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The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Public Affairs Office
Guidelines on Crisis Reporting Mechanism & Communication Strategies

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Introduction

The University has a Critical Incident Management Procedures (CIMP) which provides a framework for evaluating critical incidents according to their severity and potential impact, as well as the systematic and coordinated response in crisis situation.

While CIMP seeks to address the operational aspects in the handling of a critical incident, this guideline serves to outline the formulation and notification mechanism of the University's internal and external communication strategies in time of crisis, so as to provide guidance for HKUST staff on what to do when a potential crisis is identified, factors to consider in notifying their supervisors and the reporting line on different crisis levels.

1. Crisis that may inflict negative impact on the University

Crisis is an event that may potentially inflict negative impact on the University's normal operation, public image or reputation. It could be caused by something said or done by an HKUST member, accidents, mistakes, unpopular policies, or any fake or misinterpreted information about the University etc. If not properly handled and mitigated, incomplete or misleading information can disseminate quickly on the social and mass media, causing damage such as loss of trust, support and even talent to the University.

Examples include:
1.1 Individual-related
- Inappropriate behavior, acts, fraud or dishonesty committed by HKUST students, faculty, staff or even alumni
- Inventions/discoveries/academic papers by our faculty/researchers accused to be plagiarised, unauthentic or obtained via dishonest means

1.2 University-related
- Blunders or system failure
- controversial policy/initiatives criticized as unfair or illegitimate
- Photos, videos, social media postings from people related to the HKUST which contain sensitive or offensive content such as bullying or intimidation of an individual or group, discrimination or stereotyping of race, gender, age, social status or nationality or hate group paraphernalia which are mistaken as a stance representing the University
- false or malicious statements being circulated about/in the name of the University

1.3 Society-related
- Protests, strike or class/work boycott in pursuit of social causes which do not originate from the University but affect the University's operation

2. Role of the Public Affairs Office (PAO)

PAO is the centralized public relations unit that formulates strategies in promoting positive publicity as well as managing crisis or issues that could inflict negative impact on the University. Apart from advising on all public relations matters, PAO also monitors daily media coverage, postings on social media channels such as Facebook, Telegram, Instagram or Forum related to the HKUST, the higher education and technology sector as well as relevant government announcements in order to keep the University's senior

management ahead of social happenings, so as to help them make sound and informed decisions.

Any University external communication on crisis – including media enquiries and sometimes public announcements – should be coordinated and in many cases disseminated by PAO - with appropriate actions advised by the Director of Public Affairs (DPA) or his/her designate at PAO.   For internal communication on crisis, PAO often coordinates and advises relevant offices on the communication strategies and actions that should be taken in mitigating the impact.

On crisis/issues that affects individual schools or departments, PAO acts as the adviser and collaborate with representatives from the relevant offices to come up with an issue management and communication plan for both internal and external stakeholders.

On major crisis/issues which may cause serious damage or long-lasting impact to the whole University, a taskforce (University Core Group) comprising the President, Provost, Vice Presidents, Deans and relevant Associate Provosts and Directors will be in place to deliberate on measures or responses that should be adopted.   Taking into account of the inputs and advice shared by the University Core Group, DPA or his/her designate at PAO will take the key role in devising the communication strategy for the University. PAO will also serve as a central coordinator and work with different offices/ departments on the monitoring and management of crisis.

3. Risk Management

While a full-blown media or social media crisis is likely to be detrimental to the University's reputation, not all incidents would carry the same impact.   To formulate the most optimal strategy in managing an issue, it is essential to understand the nature, differences and relationships among risks, crisis and critical incidents.

3.1 Risk
A risk is an early stage of an incident or situation which has the potential to trigger or escalate into a crisis. Taking prompt and appropriate action at an early stage of a crisis is very essential in containing any potential damage the crisis may bring.   According to the definition of crisis stipulated in Section 1, a University staff who spots a controversial speech, statement or inappropriate behavior made or committed by one or more HKUST members; or any complaint or accusation made by the University's stakeholders such as contract workers, donors or collaborators - especially those that have been circulated among communities or on social media, should promptly inform his/her superior, who are advised to follow steps mentioned in Section 4 to contain or stifle the damage before it grows.

