

Covid-19 All staff briefing 22 June 2020: Questions and Answers

Transitioning from lockdown

Social distancing

- Will Brunel be working on the 1 metre safe distancing rule rather than the 2 metre rule as it is very likely to change very soon.
- Given that social distancing rules are going to ease more to 1 meter distance, is it more likely now for us to get back to the campus? This should also increase our capacity to accommodate more students in classrooms.
- Open plan offices - what is being done to keep the social distance requirements?
- The 2-metre rule will be reduced to 1 metre very soon as reported by the news. Several research has shown 1 metre is not very effective. Whilst I understand the uni will be going by the government's advice, I have concerns about the reduction of the rule and how it leaves us more vulnerable.

We know that an announcement has been made very recently about this issue and so it will be important over the next few days to look at what the new rules mean for us and how we go about planning for them.

When we looked at teaching space on campus, we did an analysis based on 2m and 1m social distancing so we are planning for all eventualities. This has to be the case because we also know that social distancing measures could change in the future depending on government guidance at the time. We will follow that guidance closely, but we will also place an absolute priority on the safety and wellbeing of staff, students and visitors to the campus.

Safety on campus

- **Regardless of government policy, given what we know about the potential for masks to reduce the risk of exposure shouldn't students be required to wear masks inside classrooms?**

The government guidance on face coverings is that it is not compulsory but that it should be down to individual consideration. Though we would welcome students and staff to use their own face coverings on campus it isn't something we would enforce. We are, however, considering the safety of our teaching and office spaces very carefully, and will be updating staff about the work that is currently taking place on these issues at next week's briefing.

- **Will Brunel be paying for washable or disposable face coverings and any other relevant PPE for those staff that come in contact with large amounts of staff and students for their jobs?**

The use of face coverings is something that has been looked at closely by the task and finish group responsible, which is considering the best way of providing face coverings where staff require them, but that would depend on the nature of the job. Individuals can also choose to wear face coverings that they provide themselves.

- **Please can the University install some transparent plastic screens for departments that have a front desk where students normally visit with queries? E.g. TPO reception, Language Centre reception, etc.**

The team are looking at the need for all of these kind of measures and we will be sharing more about changes to the campus for our own safety at next week's briefing.

- **How will staff who rely on public transport be supported when they return to work on campus?**

Current government guidelines on using public transport can be found [here](#). It is currently the law that people using public transport must wear an adequate face covering to reduce the spread of the virus so we would encourage all staff to familiarise themselves with this information, which also has advice on how to make your own face covering. In line with current government guidance we won't be making face coverings on campus compulsory, however we would encourage staff to bring their own if they want to.

Staff are encouraged to speak with their line manager if they have concerns about using public transport as it might be possible to accommodate a change in start and finish times to avoid traveling at peak periods.

- **Will there be hand sanitisers at the entrance of every building? Will testing be available for students and staff? Will disposable masks be provided for students and staff?**

On masks, we are guided by the government, and at the moment it's not compulsory. That said if people want to use coverings they can. Having hand sanitisers across the campus is something we are looking at very closely and we will be updating staff on some of the changes being made to campus at next week's briefing.

- **What about BAME staff please?**

We know that Covid-19 has a disproportionate impact on BAME people and Brunel's community is incredibly diverse. At the moment there are no government guidelines on

this but it is a vitally important consideration and our aim is to ensure that our plans and preparations meet the highest standards required and protect BAME staff and students. Similar to advice issued to NHS employers, we will undertake risk assessments for staff from BAME backgrounds and make appropriate arrangements accordingly.

The HR and H&S teams are meeting with the BAME network next week to listen to their concerns and explore what measures can be taken to ensure they feel protected. This is also an area that we are discussing with the trade unions during our regular consultation meetings.

Returning to campus

- **Other universities are carrying out surveys to see whether staff are comfortable coming back in January – will we be doing the same?**

Yes, the task and finish group that Gemma Bailey is chairing looking at organisational change will be looking at a staff survey.

- **I have several items in my desk that would help me with my work from home. Would it be possible to come in under security supervision to collect them?**

All visits to campus (eg to collect belongings/files/equipment) must be approved by your Head of Department using the relevant approval process:

- Access to campus for research activities
- Access to campus for Professional Services and Administrative staff

Please visit the Health and Safety website for the [application process to attend campus](#).

