

## Communications Guidance

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# COVID-19 Response

15 March 2020

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# 1. Background and aim

- 1.1. This communications guidance supports the delivery of the British Council's Global Covid-19 response. It follows the Incident Management Team structure and draws on the British Council's own experiences of managing crisis and the Government Communications Service's PRIMER's Framework for public bodies communicating in emergencies.
- 1.2. It is designed to support Regional Heads of Communications and in-country communications colleagues to develop their own crisis communications plans to work in the local context while staying aligned globally.
- 1.3. This document should be read by communicators within the Marketing Function (press, digital, external affairs, internal) but may be helpful anyone involved in the IMT operation.
- 1.4. This document should be read in conjunction with the [global FAQs](#) available on the intranet.

## 2. Objectives

- 2.1. There are three primary objectives of British Council's Covid-19 Incident Management Response:
  - **Preserve life:** To safeguard British Council staff, customers, students and partners by minimising the risk of infection/transmission of Covid-19
  - **Maintain operational delivery:** To minimise the loss of revenue due to disruptions to programmes and exams as a result of Covid-19
  - **Uphold the British Council's reputation:** To protect the reputation of the British Council through its operational response to Covid-19
- 2.2. Effective communications can support the delivery of these objectives. The objectives of our communications are:
  - Deliver clear, coordinated and timely and messages to staff, customers, students and partners in a manner that fulfils our duty of care
  - Effectively manage our relationships with key audiences to minimise the loss of revenue and enable the organisation to recover quickly
  - To rebut misinformation about British Council operations

## 3. Guiding principles

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- 3.1. Decision-making:** Countries should use FCO travel advice and official local government guidance to guide decision-making, as described in the Global Policy shared with Country Directors and Region Directors. Operational decisions should be made at IMTs and communications colleagues should look to their Bronze IMT for guidance on managing communications.
- 3.2.** All communication requests and engagements should be routed through the identified communications leads, usually the Country Communications Manager. Communications decisions should be made at the country level, in agreement with your respective Country Director and Regional Head of Communications.
- 3.3.** Regional Heads of Communications have final approval of messaging and can escalate through the Communications IMT as needed. Countries should only change communications received from their region where the changes respond to local government directives and policies.
- 3.4.** All parties should act within the parameters of this communications strategy and escalate issues within the IMT structure where they do not have delegation. (See **Annex A** for Operating Model and **Annex B** for the Messaging Clearance Model).
- 3.5. Audience segmentation:** Segment your audiences as you normally would for any marketing activity and list in priority order, ranking according to the interest and impact on operations against the influence they can exert over British Council. For a global issue, what we say to a country-based correspondent or an HE stakeholder in one country needs to align with what colleagues in another country or region are saying - the messages may be different but messaging principles (See below item 3.3) need to be consistent. (See **Annex C** for template audience segmentation.)
- 3.6. Messaging:** Because the situation is moving quickly you will need to review and revise your communications regularly. Your crisis messaging should always follow the '5Cs':
- **Care:** This is an issue that affects our operations, but first and foremost it is a health issue and we must be true to our values as a responsible organisation by showing care to our customers, staff and students. People may be anxious, scared or disappointed. Acknowledging your audiences' needs is vital.
  - **Clarity:** The situation will evolve and you must take care not to hold yourself hostage to fortune. You may not have all the facts and you should anticipate that the situation will change. Provide shorter holding updates regularly rather than lengthy updates that take time to clear. Do not over promise or speculate.
  - **Control:** It's natural to want to say something in a crisis (particularly when you are trying to show Care and give Clarity). But showing you are in control does

not mean over-communicating or giving a response to everyone who asks. This creates unreasonable expectations that you will respond to everything—which may not be possible, appropriate or sustainable.

