Downing College: COVID-19 FAQs for postgraduate students

UNIVERSITY INFORMATION ON CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

University Coronavirus (COVID-19) webpages
Please refer to the University webpages for up to date information and UK Government links relating to health, travel, visa and immigration matters, and staff working arrangements. They also contain important University statements on arrangements for teaching and learning, assessment, and research in Easter Term 2020. These webpages also include a growing set of helpful FAQs.

These pages represent the central definitive resource for University information on COVID-19 – please check it frequently.

COLLEGE INFORMATION ON CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

GENERAL

Can I still go home, despite government advice to avoid all but essential travel?

The UK Government issued strengthened ‘staying at home and away from others (social distancing)’ advice on Monday 23 March – this can be found here. This advice was reinforced in a letter from the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, to Universities on Thursday 26 March, which notes:

The Government’s advice is that students remaining at university in England should now stay where they are and not attempt to travel. If you are living in student halls, or private rented accommodation, you should remain there and stay indoors while current restrictions are in force. As the Prime Minister said, staying put and remaining indoors is a crucial step now to slow the rate of transmission of COVID-19, to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, and save the lives of fellow citizens. The government published advice on staying at home.

Although the general rule from the UK Government is to avoid all travel, there may be cases where international students are receiving conflicting advice from their home government. Students who have not already done so, and who are in a position to travel, should of course seek their home
government’s support for repatriation as appropriate. Any students who receive this support should contact their Tutor or the Senior Tutor, who will be able to provide them with documentation to assist them in travelling to the airport. It is possible that any student attempting to travel home may be stopped by the authorities and required to return to Cambridge. In this situation the College would welcome the returning student but, depending on the specific circumstances of exposure to potential infection, may require a period of self isolation upon their return to Cambridge in order to minimise the risk to the College’s resident student population and its staff.

Why has the College asked as many students as possible to go home?
To the College, it’s most important that when the situation becomes truly difficult, students are at the place where they feel most at home. No student will be forced to leave the College. However, Government advice changed on Thursday 12 March when the UK moved from the ‘contain’ to the ‘delay’ phase. The aim now is to ensure that the disease does not spread fast so as to reduce pressure on the nhs. The University is in the ‘red’ phase of its Coronavirus response. The College is aware that a significant number of our staff will fall ill. Schools are closed, and many staff must be at home to look after young children. The College does not therefore have the resources to provide the same facilities and support that it can in normal times. The Pro Vice-Chancellor wrote to all students about University preparations on 16 March. Follow that advice and keep in close contact with your programme director or graduate supervisor on the action that is best for you. We believe most students will generally be better off going home for the time being where possible because they can support their own families and be better looked after if they fall ill. Foreign governments are closing their borders to all but their own nationals, and students are strongly advised to make their plans accordingly.

ACCOMMODATION

Can I return to collect belongings from my room in College-owned accommodation?
This is not possible at the current time, based on the current Government ‘staying at home’ guidance. This guidance will be reviewed around 14 April but our current expectation is that this advice will remain in place for the next few months. For more information, see FAQ ‘Can I leave my belongings in my room?’, which includes who to contact for more information. The College will try to contact you before touching belongings left in your room. However, safety and security checks will continue across all College-owned and College-managed accommodation, including removing perishable items from accommodation areas.
Can I leave my belongings in my room?

Students who are unable to transport their belongings home with them are asked, where possible, to pack up their belongings securely and to label them with names and CRSID. Boxes should not weigh more than 20kg to enable them to be moved safely. Students who have already left, or who did not pack up their belongings before leaving, may have their items packed by College staff. Please get in touch if this causes difficulties. The reason for this request is so that we can manage our room stock if needed with as little disruption to your possessions as possible. We are unable to accept any liability for damage to items that are packed by staff, although all reasonable efforts to avoid damage or loss. All valuables should have been taken home. If this was not possible, either because you have already left College, or because you are unable to transport the specific items (e.g. large musical instruments), please contact your Tutor to discuss arrangements, and we will find somewhere safe to keep them.

