

Exchange Student Forum - March 2021

Introduction

The SU has conducted several forums with international students during the Covid-19 pandemic but there is very limited feedback on the experiences of exchange students who have faced similar challenges during this period. There has been a significant reduction in the number of exchange students at Bath this academic year, and while some have come to Bath as usually expected for exchange, others are undertaking a virtual exchange from their home country instead due to international travel restrictions. In order to better understand the exchange experience during Covid-19 and identify areas of improvement to support students, a virtual forum was held on Wednesday 24 March to hear directly from the exchange student community. This report includes key findings and responses to prepared questions, as well as suggestions for the University to improve support for exchange students.

Key findings

- Students living on campus were placed in separate flats, resulting in some students experiencing loneliness if placed on their own but no action was taken to support them.
- Students were not properly informed of items they should bring for living in University accommodation which caused problems upon arrival and negatively affected the quarantine experience of some students.
- There are varying degrees of support for students depending on which department they are based in during their exchange, with some feeling “forgotten” by their department.
- There are concerns from some students that their academic work at Bath will not be accepted by their home university due to restrictions on lab entry.
- The exchange induction session was very useful for students, but they received slow or no email responses from the Inbound Exchange team.
- Students have formed friendships with other exchange students but have had little or no contact with Bath and UK students. Some have not attended any online social events.
- Students living on campus appreciate the food options available, enjoy exploring the city and are looking forward to the Covid-19 restrictions relaxing. If the Covid-19 situation in the UK improves, students currently on virtual exchange may come to Bath after Easter.
- Suggestions for improvements included UK students being assigned as ‘buddies’ for all exchange students so they can help with basic student living questions, along with the Inbound Exchange team creating a Facebook group for exchange students so they can easily find each other.

Attendance

All Semester 2 exchange students were invited to the forum in advance using a mailing list from the International Relations Office (IRO) received in February 2021. The forum was intended to be for any exchange student at the University, however The SU did not receive a list of full-year exchange students from the IRO on request.

A total of four students attended the virtual forum while on Semester 2 exchange with the following departments: Pharmacy & Pharmacology (2), School of Management and Politics, Languages & International Studies (PoLIS).

Topics discussed

Are you studying in the UK or remotely from another country?

Of the four participants, three were living in campus accommodation (Marlborough Court) and arrived in early to mid-February 2021. The remaining participant was on virtual exchange from their home country but was considering coming to Bath after Easter depending on the Covid-19 situation in the UK. They noted that although living in Bath would be beneficial for meeting people, they save money by living at home and will not be reimbursed by the Erasmus programme if they stay in Bath for only one month (they received funding for just three months of experience abroad).

In what ways has Covid-19 affected your exchange experience?

The participants agreed that it was strange not being able to go to classes or meet other people, but they had become used to the situation. A participant described their quarantine experience on campus as “awful, it was the longest ten days of my life” due to a lack of information from the University. Although they had been advised that the University would lend them cutlery and other kitchen items, these were not provided on arrival in their accommodation and they had to wait two days to receive these. They appreciated food being delivered but it would’ve been helpful to receive a list in advance of everything they should bring to Bath, noting that exchange students will have less capacity to bring items due to international travel.

Another participant shared their concern about having no lab work due to Covid-19 restrictions, noting that they have had to generate results electronically instead. They were pleased to hear from their supervisor that they may be able to enter the lab after Easter, but they were worried that their results will not be accepted by their home university as “hands on experience” is required.

In contrast, some benefits of Covid-19 were also mentioned. The participant on virtual exchange appreciated the time saved from not commuting and how Bath has fewer classes per unit than their home university. This has allowed them to take additional units and assessments from their home university while on exchange which will give them more free time later in their course.

How has it been so far making friends and integrating with Bath students?

All the participants confirmed that their friends at Bath were other exchange students and they did not know any full-time or UK students. Furthermore, none of them had attended any online social events to meet other students. The virtual exchange induction session, however, was noted as a good opportunity to meet other exchange students.