Re-opening campus buildings

- **Do you know any more on when the University will start to open, especially the Library?**

We have a schedule for getting buildings ready and the library is one to consider carefully because of the potential need for students to study during the exam period. It's an area we're looking at closely and we will be sharing more about our plans to reopen the campus at our briefing next week.

- **For PGR students in particular, it is important to know that they will be able to access labs / workshops for their projects. Is there an update on access to research labs and facilities?**

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.

In the meantime, we are asking all work on campus to be approved by your Head of Department using the relevant approval process below:

- Access to campus for [research activities](#)
- Access to campus for [Professional Services and Administrative staff](#)

Questions for the Task & Finish Group:

Will our students be paced into bubbles, living and studying together in small groups and minimising contact outside these groups?

Supporting staff

Annual leave

- **Will the number of holiday days staff will be allowed to carry forward to next year be increased from 5 due to Covid-19?**

We know that going on holiday isn't something that everyone wants to or is able to do right now, though that may change soon with a lessening of restrictions. However, we would encourage staff to continue to take leave because it is really important for your health and wellbeing and particularly as the difference between work life and home life become less well defined.

We have, however, already taken the decision to allow staff to carry forward 10 days of leave this year, which we hope will give some flexibility if it is needed.

- **Is there a possibility that staff who have carer responsibilities could have extra annual leave even if it's at reduced pay? Some other companies have offered this to their staff who have children etc.**

We are working on a new scheme that would provide the opportunity to purchase additional annual leave. More information will be available shortly. Staff may also want to consider parental leave, further details are available [here](#).

- **If we go abroad on annual leave, will the 14 day quarantine be incorporated into HR policy?**

This is an example of one where we'll have to wait and see whether or not we will need to quarantine. As it stands, we still have a policy on non-essential travel and so we wouldn't want staff going abroad and coming back, and putting other staff at risk. But it is something we're looking at and it could be that if you can work from home we can take a balanced approach, allowing staff to take some of the 14 days from annual leave and some working from home.

- **Can staff have an option to be paid for unused holiday instead of getting the extra days to be carried over as this could impact on services being offered to students next year.**

We are not looking to introduce the ability for staff to be paid for their outstanding leave. It is important that staff take breaks from work for their health and wellbeing, even if it is not possible to go away on holiday. We appreciate staff are working hard and

that it may not be possible to take all your holiday this year, which is why we have increased the amount of annual leave that can be carried over into the next leave year from 5 to 10 days.

Line management

- **How do we encourage line managers to have discussions with their teams about their mental health and wellbeing?**
- **What training is available to line managers who are expected to be the gatekeepers of the mental health of their teams, this is difficult at the best of times, but even more challenging when working remotely?**

The role of a leader and a manager is really important in ensuring good mental health. The way you're treated by your line manager makes a massive difference to your mental wellbeing but a manager also has a gatekeeper role and it's key to being able to spot changes in mood and behaviour within your team. It really comes down to having a culture of openness, where managers ask staff how are you, having 1-2-1 chats and noticing when staff aren't in a good place. If individuals don't feel able to approach their line manager then you can go to your HR business partner and speak to people in confidence.

- **Who is looking after the line managers?**

All of us have a line manager and that means the onus is on all of us to be talking to our teams and making sure they have the support they need, while recognising if staff are having difficulties in what is an anxious time for everyone.

Working from home

- **Is the University considering amending contracts of employment to enable people to work from home, as long as they are able to do so without a negative impact on their work?**

We wouldn't necessarily look at changing employment contracts, but there is definitely the need for us to get the right balance between some working from home and some working on campus because in order to maintain social distancing we simply aren't going to all be able to go back to campus at the same time. We are currently updating our framework to support effective working from home and that is around making sure

people can work safely and have access to the right equipment.

- **Are pregnant staff considered vulnerable and will they be allowed to continue to work from home?**

The situation is changing all the time and our first responsibility to staff and students is to follow the government's guidelines. As it stands, pregnant staff are not required to shield unless they also have a heart condition.

Pregnancy is a condition that the NHS list as 'moderately vulnerable' and while shielding is not required, staff should work from home where possible. Staff and their line managers should explore if additional support and flexibility can help with making working from home possible. However, if attendance on campus is required, a full risk assessment must be undertaken by the manager and the individual together in advance so that appropriate support and risk controls can be put in place.

