

Covid-19 All staff briefing 2 September 2020: Questions and Answers

Transitioning from lockdown

- **The number of COVID cases are slightly on the rise in the UK. Is there a risk for the university to get closed again?**
- **Of course we all hope re-opening the campus will go smoothly, but with scientists predicting a second wave in autumn/winter, what's the plan B should the UK and/or local cases rise too much?**

We need to be realistic in that the Government could change its position at any point if the number of cases rises, and we would go back into lockdown. This is something we're planning for and making sure, for example, that teaching is as flexible as it can be so that we can make changes to delivery at any point. One positive is that when we first went into lockdown we learned a lot about ourselves as a community and as how well we could all work together to support our mission and each other – going into a second lockdown would be a lot less daunting.

- **According to the news, Sage has advised that university teaching should not take place in person (i.e. we should not be doing dual delivery). Has this changed our perspective on how we will be teaching?**

Although the Independent Sage report didn't say that university teaching should not take place in person, it did make recommendations for how universities should make their campuses safe. We are aware of the report, which covers a number of areas from use of face coverings and testing on campus to face-to-face teaching. Up to this point we have been following Government and public health guidelines closely and also keeping a close eye on the approaches taken by the rest of the sector. But it's also clear that these discussions need to be had and that we consider everything in light of the needs of our own community, as we have all along.

We have, for example, made the decision to adhere to 2m social distancing on campus and to have a number of other mitigations in place as communicated through these briefings, to ensure that we aren't ever relying on one method to reduce risk. We will keep a close eye on the impact of these latest recommendations nationally and within the sector to ensure that the decisions we make continue to place the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff first.

- **Is there a virtual tour to show all the work being done and how the campus looks to reassure staff - especially for working in open plan offices?**

Yes, we will be putting together videos in the next couple of weeks highlighting to staff and students how to use the campus properly and emphasising the work that has been done to make the campus Covid secure.

- **UCU has suggested that returning to university will bring about a spike in Covid-19 - is it likely that the university will reconsider its dual delivery policy as this is proving extremely difficult to implement and meaning that it is hard to focus on the online delivery required?**

We're working really closely with UCU and our Union colleagues, and meeting on a weekly basis to discuss issues such as these. We are aware that dual delivery is a huge task, but we also believe that ensuring our students have some face-to-face teaching on campus is something that we should try to deliver if we are able. We also need to be aware that some academic teaching can't be done virtually.

The reality is that face-to-face teaching will only be done in small groups because of social distancing measures and the work that has been taking place across campus to make spaces Covid secure is significant.

- **An academic was on the radio the other day (and was in the campus newsletter) saying that social distancing isn't necessary - why are Brunel allowing themselves to be represented by someone who is going against all the hard work that is being done and against medical science?**

It is Brunel's role and responsibility to promote and support our academics in their studies and in sharing their opinions; and a fundamental function of academia is to question, discuss and debate. This doesn't mean their views represent the university position, which in this case has been to follow the guidelines set by Government and Public Health England. Specifically, that has meant adopting what many might consider to be cautious 2m social distancing restrictions to safeguard our community as far as possible.

Sessions on campus

- **I have on-site meetings booked for the 7th (with new staff) - when will we know if specific buildings ARE going to be open?**
- **Hi I'm due back to work for a 'settling back in' session on 7th September to Michael Sterling but you've just said the buildings won't be open - will my coming in on 7th be cancelled?**

There is currently a process being followed to enable individual staff members to return to campus, which requires risk assessments provided by line managers and, though it is disappointing that we can't have all of our non-residential buildings reopened as quickly as we had intended, that doesn't make the current process any less suitable. If you are unsure for any reason, please contact the Health & Safety team who will be able to assist.

- **Should all air conditioning units that serve multi-occupancy spaces be switched off to prevent the spread of Covid?**

There is a significant amount of work taking place right now looking at ventilation of rooms and the impact that might have on our work to make the campus Covid secure. Ventilation in buildings includes air handling units, which sit on top of our largest buildings, bringing in fresh air and expelling foul air. These are now being set to delivering 100% fresh air, meaning it circulates the building once before being replaced.

Smaller air conditioning units are used in buildings across campus and these are more difficult to manage. The general rule is that if these units are in a room with windows that open, and /or with mechanical ventilation i.e. ducted from the Air Handling unit, then they can still be used.

