

Online Learning during an international pandemic.

As we reference in the attached letter there are likely to be several phases to our process into, through and out of lockdown in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Every different organisation will manage this differently based on their context and try to make practical sense of frequently changing guidance as things move at each stage. Each set of changes may not always suit us individually. There is almost nothing about the current circumstances that we would have chosen. However, there is always room for empathy, growth and the potential to seize opportunity where we can.

We seek here to outline how we have arrived here and the next phases as we currently see them, whilst emphasising they will always be subject to changes often only released to us at the last minute and rarely in working hours!

The journey to here:

On 10 March we received the call that Ofsted were arriving for their inspection visit. Coronavirus was already a known factor and by the following week many people, including staff were being instructed to self-isolate, large gatherings were discouraged and by Wednesday 18th March we knew schools were closing from 20th March.

The College has often been ahead of government guidance, maintaining weekly transparent communication with parents. Unlike many schools we were able to sort Free School Meals for students swiftly, including automatically committing to the holiday payments whilst the official channels were delayed and overwhelmed; we ensured Year 11 and 13 had leavers' assemblies at 48 hours' notice. Also, unlike many schools, from Day 1 of isolation using our existing technology and systems, we were providing a full timetable of daily lessons with staff available and providing weekly feedback. Again at 48 hours' notice we opened on 23rd March for Key Worker children continuing almost every day since, including school holidays.

Unlike many students across the country who had to share devices or rely on paper copies of work, our students were engaged and working using devices and simple systems they understood from the start. We established pastoral communication and networks, protocols and guidance for parents, students and staff which meant all could continue with learning as planned up to Easter and beyond, including additional holiday activities for families.

This pattern continued throughout Term 5 and into Term 6 with the added enhancement of more staff learning to provide more interactive learning materials, audio/visual recorded lessons. At all times a full timetable of daily work was provided, adjusting to parent feedback over the amount set, explanations and deadlines for work to allow those with poor WIFI, other caring commitments, illness or anxiety to feel able to stay in touch with their learning. We track and monitor work completion, contact and support where we know there are issues. No student has been left to fall behind.

Nationally there are emerging concerns about a widening of the disadvantaged gap, stories of 4 in 10 students not in regular contact, doing little to no work. In contrast, from the start we have planned carefully the approaches and content for all students to keep in touch with all lessons in their timetable, in parallel with the heralded approaches of some private schools. We know over 90% of our students are engaging with all or most of their set work in accordance with their timetable. Where we are aware of the potential of widening gaps we are already proactively intervening.

At all points we have been guided by three clear priorities, in line with our Goals and Beliefs:

1. Our students need to be able to come through this process (with up to 1500 different experiences between them) healthy and happy both physically and mentally.
2. The work we provide needs to be able to be equitably accessed, sufficient to keep students in touch with their education. Review, recap and a reasonable approach to stepped progression will allow us as educational professionals to pick them up at the end of this and move on with pace.
3. All plans must meet health and safety requirements set out by government/ESCC advice.

Misconceptions:

It may be useful to address some common misconceptions

There is not enough work to last all day.

For each piece of feedback of this nature we receive an equivalent one stating there is too much work provided. A school day includes social time, tutor time, travel between lessons and start and end of lesson routines. Work can take longer in lockdown, so further to feedback we reduced content. If a student works through the morning and is finished by early afternoon, that can still equate to 5 hours of learning. Equally some struggle to do that, working long days and risking anxiety that they have not completed enough. We routinely monitor the work set and are confident there is sufficient to achieve our stated aims. Allowing flexible approaches to when the work is completed allows those with IT issues or significant caring commitments to keep on top of work alongside other commitments.

What are “live lessons”?

There are some disingenuous descriptions of “real time” lessons or “live lessons” which are not helpful. It is clear from regular discussions between Headteachers that virtually no school within ESCC has been providing timetables of video conference style full lessons. Whether using Google Classrooms or Digital Platforms like Firefly, the same facilities are available: lessons are set daily, feedback from teachers is sought and given, audio-visual materials are used to provide visual explanations and review.

