

Covid-19 All staff briefing 17 June 2020: Questions and Answers

Transitioning from lockdown

Returning to work

- When do you think the university will be open again?
- I have a lot of anxiety about coming back onto campus. I am an administrator so can easily continue to work from home. Will I have a choice?
- With the uncertainty of school provision how will those staff with childcare requirements be accommodated if their children can't return in September? Will they be allowed to continue to work remotely?
- Can staff choose to work from home even when the campus is open?
- Is the plan to all return to campus all at the same time or will it be phased?

At present the government and university advice is to continue working from home where this is possible – if you have concerns around this or need further guidance you should contact your line manager.

We are developing a plan to enable our transition back to campus, prioritising the safety and wellbeing of staff, students and visitors. We are working to government and Public Health England advice and considering the needs of the more vulnerable members of our community as part of the process. This will mean opening the campus gradually while continuing to follow government guidance on safe working and social distancing.

A Building Preparation Checklist and Schedule has been established, which sets out the measures that need to be in place before a building can be opened fully – this includes introduction of signage, space planning and cleaning procedures amongst other measures. Specific functional areas within buildings are being operationalised in phases between now and September, prioritising spaces required for essential work. These are being prioritised as follows:

- Priority 1: Research labs
- Priority 2: Spaces required for student facing support (eg clearing, TPOs etc)
- Priority 3: Exam and revision spaces for summer exams
- Priority 4: Operationalisation of all teaching spaces for September
- Priority 5: All other office spaces and facilities

As buildings are signed off as fully prepared, we will continue to follow government guidance and advise those who can work from home to continue to do so.

Shielding

- Are there plans for staff who are shielding to return to campus?
- If someone in my household is working in a NHS Hospital, as we are high risk, would it make more sense to work from home?

The current government guidance concerning people with underlying health conditions is that anyone who is shielding at home should continue to do so in order to protect themselves. According to the advice, members of a household which includes someone who is shielding don't have to shield themselves but should take appropriate precautions.

However, the last thing that we want is for staff to come to work feeling unsafe, so we will be ensuring measures are in place and that discussions can be had on individual cases once the University's position around working on campus changes.

Visiting campus during closure

- I would like to ask for assurance that staff are not coming on or allowed to come on to campus without authorisation?
- Can we come to campus without needing approval?
- For clarity when we talk about returning to campus requiring approval. Does this include public services such as the on campus GP, pharmacy, shop, coffee shop etc?

To accommodate the needs of essential activities across campus we have been working closely with different areas throughout to ensure that some necessary work has continued (eg Estate Management). We have also been putting in place procedures and plans so that essential work activities (eg research) can resume safely in the coming weeks. Anybody wishing to attend campus must follow the agreed process set out below.

All work on campus or visits to campus must be approved by your Head of Department using the relevant approval process [here](#). You are advised to wash your hands on arrival and frequently while on campus.

If you are using any of the open public facilities (eg pharmacy, shop etc) on campus you should observe the social distancing and safety measures in place.

Social distancing

- Are you also scenario planning for a 1m social distance as that may come into effect next month possibly?
- In the preparation of the campus for global social distancing, do we know how many fulltime students in total we can accommodate on campus for 2020-21?
- But can staff wear masks, even if it's not government advice?

- 'Government guidance and advice' has proved itself pretty useless - why not formulate a strategy with reference to the expertise available from within the academic community?
- If we are currently planning re-opening lab/office, I guess you already have signage, sanitisers etc, how do we get these to save re-ordering them locally
- Will there be more sanitiser dispensers in every level/floor in any building, please?
- Are you hoping there will be students in halls or is this not in the plans?

A full review of teaching spaces has been conducted with 2 metre and 1 metre social distancing options explored. We are taking a flexible approach to planning which will allow us to make adjustments as the government advice evolves. We are now working on a similar review of office spaces.

Work is underway to install around 450 sanitiser dispensers across the campus, primarily covering entrances and communal areas.