The College may find it necessary to redistribute room usage for reasons including the better management of student support or infection prevention and control. We appreciate your understanding; again, we will ensure that no student is financially disadvantaged (i.e. there will be no increase in Residence Charge if you are moved to a room in a higher band).

Residence Charge

Whether you have left College already, or are due to leave in the near future, any residence charge payable from 17 March up until the commencement of NPR (Tuesday 21 April) will be credited to your next College bill. Your residential contract for next term will be terminated and no residence charge will be payable.

If for any reason, you are experiencing financial hardship, then please discuss your situation with your Tutor.

My family members are vulnerable and I am afraid of bringing the virus with me. Can I stay?

We encourage you to discuss this matter with your tutor and your family. Steps may be possible to segregate you or them once you get home. In the longer run, you may be better placed to help them from home. Each case is distinct and you will not be forced to leave College accommodation.

What should students who are renting privately do?

Students who are renting accommodation privately, not from a College or the University, will have a contract or licence with their landlord. They should comply with this contract; paying rent and giving notice as it requires, and they should contact their landlord if they feel they need to shorten the rental period for any reason. They should still heed the advice from Public Health England on whether it is better to be in Cambridge or elsewhere for their safety and wellbeing, and should follow the public advice on self-isolation and social distancing.

Colleges remain responsible for supporting as best they can all their students, so please do let the College know of your status and intentions if you are anywhere in Cambridge. Students who are in
difficulty, should contact their Tutor. In particular, please inform the College immediately if you are self-isolating or are ill.

**ACADEMIC MATTERS**

**What arrangements are in place for examinations**

Please refer to the statement made by the Pro-Vice Chancellor Graham Virgo on 31 March 2020 and especially to detailed communications from your Faculty or Department relating to assessments for taught postgraduate courses. Further guidance can be found in FAQs on the main student pages on the University’s COVID-19 website. Your Graduate Tutor, or Director of Studies where applicable, will also provide additional advice.

**I am not able to study effectively at home; can I return to Cambridge for Easter Term?**

The current position is that students should remain where they are until the Government’s reinforced advice to stay ‘at home’ is reviewed and lifted. If you have been unable to study effectively for your examinations in Easter Term, then you will have the opportunity to submit a request to the University through your Tutor to apply to delay your examinations until the Second Assessment Period when the University re-opens for students (refer to University FAQs or your Tutor). Please note that we cannot yet be sure when that Second Assessment Period will take place, given our dependence on Government advice. It is most unlikely to be before September 2020 at the earliest, and may be later.

**Will the decision to leave affect my residence requirements?**

Please refer to the Senior Pro-Vice Chancellor’s message on teaching arrangements, dated 16 March 2020, available [here](#).

**I am due to take exams in April or later. I would rather stay in Cambridge (for example clinical medics, vets and taught Masters)**

Please refer to the Senior Pro-Vice Chancellor’s message on teaching arrangements, dated 16 March 2020, available [here](#).

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

**What effect will leaving have on my visa?**

The University’s FAQs deal with this [point](#). See also the Government’s own [guidance](#).
Several countries have closed their borders to non-nationals. I come from one of those countries. Should I still return home?

No student will be forced to leave the College. However, if you can, and have a clear travel plan to get you home safely then you should do so. However, students in difficult situations such as this will not be required to leave the College.

I am from a country that has imposed quarantine on my return. Should the likelihood of the need to self-quarantine on my arrival in my home country for two weeks affect my plans to return home, book flights?

Take official advice for your country and discuss this with your family. No person will be forced to leave the College.

COLLEGE PROVISION

Should I let the College know that I am remaining in Cambridge during the COVID-19 outbreak?

