How we work at Essex – Hybrid Team Working Principles and Review

## The Context

During the early stages of the pandemic, many of us worked from home for all or part of the time due to the restrictions that Covid imposed on us. This enforced shift accelerated changes in flexible working practices and employee expectations of the future world of work. This is mirrored by the opportunities that the pandemic has created for institutions, leaders, and managers to deliver strategy and services differently, and to adapt to new ways of working in ways that continue to strengthen and re-connect our community.

Expectations about what work looks like have changed and will continue to evolve. We are therefore reviewing and rethinking how work is delivered, at the same time as we reconnect with one another and reimagine how we interact with place and space. As we re-engage with our campuses in the post-pandemic period, our primary focus will be on delivering a transformational education to all our students, enabling ambitious and impactful research, and operating in ways that maximise inclusion, collaboration, and productivity.

Our University Strategy makes clear our shared commitment to putting student success at the heart of our mission, and to world leading research focused on asking difficult questions. We will nurture and celebrate these shared commitments as a campus-based community, generating energy and strengthening belonging from the in-person experience of studying and working in a campus-based, living and learning community.

As we adapt our working environments to harness the opportunities of different ways of working, our starting point for hybrid working will be to identify the blend of working practices and environment that will best support the delivery of our education and research priorities. Within these parameters we will aim to support inclusive, agile and flexible working patterns, which we know many have been operating for some time, reflecting the diversity of the work carried out by teams across the University, and the opportunities that hybrid working can offer to support our staff in contributing to our mission.

## What is hybrid team working?

‘Hybrid working’ involves a mix of working on our campuses and remotely, as appropriate to the requirements of the role. Not all roles are compatible with a hybrid working model (see our [About Hybrid Working information](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/hybrid-working) although other flexible working arrangements are available for consideration (see our [Flexible Working Policy](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/flexible-working/flexible-working)). Hybrid working provides scope to consider how and where work is carried out, in ways that may be fixed or fluid in terms of the proportion of time spent in each location in a typical week, based on operational requirements. It may also operate differently during term-time and outside term-time for some roles and may not be a preferred mode of working for some people, even if their role would allow for hybrid working. Hybrid working is an informal arrangement: it does not require a variation in contractual terms and does not create contractual entitlements.

Over the past few months, we have been developing our approach to hybrid team working, refining a set of organisational principles, and developing detailed resources for managers and colleagues to support and guide us in our journey through evolving ways of working. Our approach will continue to evolve over the next 12-18 months, with a provisional team-working model in place immediately (but without full remote working available at this stage).

## Principles to support a hybrid approach to working

As more colleagues have returned to work on our campuses, we have developed a framework to guide our thinking about how core education and research activities will be delivered in-person, remotely or through a dual mode of delivery. Working within these parameters, applying the principles set out in the Delivering our Education and Research Strategies in a Hybrid Environment document, and applying an outcomes-based approach, Heads of Departments and Sections will lead locally, in consultation with their teams, to develop local approaches to establishing new working patterns.

Adopting a hybrid approach to working may mean that some colleagues will work both on campus and remotely, with remote working including working from home; and colleagues may be working at different times. We expect that our approaches will evolve over time and will support this process of evolution and learning through transparency of practice, shared learning, and high levels of personal accountability. We will be working successfully in a hybrid way when our working patterns align with each of the following principles:

## Overarching Organisational Principles:

* Delivers excellent education and excellent research

The positive impact that each of us can make and the outcomes we achieve is paramount. We will be creative and receptive to how and where that impact may be achieved wherever possible, encouraging people to experiment with different ways of working within the institutional parameters we have set. We will be sensitive and responsive to the potential for our ways of working to have a negative impact on others. Resources are available through our [Hybrid Working page](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/hybrid-working/about-hybrid-working) to support managers to think through the implications and possibilities for teams experimenting with different ways of working.

* Promotes our status as an inclusive, campus-based community

We want everyone to contribute to an innovative culture of collegiality, collaboration, and teamwork. Our community is built on collective and collaborative working: even if an individual’s work could be undertaken successfully from a remote location, our commitment to fostering a strong culture of belonging and inclusion would mean that we still expect our colleagues to spend a proportion of their working hours on campus, so that they can be immersed in our shared ‘lived experience’ and have face-to-face opportunities to mix with colleagues and students. How this works in practice, and the balance of time, will be determined locally by managers in conjunction with their team members, within the parameters of the institutional framework.

* Supports the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of our students and staff

With boundaries between work and home life increasingly blurred, it is important that we are all mindful of our wellbeing and take positive steps to manage our health across different locations and styles of working. We have created [guidance](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/hybrid-working/hybrid-working-managers-guidance) to specifically support colleagues when working from home.