- **Consistent:** Communicating at regular and manageable intervals and keeping a commitment to that regularity allows your audience to know when to expect communication. This can reduce anxiety and the feeling that there is a vacuum.
- **Calm:** Part of your role as a communicator is to keep calm, to keep your team calm and to keep your colleagues calm. You have perspective about the size of this crisis within a wider news agenda. Your role in IMT is to provide sound advice, challenge and counsel to colleagues about the communications implications of any given decision. The language you use in communication, the body language of your spokespeople and the frequency of messaging is something you need to be mindful of.
- **Channels:** Because the situation is likely to change, think about the most appropriate channels to reach your target audiences while also being sensitive to the local advice. ie. Social media, direct mailings, Teams/Skype will be more appropriate than large in-person staff meetings. Your audiences' ability to receive information may also be disrupted because of health advice. So ensure you think through the customer journey and identify the best way to reach your audience if, for example, there is no office access.
- **Media Monitoring:** The situation is moving quickly. It is advised that you monitor the local news and government announcements daily and provide a readout to your IMT first thing every morning to help support their decision-making. (See **Annex E** for template Media Monitoring Report).

#### Messaging guidance

##### Do:

- Always put people first
- Outline key facts of the situation and operational decision
- Acknowledge how the audience might be feeling
- Explain how/when further communications will be issued
- Provide details of how the audience can follow-up
- Keep it short, using simple language

##### Do not

- Make promises you cannot keep
- Provide health or travel advice
- Apologise too much: this undermines trust long term
- Speculate, say no comment, use jargon or acronyms

## 4. Phases of Crisis

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4.1. There are three stages to every crisis: **pre-crisis, crisis, recovery**. As Covid-19 is affecting different countries, countries are in different phases. In some countries we are still in the pre-phase crisis meaning that there is minimal disruption to operations. **Manage the risk of the crisis phase by using the pre-crisis period to plan.**

#### 4.2. Pre-Crisis Phase:

- **Proactively communicate to staff** about the behaviour changes you need from them now (ie. Hand-washing, complying with British Council travel restrictions, regularly checking and following FCO travel advice).
- **Review, update and test your crisis communications plan.** Your crisis plan should include draft messages to cover at minimum, the following scenarios:
  - Disruption to your programmes, teaching centres and exams
  - Work from home/self-isolation policies
  - Evacuation of staff
- **Build your crisis team now.** If you find yourself in a prolonged period of crisis, your staff, and your senior decision-makers will get tired. They too may fall sick or may become carers for loved ones who fall sick. Build a team with the following skills, and consider drawing staff from other teams:
  - External response: media and digital audience handling, on-site communications
  - Stakeholder response: communicating with staff, managing stakeholders and partners including Embassies and High Commissions
  - Audience insight through social listening and media monitoring for identified audiences
  - Reporting and administration, and evaluation skills
- **Develop your battle rhythm and rota.** This may include putting in place measure for out of hours working. (See **Annex D** for example Battle Rhythm and Rota). Identify a shift system to implement in the event of a crisis and make it clear what the roles and responsibilities are for each team member and how the rota will work. Agree with your Country Director whether you will need to put in place TOIL or overtime payment arrangements to facilitate this.
- **Ensure you have details of key contacts** within and outside the organisation - and that they are accessible if your team is unexpectedly asked to work from home or if default systems are not accessible.
- **Verify your sign-off process and spokesperson,** ensuring key decision-makers are available outside of working hours and will be available at short notices to clear messaging. Identify a spokesperson who can capably manage media interview if required.

**4.3 Crisis:** In a live scenario, you will be experiencing disruption in multiple areas (this is likely to be true on a regional level before it is felt in country). During this phase it is important to:

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- Activate your crisis team quickly. Bring people together and brief them on the situation- media coverage, social media monitoring, official sources and organisational policy.
  - Ask yourself: “Is this actually a crisis and is it our crisis to manage?” Brief your team on the immediate actions required and clearly give direction on roles and responsibilities.
  - Identify the process for keeping track of information.
  - Issue communications swiftly, within 30 minutes ideally, and provide follow-up communications as needed.