Where there is no window or mechanical ventilation in the room, then they should be turned off, except in rooms that house specialist equipment. All decisions are taken by our engineers and the complex nature of air conditioning has meant that we have to take this issue very seriously, which has also contributed to our 11-step plan being delayed. We will shortly be giving webinars to Heads of Departments and our Building Custodians focusing purely on air conditioning.

Building reopening

- **When will a list of 'ready' buildings be published?**
- **If we aren't opening on the 7th what do you see the new target date to be?**
- **Now that we are not opening on 7th and don't have an ETA. How will this effect week 0?**

It is disappointing that we can't reopen all of our non-residential buildings within the timescale we had intended, but it's also important that we are 100% clear that we are doing everything we can to make the campus Covid secure. That also means it is very difficult to give a target date – there is a lot of work to be done and these are unique circumstances – it's our first time using our 11-step process.

What we can say is that we are re-prioritising the workload, focusing on those spaces that will be used to deliver teaching and student-facing services, so that our priorities as a university aren't impacted. The most important thing is to ensure the work we are doing is thorough. We will be sharing news of reopened buildings as soon as possible with the Brunel community, via IntraBrunel, our briefings and our Covid pages for staff, accessible from the IntraBrunel homepage.

- **What about TPOs, when will they open to students?**

Our TPOs are a frontline service and so it's important that these are open and managed in time for the return of students. The schedule for the reopening of buildings doesn't determine when services such as these can be made available to students, however, through local risk assessments, managed by the Health & Safety team.

- **Brunel Gym emailed all members to say that they are opening on 7th Sep. If the main campus isn't opening on 7th Sep, could the Gym postpone their opening date? I would feel uncomfortable with the gym opening earlier than the campus, because it means the public will also come onto campus**

The gym is currently open for students living on campus, not members of the public. There are also significant parts of campus that are already being used, for example our Halls of Residence which have continued to accommodate students over the summer. This doesn't mean that those spaces represent a risk to people, but that they have been managed via a separate risk assessment process.

A lot of work has also been carried out to ensure that visitors use spaces in a responsible way, recognising where we have made changes to the environment and ensuring signage helps them understand expected behaviours while on campus.

- **Will rooms need to be cleaned between teaching? If so who is responsible for this?**
- **Also, will there be signs in the buildings to show that it has been cleaned, or due for cleaning?**

Thorough cleaning of teaching rooms and communal spaces will take place daily and key touch points will be visited and disinfected throughout the day. Disinfectant wipes will be available in all communal and teaching spaces so that students and staff can disinfect their own space as required, and materials will be replenished as needed.

We will also make available a cleaning rota online and within communal spaces so that staff and students can be assured that spaces are being regularly cleaned.

- **Will there be any restrictions to staff or students entering buildings, so as to potentially limit movement and the spread of the virus? Or will access to buildings still be fully open?**

We have a variety of methods for entering buildings across campus, which includes card and keypad entry and so there's no one policy. However, the Security team have been looking into the feasibility of different entry systems in certain areas of the campus, while balancing the need for people to have access for their roles.

- **What does the 'enhanced cleaning' consist of and how does it differentiate from what was in place before? Will staff be provided with suitable cleaning products and equipment to ensure that shared desks are safe after use?**

Our enhanced cleaning protocol means a thorough clean in the morning and then subsequent cleaning operations throughout the day, including in office and communal spaces. Sanitisers and wipes will be supplied and stationed across campus, and we will shortly be providing floorplans for buildings with the location of these stations.

Sanitisers for communal areas will be sourced and maintained centrally. We will purchase a stock of alcohol wipes which will be distributed to the identified disinfection stations before the buildings open and replenished as required throughout the day. There will also be a contact email for emergency requisitions to replenish these areas.

- **Is Brunel planning on developing a "Covid dashboard" that allows staff and students to see how many positive cases there are on campus at any one time, allowing people to be reassured and/or warned?**

This isn't something that is being planned, however we have an early warning system available and would be able to share messages and information quickly if the situation demanded it.