* Balances trust and accountability

Instilling a sense of accountability/ownership and giving people the agency and trust to do their best work is not only in their best interest—it’s good for delivering our strategic goals. Performance will be evaluated on the impact made and the outcomes delivered. It is about new ways of working using new tools, new processes, and new approaches to management, teamwork, and collaboration. This requires different types of behaviours and different expectations about how work is done. We will support managers by building their skills and confidence to manage their hybrid teams most effectively.

* Maximises agility

We recognise that change is constant and always with us and that the future of work will require an adaptable approach. We will harness systems, working spaces, and technology, to offer the best options for delivering our work in the most effective ways.

* Prioritises communication

The importance of good communication remains key, and we will continue to adapt our ways and styles of communication to suit these new ways of working. We will offer support and guidance to managers and colleagues to ensure great communication and collaboration takes place across our teams, and encourage the development of ‘[Team Charters](https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/directories/human-resources/hybrid-working-team-charter.pdf?la=en)’ to adapt and enhance communication and the use of meaningful but light-touch check-ins with each other. We will also invest in technologies and collaborative spaces that will help these new ways of working to be successful.

## Hybrid Team Working Principles:

* We are a campus-based university: this means that all colleagues will spend some of each working week on campus to promote face-to-face contact, effective communication, and a shared sense of purpose and belonging. This may change during the academic year to reflect University needs and cycles of activity
* Hybrid working arrangements must ensure the delivery of high-quality teaching, research and other University services, in line with our institutional framework
* Hybrid working arrangements must be inclusive and continue to foster a culture of collegiality and collaboration
* Hybrid working is available based on role, not contract type (e.g. academic/professional services, fixed term/permanent, part/full-time etc). The nature of some roles will make them unsuitable to hybrid working
* In implementing hybrid working arrangements, we will have due regard to their impacts for physical, mental and emotional wellbeing
* Arrangements for hybrid working within teams will be framed within the above parameters (and the additional Delivering our Education and Research Strategies in a Hybrid Environment) and in line with service priorities and expectations, with decisions made at the lowest appropriate level, with individual needs and preferences accommodated where possible
* Where individual staff make hybrid working requests, that focus on how and where someone will work, these will not require a contractual change and will not create contractual entitlements. They will inform working practices and arrangements within and across teams, with built in review periods, including evaluation of impact within the wider team needs. For changes to working patterns or hours (for example a reduction in the length of the working day or working week) then the Flexible Working Policy should be used to make this request, which if approved, would result in a contractual change.

### Overseas Working

Requests to perform role-related duties and work either partly or wholly outside of the United Kingdom will not be permitted other than in very exceptional circumstances. This is due to the potential significant tax and cost implications to the individual and/or the University. Any requests of this nature need to be discussed with the respective Head of Department/Section and they should contact hrer@essex.ac.uk before any overseas working takes place.

## Implementing Hybrid Working

Arrangements for hybrid working should be agreed between the manager and the member of staff following discussion. Managers must ensure that the operational needs of the University are prioritised and note that it will not be possible for all staff to perform some, or in some cases any, elements of their role from home. While managers should aim to be flexible in accommodating requests, some tasks/duties may not be compatible with a hybrid-working model and a manager may refuse a request to work from home for legitimate business or logistical reasons.

To assist the decision-making process and the practical implementation of hybrid working, we have created a series of resources to support managers. These include information on a range of hybrid working queries you may have, guidance on how to develop ‘team charters’ to help hybrid working operate most effectively, and a range of other ‘[Working in hybrid teams](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/hybrid-working/hybrid-working-managers-guidance)’ resources.

Colleagues who are hybrid working are still subject to the usual University policies, procedures and standards (including sickness absence reporting, health and safety etc). Obligations set out in the individual’s Contract of Employment continue to apply.

## Safety and Security

We are committed to ensuring colleagues work safely whilst working in a hybrid way. We expect the same care and attention to maintaining the safety of individuals and security of data and resources when working away from the University as we do when on campus. It is important that all working environments are appropriate and a [DSE risk assessment](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/equipment-safety/display-screen-equipment) must be undertaken. We also encourage managers and colleagues to assess any risks associated with changed patterns of working; for example, greater lone working as a consequence of lower numbers of staff in offices at certain times due to hybrid working.

## Review

Over the course of the next 12-18 months, we will be listening to feedback from colleagues and reviewing and refining our approach to hybrid working. Getting it right will allow us to make the greatest impact on our vision for excellence in education and research, and for our work lives to be the most productive, agile, and flexible.