Becoming Covid-secure. Finding clarity in confusion

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The University Caterers Organisation forum has been absolutely buzzing with activity, as our industry seeks much needed clarity around government guidelines and the best way to ensure campuses are Covid-secure for September and beyond.

Our members are sharing best practice around multiple topics including, signage, screening, payment, service type and social distancing measures.

Quite understandably, there is a lot of confusion. Concerns continue around whether serving international students on accommodation plans which include catering would see them classed as restaurants. The consensus is that takeaways with safe areas for waiting and queuing in addition to contactless payments is the way forward. Perspex screens, at the time of writing, have not been made mandatory, but advice suggests they may help provide extra safety around reception areas or till points. Universities may also be better placed in being able to operate one-way systems, given catering outlets are usually inside larger buildings where there is normally more than one entry and exit point.

At my own university at Reading, we’ve been looking into expanding our external seating areas and using temporary structures so that people can eat together safely. Technology will also play a large part in the new normal and we’re researching virtual queuing technology. I know that many of my colleagues are also expanding on the technology they use to facilitate the increased use of click and collect services. Another area of concern is around the legislation for food businesses to keep a temporary record of customers and visitors. Bookings are one way of doing this and we know some universities are considering whether they can use card access logs or purchase methods where bookings aren’t being made. A simpler method may be to ask for a contact email for everyone who uses catering outlets, although this method must comply with all GDPR requirements.

Finally, although many universities will be facilitating online learning, there will be students returning to campus. For those instances, many have planned to create ‘households’ in residences to avoid students having to socially distance 24/7.

Although there are many uncertainties, at TUCO we are always here to support you and will continue to share our findings.

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