Equipment for working from home

- **Some companies are paying their employees for using their own laptops, electricity, broadband and so on...is Brunel going to consider this for their staff?**
- **If you need/ can work from home but have no internet will Brunel help with costs of installation?**
- **In the last briefing, it was noted that we should be speaking to our line managers about equipment for a working from home set up and borrow equipment. But, as you have mentioned today, we all had to work from home very quickly and I have neck and back problems and no car so I ended up having to purchase a lot of equipment. Are we going to be offered some money (over what the gov does) to cover some of the costs that I'm sure many of us had to cover to work from home over the past three months?**

At the moment we're not offering this as the current arrangements are temporary. There are also considerations around tax. For example, if a staff member needed a printer it would be a taxable benefit if it was used for home and work activities. Equipment needed to undertake work effectively from home can often be sourced from (and returned to) the university, such as IT equipment, chairs and desks. Please speak to your line manager if you need assistance.

While we are not provided financial support for utilities and broadband, staff can approach HMRC directly and apply for tax relief associated with working from home. Further details can be found [here](#).

We are currently updating our framework to support effective working from home and that is around making sure people can work safely and have access to the right equipment. We will have more information about that soon.

- **Does the university provide equipment such as desk chairs, tables, keyboards etc for staff that are working from home?**
- **A lot of staff are still using their own laptops and computer equipment, with single screens (when they are used to having 2 screens etc). Are there any plans to roll out better computer equipment and perhaps more importantly, office chairs, to maximise productivity and also look after staff working conditions at home?**

The best guidance currently is to seek support from your department via your line manager. Equipment needed to undertake work effectively from home can often be sourced from (and returned to) the university, such as IT equipment, chairs and desks. Please speak to your line manager if you need assistance.

The IT team has worked very quickly to ensure that laptops are made available for staff, but 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. The HR team are currently developing a new working from home framework, which includes the need to ensure staff working from home are able to do so safely and effectively. We will have more information about that soon.

In the meantime, 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.

Delivering education and student support

Dual delivery

- **When can we expect to have more details of how the dual delivery will work for individual programmes?**
- **As we were told in last week's briefing that departments will need to prioritise which sort of modules should be taught in-class, will we get some guidance on how to prioritise?**

Departments are working to build a picture of what the programme delivery will look like, when activities will take place, and whether these are online or on-campus. As of last week, we have information about which modules are being delivered next academic year, which is a starting point for timetabling. Given the reduced room capacity, the programme team will need to decide which aspects of the programme requires on-campus teaching, and how this can best be done (how many groups are required, etc.); and which on-campus activities gives the greatest added value to the student experience. We will have to provide more detailed information about their programme delivery to students by the end of July, and so the work that is currently happening is very important.

Departments received support through our [Framework and guide](#) to getting started, and feedback from academic staff is being collected by the Vice Deans Education and regularly shared with the Task & Finish Group for educational delivery. There is also a dedicated Teams site set up for academic staff to engage with each other and the T&FG.

- **Are there plans to extend the teaching timetable into evenings and weekends?**

No, there aren't currently any plans to extend the teaching timetable, not least because our students often have commitments outside of their university work. Dual delivery does, however, afford a level of flexibility that isn't possible in a solely physical teaching environment and departments are being asked to use all avenues available to them.

- **There is a lot of strategising around student recruitment, but less clarity on planning for students once they arrive - particularly international postgrads. What is being planned, to reassure candidates, in light of the situation?**

The task and finish groups concerned with the transition back to campus and our educational delivery are looking closely at the student experience as part of their role, ensuring that students' safety and wellbeing is our absolute priority. We will continue to share updates from that work with staff and students.

So far we have shared with students an overview of what our offer will look like in September through our website, and are communicating directly to specific groups, including PG students. So far much of what we can say is about reassuring students that we are open for business, and that we're making their safety and education our priority, but these messages will become more specific and more targeted as we progress.

Clearing

- **Have you got enough staff to 'man' the phone lines during Clearing?**

- **If part time staff volunteer for clearing can they adjust their working weeks so that their working days fall on the Thursday and Friday. Also, can staff have a day's holiday in lieu if they work over the weekend during clearing?**
- **Can people who do not currently work for Brunel volunteer for clearing? My son is unemployed and would like to help**

As always, the Brunel community has been extremely generous with its time and we will certainly be able to deliver a working Clearing call centre, however we can never have too many volunteers and if staff are able to help they should contact Shanice Tiryaki in the first instance at Shanice.tiryaki@brunel.ac.uk. That goes for non-staff volunteers too.