Where schools are experimenting with live discussions via platforms such as Teams (*no ESCC school uses Zoom*), this also has equity and safeguarding issues which have to be avoided. Where conferencing is used, lesson materials are only available for the hour of the set lesson time. However, with clear protocols in place, we are utilising this with Year 12 in small groups and some small groups of students in a mentoring capacity in other years.

It is arguably less effective for whole class teaching; not all students can be seen or heard at the same time, even if all can attend at the appointed time. The opportunity for live questioning is therefore reduced and often relies on a chat feed - rendering it no different to an audio/visual facility (which can be repeated) plus a comment thread as in Firefly. Research is now showing it is this recorded work with audio/visual which can be paused and replayed which is of the greatest value in aiding long term understanding and retention.

We miss tutor time/contact

All pastoral managers make weekly contact to all students to check wellbeing, if this raises concerns or there is a lack of response there is always follow up. We are lucky to have these non-teaching staff who can focus their time solely on wellbeing. Heads of Year have work phones and have spent long hours at times supporting students and families throughout this period to overcome difficulties. Tutors will be reaching out more in Term 6 to tutees. Tutor time materials every week, including the weekly quiz, are emailed directly to the students from Ms Barlow, as are regular well-being activities and support from Miss Burgess. Twitter shares experiences, stories and successes on a daily basis.

Wider opening:

It may be useful for us to set out the extended provision we have started and what we plan to do as we move into a new phase for the remainder of this term. All our plans have followed the public health guidance, subject to both the ESCC risk assessment and our own conditions for opening, with specific guidance on population bubbles which cannot be mixed and social distancing.

- **Year 12:** The Teams seminars are working well with high attendance. Students who are behind with work are able to come onto site and get study support in the LRC. This will continue in the set pattern until the end of term. To bring more Year 12's onto site for each of their three different subjects would incur large amounts of mixing of populations, which is clearly in breach of the health guidance.
- **Year 10:** This week of face-to-face support in set bubbles of populations for core subjects has gone well and shown how well Year 10 have done at maintaining their learning. Even before the advised opening of 15 June we were offering study support for those who were struggling to engage with all their learning. We are pleased that the clear campaign we ran with Ofqual to support their grades this summer was effective and they can now focus on their remaining exams next year. Many schools are not offering this amount of face-to-face support for Year 10 but we are comfortable to continue this throughout Term 6.
- **Year 9:** Ahead of the official advice, in the first week back after half term we met Year 9 students on site who were struggling to keep up with their learning. We are looking to repeat this during the remainder of this term as well as look for opportunities to afford more of Year 9 some additional face-to-face teaching (*possibly remotely*) as an option for some in their 2 year GCSE courses.
- **Year 7 and 8:** We are aware these groups have had the longest time out of College and there are currently no government plans to bring them into school bar the possible provision to come in for a meeting. We are extending in Term 6 to provide face-to-face support on site for Year 7 and 8 who are struggling to complete work as we have for Year 9.
- **Year 11 and 13:** We are also conscious of our continuing commitment to exam year groups as we now look forward to results days and transition planning. Those returning to 6th form, going onto College, university or other opportunities will need support and guidance as we go forward. We are currently planning how this will work under social distancing guidance.
- **Other changes**
 - Our key worker provision continues to grow as more people return to work, this is maintained by teaching staff on a rota, as well as their lesson commitments and is reliant on all adhering to social distancing guidance.
 - Staff continue to receive training on new programmes that will provide additional audio/visual support; they continue to use Firefly to be available throughout the day for comments and give feedback weekly via Firefly through either quizzes, single student comments or whole class comments. They are contactable by email for other issues.
 - INSET Day 26 June will allow us to plan for what September may look like and how we will plan for "catch-up" provision but until we get clearer guidance we will be, as we have done from the start, deciding what is best for our College and our community in its entirety and planning from there.