3.2 Crisis
A risk that eventually deteriorates, grows in complexity or draws more negative attention could turn into a crisis.   A crisis can trigger a series of incidents and lasts for a relatively long period which not only damages the University's reputation, but also affects its policy or even normal operations.   It can be caused by both internal and external reasons - the latter including social causes such as pandemic or social movement which are largely out of the University's control.   In such cases, the University can only address on issues directly relevant to it or clarify its position.   Offices, Schools and Departments should work with PAO and seek directions from senior management whereas appropriate in face of a crisis (please refer to Section 4).

3.3 Critical Incidents
Critical incidents are mostly emergency situations which may bring harm to persons or damage to properties/environment or may cause significant disruptions to operations.   That include campus fire, accidents, casualty, leakage of hazardous materials, and disruptions like power failures or campus attack. The University has a Critical Incident Management Procedures which provides a framework on addressing the operational aspects of such incidents, while this Guideline sets out the mechanism and principles in ensuring timely update of the situation and dissemination of accurate information to supplement any

action or strategy directed by the University.   With advancement in technology, critical incidents can also come in virtual form, for example data leakage or spam fraud which may lead to reputation damage or even legal liability.

4. Crisis Reporting Mechanism

If a staff member spots issues that may constitute a potential crisis, he/she should report to the head of his/her relevant department, who will assess the severity of the issues and deliberate if the matter should be further escalated to the School level.   In the absence of the head of department, staff may bring the matter to the acting head or directly to the school dean depending on severity of the issue.

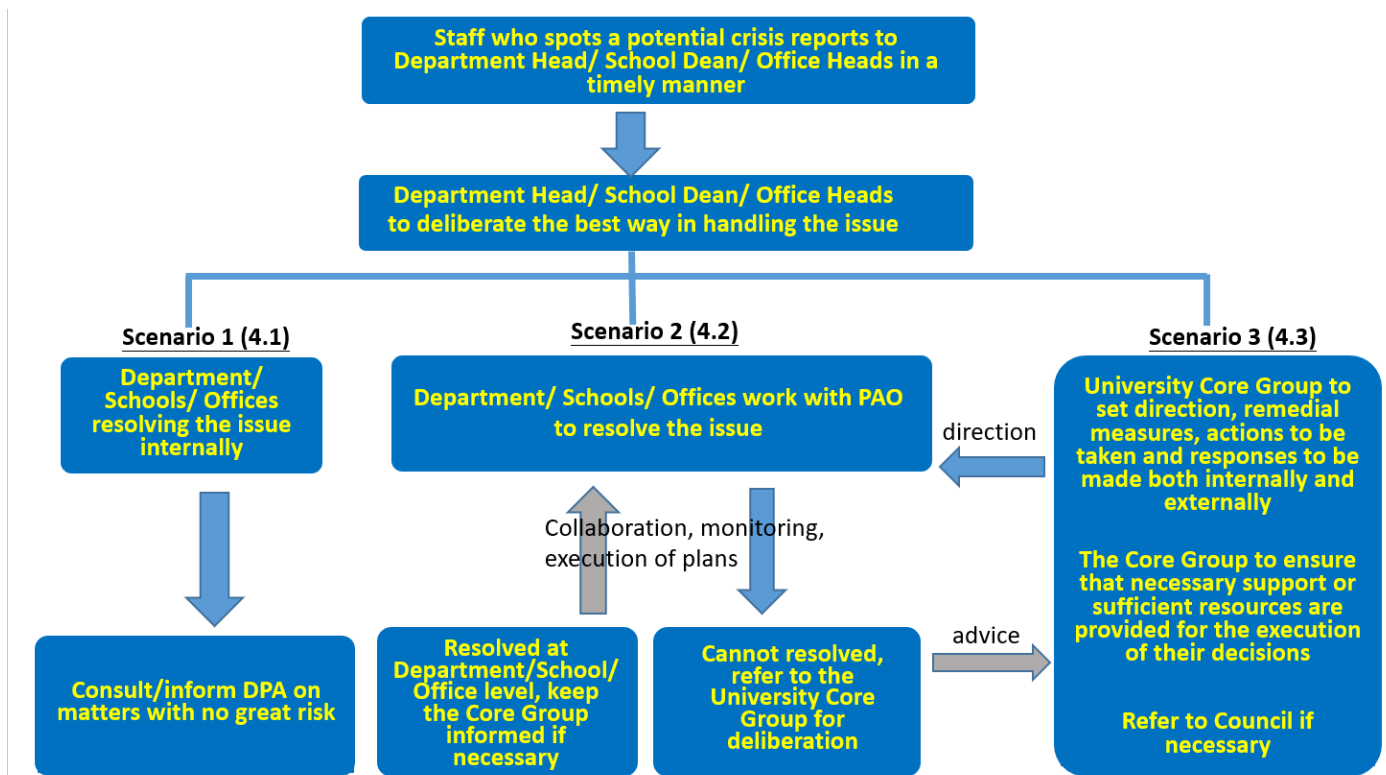4.1) Managing at School/ Department/ Office level (Scenario 1 of the figure below)
The Deans, School Administrators and Heads of School PR Units, Departments and Offices would then decide if the matter should be handled internally, refer to DPA for advice, or escalate to the University Core Group for discussion or knowledge.   For issues with no great risk implications or lasting effect that may spill over to the University level, Deans or Heads can manage the issue directly, keep the senior management informed and copy DPA and legal counsel for risk and liability analysis.