It is really important that you let the College know if you plan to remain in Cambridge after 23 March 2020. All Colleges across Cambridge are working hard to provide core services for their remaining students. In the coming weeks, this may require collaborative work between neighbouring Colleges. You were previously asked to complete a census to provide core data to help the College in planning support. Please email senior.tutor@dow.cam.ac.uk if any of the following information changes:

- your plans to remain in Cambridge (in College-owned or private accommodation), your address, your previously reported status about any vulnerability to more serious COVID-related illness, your status in terms of self- or household-isolation, and the names of two nominated self-isolation supporters (where known, and noting that these should not belong to your own household).
- If you have a disability and you have not yet disclosed it to the College Disabilities Officer, please do so now.

Students living in privately-rented accommodation in Cambridge are also urged to keep the College updated on changes to their situation to enable us to provide what help we can, including pastoral and welfare support, and to provide assistance and guidance on medical issues if these arise. You are still part of our community. Keeping in touch is particularly important if you think you are medically vulnerable (see FAQ below). Students whose home family is located in Cambridge do not need to do so, but all communication will be welcomed.

How does Government advice on social distancing actually work in the College environment?

Please take time to read and digest the Government’s advice on staying at home and away from others. Some students live in self-contained accommodation with its own kitchen, bathroom and toilet (or currently occupy a room in an otherwise empty shared house. However, if you share any of these facilities with other people, then you should consider yourself to be in a ‘household’ with
those others. This definition and way of living is an important factor when interpreting the Government advice, especially where it refers to members of the same household. The core principles of the advice on social distancing are that you should only leave your room or household for very limited reasons:

- shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, which must be as infrequent as possible, including collecting food from the College Servery.
- one form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household. If you exercise with a friend (not from your household), then you should remain at least two metres distant from them at all times.
- any medical need, including to donate blood, avoid or escape risk of injury or harm, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person.
- employees travelling for work purposes, but only where you cannot work from home.

These reasons are exceptions - even when doing these activities, you should be minimising time spent outside the home and ensuring that you are two metres apart from anyone not in your household. The College gardens should be used responsibly by households. They are no longer open to non-College members or visitors.

Please follow the existing nhs guidance to help minimise onward transmission of all respiratory infections including COVID-19. The College Housekeeping team is putting additional effort into more frequent cleaning of high contact surfaces and door handles.

**Can I have friends to visit me in College during the outbreak?**

All College-owned accommodation and facilities including gardens are closed to non-members while the current UK Government advice on social distancing remains in force. Unless they are members of your existing ‘household’, you must not have visitors in your room or in the College grounds. This advice is intended to reduce the overall level of human interaction and thereby slow the spread of infection. Hosting visitors from outside the College brings unnecessary risk of infection to members of your household, other College members and staff, as well as to your. Remember of course that contact with friends online and via social media is always possible, and it works! Try Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, MS Teams and many other free apps.

You may choose to exercise with friends who are not members of your household away from the College, but you should always ensure you remain a minimum of two metres distance from them at all times and must not share equipment.

**I am remaining in Cambridge and think that I am more vulnerable to more serious COVID-19 related disease. What should I do?**

Please check the current PHE advice on vulnerable persons to see if your health condition does indeed make you more vulnerable to COVID-19 related disease. A subset of these more vulnerable people are at greater risk of very serious COVID-19 related illness. Check here to see if this group includes you. If it does, you should have received a letter from the nhs with specific advice on how to shield from infection. If you haven’t received a letter but think you should have done, then you
should contact your GP or nhs consultant’s office directly straight away and discuss their advice with the College as a matter of urgency (see next paragraph).

All students who consider themselves vulnerable to more serious disease are encouraged to make themselves known confidentially to the College Nurse or Tutor or Senior Tutor in the Nurse’s absence. They should follow the PHE advice at the above link, ensuring that they are stringent in following social distancing advice, including frequent handwashing, and keep in mind that there may be safer options for accommodation. Vulnerable students who find themselves in a ‘household’ isolation should take specific advice from the College Nurse or Tutor or Senior Tutor. If in doubt, please always ask for advice and call nhs 111 if necessary.

