



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

22nd October 2020

A personal update on Covid-19 and University life

To: all on-campus students

Hi all,

In amongst all of the 'big message' emails I wanted to find a way to reach out to give you a sense of what is going on in the University more broadly. I thought it might be good for you to hear a little more and maybe give you a more personal perspective from me, but also from other University colleagues from time to time. I have met quite a bunch of you - including in person which was amazing - and again everyone I spoke to liked the idea of hearing more about what's going on. So we will try to do this weekly - let me know what you think!

This one might be a bit longer as it's the first...

Everyone is working really hard dealing with this incredible and complex period - you as students and all of us as staff. Many of you have heard me say that we won't get it right all the time, but if we keep talking we will get it more right than wrong. What I really enjoy most is hearing little things about how the year is going. For example, my favourite bit of trivia was how of the millions of downloaded lecture materials (something like 12 million minutes of lecture content was downloaded in the first teaching week which is amazing!), most of it was watched at fast-speed and the most common speed being 1.5x. That must make for some interesting viewing!

I also had a great visit to Pollock Halls during one of the early weekends of term, and met some of you and the great team managing everything. I am sorry to say we have had some serious breaches of our normal good standards of behaviour this week, and we have had to take quite serious action to make sure that the majority, who are very understanding of the restrictions we are all living with, feel safe and secure. I know you may see the Accommodation, Catering and Events team as 'fun police' sometimes, but they have been working like crazy for over six months to be ready to welcome you back. Whatever challenges you may be experiencing, please don't take them out on the team - but do say hi, chat (socially distanced!) and bring up problems. They are on your side and they are working to deliver for you. I am going to arrange to visit again soon, hopefully for a 'town hall' meeting in person as opposed to online.

We are still worried greatly for those of you who are finding the stresses of pandemic life overbearing. If there is one thing that keeps me awake at night, it is that concern, that somewhere a student is having real trouble and is not reaching out and we are not finding them. Please do look out for each other. Ask if you are concerned about someone - check they are ok. And don't think that a problem is not worthy of raising with one of the team - either your own problems or when you see others struggling. Please don't assume that the solution for someone feeling alone and concerned may be to invite them to a party or big gathering. That may be the thing that they fear the most, due to the risk that this brings. Since we will be together in this University for quite some time - at least a year, maybe four, maybe more - we need to respect each other.

As said at the start of the semester, partying and breaking rules is something we can't accept. Some of this is about the rules we are all under and as citizens we must respect these. Some of it though is about being good people. Most students are playing their part – so thank you for helping to keep our community safe. But I see reports every day from the residence team that really make me worry. Some behaviour is just not on. It might seem fun, but people go to work every day, 24/7, to look after you – please do not make their lives harder. For more information about our expectations of you, please read our [Good Citizen Guide](#).

My other 'up at night' issue is that we get to a point where someone is just coming out of isolation and - boom - they go back. Right now, there is no alternative to this happening unfortunately - public health guidelines make this a requirement. We are looking at every option - but let me be clear that 'herd immunity' is not one of the options. You might think that this is true - and indeed immunity may come from having had Covid-19 - but we don't know that, so we need to protect our community. By not being reckless we can break the cycle of isolation and avoid catching it. And if you have it, you can prevent giving it to someone else in your building and we can all get on with life being as free as it can be.

The University is here to support you if you have to self-isolate, so [please do let us know](#).

What is going on now for the University?

Well, as I am writing we are trying to figure out the implications of new government guidance. We are coming out of a reset in Scotland, and there are all of the discussions going on around restrictions in England, and Wales has locked down. What is great is that the Governments in all the UK nations have been committed to education and we will keep going as planned. We are also talking a lot about Christmas and returning in January for Semester 2 - something I plan to talk about in my next update.

I have had a lot of meetings with student groups including some which have been very critical of the University - constructive and supportive but critical. That is exactly as it should be in a University - we value that. Much of the focus has been on working to ramp up the activity both in-person and digital that is 'synchronous' - in real time. The difficulty here - and I will use the 'community' word again - is that we have a lot of students who can't get here, particularly those overseas in different time zones - so 'live' teaching can be a challenge to these students who are stuck in this way unless they want to be up at 3am listening to an Economics lecture... and at normal speed too! Whatever the challenges, we are talking a lot to Heads of School and others, and Professor Tina Harrison (Assistant Principal) has been doing a lot of work on this topic. Semester 2 plans are critical, but we are already working on plans for the 2021/2022 academic year!!

Let me finish by saying two last things. Thank you. Thanks for listening to us, and for being great members of our community at the University. We've had bumpy starts, changing advice, and us getting some things wrong. But we move forwards, and that is important to me and to all of us in the University.

Take care - and keep in touch.

Colm

Professor Colm Harmon
Vice Principal Students