4.2) Managing at School/ Department/ Office level in consultation with DPA (Scenario 2 of the figure below)
However, if the incident eventually evolves in complexity, involving more parties, triggering more reactions, or even start generating false or misleading information, Department Heads/ School Deans/ School Administrators/ Office Heads/ School PR Unit Heads should consult DPA in a timely manner.   Together they will deliberate if the matter should be brought to the University Core Group for advice or deliberation. For matters that can be managed at the department/ school/ office level, DPA or his/her designate would assess the risk, advise on according actions to mitigate any reputational damage, work with the relevant departments/schools or offices to monitor the development, and keep the senior management informed whereas necessary.

4.3) Managing at University level in consultation with University Core Group (Scenario 3 of the figure below)
On issues with major or lasting impact on HKUST's reputation or governance, Departments/ Schools and Offices should inform the University Core Group for direction, remedial measures, actions to be taken and responses to be made both internally and externally.   Department Head/ School Deans/ School Administrators/ Office Heads/ School PR Unit Heads in collaboration with PAO will update relevant working parties about the latest situation to ensure decisions made by the Group are properly enforced and followed up.   Ad hoc working groups led by a designated coordinator may be established whereas appropriate to allow prompt and smooth handling of individual incidents.   Meanwhile, the Group should ensure that necessary support or sufficient resources are provided for the implementation of their decisions.   Depending on severity of the issue, the case might have to be reported to the Council or be referred to it for advice.

Staff who spots a potential crisis reports to Department Head/ School Dean/ Office Heads in a timely manner

Department Head/ School Dean/ Office Heads to deliberate the best way in handling the issue

Scenario 1 (4.1)

Department/ Schools/ Offices resolving the issue internally

Consult/inform DPA on matters with no great risk

Scenario 2 (4.2)

Department/ Schools/ Offices work with PAO to resolve the issue

Collaboration, monitoring, execution of plans

Resolved at Department/School/Office level, keep the Core Group informed if necessary

Cannot resolved, refer to the University Core Group for deliberation

advice

direction

Scenario 3 (4.3)

University Core Group to set direction, remedial measures, actions to be taken and responses to be made both internally and externally

The Core Group to ensure that necessary support or sufficient resources are provided for the execution of their decisions

Refer to Council if necessary

For emergency situation, a notification mechanism had already been in place between the Campus Security Manager of the Campus Management Office (CMO), Dean of Students' Office (DSTO) and the PR & Media team of PAO, where CMO and DSTO would notify PAO as soon as practicable when any incident on campus involves injury, casualty, damage to personal or public property happens, which require law enforcement or medical officers entering the campus to perform their duties.

