Virtual Social Handbook

This year, university life will look very different to the way it has in the past, so we thought we'd gather some information for you on what this year might hold. This includes both tips for studies online as well as how to make and keep friendships online. So have a browse and we hope you find some helpful information.

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Tech

At this point, you have probably used some technology to keep in contact with friends and family and maybe for teaching as well. For more information, you can go to your year's Learn page. From a student perspective, this is what we've found using different technologies.

Teams

Get started with Teams

- Good chat feature
- You can search other students by name
- Able to use online
- Chat supports voice notes when using the mobile app

Zoom

Quickstart Guide for Zoom

- No need for an account (easy to use with people outside the university)
- Good for lots of people (breakout rooms are good for organisation of smaller groups)
- Least amount of audio interruptions from cross talking (helpful in social situations when everyone is chatting)

Skype

Skype website

- Video calls as well as possibility to call mobile phones and landlines
- Good chat feature
- Less functionality when it comes to raising hands, taking notes, etc but more relaxed atmosphere
- Able to use online and in app on both computers and mobile devices
- Need to know other people's information

Facebook Messenger

Messenger website

- Easy to call/video call someone you are already messaging
- Funny filters and games to play with friends and have a good time
- Audio quality not great with more than 3-4 people
- Available for mobile devices as well as in browsers
- New Room functionality: able to join link without a Facebook account
- Planned: Able to contact people from Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp as an easy contacting tool

Houseparty

- Fun app for having games nights etc as the games are integrated in the app
- Annoying with an odd number of people (cuts off weird bits of video)
- Works on mobile devices, mac OS and Chrome
- Uptake was significant at the start of lockdown but the userbase then reduced as a consquence of privacy concerns

Discord

- Can support a lot of people
- Easy to organise conversations by topic
- Good for creating a community
- Servers are invite only
- Works online or in app
- Similar to Teams

Gather.town

- Combines 2D video game with video calls
- Parallels meeting up in real life as you see the video and can talk to people who are close to you on the map
- Only works on Chrome or Firefox
- Don't need an account
- Has integrated mini games
- Quite fun but also a bit weird because people keep disappearing when they move too far away

Best Practice

When using the different technologies, there are some general things everyone can do to make everyone's life a little easier:

In (video) calls
- Turn your microphone off to avoid unnecessary background noise (especially if you're eating or there's some other noise around)
- Only turn on your camera if you feel comfortable
- When using your camera don't move around too much

In emails or other written communication
- Keep it short
- Highlight important information such as deadlines by making them **bold** or *italic*
- Consider the audience: what's appropriate to message/post to the people who can see your message?
- Where possible, reference critical information in the subject

Voice notes
- Permit asynchronous communication of a more personal kind than email
- Don't include important information in the middle of a 7 minute recording

Practice Empathy Towards Your Peers

Practice Empathy Towards Your Peers
We are all going to have to pay special attention to the situation our peers may be in over the course of the year. Here are a few ways in which to help each other make it through together.

Consider Your Peer's Situations
Many students are going to find themselves in different situations than your own, some issues to consider when communicating or planning an event are the following:

- Different time zones
- Low bandwidth internet connection
- Caring responsibilities
- Loneliness / isolation
- Limited technological equipment access
- Lack of an adequate study environment
- Uncomfortable making contributions in a virtual environment
- Anxiety

Stay Connected, Be Aware and Be Considerate
In a time when people are practicing social distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine, it's all too easy to focus on your immediate circle. Make a concerted effort to **reach out** to your classmates and **check-in** with them.

Help Others
In the midst of something that seems so overwhelming, **helping others** can provide a sense of empowerment. If it be sending around class notes or even suggesting an online game or revision session, find tangible ways to do good and make things better for someone else. We are here to help each other make it through as a community!

Work-Life Balance and Studying from Home

With everyone working from home, it might be more difficult to get a good work-life balance so here are some tips we've found to help with working/studying from home:

1. **Find a study space.** Whether that's at your desk in your room, in the kitchen or the lounge, find a space where you can study. It might be difficult because everyone is home most of the time and there isn't much space so if you don't have your own room to work in, set rules with other people using the space. Whether that's a schedule when everyone is working so things are quiet or rules about taking phone calls in a different room, find something that works for you so you can concentrate in your space. Maintain communication about the best use of shared spaces.

2. **Manage and plan your time.** Make yourself a schedule of when you want to work. It's tempting to start and never stop when working from home or to never get started in the first place. So make a schedule that you think will work for you and try to stick to it. If you aren't an early bird, maybe it's not realistic to say you'll start working every morning at 9 instead maybe you'll want to start at 10 or 11 but set yourself an alarm and get started at a set time. If you find you're not sticking with that, maybe ask a family member or flat mate to keep you accountable. Obviously studying isn't as predictable as working with set working hours, but it might be helpful to limit yourself to only doing your uni work on weekdays or finishing before a certain time.