We are certainly planning for students to be able to live on campus in September, and of course there are currently a number of students currently living in Halls. These student flats are being treated as a family group and so all the social distancing and staying at home restrictions that apply to households apply there. This has enabled us to put a number of protocols in place that make them as safe as possible.

Quarantine and future lockdown planning

- What would happen if there is a surge in infection in the future and lockdown is imposed in September or October?
- Is there a contingency plan in place in case the lockdown is reinstated? If so what is it?

While our efforts are currently focused on how we can return safely to campus we are mindful that this is an ever changing and unpredictable situation and scenario planning for future lockdowns is on the agenda for the Task & Finish group.

What is senior management doing to improve morale? At the moment, the only thing that exists is self-care workshops, but not many people attend these.

This is a really challenging area, and though there are some staff who prefer the way they are currently working and have found it a more comfortable experience, for others it simply isn't possible to adapt so easily with the workloads they have. There are a lot of great examples of good practice that have evolved as we have gone along, for example teams meeting every week for coffee or a chat, and though it's not the same as meeting people on campus it is a really good idea to try to create these opportunities to get together informally and making sure that we all keep in touch. We also encourage you to make use of the range of [health and wellbeing resources](#) available to you. There is no one-size-fits-all approach and we need to be mindful that we all have different needs.

There are concerns that a number of members of staff are working very long hours, sometimes juggling caring for small children and other relatives, and they need support. The programme we are developing for teaching in 20/21 is similarly demanding and we have spoken about how important it is that Heads of Departments think very carefully about how they manage the workload of their staff, which will invariably mean stopping doing some of the things we are doing in order to do new things. We have to be good at prioritising our workload and simply saying there are some things that we need to stop doing.

A lot of staff struggle using new technology, will there be enough support for them, so it doesn't fall to prof. services?

Our [homeworking hub](#) has lots of advice and guidance to help you access the tools you need to do your job. This [guide](#) also has some specific guidance on using technology tools and keeping in touch with your team.

Some staff are developing physical problems / RSI due to poor 'work stations' at home. Is there any advice or support available to manage those situations?

Guidance is available to help you ensure your home set up is suitable, including a shortened self-assessment version of the [Display Screen Equipment checklist](#). These short videos offer practical advice that can easily be applied in a home environment:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Af7q5j14muc>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLwIP8cBaWA&feature=youtu.be>

If you need further assistance of guidance please contact your line manager in the first instance or the [Health and Safety team](#).

What provision will be put in place for BAME staff?

We know that Covid-19 has a disproportionate impact on BAME people and Brunel's community is incredibly diverse with large numbers of BAME staff and students. This is a vitally important consideration in our planning.

Our aim is to ensure that our plans and preparations meet the highest standards required to protect BAME staff and students. There will of course be some individual circumstances that will require particular risk assessment and adaptations, but as a rule, our approach is to use measures required to protect BAME staff as our baseline, so that everyone is protected.

What about externally funded research resumption? Funding bodies are asking academics these questions

We appreciate that research staff, particularly those receiving external funding, are keen to return to campus to continue their work and research labs are our first priority in our building preparation schedule. This sets out the measures that need to be in place before a building can be opened fully – this includes introduction of signage, space planning and cleaning procedures amongst other measures.

In the meantime, specific requests to attend campus for research work can be accommodated. Please make any requests to your head of department by following our guide for access to campus for research activities.

Given that China appears to be experiencing a second wave, are we really considering opening campus up to all students in September? Or are we just considering opening up to those in digital poverty?

We want to be able to offer as many students as possible a full university experience. Currently that means working with social distancing rules and focusing on dual delivery. On-campus teaching will focus on high-value activity such as seminars and small group sessions, allowing us to continue to be flexible in case further restrictions are in place further in the year.

Are we looking at any provisions for quarantine facility on campus for International students?

Yes, we are planning to offer quarantine facilities for students arriving within certain dates in September. The details of this are currently being finalised and we will be able to share more details in due course.

