

Doctoral College Coronavirus update  
**A message to doctoral students  
about our research programmes**  
9 July 2020

This is one of a series of occasional updates for  
doctoral students from the Doctoral College –  
[previous updates can be found here](#). It's important  
to also check the [University's student advice](#).

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To all Doctoral students

Following my previous two emails to you (see <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/information-on-returning-to-work-in-labs-on-campus/>), I am writing to you with a further update (see below).

Before I go on to discuss these updates, I also wish to recognise the issues raised in the Open Letter 'Concerns over the Protocol for return to research environment' at [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fBCRNATQ8RcgJRPxwsXhTKysnnikRxrY-hw1bJEeb2w/edit?fbclid=IwAR3KnR2HlSrhmF9Wtlq6VtK9\\_xBKYSsRip6nhEpDfOnKIheANq8j4CcSCnc](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fBCRNATQ8RcgJRPxwsXhTKysnnikRxrY-hw1bJEeb2w/edit?fbclid=IwAR3KnR2HlSrhmF9Wtlq6VtK9_xBKYSsRip6nhEpDfOnKIheANq8j4CcSCnc).

Since the time that the open letter was written, things have moved-on significantly such that you have now received several updates (from myself and from Prof Bradshaw <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/updates-from-the-pro-vice-chancellor-international-doctoral/>) as well as the updated information on the Doctoral College website <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/guidance-for-doctoral-students-on-returning-to-campus/>. Reading through these various resources, many issues raised in the original letter have largely been addressed, and thank you for raising them. However, I would welcome any further queries or concerns that remain, once you have read my further update below.

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As you will be aware, we have engaged in a programme of recommencing laboratory-based research following the [Government guidance](#) issued 11 May on laboratory-based work (updated 24<sup>th</sup> June to reflect the changes to the 2m distancing rules), the successful completion of the University's "pilot restart" programme, and the gradual easing of restrictions on activities.

My last message to you on this topic was at the start of June, and we have made significant progress since that time. I want to take this opportunity to update you about what research has restarted, how that has been done, and the next steps.

As our laboratory-based research programme returns to life, we need to remain conscious of the need to be alert to changes in national guidance and the local situation. The situation remains highly dynamic. Government and University advice remains that work which can be done from home, should be done there. For specialist research work which cannot be done from home, we should be opening our laboratories on an individual basis through a managed process.

A short film <https://vimeo.com/434028259/ef5fe21e73>, has been produced by colleagues to show some of the measures taken on campus so far to help the restart of research activities.

### **Health, Safety, compliance and wellbeing**

Health and Safety remains a primary concern and we continue to engage regularly with Public Health England, and also follow government procedures and policies. We are also acutely aware of the concerns of individuals about Covid-19, recognizing that these concerns can vary greatly from person to person depending on their differing individual situations.

As a result, we have developed careful processes which take account of both personal and working situations.

The process is designed to take account of the personal situation of individuals working in the laboratories, including whether they are content to return to the laboratories, whether they are in an at-risk group or live with others who are, and their travel arrangements to campus. To facilitate the assessment of what is right to do, all individuals must complete a health screening questionnaire (available through the Covid-19 link on [Topdesk](#)), before they can be approved for a return to the laboratory. At that point, individuals will also need to work with their supervisors, line managers and lab managers to revisit their existing Health and Safety risk assessments, to identify whether these need to be amended in the light of the Covid-19 restrictions.

A whole series of detailed processes have also been carried out to ensure that laboratory practices and procedures follow approved Covid-19 safety processes. Before restarting laboratories, managers - both academic leads and technical staff – develop Covid risk assessments, operational plans and rotas, and ensure that the researchers are happy that they understand the arrangements and are content to return on this basis. These arrangements are detailed. For example, local operation plans consider how both laboratories and general spaces (corridors, toilets, stairwells) can be used in ways that are Covid-19 secure. Part of this will typically be the provision of signage, hand sanitizer at entrances and exits, and enhanced cleaning protocols for communal space and for lab space, including bench tops, keyboards and shared equipment. It may, in exceptional circumstances, include the use of personal protective equipment and Perspex screens. Ways of working including a protocol for essential face-to-face meetings, procuring supplies, the use of rotas and dealing with accidents or incidents also need to be defined. The impact on catering and kitchen facilities, overall building assessments and major transit routes require consideration. This is not a comprehensive list but does serve to illustrate the range of issues that are thought through and documented before a laboratory can be considered for re-start.