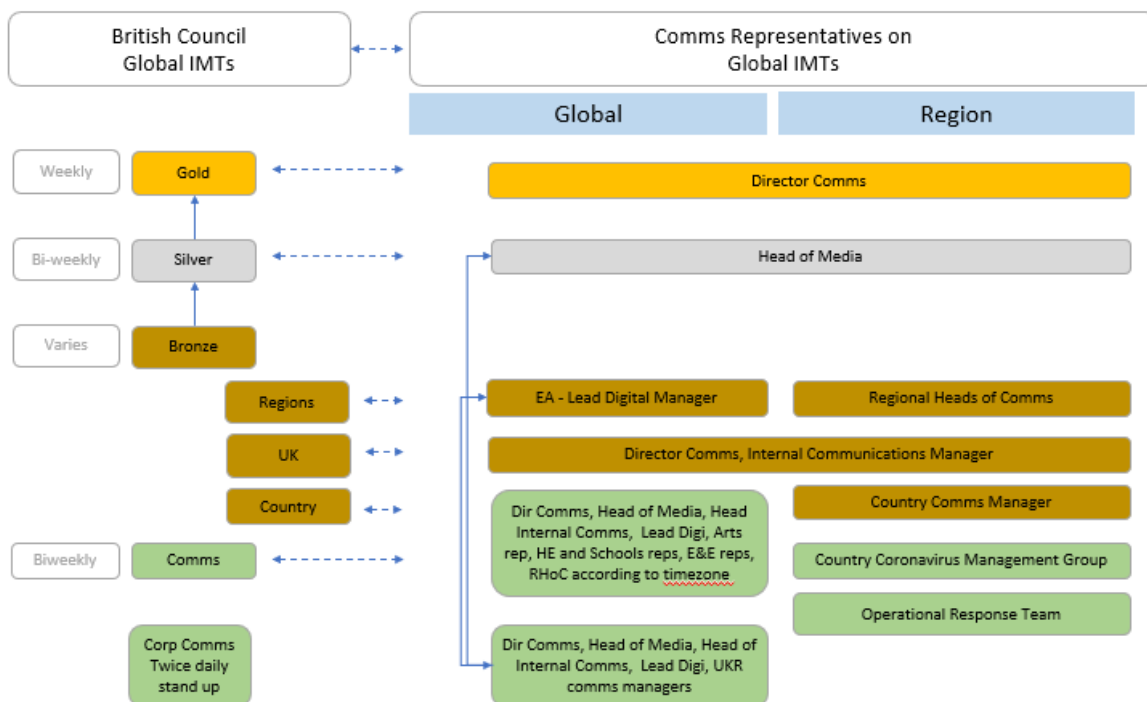
**4.4 Recovery:** Once the initial crisis is over, it will take some time to return to business as usual. Allow yourself and your team to take time to recover while also doing the following:

- **Gather your lessons learned.** Ensure you capture lessons from your own team and the wider office so that you can make changes and improvements to your communications operations in future. There will be lessons learned sessions within the IMT structure so please share these accordingly
- **Reach out to your audiences.** Part of a quick recovery means regaining the confidence of your audiences once the crisis is over. Communicating quickly is important, and a audience map (**Annex C**) will enable you to rebuild effectively.