Questions to be discussed at the Task & Finish Group

Even prior to the C19 outbreak I believed that the toilet facilities in many areas of the university were extremely inadequate. As a vulnerable person, I will be even more concerned having to share the facilities with students when I return to work on campus. Will you consider, sooner rather than later, providing those facilities for staff access only?

Delivering education and student support

Student fees

- Will students be paying the same fees as before?
- Have students, current and prospective, been asking for reduced fees?
- Do they still have to pay the same amount?

The Universities minister has indicated that the Government does not expect students to be reimbursed if the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is there. Our focus must be on providing a high-quality experience and continuing to offer value for money to our students.

Timetabling

- Could Timetabling release a complete list of Covid-19 room capacity?
- When will teaching timetables be released for students?

The work done by the Estates team to identify room capacities or teaching has been circulated to Colleges and to members of the Task and Finish Group. The document is also now available on the educational delivery Teams site. Timetables will be made available to students once departments have been able to determine how modules are to be delivered, but it's more important than ever that students receive their timetables in good time and so that will be our priority.

When will we know what modules will be taught online or on site?

We have been collecting data from programmes up to a deadline of 19 June, and so from this week we will know what modules are going to be taught in 20/21. There are a handful of programmes that won't be able to teach online, and there are some with aspects, for example clinical or practical, that might need to be delivered in later terms or in different ways. We are aware of these issues and will be supporting programmes to meet these additional challenges.

Are you surveying students as to whether they want to come to campus or would prefer online teaching?

We haven't surveyed students on this particular question because the situation is different for everyone and in some cases we simply may not be able to provide all options. We have based our offer on dual delivery because that gives both staff and students the greatest degree of flexibility. We are currently surveying students on their preference around a January start and their digital capability in order to gauge our response.

Will all lectures be online so the dual-delivery aspect only applies to seminars and other types of teaching? Is this for the whole academic year?

Due to the current social distancing restrictions and the fact that they may remain for a long time yet, we do want to deliver lectures solely online. This means campus teaching can focus on high-value activity such as seminars and small group sessions and it also allows us to continue to be flexible in case further restrictions are in place further in the year.

Are there plans to offer fully online 'distance learning' style courses at all levels?

No, we want to be able to offer as many students as possible a full university experience. Currently that means working with social distancing rules and focusing on dual delivery.

Have disabled students been taken into account when looking at delivery of courses online/virtually? For example, sensory impaired students who may need human support. How about disabled staff and what they need to deliver teaching online?

We know that the move to a different way of teaching will create a number of issues for students and staff and the Task and Finish Group concerned has already begun looking at finding solutions to circumstances that might make it more difficult. The group will continue to work with departments to highlight and respond to specific issues.

As a lot hinges on our student recruitment, is there any update on how Brunel are progressing here, both for Home/EU and international students?

We will have an update for all staff at our upcoming briefing on Monday, however it's a complex picture and understanding the intentions of our applicants is difficult. We've had fewer applications from UG Home/EU students than in previous years, but on the other hand we've made as many offers as in previous years – until the students make their minds up about their offers, we are none the wiser. We've had a big increase in PG applications, but what that will translate to is uncertain, however we can say that we are analysing what is happening and that our information is being updated all the time.

Questions to be discussed at the Task & Finish Group

One of the things colleagues are considering for next term is online asynchronous lectures/short videos. Making these high quality requires a great amount of time and technology skills. Are there any plans to centralise this/make this easier for teaching staff?

Are we required to have a record of returning to the workplace after lockdown conversation / form completed to assist management in supporting staff to ensure each person's needs are covered and that they fully understand their duty in returning to the workplace?

Ensuring financial sustainability

Job security/recruitment

- Other universities have already announced they are opening VR schemes and restructures, is the University considering following this line?

