**Template letters for staff regarding returning to the workplace: Pregnant woman of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic background (HE)**

Dear [ ]

I am writing to register my concern about the proposal that I should resume working in the workplace instead of from home from [date] and to request that I be allowed to continue to work remotely and deliver my teaching online.

I have seen a copy of the university’s risk assessment for the buildings in which I will be expected to work and I believe that this does not give adequate weight to my specific circumstances, which I will set out below.

I am also concerned that the 'Covid Age Tool' which the university suggests is used as a basis for discussions will line managers is not fit for purpose. Using this as a basis for decisions about in-person working does not take into account the range of limitations listed by the Association of Local Authority Medical Advisers, not least that "The tool is based on evidence that is evolving and is under constant review. As new scientific evidence becomes available, its estimates of vulnerability may change over time." (<https://alama.org.uk/covid-19-medical-risk-assessment/>). Emerging evidence of long-lasting effects of even initially 'mild' bouts of the virus are not addressed by the university's 'Covid Age Tool'. I also note that even where the 'Covid Age Tool' gives a 'Covid Age' of 'below 50' and 'low risk', the tool itself notes that 'Increased risk of infection may be accepted where there are no reasonably practicable means of reducing it further'. In the circumstances of my work, it is clear that there are 'reasonably practicable means of reducing' the risk further, as I can carry out all of the tasks required of my work from home.

**My circumstances**

As you are aware I am currently pregnant. Pregnant women are in the group described by the NHS as ‘clinically vulnerable’ to serious illness caused by coronavirus (see <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/>).

[If 28 weeks pregnant or more I am [number] weeks pregnant and so am in my third trimester. You will be aware of this study by the University of Oxford - <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m2107> - which found that the majority of pregnant women in the study who became severely ill with COVID-19 were in the late second and the third trimester of pregnancy. I believe that this means I am in a higher risk group amongst those who are clinically vulnerable due to pregnancy.]

My ethnic origin is [ ]. You will be aware of this study which has shown that people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are at greater risk both of contracting COVID-19 and of dying from it than White British people: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf>

In the study Public Health England found that after accounting for the effect of sex, age, deprivation and region, people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death than people of White British ethnicity and people of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Black Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10 and 50% higher risk of death when compared to White British people.

The NHS has acknowledged the impact of the intersection of pregnancy and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds on women here: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/06/nhs-boosts-support-for-pregnant-black-and-ethnic-minority-women/> which shows that Black pregnant women are eight times more likely to be admitted to hospital with COVID-19, while Asian women are four times as likely. [If of other ethnic origin: as yet the study has not revealed the impacts of COVID-19 on pregnant women of my ethnic origin but as we are more likely to catch and die from the virus than White British people, it reasonable to assume that the risk to pregnant women of my ethnic origin is similarly much greater than that to White British pregnant women.]

**The applicable guidance**

I refer you to the guidance document, “Principles and Considerations: Emerging From Lockdown” issued by Universities UK to institutions, and the Appendix to that document which contains a jointly agreed statement between UCEA and the HE trade unions including UCU, of which I am a member. The guidance document states:

“**PRINCIPLE ONE**

**The health, safety and wellbeing of students, staff, visitors, and the wider**

**community will be the priority in decisions relating to the easing of Covid-19**

**restrictions in universities.**

**Consider….How to ensure risk assessments consider those who may be at increased risk,**

**including individuals who require shielding and those with underlying health**

**conditions.**

**PRINCIPLE FOUR**

**Universities will regularly review the welfare and mental health needs of students**

**and staff and take steps to ensure preventative measures and appropriate**

**support are in place and well communicated as restrictions are eased.**

**Consider…Reviewing the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion implications of the**

**institution’s approach to emerging from lockdown and the actions required**

**to mitigate the impact on specific groups of staff and students (e.g. vulnerable**

**groups such as those who are shielding, those whose family members are**

**shielding, care leavers, students with mental health problems, etc.)**”

The agreed statement between UCEA and the trade unions states,

“**6. Impact on staff**

**Universities will assess how the transition back to campus will affect different cohorts of staff**

**and take into account any equality considerations. HEIs will seek to identify reasonable**

**actions to mitigate possible adverse impacts on specific group/s including those, or those**

**living with, people who are shielding or vulnerable.**”

This guidance and statement therefore requires you to put the health, safety and well being of staff (and students) first when making decisions about returning to face to face working, to consider individual risk assessments that take into account staff’s individual characteristics, to protect staff’s mental health, and to factor equality considerations for people with different protected characteristics such as pregnancy, sex and race into decisions. I do not believe that the risk assessments for the institution which I have been shown has done this adequately.

[If wanted – pick up detailed issues from the RA about which the member is unhappy:-

**The issues**

I am particularly concerned about the following points from the risk assessment:

* ]

**The law**

**Health and safety at work**

You will be aware that under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 the University is required as my employer to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work (Regulation 3) and where the employee is pregnant and the work is of a kind which could involve risk, by reason of her condition, to the health and safety of a new or expectant mother, or to that of her baby, from any processes or working conditions, Regulation 16 requires the assessment to include this risk. Regulation 16(4) specifies that references to risk, in relation to risk from any infectious or contagious disease, are references to a level of risk at work which is in addition to the level to which a new or expectant mother may be expected to be exposed outside the workplace. Clearly, working face to face with students [on a campus/in a building] containing [number] of people increases the risk of Covid-19 to me as a pregnant woman of [ ] ethnic origin [in her third trimester] in addition to the level of risk I would face outside the workplace. Outside the workplace I have of course been working from home, associating with a very small number of people and [mention any other relevant precautions eg getting someone else to do the shopping]. You therefore have a duty to assess this increased risk to me and take preventative and protective measures. I request as such a measure that you allow me to continue to work remotely and deliver my teaching online.

As you are aware, you also have a duty under Regulation 8 to provide me with a procedure to follow in the event of serious and imminent danger to enable me to stop work in the presence of such a danger and proceed to a place of safety. I request that you fulfill this duty by allowing me to continue to work remotely and deliver my teaching online.

**Indirect discrimination**

Under section 19 Equality Act 2010, where an employer applies a provision, criterion or practice to employees which puts a group who share a protected characteristic under that Act at a particular disadvantage, this will be unlawful indirect discrimination unless it can be shown to be a proportionate means to a legitimate aim. Your proposal for staff to work in the workplace puts me and other pregnant women from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds at the particular disadvantage of an increased risk of being seriously ill with Covid 19. This is potentially indirect sex and race discrimination. I do not believe that your proposal is proportionate when I have been working remotely with great success since [date] and I can deliver my teaching online.

**Negligence**

As my employer you have an actionable duty of care to guard against foreseeable harm to me as your employee. As set out above, there is a foreseeable risk of harm to me by way of serious risk of illness from Covid 19 if I have to return to working in the workplace and I believe that you would be in breach of your duty of care to require me to do so.

As evidenced by the UCEA guidance and its Appendix mentioned above, you are also aware of the risks to the mental health of staff. The proposal for me to resume working in the workplace in my circumstances has made me anxious and distressed and I will be consulting my GP about this if I feel it is necessary. I believe you would be in breach of your duty of care to require me to resume working in the workplace and that any harm to my mental health in these circumstances is foreseeable.

**Whistleblowing**

I would just remind you that I am protected by section 47B Employment Rights Act 1996 from any detriment on the grounds of having informed you about these potential breaches of your legal obligations and endangerment of health and safety.

I would be grateful to receive confirmation that I may continue to work remotely, or a full written response to my concerns as set out above, and in the meantime for your confirmation that I may continue to work remotely whilst I await this response.

Yours sincerely