4.4) Managing issues of HKUST (GZ) campus

HKUST(GZ) is expected to commence operation in 2022.   Under the principle of "One Unified University System, Two Complementary Campuses", PAO will oversee the PA function of HKUST(GZ), offering necessary guidance, collaboration and support on publicity and issue or crisis handling.

Similar to the mechanism mentioned above, when staff of HKUST(GZ) or Fok Ying Tung Graduate School (FYTGS) spots a potential problem, such as irregularities or blunders in budget planning or construction process, circulation of false information or allegations about the HKUST(GZ) campus, they should report to their Office Heads or Hub Leaders at HKUST(GZ) in a timely manner.

For complex or sensitive issues with impact on HKUST's overall brand or reputation, the Office heads or Hub Leaders should consult DPA or his/her designate, PR representative of HKUST(GZ), Group Lead of the MOE Final Report Joint Planning Group and the Director of the Central Administration Office.   They, with the relevant heads and hub leaders, will deliberate whether the matter should be escalated to the Provost and President at HKUST (as well as the President of HKUST(GZ) upon his/her assumption of office). HKUST's Provost and President (and HKUST(GZ)'s President) will offer direction and advise on remedial measures, actions to be taken and responses to be made for both internal and external stakeholders for relevant offices and hub leaders to carry out.

On major issues that may have implications on HKUST(GZ)'s planning and reputation, the Provost and President of HKUST will deliberate in concert with the President of HKUST (GZ) whether further escalation is required, and they may also have to escalate to HKUST(GZ)'s Governing Board for advice or knowledge, and even HKUST Council – depending on the nature and severity of the risk.

The mechanism will be reviewed again when the organization structure of HKUST(GZ) takes shape.   PAO at HKUST will work closely with the future PAO from the Guangzhou campus on issue management to ensure

aligned responses for external stakeholders and same principles for both HK and GZ campus.

5. **Composition of the University Core Group (list of members may be updated according to the issue/crisis in question)**

President
Provost
Vice-President for Administration and Business
Vice-President for Research and Development
Senior Advisor to the Provost (Teaching Innovation and E-learning)
Associate Provost (Teaching & Learning)
Dean of Students
Dean of Science
Dean of Engineering
Dean of Business and Management
Dean of Humanities and Social Science
Director of Interdisciplinary Programs Office
Director of HKUST Jockey Club Institute for Advanced Study
Director of Public Affairs Office
Office of the President
Legal Counsel
Relevant Administrator of relevant offices/units

6. **Approval of the message to be communicated**

When a crisis poses wide implications on the University level (e.g. University governance/ reputation/ University-wide education issues), President, or the University Core Group when appropriate, shall be informed and consulted for strategic decisions and approval of messages to be communicated, internally and externally.

When a crisis could be managed at departmental/school level, the head of relevant departments/units School PR Unit Heads/ School Administrators or Dean of Schools shall be consulted and give approval of messages to be communicated, internally and externally, having DPA informed.

When a crisis involves regular student or teaching and learning matters, the Dean level such as Dean of Students/ AVP for teaching and learning or sometimes Dean of Students, shall be informed or consulted for communication and approval of any messages to be communicated, internally and externally.   The Head of relevant departments/units shall also be informed and consulted for communication and approval of any messages to be communicated, internally or externally, where appropriate.

DPA or his/her designate at PAO shall be the gatekeeper of messages to be communicated, internally or externally, in time of University crisis.

7. **Planning ahead**

Crisis is not always a breaking issue that could only be addressed reactively, it can also be planned ahead. For regular/annual events such as congregation or Info Day, PAO would coordinate with relevant offices/departments such as schools and CMO to assess any potential security and operational breaches in different scenario planning in order to get prepared for any potential crisis as well as the according communication tactics.

For one-off events such as conference or launching event of a major campaign, the event organizer should take the initiative to consult/inform PAO - especially when media is invited.

If you have any enquiries on media related issues or require assistance on potential crisis, please contact the PR & Media Team of PAO at 5190-7882 or media@ust.hk.   Alternatively, you may also consult the external relations unit of your own School for advice, whereas appropriate, before approaching PAO.