I continue to liaise with the Doctoral College to ensure that guidance is updated on their webpage <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/guidance-for-doctoral-students-on-returning-to-campus/>. Crucially, and as reinforced on the DC webpages, I would encourage everyone to take their time to carefully consider and follow these processes.

Only after this has all been completed and signed off at both faculty and University level are researchers permitted back on to campus and into the laboratories.

### **Sequence of reopening**

Under social distancing, the capacity of our campus infrastructure would not be sufficient to restart all of our research simultaneously, and so our approach has been to prioritise individual laboratories. That prioritisation has been done at a faculty level, with criteria including externally funded projects, numbers of researchers, and industrial funders. The programme has extended over several weeks to allow the significant work required in advance of buildings and laboratories restarting. That first phase of laboratory restarts is now almost completed.

### **Laboratory restarts to date**

Laboratories have so far been restarted in almost all departments, including Departments of Biology and Biochemistry, Chemistry, Pharmacy and Pharmacology, Physics, Health and across all departments in the

Faculty of Engineering and Design. The pace of laboratories being signed off for restart will be maintained over the coming weeks, and we anticipate that the number of individual laboratories that have been reopened will rise to well over 60 over the next week. By that point, over 130 researchers supported by around 50 technical staff will have resumed their work in the laboratories and facilities, albeit on a rota basis in many cases.

### **The next phase of our laboratory restarts**

With the first phase of laboratory restarts now completed, we have streamlined our approval process building on what we have learned. We are currently extending our plans for lab restarts to include all laboratory-based researchers being able to access laboratories so that they can progress their research. In deciding the sequencing of restarts for this next phase, we will prioritise those laboratories required for PGR students to advance their theses, alongside those that support externally-funded research and those that are required by other early career researchers who might not be covered in the previous two categories, including probationary staff.

I would however recommend that you continue to check with your supervisor and the relevant laboratory manager/technician for localised updates.

### **Research with human participants**

One challenging area is research that requires human participants, including NHS sponsored studies. The guidance and protocols for this are significantly more stringent, and many Universities have not yet re-started any such programmes. Here, the issues go beyond ensuring that the laboratories are safe for researchers, to being confident that the participants will be safe, that the additional risk is justified by the potential outcomes, and that the original ethical approval for the study remains valid after the pause.

I do hope that this communication offers some insight into the processes around laboratory re-start and an indication of how far we have come. The pace of re-start is slower than some might wish, but has greatly accelerated and is broadly in line with re-starts at other comparable institutions. I trust that it also convinces you that the University is doing what it can to facilitate the re-start in a considered and compliant fashion. More information on your local situation is available through your department.

### **Beyond laboratory-based research**

In addition to the restart of laboratory-based research activity, we are starting to consider how other University business that cannot be satisfactorily progressed by working from home might be accommodated on campus. The Chair of the Summer Priorities Restart Group has sent an emailed request to Heads of Department asking what needs there might be in this regard, and we are considering how to prioritise and address these needs by reopening other parts of our campus. The Library are working with SPRG to introduce a 'Click & Collect' service and are working with IDPS to bring back a print service for students.

We recognize the effect that Covid-19 will be having on our researchers, and we are doing what we can to accelerate a return to normal laboratory work, while keeping the need to reduce transmission and people's safety at the forefront of everything that we do. I encourage doctoral students to remain in

close contact with their supervisors, their colleagues and their Department as sources of both support and information.

Regards

Jonathan

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