Information for postgraduate taught students in the academic year 2020/21

Hello,

We hope you have been enjoying your summer.

Over the last few weeks, you will have heard much from our student communications team about your education and experience at Bristol in the Autumn term. The most up to date information can be found on our Student Experience and Study in 2020/21 web pages.

In particular, note the guidance you have received about safety, collecting your PPE, studying online and ensuring you have sufficient IT provision to fully engage in the coming year (You will have these links in University mails, but I have pasted some of the most crucial ones at the end of this message).

No matter what degree you are doing, you will find the School of Earth Sciences to be a relatively small but world-leading department that excels because of a strong sense of community. Despite the unusual nature of your education (for at least a few months), we are very excited to welcome you to that community.

A warm welcome to the School of Earth Sciences

The School has been very quiet and empty without any students for many months now. We miss that, and we are more than ready to welcome you and returning students.

Our primary obligation, therefore, is to make sure that your lives are not any more disrupted than they already have been, that you are able to get on with your education and move forward. In short, we are committed to ensuring you have a safe and high-quality education. In some respects, you will benefit from the new skills we learned over the summer; at other times, it will be imperfect as we settle into new ways of teaching and learning. We are keen to work with you over the coming months, not only to give you the best possible education but also to learn what is effective (or not) and to facilitate our return to normal teaching as soon as possible. We can teach a lot online – and we will retain some things we have learned – but the Earth Sciences thrives best in the field and in the lab. And our community is happiest when we share our lecture rooms and corridors!

As for that online learning, we have been working hard since the Spring to redesign our taught programmes to best enable them to be delivered in a blended manner with a combination of pre-recorded lectures and live online sessions. We will also deliver in person teaching amidst the online offering. Finding safe physical space that is Covid secure for in-person teaching has proven to be quite a challenge under 1m+ let alone 2m social distancing rules. We are luckier than most schools in that we have some large laboratories that will enable us to teach you face-to-face as often as we can (more on that below). We are confident that as long as further restrictions are not imposed that we shall be able to welcome you into our territory to teach you and to enable you to feel part of our Earth Sciences family. We’ll give you a lot more information about that in the coming weeks. (NOTE: Some of our international students will be learning online only in the Autumn and I discuss that at the end of this letter).

We hope that the current difficult situation will not detract from your excitement at starting a new degree. It will not be what you’ve been used to as a student, but the plans and structures in place should result in different but equally rewarding times for you.

Academic and Administrative support

The wellbeing and happiness of our students is always of paramount importance and the School has a Senior Tutor for postgraduate students, Dr Kate Hendry. Kate has written a short message to you which you can find on the new students’ webpage.

Our amazing administrative team is also a great source of support. Normally, they also have an open-door policy, but as with your academic teachers that has to be restricted. They will be available to answer questions and you can schedule meetings with them (earth-enquiries@bristol.ac.uk). They are: Hannah Silvester who sits at our reception desk in the School Office and will be able to answer administrative queries or direct you to
someone who can; Daniel Rydval is the Postgraduate Student Administrator; Karen Spencer is the Student Administration Manager; and Jane Coles is the School Manager. Sue Amesbury, Sarah Lawrence, Julia Davidson and Siân Jones are also vital members of the team and always happy to answer questions but have less postgraduate (PG)-facing roles. Do get to know them when the conditions allow as they also are a vital part of our community!

Teaching spaces and safety
As mentioned above, we hope to be able to welcome you into our teaching labs from the outset. All our teaching labs have been laid out to achieve maximum spacing and safety. You will see Perspex screens between benches in some places and Perspex barriers to protect yourselves and lecturers when you approach to ask questions. We will ask you to wear face coverings and visors when in the building, with the specific requirements being dependent on the capacity of the room. However, pay close attention to the advice of your individual lecturers as they may invoke some extra conditions due to their own personal health situation. We will issue you with instructions about where and when to enter and leave buildings shortly. Watch your university e-mail account for details of changes to routes, timetables and interactions.