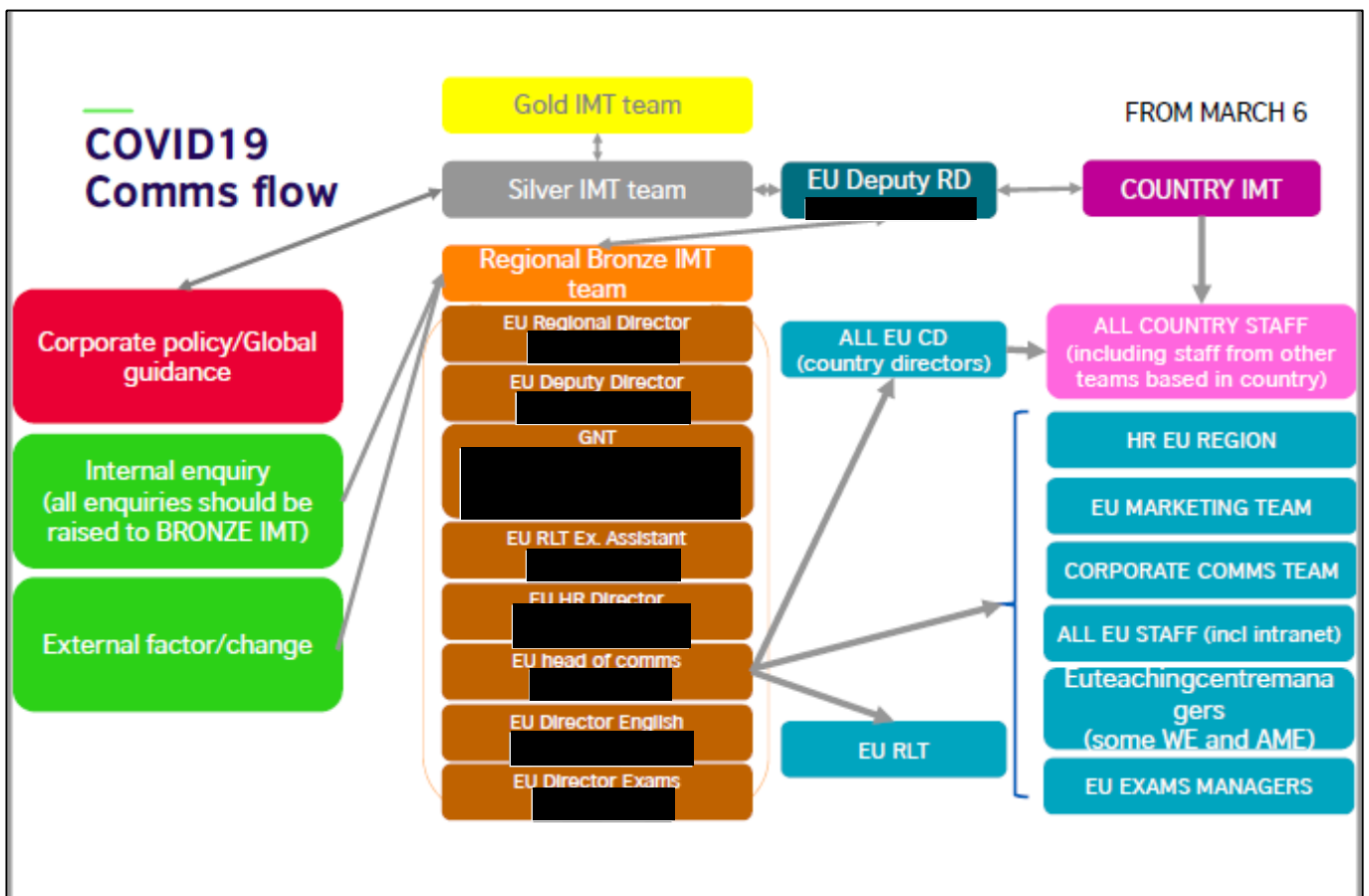
# ANNEX A: Operating Model

The **Gold IMT** (SLT) has overall accountability for the organisation's strategic and operational response.

- The **Silver IMT**:
  - Day-to-day operational responsibility for coordinating response at global level, bringing together geographies, businesses and professional services.
  - Monitors and anticipates emerging risks that cut across geographies and businesses, coordinating with Gold and Bronze.
  - Provides assurance and information to Gold on global response, escalating issues as needed.
- All regions have a **Bronze IMT** that:
  - Coordinates decision-making between countries, businesses and professional services and leads the response to emerging risks within the region.
  - Provides assurance to Silver, coordinating as needed.
  - Immediately updates Global Sitrep when there are changes to operating status.
  - Chairs of Bronze IMTs dial into Silver IMTs.
- **SBU and professional services, including Communications** dock into this structure at all three levels. Coordination at each level is essential, but consistency is not, e.g. Exams and English may apply different policies on refunds (where such differences have been agreed, the position should be accompanied with clear communications / rationale to explain why there is a difference in policy). Where a lack of consistency may create a problem, e.g. reputational damage, this can be resolved at Bronze for regional and Silver or Gold for global.