It will be up to departments on the level of support they can give staff who would like to volunteer for Clearing, but staff should also bear in mind that even if they can only spare half a day that it is very much appreciated and could make all the difference in recruiting the students we need to support the long-term future of the university.

Ensuring financial sustainability

Recruitment freeze

- **A lot of areas in the University administration are carrying staff vacancies. Whilst I understand the need to have frozen recruitment of staff, could you please assure us that each vacancy is being considered carefully and the impact on the existing staff of additional workload is being considered?**

We've developed an extensive form that Heads of Department need to complete when requesting to recruit to a position. One of the questions asks what the impact will be on existing staff workload and wellbeing if that post isn't filled. If a role is absolutely critical and it can't be filled any other way then it is approved. There are several cases we've looked at a number of times, which shows the level of detail we are going into on such an important issue.

- **Dual delivery requires more not less staff and equipment resource. How will that be funded with less students?**

This comes back to not overloading staff and seeing what we can reprioritise and what we can pause. Each department is going to have to be very honest with itself and to take the same approach to ensure that essential tasks can be carried out.

- **Do pay freezes include our contracted pay scales?**

There are two elements of pay freezes. The first is the cost of living award, which is negotiated at a national level. This is out of our control to some extent. Early indications are that a pay freeze is being considered for 2020/21.

The second freeze is on increment progression, which is a contractual requirement. A freeze on incremental progression would be subject to collective consultation and negotiation with the trade unions. It's a step we wouldn't take lightly and would only do so if it was necessary to minimise job losses. We're not there yet but it's on the list of things that we may need to look at.

- **Implementing a pay freeze in the context of a freeze on staff recruitment would be tough for existing staff, who are all working extremely hard to help the University continue to run, sometimes with a smaller number of staff in some units. I assume this will be taken into account by negotiation with trade unions?**

Absolutely, and if there is a pay freeze it would be temporary. As soon as we can return to what salaries should be then we would do so. It's not something that we would want to do and we understand that staff are working really hard at the minute and that we need to reprioritise our workload so that staff aren't overloaded.

- **Can the University legally force someone to take a pay cut?**

Legally, there is an avenue called 'dismissal and re-engagement' but this is quite a severe thing to do and it is not something any employer would want to do. Our approach is to consult extensively with the unions and staff and to be clear on the financial cases for seeking to reduce pay. What's important is that staff understand the strong business reasons for doing something like that, which would have to be to save jobs. A mandatory pay cut would only be pursued if absolutely necessary to safeguard jobs.

Job security

- **I am still in my first year probation, should I be worried for my job?**
- **Does Brunel have plans for voluntary redundancies?**

Being on probation would not be taken into consideration if we were in a position of considering redundancies. Brunel would not follow a 'last in first out' approach that you may have seen elsewhere.

Brunel doesn't have any plans for redundancies at the moment, but we can't say never because we can't say what our student numbers are going to be.

Furloughing

- **Are staff still being furloughed?**
- **Will the university be extending the furlough scheme?**
- **I heard that the government contribution to salary for furloughed staff is going to be reduced to 60%? if this is the case, will the University be topping up salary for furloughed staff by 40%?**

Under the new scheme that is effective from 1 July, no additional staff can be furloughed. Therefore, if you have not already been furloughed, we would not seek to furlough you now.

The scheme is due to end in October. We are continuing to pay staff who are furloughed at 100% of pay.

Optimising the academic portfolio

- **Have we considered offering more adult learning courses to backfill the shortfall in income due to drops in other student numbers?**

More online provision, particularly for adult learning, will be key in our future plans. One of the things that universities will be asked to do more of is to see how we can support the adult population in upskilling as roles in the workplace change rapidly. A lot of that provision will have to be online in order to help people fit learning into the rest of their busy lives. More generally, we have to think flexibly about the way we deliver learning, not just in the next academic year but in the future, and these are considerations we will need to make as we develop our contingency plans.

Other

Parking

- **We still do not know when we will return to the office and we still pay for parking. Is this to continue?**
- **Will we get a refund on parking for all the months we have not been at work?**

We have been unable to give staff a refund on their parking, partly because of how the system works but also because some staff are still on campus or attending campus on an ad-hoc basis and so we don't know who needs to park on site and who doesn't. On the basis

that working from home is temporary we have continued with parking, however staff who want to cancel their permits can do that online through reception, but must remember to reapply when they return.