Unfortunately, our social spaces will not be open until the risk of Covid-19 infection falls. Consequently, the best overall policy for both students and staff is to only come into the building when you need to and to use online communication at other times. We hope to make more and more space available to everyone as the term progresses.

It is crucially important that you follow instructions to the letter and that you never congregate in tight groups in the building. This not only keeps you safe, but it minimizes the chances of a shut down, allowing us to offer the best possible educational experience. Having said that, students from other Schools use some rooms in our building and they will likely contribute to congestion; the University is striving to minimize this and all of your lecturers are well informed that students might be running late to practicals. There is more safety-related information on the new students’ webpage.

Be careful, stay safe and recognise that things might be somewhat imperfect as the University identifies and deals with these issues. For more information, please view our campus safety guidance.

Your digital induction
On the 28 September, you will receive information about digital induction materials to help you in your return to study. On the 5th October there will be a programme induction, more details about this will be circulated nearer the time.

Closing Thoughts:
I have mentioned community a lot in this message. It is genuine. I have been in a lot of other institutions and other Schools and the community we have here, between all staff and students, is unparalleled. But it will be hard to maintain in online learning environments and when conducting practicals in masks and face guards.

So the most important thing to ensure we have strong community during these unusual times is to communicate. Our current students know this – but you can e-mail all of us any time. You certainly should stay in touch with your programme director and your lecturers, but you can also contact Kate or me. Do not be shy! Talk to us if you feel that something is not right or not working.

The corollary is that we need you to be on top of your communications. You need to check your University e-mail… a lot. At least every day, probably more.

Unfortunately, there will be some messages that appear to be contradictory as the University mails you general guidance, Mary Benton (the Director of Teaching) and I mail School-specific guidance, and your Programme and
Unit Directors mail you the specific instructions for your lectures. These issues arise when some messages are general and some are specific. For example, the University has ensured everyone will have some face to face teaching; we will tell you that we are generally delivering that via our practical sessions; but your Unit Director or Lecturer might explain that a specific upcoming practical is online.

If there are apparently contradictory messages, prioritise School mails over the coming weeks; and when classes start, prioritise the messages from your lecturers!

Finally, we are going to have to be very understanding of one another. The situation is complicated for all of us – no matter how much preparation we have done, we cannot anticipate every possible situation. The same will apply to you. I have asked staff to be very understanding and ask that you do the same as we do our best to deliver you a fantastic experience under very challenging circumstances.

All the Best,
Rich

Rich Pancost, Head of School

As mentioned above, the following are some of the most important links from your University communications, including notes for international students studying online and School-specific guidance on picking up your starting material!

Safety: The University is providing you PPE; you can book a slot here to pick it up. Through the year, we will be relying on you to let us know if you are experiencing coronavirus symptoms as soon as possible. Bookmark this form today and use it if necessary, helping to keep everyone safe. Testing is also very important. We have a Public Health England testing centre in the Victoria Rooms car park. This is available to students, staff and members of the public, and is part of our efforts to support the local public health team with their testing system. You can book a test online.

Ensuring you have sufficient IT to participate fully in online learning: If you need help buying laptops or other IT equipment for you to engage with blended learning, the Student Funding Office is offering financial support to students in need. We’ve also got lots of other IT advice for you to help you get the best from your studies.

Studying only online: While we are looking forward to seeing you in Bristol from 19th October, we know that some of our international students will not be able to make it to Bristol. Some of you have told us about this, but you must formally alert the University so that both the University and the School can support you appropriately. You can tell the University using our new Location of Study form and tell us by emailing your programme director. Crucially, you will be expected to fully participate in the Autumn Term, by taking part in all of the online provision. For the face to face teaching you miss, we will either offer alternative teaching during the Autumn term or make up teaching when you arrive in the Spring.

Further important information

This message includes updates for students planning to attend university in October 2020. We have made every effort to ensure all details are correct at the time of sending (September 2020). However, since this information is subject to change, you are advised to check the University's Unit and Programmes Catalogue for the latest course updates and advice pages for all other updates. Unit teaching and assessment details, and other information contained within this email, is indicative and may be altered due to changes imposed due to the current coronavirus.