

The impact of Covid-19 on social networking at University

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If the last few months have taught us anything, it is that as a society we take social interaction and relationships for granted. Being stripped of social freedom, and in-person communication made us realise how important it is to have those kinds of social networks built up around us and the impact even a simple face to face conversation can have in making your day a little more positive. The psychological impact that comes along with a lack of social interaction can be huge, with the Royal College of Psychiatrists reporting an increase of 43% in the number of emergency and urgent cases since the start of lockdown, it is clear that the mental toll of the Covid-19 pandemic is huge, and the lack of socialisation playing a huge role in that.

In Anderson Anderson & Brown Consulting's paper on school leavers during the pandemic, *The Trials of the Class of Covid-19*, 45% of respondents said that social life was an influencing factor in deciding on what to do after school. As a school leaver trying to figure out my next pathway myself, this didn't surprise me. For many prospective university students, the social experience is almost as much of a deciding factor of choosing a university as the degree itself. Despite this there has been very little to no communication from universities on how social interaction will work in the new Covid-19 climate. All communication from universities up until now has been almost entirely education based and on how teaching will work, ignoring any idea of how students are meant to socialize - we're only sure that whatever way it is, social distancing will be in place.

So how will socialisation work when the new university term starts in September? With the two-metre social distancing rule probably still in place, an environment that promotes social interaction will be difficult to achieve. Starting at university can be daunting anyway, when a barrier like social distancing is introduced it can create an awkward atmosphere in which communicating can become strained. For prospective university students that will be thrown into this situation in September, they've already lost out on key days to interact with others on their courses with almost all offers holders days having been cancelled. Despite this, school leavers have taken social responsibility into their own hands – doing what teenagers do best, using social media to connect with others in their course and university, mostly through Facebook groups. This highlights the resilience of young people and their determination to not let Covid-19 put a downer on their university experience.

One idea that has been proposed by many universities to make on-campus living and studying work is 'social bubbles'. The proposal was that students would live and study with people on the same course and students would have 'social bubbles' of around 8 people – most likely their flatmates – who they would socialise with. The one major flaw with that idea was that it limits social outreach. By limiting students to 8 people it stops them creating the kind of networks that promotes the sense of community universities thrive on. The idea that the university could enforce it effectively is also unrealistic. University students are also eagerly awaiting communication from universities about one of the biggest social events of the year – freshers' week. Usually, universities as well as pubs, clubs and bars will put on events and entertainment. However, Coronavirus has thrown a roadblock in plans for 2020 freshers' week, especially when clubs are a no-go with social distancing in place. Most university students will be devastated with the loss of one of the biggest social events of the

year however, prospective university students like myself may be filled with nerves at the loss of fresher's week. No fresher's week removes the ability to get to know fellow students and flatmates in a more relaxed environment and only leaves space for more formal introduction from two metres apart. The idea of being thrown into a completely new environment and having to make friends is daunting in itself but having to do it in such a controlled formal way removes any kind of spontaneity from the meeting and makes it much harder to socialise.

Overall, a few things are clear. Firstly, we can say almost certainly that socialising at University will be different to anything before. The introduction and importance of social distancing means that fresher's week is unlikely to go ahead, and any kind of introductions will be far more formal from two metres apart. Secondly, communication is key. The lack of information from universities so far has left students – especially those starting in September – without any kind of idea of how life will work on campus and off during term time. Students can't make plans about living arrangements, financing etc. without some idea of how flexible and open the university will be. Lastly, one important thing we've learnt over the course of the Covid-19 lockdown is that young people will use their initiative to make the best out of a bad situation. Despite the numerous setbacks from universities about cancelled socialising opportunities, we've managed to make connections, social networks and even friends through social media and the internet. I have no doubt that no matter what disruption Covid-19 creates, young people as a generation will find a way around it and still create a positive outcome.