Supporting staff

- **Have we considered running a short CPD session for current line managers? It could be titled 'managing a team through a pandemic'.**

We haven't looked at anything specific to Covid, largely because we currently run a number of fora through which management development is supported – for example our Management Bites programme. It is very likely that future iterations of these programmes will include Covid-specific management issues. We shouldn't forget that the situation created by Covid is totally unique and so there isn't a quick fix - we're all learning as we go and doing the best we can.

- **Will we have an online compliance training module for our return to campus in a Covid secure manner? When will this be available?**

Staff development are working with Health & Safety on materials that will help members of staff understand the behaviours expected on campus, and we will be communicating that in due course. In the meantime, our Covid recovery pages are kept up to date with the latest information and Q&As from these briefings.

- **Some Universities have a no detriment principle for staff aimed at ensuring no member of staff is penalised for the effect Covid-19 has had on their performance during the pandemic. What is Brunel University London doing about this?**

We are taking a no-detriment approach, as we recognise that staff will have re-prioritised work to support the response to the pandemic. For academic staff, for example, we have reviewed the promotion form, including with our trade unions and have added a section at the beginning where staff can outline the impact the virus has had on their application. This will give them the chance to raise additional challenges and re-prioritisation of work commitments, but it is also an opportunity to recognise the good work that has been done to support Brunel, our students and research activities.

- **The HR guidance says we should try to work at home wherever possible. However, staff are being asked to complete a form about home working and to meet with Line Managers to discuss it. This feels a bit confusing but that might be my misunderstanding of something.**

The purpose of these 1-2-1 conversations is to ensure that everyone is able to work from home to the best of their abilities and where that isn't possible to consider arrangements that might help the situation. Not everything can be done from home, but we want to make sure that we are protecting those members of staff who are most at risk.

Equipment for working from home

- **As well as discussing equipment for working from home, we need equipment to work in the office as we return. We need webcams and headsets in the office to be able to take part in Teams meetings. Will these be provided where needed?**

- **How do we go about getting suitable chairs for working from home (if we can)?**

Within the risk assessments currently being completed by line managers and Building Custodians, people can stipulate how many headsets and webcams are required by staff. These are currently on order and will be provided as needed.

Chairs and desks can be ordered as part of your workstation requirements through the [IT Order Form](#).

- **Is there a way that staff in very high-risk groups can be informed 'urgently' (perhaps via text) if there is an outbreak on campus?**

We have text alert systems used by the University, so we are in a position to let people know about emergency situations quickly if they arise. This extends to our wider community too. For example, we've been working with Hillingdon Council on the potential for wider lockdowns that don't necessarily originate from an incident on campus, but that we can address through a coordinated and informed response.

- **Can those who are delivering lectures and other similar roles be issued with visors so there is a suitable barrier which lip-readers can see through?**

We aren't currently issuing visors, and face coverings within teaching spaces aren't currently mandatory. We're also confident that the measures we're putting in place will support a Covid secure environment. However, if a member of staff needs a visor – they should fill in a Risk Assessment form and a Visor can be supplied.

- **Are you expecting all members of staff to stop working from home by Christmas? My Line Manager said he thinks everyone will have to return regardless of health risks and so on.**

No, these are discussions that are currently being had within departments and teams, which has to be the case because everybody has unique circumstances to consider. It is too early to be able to say what might happen in the future, but right now we would encourage line managers to have discussions with their staff to determine working arrangements.

- **Will working parents who can no longer rely on afterschool clubs get priority to work from home where possible?**

Where possible, homeworking should be considered for staff with caring responsibilities and there is more information about this in the homeworking policy. It might also be possible for staff to vary duties temporarily to support homeworking or to vary hours of work to account for the school pick-up.

- **From these meetings and from personal experience, it's evident that Brunel has some major issues with management. It's too bad this has become more apparent when we are in the middle of a pandemic. Will Brunel address this issue at all?**

As with any issues that individual staff members might have with management, we need to be able to understand the specifics before we can address the problems. Any member of staff who has any concerns at all should talk to their line manager or HR Business Partner.

Delivering education and student support

- **Is the university planning on testing all students for covid on arrival of campus?**

Discussions are ongoing about what might be possible, but we're not currently planning on testing all students as they arrive. There are a number of factors to take into account, including the logistics of testing students and monitoring effectively.