## Example communications flow, EU





## ANNEX B: Messaging Clearance Model

Issue	Decision-maker	Messaging	Consult	Accountable for sign off	Inform
Country level: Exams, class cancellations and/or teaching centre closure	SBU regional lead and Country Director	Country comms lead	Operational decisionmaker ie. Country Director SBU regional lead	Regional Head of Communications	Bronze region IMT
Response re: infected or quarantined customers and staff Office closures	Country Director	Country communications lead	Country Director	Regional Head of Communications	Bronze region IMT
Cancelled events for which we had delegations planned	SBU regional lead and Country Director	Country communications lead	Country Director SBU regional lead	Regional Head of Communications	Bronze region IMT
Cancelling our own Country-led events	Country Director	Country communications lead	Country Director SBU regional lead	Regional Head of Communications	Bronze region IMT
Cancelling our own Region or Global-led events	Region Director and regional or global SBU lead as appropriate	Regional Head of Comms	Country communications lead Global corporate comms	Regional Head of Comms	Silver IMT

## ANNEX C: Audience mapping example

Audience	Objectives of engagement	Frequency	Relationship holder	Engagement Channel
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<b>Examiners and Exams staff</b>	<p>Communicate and build understanding of decisions that impact their work</p> <p>Provide relevant and timely information that maintains confidence and support for operational decisions</p> <p>Content that inspires morale and supports the retention of staff</p>	<p>Weekly Exams update from [REDACTED] sent mid-week to all examiners</p> <p>Ongoing updates to examiners via Team leaders</p> <p>Communications as required for specific activities such as departed assistance</p>	<p>[REDACTED] overall operational matters</p> <p>[REDACTED] – Examiners</p>	<p>Email</p> <p>Team leaders cascade/team huddles (virtual)</p> <p>Exam's operational update</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>
<b>Customers</b>	<p>Inform and reassure test takers through regular communication</p> <p>Signpost to relevant updates regarding reopening</p> <p>Support, and nurture test-takers, gain loyalty through messaging and content</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>Communications for events such as further closure, resumption of operations</p>	<p>[REDACTED] - comms managed through Marketing Project, liaise with Comms team to ensure consistent messaging across all stakeholder groups</p>	<p>Email</p> <p>Website updates</p> <p>Social media updates</p>

It may also be useful to use the Think/Feel/Do template, for example:

Audience	Overview	Think	Feel	Do (policy)	Tips
British Council staff (all including teachers, accreditation staff, teachers)	We have a duty of care to our staff to do what we can to keep them safe while at work. This means taking reasonable measures to provide them with guidance about how Covid-19 might affect their work, and what they can do to minimise their risk.	<p>Senior Leadership cares about and prioritises the health of staff above corporate or financial needs</p> <p>My manager cares about me and I know what I need to do and tell my customer, partners etc</p>	Reassured that they have the best information possible, are empowered to act appropriately and communicate effectively	Take action based on the communications provided	<p>Ensure all communications are provided in a format that is accessible to staff - i.e. do staff spend much of their day away from their computers? If so, emails might not be effective</p> <p>Teachers will need a more direct approach</p>

					through teaching centre management
British Council Staff (Managers)	As above	Senior Leadership and UK professional functions are handling the situation well	Confident that they have the right information to handle questions from their teams, and empowered to act appropriately and communicate effectively	Take action based on the communications provided  Escalate risks and issues promptly through the correct IMT channels	Line managers with several members of their team out of the office may need additional support and targeted messaging through more direct channels
Customers	Rely on British Council-provided exams, classes and programmes to achieve their goals	Informed and reassured through regular communication  The British Council is a responsible organisation that offers high quality services	Positive towards the British Council and understanding of the changes required  Reassured and loyal to the British Council as first choice provider	Remain customers and reschedule their exams or classes with the British Council	

## ANNEX D: Example Battle Rhythm and Rota

Time	Activity
0800	Media monitoring and situation report (sit-rep) updated
0900	Issue updated sit rep with new coverage to Bronze
0930	Team stand up meeting to review priorities for the day

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1200	Lunchtime broadcasts and social media peak - update sit rep as needed
1300	Country IMT
1400	Regional IMT
1500	Stakeholder briefings and calls
1700	End of day Team stand-up and handover for on-call team members
1800	Evening broadcasts- (potential for media) - on-call team members update sit rep
2200	<i>Media monitoring for late evening news and sit-rep updated</i>
0800	On-Call hands over

## ANNEX E: Situation Report Template

**Covid-19 Update – 10 March 2020 10.00**

China Communications Team

### Summary

1. **Beijing and Guangdong** both reported one **imported case** of COVID-19, raising the total number of imported cases to 69.
2. **NHC:** all mobile cabin hospitals expected to close by 10 March