The difficulty in making friends in a virtual environment was highlighted. One participant had met students by deliberately starting social conversations during breakout rooms in classes and had created several WhatsApp groups, including one for exchange students. Similarly, the participant on virtual exchange noted that they hadn’t had the opportunity to get to know other students very well, adding that the students they knew the most were from their Cambridge English course, but they had also made a friend from a group presentation as well as others through the exchange WhatsApp group. They otherwise did not have any other friends at Bath and described this experience as “sad”. In response to these comments, and on a more positive note, another participant encouraged them to come to Bath:

“If you have the possibility to come, I think you will have a great time here. I’ve had a very good time even though we’ve been in lockdown, I met some good friends. You can always go out for walks and it’s a beautiful city, it’s really starting to open up.”

The participants requested more information about the roadmap out of lockdown in the UK, especially regarding dates when outdoor and sport activities can resume, which the SU Community Officer provided after the forum.

If you are in Bath, what's it been like living in University accommodation or in private housing in the city?

The placing of exchange students in University accommodation was highlighted as a major issue. The participants living on campus had mixed expectations of living arrangements (either being placed with other students, or alone due to the small number of exchange students) and found themselves living either alone or with one other student initially. One participant was placed in a flat on their own and contacted Accommodation multiple times as they were often feeling lonely, however the response was very slow and no action was taken to support them. They also informed living support staff that they were experiencing loneliness. Accommodation later informed the participant that two other students were living alone in the same accommodation, creating confusion as to why they were not all placed together in the same flat. The participant added that they were looking forward to getting to know their flatmate who recently arrived and was currently in quarantine.

Two of the participants noted their relief being placed together, with five students now living in their flat which has made their experience more enjoyable. Another positive aspect of living on campus was the good food service with participants praising having cheap options for breakfast, lunch and dinner available, as well as a Sunday dinner delivered to their room. A participant noted that they enjoyed being on campus and always seeing students outside, but also being able to speak to others in the Fresh supermarket.

How well do you think you have been supported by the University?

There was mixed feedback regarding support from the University, with participants describing varying levels of support depending on which department they were on exchange with. A participant in the School of Management greatly appreciated having regular catchups with a member of the School's International Relations team who asked how they were doing and was happy to help with any questions. In contrast, the two participants in the Department of Pharmacy & Pharmacology felt "forgotten" and received more emails asking how they were from their home universities than from Bath; although they were assigned a tutor, they never met properly (communicating only by email) and received only a few helpful links for support at the start of their exchange. They had many questions about study, including accessing papers from the Library and advice for writing essay exams, but they didn't have anyone available to ask for support.

Regarding the Inbound Exchange team in the IRO, mixed feedback was also received. The exchange induction session was praised for being informative and helpful, allowing the participants to receive useful contact details and understand where to find places on campus, however participants noted very slow email responses, or no response, from the Inbound Exchange team.

In what ways do you think the University can improve the experiences of exchange students at Bath?

The participants gave the following suggestions for improving the exchange student experience:

- Assign UK students as 'buddies' for all exchange students at Bath who can support them with basic student living questions e.g. where to buy a second-hand bicycle, which is the cheapest supermarket in the city centre. UK students of a similar age would be much easier to approach than a member of staff regarding these questions.
- The inbound exchange team should create a Facebook group for all exchange students so they can easily find each other and form a community (Microsoft Teams was noted as an unsuitable platform for meeting students informally). Students were told during induction

that they would have to set this up themselves, however the Inbound Exchange team did not respond to emails asking for a list of the students' email addresses to do so.

- Assign support staff in departments so that exchange students can ask subject-related questions.
- Provide a list in advance of everything exchange students should bring for living in university accommodation (especially if quarantine continues).
- Provide softer furniture in Marlborough Court e.g. a couch.