- Other universities are asking staff to reduce their working hours. Will Brunel ask staff to go to a three or four-day week?
- Will there be a freeze on incremental and annual pay awards and are you considering pay cuts?
- Many areas are carrying significant staff vacancies and with the freeze on recruitment, many areas are under considerable pressure, particularly with their working arrangements having been changed and meeting the challenges of covid more generally. Could it be confirmed that key posts, particularly in the administrative areas, are being considered thoroughly with a view to recruiting to these vacant posts?
- All of the plans made for post-Covid delivery of teaching and other activities generate increased work yet staff recruitment is frozen. We were already 'lean' in terms of staffing. Is it fair to ask fewer people to deliver more?

These remain very difficult questions to answer because we simply don't know how things are going to shape up next year and the situation is, of course, changing all the time. But one thing we can do is to make sure we are using our money effectively and efficiently and making sure that we are making savings on our non-staff costs as well as we can. The way in which members of staff have responded to finding savings and freezing recruitment has been brilliant – we have risen to the occasion and we are saving money. And if posts are essential, we have tried to fill them internally, which is a really important approach. However, we can't say how long that must continue.

We can't guarantee that there won't be job losses, but we can reassure staff that we will do all we can to stop that from happening. Ultimately it depends on what our income looks like next year and how the Council responds to the proposals put forward. The one thing we have to keep our eye on is how much cash we have – and of course we cannot allow the University to get into the situation where we can't pay bills.

Our briefing on Monday 22 June will be led by Gemma Bailey who will be able to address some of the concerns around job security and recruitment and Helen Coleman who will give an update on student recruitment for the year ahead and its implications.

Our position on furloughing

- Is the university considering bringing furloughed staff back part-time, once allowed in July?
- Are furloughed staff being asked to take annual leave on a pro rata basis so that when they do return to work they do not have all their annual leave to take?

Our Task & Finish groups are looking at how we transition back to business as usual on campus and how we shape our offering going forward, making the best use of our resources. All of this will inform the timing and nature of people returning to work from furlough. Some colleagues have already begun to return. The flexibility of part-time furloughing is something we will look at carefully now that is an option.

Existing statutory and contractual annual leave principles continue to apply. Employees will continue to accrue holiday pay whilst on furlough. If an employee takes holiday their period of furlough would end and if the furlough has lasted less than three weeks, reimbursement will not be possible for that furlough period.

Questions to be discussed at the Task & Finish Group – we will share the answers to these as soon as we are able

Are building works going to carry on once campus is open?

Can you update on building work on campus including education on the 2nd floor of Gaskell - we were asked to clear our offices?

Other

Longer term working arrangements

- Will working from home be an option even when things go back to normal?
- Though the situation not ideal nee nightmarish, it has given the University and the business a chance to adopt virtual meetings and remote working practices which we have all used to great effect and still are achieving a high standard and frequency of output. Would you agree that we need to keep this momentum in this direction going forward?

Working flexibly is something that we will need to consider as a university, particularly as so many of you have adapted so well and so quickly to new ways of working. Although the situation changes by the day, in the short and medium term it seems that social distancing is going to become the norm and you only have to look at the way the University is populated that it is not going to be possible to have all of us on campus at one time and adhere to social distancing.

It is clear that if we are in the position where we can support more working from home then we have to make sure we all have the right long-term support to do that. We need to be confident that you have the right environment at home in which you can work. It is a really big positive that we are all finding ways of working remotely and that many people will prefer to do so – if we can make it work for members of staff and the University it's a great opportunity.

Weekly briefings

- What time will the briefings take place on Mondays?
- Could the slides be made available please?
- Can HR be involved in these Q&A sessions in the future?

- As some of the questions are related to HR issues should there be a representative from HR for the briefing?
- As well as HR Management being available for questions can we also have representatives from Health and Safety as they will have a big contribution and be able to answer a lot of concerns.

Recordings of all briefing sessions will be available and shared on the intranet along with the Q&As. Times will vary but we expect most briefings to take place somewhere between 12 and 2pm.

We will be inviting various members of the leadership team to lead these sessions in response to the questions you ask. Gemma Bailey and Helen Coleman will be joining us on Monday 22 June to address HR and student recruitment questions.