



A Message to Somerville Parents – 29th September 2020

Dear parents, guardians and soon-to-be friends,

I know that right now, following the reports of rising cases and lockdowns at other universities, you will be feeling anxious about sending your son or daughter to join us for Michaelmas 2020. That's why I wanted to take this opportunity to write to you directly and reassure you that, both as a college and university, we have plans in place for every possible contingency this term.

We are, of course, concerned by the news about the spread of the virus and the situation in other universities. However, we are monitoring the situation very closely and we are also fortunate that we can learn from the experience of others whose term started earlier. In line with the latest government advice, therefore, we are continuing to invite students to return to Oxford. We want this to happen not merely so they can access the full range of online and in-person teaching that we are offering, but also so they can experience the real Oxford as much as possible. There really is nothing quite like it.

To reassure you as to the robustness of our plans, I have asked your son or daughter to pass on some guidance about what they will have to do in the event that they need to self-isolate, either because they are suspected or confirmed as positive for COVID-19 or because they are part of a household in self-isolation. I will also talk you through some of our other planning, if I may.

The first point to make regards testing. I am acutely conscious that going for a test might seem daunting to a young person. However, there is a simple process to follow for both students and staff allowing them to take advantage of the University's testing service, the Early Alert Service. There is guidance about this on our website, and students can also contact me or one of my colleagues at any time if they need advice about testing. If they request a test, either Andrew Parker (The College Treasurer and Domestic Bursar) or I will be informed by the testing service and we can immediately put some support measures in place for the student and for their household which would have to self-isolate.

Hopefully, the test will be negative, in which case the self-isolation would end. However, in the event that a test is positive, we also have plans in place for that occurrence. Assuming the test is positive, the student in question will self-isolate for 10 days and the rest of the household for 14 days. During that time, food will be delivered to their rooms, our welfare officer and others will keep a regular check on them, teaching will continue online and the JCR will make sure everyone's spirits remain high through online social events. Students can also opt to receive a delivery of library books and/or DVDs through the extension of the 'click and collect' system.

The mental health of students is uppermost in my mind at this time, and I want to reassure you that we will do everything in our power to ensure that not only are the wellbeing needs of our students, met, but that we take pre-emptive action to ensure they have a successful and enjoyable term. Somerville is a friendly and close-knit community, and we must support each other more than ever now.

Another of our key priorities, of course, is to minimise the number of cases of COVID-19 at all times. I strongly believe that our collegiate system will be of enormous benefit here, because we do not have huge halls of residence and we can constantly encourage responsible behaviour including the wearing of face coverings in shared indoor spaces (with the exception of households), as well as



social distancing of 2 metres and the frequent washing of hands. We have sanitising gel all over College and also signage to remind the whole community what to do.

We are acutely aware of our responsibility as a College to keep our students safe, but they also have a responsibility to respect the rules that have been carefully thought through for everyone's benefit. There will, therefore, be a series of sanctions which can be imposed if necessary. All students are required to sign up to the student responsibility agreement (a copy of which was attached to my original email to your son or daughter) which is focused not just on the wellbeing of students and staff of the College and University but also the wider community. Naturally there is some apprehension amongst the citizens of Oxford about the impacts of students returning, but we are maintaining a close relationship with the City in order to reassure them as far as we can.

We understand the importance of in-person tutorials, the cornerstone of an Oxford education, and in most instances these will continue alongside online teaching. Our library has reopened, though with fewer spaces to study than usual due to social distancing, and we will be providing other spaces where students can study together in the evenings. Social distancing is a key part of our safety measures and is the best way to minimise the transmission of the virus. That is why tutorials will be socially distanced as well as our eating arrangements in the dining room.

One last point to consider is social life. Students' social lives will not, for obvious reasons, be as they might have anticipated in a pre-COVID world. But we are still determined to make the experience of students as varied and interesting as we can. Our JCR is wonderful, full of ideas and initiatives for both remote and in-person activities. There will be music, drama and sport as well as other clubs and societies. Across the Collegiate University we are doing whatever we can to ensure some parity of experience, but to a great extent this is influenced by the size and shape of Colleges. The vast majority of Colleges have agreed not to allow visitors by day or by night.

The planning has been complex and meticulous but, like every other individual and organisation, we are subject to government guidance and the spread of the virus. We therefore have to be adaptable and prepared to change our plans when necessary. Communication will be extremely important and we will provide regular updates to our students and on the '[COVID-19 Hub](#)' of our website, which we do encourage you to visit.

I hope that you find this information answers some of your concerns. If you or your son or daughter are still concerned about returning, I would encourage you to speak to us. Finally, if your son or daughter is not able to return to university for the start of term due to health reasons, then do please encourage them to speak with us about obtaining a residency exemption.

The challenges will be great but I can assure you that we will do our utmost to keep our students safe and their mental and physical health will be at the centre of all of our decisions.

Warm regards

Jan Royall
Principal
Somerville College