3. **Plan what you're going to do.** With multiple platforms to keep track off, utilise your calendar and emails. Make to do lists for what you have to do in one day and in one week. And make sure to make them reasonable! No one can watch 17 lectures in one day. So figure out how much you can get done in a day and write a to do list that you can get done in a day to make it achievable and reward yourself after you've crossed things off by taking a break.

4. **Use your time efficiently.** Once you've made your schedule, it can sometimes feel like you have to do something because it's on the plan but if you're having an off day, are tired or just can't concentrate, it's probably not the best use of your time to sit there and either do your work half-heartedly or just browse the internet. Also don't push the tasks that need the most concentration to a time when you know you generally aren't concentrated whether that's early in the morning, just after lunch or late at night for you.

5. **Study actively.** It's tempting to put a recorded lecture and just let it run in the background while you're checking your emails or playing a game on your phone. It's easy to get distracted when everything is online but use the online teaching like you would in-person teaching: put away your phone, pay attention and take notes. This way you'll be done quicker because you don't have to keep pausing or rewinding because you missed something.

6. **Get dressed.** Even if it's from your pyjamas into the comfiest joggers and loungewear you own, get out of the clothes you slept in so you're mentally ready to do work during the day.

7. **Take breaks.** Once you've gotten started, it might be difficult to stop and take breaks. It's important to take them though. No one works well after staring at a screen for hours on end without ever looking away. So open a window and get some fresh air and get up and move around (even if it's just to make a cup of tea or go to the toilet). If you're feeling particularly motivated, you could do [some desk stretches](#) as well.

8. **Set deadlines for yourself.** With lectures being delivered online and recorded, it's tempting to put them off for 'later you' to deal with but that's not always helpful. Depending on where you are, it might not be possible to watch the lectures when they are happening, but you could try setting a goal of watching all lecture of the week by Friday evening so you stay on top of things.

9. **Reach out to people.** Whether it's to socialise or to ask for help, contact people. Studying from home can be an isolating experience so make sure you talk to people on your degree and your friends and stay in contact. If reaching out seems stressful, have a look at the section about 'Reaching Out' for some tips.

10. **Exercise regularly.** Whatever type of exercise you like, try and do that regularly. Without a commute, you might find yourself barely leaving your home and moving about so whether it's a Youtube workout or a cycle around town, find some type of exercise you'll enjoy and can actually get yourself motivated enough to do.

11. **Simulate your commute.** To help make a psychological transition between work-space and home-space when you are working from home, decide on a walking or cycling route you can take at the start and end of your working day. This commute will mark the start and finish of your working day, ensure regular time outside of your home and a space for reflection, will be a short piece of regular exercise.

Reaching Out

You might struggle with reaching out to people online, especially if you do not know them well. Maybe you are worried that the other person doesn't want to talk to you, that they will judge you for the question you have or you are just not used to communicating with people who you don't know well online. Whatever the reason, keep in mind that everyone is in the same boat at the moment. The way we are keeping in contact and communicating with people rapidly changed and it takes some time to get used to the new normal. Others will probably feel similar to the way you feel and are unsure themselves.

With a lot of teaching and extracurricular activities being delivered online for the time being, we will all have to get used to this new normal. As more people are working/studying away from each other, we will have to get used to communicating online and that includes reaching out. Some things that could help anyone struggling could be:

1. If you are unsure about the video conferencing programs that are being used, maybe arrange with friends or family to use them privately before you use them so you can trial all the possible features. Trust me, it works!
2. If you feel anxious about making a call to someone, maybe schedule it as a meeting so it isn't a surprise for the other person and you don't feel like you will interrupt them. Or schedule regular meetings with a workshop group or whoever you are working with to take the pressure off. Some things might be able to be conveyed in an email or a message so you don't have to speak on a call.
3. If you are struggling with the content of some course but feel too nervous to contact a lecturer in person, you could post it anonymously on Piazza or contact friends or your programme rep to either help you directly or relay your message.

Whichever way you choose to reach out and stay in contact, remember again that everyone is in the same situation and other people will probably find it difficult as well. With the way the world works at the moment, we can all expect to be reached out to and to reach out to others online and chances are if you have a question, someone else might have an answer or if you feel like wanting to chat, someone else will as well.

If you feel that you are continuing to struggle with this and the nervousness about reaching out to people isn't getting better as you get more used to it, there are different university services that might help you work through this nervousness. You can find them in the mental health section of this guide.