For those still in residence what facilities will be available?
The College’s provision may change depending on staff availability. From Friday 20 March all College public spaces have been closed, including the Dining Hall, the Butterfield Café, the JCR, the MCR and the Library. Sports facilities are also closed. The Porters will be on site but should be contacted by phone or email if possible; in person visits to the Lodge should be brief and necessary. Housekeeping will be operating a reduced service and will not be cleaning your rooms or the communal areas which you use. There will, however, be deliveries of cleaning products, and you and your household are urged to keep everywhere clean and free from rubbish. The Nurse is contactable by telephone or email during her usual hours. Tutors are contactable by email.

Catering Arrangements
From Friday 20 March, we have been offering a pre-ordered lunch service, with collection from the Hall. All meals are served in a take-away box with disposable cutlery and a napkin. Please refer to separate instructions that you have received by email.

If I stay in College and fall ill, what help will the College be able to provide?
The College will not be able to provide routine nursing care. Students who live alone without shared facilities will have to self-isolate in their rooms for seven days if they develop symptoms of new persistent cough, fever, or the other symptoms listed on the Government website. Revised Public Health England guidance now requires all ‘household’ contacts to self-isolate for a period of 14 days starting from the day of first onset of symptoms in the group. ‘Household’ is defined by the College as those sharing the same kitchen or bathroom or toilet. Further PHE guidance is here. We shall check once a day, at minimum, on those we know are self-isolating (SI) or household isolating (HI).
We previously invited students to volunteer as self-isolation supporters. Now, we encourage all remaining students to nominate two willing people – also intending to stay, who have confirmed willingness to help each other should this be needed. We are concerned about the loneliness some students may feel. Where possible we will also provide online advice and support, again assuming the staff are well enough to provide it.
What should I do if I am self-isolating?
You should self isolate for seven days if you develop a new continuous cough, a fever (greater than 37.8°C) or the other symptoms listed on the Government website. General Public Health England Advice is available [here](#). You must email or call the Porters’ Lodge (01223 334800 or porters@dow.cam.ac.uk) – do not visit in person. Revised Public Health England guidance now requires all ‘household’ contacts also to self-isolate for a period of 14 days starting from the first onset of symptoms in the group. ‘Household’ is defined by the College as those sharing the same kitchen or bathroom or toilet.

The Porters will provide you with the guidance and support that you will need, including contacting other College staff as necessary. The Porters’ Lodge, Nurse and Tutorial Office can assist in communicating with other members of your ‘household’ if this is difficult.

Government advice on self-isolation states that all household members should remain at home. Do not go to visit public areas, and do not use public transport or taxis. College staff, and your nominated self-isolation supporters will help you obtain food and essential provisions or equipment. The 14-day period of household self-isolation starts from the day that the first person in your household became ill, but individual household members who have had symptoms are free to leave the house again once seven days have elapsed from the start of their own symptoms (with suitable hand washing and hygiene practices).

PHE advice does not preclude people who are self-or household-isolating from leaving their home for exercise once per day. However, Colleges are densely populated communities which include vulnerable students and staff. The College community reasonably expects that students, either with symptoms or from households with symptomatic students, will remain indoors in their household to minimise the risk of infection to those around them.

Will mental health services be available to me even when I am out of residence?
Your Tutor will be available for consultation via email. The University Counselling Service is putting in place arrangements for counselling by telephone for appointments and will be developing these plans. College Counselling will similarly not be in person.

I am in a situation of financial hardship, can the College help?
If students are suffering from financial hardship as a result of travel and other arrangements made in response to Covid-19 issues, please approach your Tutor. The College may be able to help, but it will not be able to meet all your costs resulting from Covid-19.