

Important update on coronavirus (COVID-19) – updated government advice

Dear students,

I am writing to update you with the latest information and advice relating to the current outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) following the government's announcement yesterday. Please see below for detailed guidance on:

- updated government advice on self-isolation
- updated teaching arrangements for those who need to self-isolate
- cancellation of non-critical and high-risk events
- possible changes to Support Centre arrangements
- travel over the Easter period.

In yesterday's government announcement regarding coronavirus, the Prime Minister made clear that the government response is based on the best available scientific advice and emphasised the need for decisions based on the long-term nature of this outbreak.

The University response will continue to be guided by the government position. Some private and public institutions have begun to take decisions that go beyond this. The University's Major Incident Team, led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, has confirmed this morning that we will continue to operate our core business as normal, including in-person teaching and activities, and continue to keep this situation under review. However, given the expanded self-isolation advice from government, from Monday materials will be made available online for those who need it. There is more information on this below.

I recognise that there will be those who disagree with this approach of continuing to operate as normal. I can assure you that our decision-making has focused on the short and longer term wellbeing of our community and has taken account of a wide range of perspectives. This outbreak will continue beyond the two weeks left of the current term. If we make sweeping changes now, out of proportion to government advice on the current risk in the UK, we will need to sustain these for several months. Such immense disruption to critical activity like exams and graduation, and the teaching required to achieve these, cannot be undertaken lightly given the potentially detrimental implication for all our students. We are, nevertheless, developing contingency plans for various scenarios for the rest of the academic year, which are dependent on the situation and up-to-date government advice. Please be assured that we are working very hard to ensure that your academic progress/attainment is not compromised.

We should all continue with the recommended hygiene precautions: regular handwashing with soap and water, avoiding touching your face, and coughing and sneezing into a tissue and disposing of it as soon as possible. Please consider our cleaning colleagues, who are facing an increased burden at the moment. For obvious health reasons, they will not dispose of tissues or masks that have not been disposed of responsibly in a bin.

I completely understand that, as the situation escalates and public concern increases, you may be worried. My best advice is to focus on factual information rather than what is being said on social media or other commentaries. Remember that most people who are infected experience a mild form of COVID-19. If you are concerned about a health condition that may make you more vulnerable, please use the [online NHS coronavirus service](#).

It is more important than ever that we support each other as a community and take time to check on each other's wellbeing.

Best wishes,
Patricia

Dr Patricia Woodman
Director of Student Services

Updated government advice on self-isolation

The main change in government advice relevant to our community relates to self-isolation, which now covers anyone with a new persistent cough or high temperature. Please check the [government website](#) for the latest guidance.

This is in addition to Foreign & Commonwealth Office travel advice, which is being regularly updated and now includes advice against non-essential travel to [Madrid and other areas of Spain](#). We will contact students on placement in affected areas directly with updated information and advice.

Although likely to be a mild infection for many people, for those with underlying health conditions it could potentially be serious. For the protection of our whole community, on campus and beyond, it is our expectation that all our students will abide by this updated guidance. The government has also issued updated [practical advice](#) for managing self-isolation.

If you are able to do so, we recommend that you return home if you can, avoiding public transport wherever possible.

Please complete this [online form](#) to advise us if you are required to self-isolate, whether you are here in Reading or elsewhere.

Updated teaching arrangements for those who need to self-isolate?

The updated government guidance will likely increase the number of students who are self-isolating in the coming days. While all classroom teaching will go ahead as scheduled, from Monday 16 March materials will also be provided online via Blackboard to ensure you can continue learning in these circumstances and minimise disruption to upcoming assessment.

Wherever practical, all assessments will be accepted online and alternative arrangements will be made for those who are self-isolating where this is feasible. We are working on mechanisms to facilitate this and you will be updated by your School programme administration team as soon as possible.

We are currently reviewing the implications of this updated government advice for our Extenuating Circumstances Process and will provide updated guidance on this early in the week commencing Monday 16 March.

Cancelling non-critical or high-risk events

The Major Incident Team has agreed to review and, where appropriate, cancel events until the end of April that are not critical to our core business of teaching and research or that represent an elevated risk. There are two reasons for this:

- The resources required to respond to the current outbreak, and to prepare contingency arrangements as it escalates, place a considerable burden on many colleagues in Schools and Functions. Cancelling events that are not critical allows us to focus our efforts on maintaining our core activities for longer.
- Some events may pose a greater risk to individuals than day-to-day business, for example those involving close interaction. Cancelling these and making alternative arrangements is proportionate to that risk.

We are working closely with RUSU to undertake a review of upcoming University and RUSU events and consider how we can minimise risk and where we may need to cancel events. This will inevitably lead to disappointment, not least where people have worked hard on preparations, but it is important that we focus our efforts where they really count.

We will keep this situation under ongoing review to look beyond the end of April if needed.

Possible changes to Support Centre arrangements

Our colleagues in Support Centres are receiving a significant number of inquiries as people seek advice on how the coronavirus will affect them and their studies. In order to ensure timely responses to these, it may be necessary to close some Support Centre desks for short periods to allow colleagues to assist with answering inquiries. Please bear with us and either visit another Support Centre or contact the team [online](#).

Travel over the Easter period

Whether you travel overseas during the Easter period is a decision for you to make. You need to weigh up the benefits and risks.

Before deciding to travel, you should carefully consider the potential impact on your return to the UK. You should be aware that there are travel disruptions in and out of COVID-19 affected regions and if the situation changes further other areas may face similar disruption. You may also face difficulties re-entering the UK.

It is important to follow the [UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office \(FCO\) advice](#) for the country or countries you intend to visit. This is being reviewed and updated regularly so it is important you stay up to date with the latest information.

You should also consider the impact on your studies of any travel disruption, particularly if you miss teaching, assessments or exams.

If you are living in Halls and you are spending time away over Easter, either in the UK or overseas, it is important that you let the Halls team know that you will be away using the Home at Halls app. We need to work together in maintaining good hygiene and keeping Halls clean. Letting the Halls team know you are away means that cleaners can focus on the areas that residents are still occupying.