Mental Health

The [Chaplaincy](#) has a Listening Service anyone can turn to just to talk about whatever is on their mind. The name 'Chaplaincy' suggests, that you have to be religious to use their offers, but the listening service is for anyone and everything. For more information, you can watch the [video on this page](#) and get in contact with the Listening Service via Listening.Service@ed.ac.uk. On this support page, they also signpost to a lot of other services which you might find helpful. Apart from the Listening Service, the Chaplaincy also offers Mindfulness Sessions and a Mindletter, a weekly mindfulness newsletter, as well as a Podcast called [Let's Talk](#) all about life in lockdown.

The [Student Counselling Service](#) is a service supporting the mental health of students. They offer short-term counselling as well as a variety of self-help information.

The [Advice Place](#) has more information about mental health and wellbeing during COVID as well as other issues you might be facing.

Social Contacts

Sports Union

[EUSU Website](#)
[Sports Union on Facebook](#)

What to expect:
- "Sports Fair is Virtual"
- "Clubs are looking to host a combination of virtual and in-person activity"
- Using "guidance from SportScotland" and the University among other governing bodies
- "Clubs are looking to be creative as possible to offer inclusive experiences"

MathSoc

[MathSoc Website](#)
[MathSoc on Facebook](#)

What to expect:
- "academic families are still planning on running this year"
- "will keep academic families to a size of 5 (or five different households)"

EUSA

[EUSA Website](#)
[Edinburgh University Students Association on Facebook](#)

Other useful links:
[EUSA Virtual Neighbourhood Facebook Group](#)
[Welcome week events app to book tickets](#)
[Welcome week "What's On" Guide](#)

What to expect:
- "society activity for the first semester will be mostly, if not all, online"
- "encouraging our societies to make most of the University's Zoom, Teams and Teams Live accounts to facilitate activity"
- "have provisional Welcome Week ticketed activity planned" which would be limited to very small numbers
- Students can access "videos introducing them to societies, links to societies' social media accounts, purchase memberships" and hopefully a live chat to talk directly to different societies
- The Activities Fair will be held virtually "which will run over 6 days in Welcome Week and Week 1, in various 4-hour slots to accommodate different time zones"

The timings of this Activities Fair are as follows:
- Tuesday 15th September: 12 noon – 4pm (BST)
- Wednesday 16th September: 6pm – 10pm (BST)
- Thursday 17th September: 9am – 1pm (BST)
- Tuesday 22nd September: 12 noon – 4pm (BST)
- Wednesday 23rd September: 6pm – 10pm (BST)
- Thursday 24th September: 9am – 1pm (BST)

Personal Experiences

Here are some personal experiences, students have made through lockdown and with the abrupt change to online teaching at the end of last year. We hope they help you get an idea of what life can be like studying online and how to make the best of it.

Excerpt # 1
Before lockdown I was always someone who was constantly out and about. If it be just revising with friends in 50 George Square or meeting people for coffee, I was never at home. Don't get me wrong I enjoyed my flat and it was very comfortable, but I am just not a homebody. When lockdown hit, I realised not only was I stuck at home, but I did not have a desk or a table that would not break my back to study at. As a result, I had to temporarily move to my boyfriend's flat to quarantine because there was desk space for me there. There ended up being seven of us in the flat and we attempted to make the most out of the situation by going for walks, cooking and playing games together (a lot of Catan!). We even designated an unoccupied bedroom as the "the office". Although it was difficult to be trapped inside finding something interesting to do with your lockdown crew became the highlight of each day!

Excerpt # 2

I quite like having my own space and enjoy being alone but the lockdown made me really miss the in-person interaction, and just being able to do anything I want. Before, I would typically go to JCMB or Appleton Tower to socialize – there were always so many people around that I'd talk to them for hours. If I wanted to get work done, I'd need to find a quiet corner where no one would find me. That's why, most of the time, I used to do most work at home. However, being unable to change the environment for months was tough. My productivity dropped, it was hard to motivate myself. I kept looking forward to doing small things like groceries, and I longed to have a cup of good coffee (I probably save a fortune not being able to go to local cafés though) with friends. On the other hand, I started reading more again (and I could tell my friends did too from their activity on Goodreads), finished some knitting projects (anything to avoid staring at a screen!) and learned many new recipes.

Excerpt # 3

I struggled to get much work done at the start of lockdown. I thought with more hours in the day (less travel, socialising, etc.) I would get so much more done—more work, more reading, more films—that was not the case. WOLS did a virtual whisky tasting hosted on discord (the drams were delivered prior to the event) which was a very nice weekly event to take me away from my work and my repetitious daily experiences. Inspired by this, I set up a film club using discord which has been a really nice way to safely engage in cultural pursuits. Many of my friends are really struggling with their mental health in this time and it is tough to see; I try to speak to people on the phone regularly (including my grandparents). Working effectively has been really hard and doing maths over email is nowhere near as good as face-to-face, if an idea is non fully developed I find video chats are much more useful than emails (which take such a long time to write).