adopted, adapted according to local circumstance to help inform communications. Here is list of some from recent years:

- We all share concerns for job security and employers constantly discuss these issues with the trade unions but this institution is responsible for its own difficult decisions relating to staffing requirements.
- HE staff have some of the best employment frameworks in the UK and decisions affecting jobs are never taken lightly.

- This institution has a good track record in handling staffing changes in an open and fair way and we only make redundancies as a last resort, always fully considering alternatives (such as voluntary severances) in consultation with the local trade unions.
- The link between the national pay settlement percentage and locally agreed performance related increases and the sustainability of posts cannot be ignored – it is only reasonable to point out that unrealistic pay and cost increases inevitably leads to greater job losses at a sector level.
- The HE sector continues to face considerable uncertainty and financial insecurity; sustainability remains pivotal as HE institutions make on-going adjustments to working within the new funding regimes.
- HE institutions' reserves or surpluses (sometimes incorrectly labelled 'cash surpluses') are not spare money. These essential reserves are needed to cover capital funding, such as student facilities, buildings maintenance and updating of IT systems.
- All HE institutions are needing to deploy more of their own resources and reserves to maintain essential estates and service provisions for students.

Contact and further information

If you have any questions or queries regarding this briefing please contact Andy Fryer a.fryer@ucea.ac.uk or Marc Whittaker m.whittaker@ucea.ac.uk