Face coverings

- **Can we request / insist that students wear masks in labs?**
- **What happens if a student does not wear a mask or follow the rules/direction? Will they just be given a stern talking to and that's all? Will security be patrolling? if there is no punishment and enforcement then what is the point of putting this all in place?**
- **A lot of these responses put students in the right and staff in the wrong; what if we refuse to speak to a student who isn't wearing a mask? Why is it fair that we would be punished. We have families as well to look after.**

It is important to understand that face coverings are not mandatory, except in certain places such as shops, the Library and on public transport, however we do understand that this is a very emotive subject. We also need to be clear that our approach has always been to have many mitigations in place on campus, from maintaining 2m social distance restrictions to providing wipes and screens where needed, etc., so that it is never just about one measure being taken to prevent the spread of Covid.

Students and staff may also have very legitimate reasons for not wearing a face covering, such as having a disability or difficulty breathing and we would not want to discriminate against people in these circumstances.

So, we won't be enforcing the use of face coverings in the classroom, for instance, which is a controlled environment where we can have mitigating measures (enhanced cleaning, social distancing and reduced numbers) in place. Safety is paramount and this is something that our building custodians have looked at very closely, and we will continue to monitor going forward.

Our behaviours as a community are critical and, as well as adhering to the community pledge we will shortly be sharing we would encourage staff and students to have empathy and understanding, and to work together in what is a unique situation for everyone.

- **Will staff and students be given Brunel face coverings?**

Yes, Brunel will be providing all staff and students with two washable face coverings, to be used when required in shops and on public transport and if individuals want to use them at any other time.

- **Will dual delivery continue throughout the academic year? Students looking to engage wholly online are concerned about securing accommodation if asked to return to campus in T2/3.**

Yes, dual delivery will take place throughout the academic year. We will be ensuring that teaching is delivered in as flexible a way as possible.

- **I'm still quite unclear on how students arrange coming to a live session - I think a booking system was mentioned - when will this be circulated? (for example what happens if 21 people want to come to a room that seats 20)**
- **Who is going to enforce and monitor that the correct number of students attend the face-to-face lecture and respect social distancing?**
- **Are we going to try to ascertain from our students whether they intend to come to campus for face-to-face teaching?**

We want to be able to offer our students as much face to face teaching as is possible, but there are obviously challenges in providing this. We are currently looking at a potential booking system for students, and a number of departments are supporting Information Services in understanding what might be required and possible. We are working to a timeline of September 7th to ensure we have all the information we need before we can determine our approach. The idea of the system would be that students could book themselves onto a seminar, for example, until it is full.

What we have decided is that we can't use an existing system because nothing currently fits our needs, and so an alternative approach could be for timetabling to allocate students into groups based on the capacities we have, but we will have more on the direction we choose shortly.

Travel restrictions

- **With such a large number of international students coming from various countries, how are you enforcing isolation on arrival on campus?**
- **What about when students go on holiday or a quick trip to Europe. How will this be policed throughout the year?**

We have set up a booking system for students who need to quarantine on arrival, with accommodation and support available for those who need to isolate, and this has been communicated to all students.

It is difficult to monitor students who might choose to travel during the academic year, and this is another example of the need to make expectations clear to our students through the community pledge that will shortly be available.

- **Why are we still doing open days with visitors on campus?**

We won't be holding any large open days on campus in 2020 because of the social distancing measures in place, however we are inviting students to small campus tours, all the time recognising measures in place to mitigate risk.

- **Has a decision been made regarding selection days (mostly between January-April) - will we be offering these on campus?**

No, a decision hasn't been made currently, but we will need to review the situation closer to the time.

Other

- **Are you working with the Unions to help with the transition back to campus and addressing people's stress and worry levels?**

Yes, we meet with the Unions on a weekly basis – and often twice a week – to discuss the return to campus as well as dual delivery of teaching. Our union reps have been fantastic.

- **Could we potentially have some guidance or an online training session with our Brunel counselling staff or researcher specialising in counselling, on the subject of how to establish boundaries when working one to one with someone on a virtual platform? This may sound weird, but in a way I feel that we are putting ourselves in potentially vulnerable situations when we video message people who we don't really know very well, from private 'spaces'.**

There are no current plans to introduce a training session, however we can look into the possibility. Our counselling staff are always available to discuss individual concerns, and details and further support can be found on IntraBrunel.