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3. **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** established Emergency Response Centre of Epidemics Importation Prevention.
  4. **Fujian:** 11 people died of the collapse of a designated medical observation hotel; 50 rescued, 21 being searched and rescued
  5. **Beijing:** local authorities ordered all medical quarantine facilities to strengthen safety inspections after the deadly collapse of the Fujian hotel
  6. **Beijing:** people with fever or dry cough should not take public transportation
  7. **Beijing** has extend matched treatment options for foreign nationals to those of Chinese citizens in community health management amid the spread of COVID-19.
  8. **Boao Forum for Asia** postpones 2020 meeting.
  9. **WHO:** COVID-19 could become the first pandemic in history that could be controlled
  10. **Italy** will implement **personnel flow control** throughout the country starting from 10 March.
  11. **France:** Minister of Culture diagnosed infection with COVID-19
  12. **Cyprus** reported its first two confirmed infection with COVID-19; **all UN countries have reported cases** of the epidemic.
  13. **Chinese Embassy in South Korea:** China will export face masks to South Korea, with a first batch of 5 million
  14. **Iran** released 70,000 prisoners because of the outbreak of COVID-19
  15. **Japan** government proposed to **designated the COVID-19 outbreak as the country's first-ever historic emergency.**
  16. **Qatar** announced suspension of all primary and secondary schools and universities.

### Useful Links

1. [WHO \(2019-nCoV\) situation reports – daily](#)

For previous updates please visit [here](#). [REDACTED]

## ANNEX F: Template Communications

### Cancellation due to local government instruction

In compliance with Government directives, the British Council has made the decision to cancel all IELTS examinations in [city or country] that are scheduled to take place in

[week/month]. The full test fees will be returned to registered test takers by [date]. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause.

## **Exam Candidate communications**

Dear Test Takers

### **RE: Health advisory and updates for all Test Takers**

I am writing to provide information on measures we are taking at the British Council to ensure the safety of all test takers, with consideration of the current Coronavirus situation. The safety, health and well-being of all our customers and the community in which we operate is our top priority at the British Council.

Please note the following updates for test takers in **China, Hong Kong and Macau**

- All IELTS tests are suspended
  - Mainland China – tests currently suspended until 1 March 2020
  - Macau – tests currently suspended until 1 March 2020
  - Hong Kong – tests currently suspended until 17 February 2020
- These dates will be reviewed as the situation develops.
- Transfers and refunds are available for affected test takers by contacting the test centre via email. Please do not visit the test centre as opening hours may be restricted.

### **Collecting Test Report Forms in China, Hong Kong and Macau**

- Test takers who have already taken their test will receive their TRF by mail.
- If results are urgently needed and it is 5 days since your computer delivered test or 13 days since your paper test then please email your test centre.

We are monitoring the situation very closely and will continue to take relevant measures in line with the advice of our national healthcare authorities. If you require more information or assistance, please contact XXX at 123, or refer to [insert link to relevant local health authority] where relevant and useful health / hygiene advisory and updates on this topic may be found.

More information on protecting yourself from Covid-19 is

here: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

Thank you for your kind attention and understanding in this matter,

Kind regards

(Name)(Country Operations Manager)

### **Facebook message to test takers**

To support efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in Hong Kong, the British Council in Hong Kong is **postponing English classes, tests and exams with immediate effect as follows:**

#### **English classes**

**English classes for playgroup, kindergarten, primary and secondary:**  
Currently postponed until Friday 7 February inclusive.

**English classes for adults:**

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**Currently postponed until Sunday 2 February inclusive.**

Please check back here for any updates and we will communicate with you directly about alternative class arrangements.

## **Tests and exams**

**All tests and exams between now and Sunday 16 February inclusive are postponed.**

All test takers affected by the postponement can apply for a full refund or defer their test to a future date in the next 3 months free of charge.

For tests and exams, please contact us from Monday 3 February at [examinations@britishcouncil.org.hk](mailto:examinations@britishcouncil.org.hk) to make alternative arrangements.

We apologise for any inconvenience that all this may cause, **but please be assured that your health and safety is our top priority.**