

18th March 2020

Dear Parent or Guardian

Key points

- The College will be closed to students on Friday 20th March so that staff can finalise preparations to support students on-line.
- From Monday 23rd March 'normal' lessons will cease and we will support students on-line. Students must regularly check their emails for instructions from their teachers.
- The College is not closed. Staff who are not self-isolating or ill will still be present next week (assuming the government does not close schools and Colleges). This means that College facilities such as the LRC will be open and staffed. Some students may be invited into College to complete imminent assessments or coursework – if so their teachers will contact them with details.
- The situation will be regularly reviewed and should we need to recommence 'normal' lessons we will do so. Similarly, should the government announce a closure of schools and colleges I will respond accordingly.

The decision to cease 'normal' lessons

Over the last few days I and my colleagues have been inundated with emails and calls from parents trying to keep their son or daughter safe whilst at the same time wanting them to complete this year's studies, particularly where they are so close to their final exams and assessments. Increasingly I have been questioned as to how students can be safe here when the government's advice is that in most other walks of life we should engage in 'social distancing'. These dilemmas are particularly fraught for parents where their son or daughter or a close family member has an underlying medical condition that places them in a high-risk group.

Some parents have suggested additional measures we could take to ensure the well-being of the College community, such as testing or taking the temperature of staff and students before they are permitted to enter the building. The problem is that even if such methods were practically and logistically possible the nature of the COVID-19 virus is that people can be infectious without demonstrating symptoms.

Similarly, some College staff have been placed in a very difficult position by the conflicting Government advice. They are all highly dedicated to their students and determined to give them the best teaching, support and guidance so that they can fulfill their potential. They are also hugely loyal to the College. Nevertheless, they have also been told by the government that where they or close family members have underlying medical conditions they must self-isolate.

The outcome of this is that we are faced with a situation where increasing numbers of staff and students are coming to the conclusion that it is not safe for them to be at College. At the same time while 'normal' lessons continue teachers have little time to support students who can't come into College. Faced by concerns about the impossibility of protecting vulnerable students, staff and family members against the virus, a lack of available personnel to adequately staff all lessons, and a lack of time for teachers to support those unable to come to College I have decided that we can best promote everyone's well-being by ceasing lessons and moving to on-line teaching and support.

Important assessments

After the well-being of the students, staff and family members of Worcester Sixth Form College my immediate concern is what will happen with the regard to the examinations, coursework and assessments of students – particularly when they are in the final year of courses in which they have worked so hard to be successful.

As I write we have had no information from the government, nor from bodies such as Ofqual or examination boards, other than statements that they have contingency plans that they are not ready to share with us. Ofqual proved particularly unhelpful with a communication that we should keep calm as there were many weeks until students' final assessments starting in May. This of course overlooks the fact that many students actually have coursework, assessments and practical examinations over the coming weeks and it fails to provide students, teachers and parents -with the reassurance they need at such a stressful time.

The official response, in my view, is very poor and I am delighted that the Sixth Form College's Association, along with the teaching unions, is pressing the government to provide some clarity and reassurance for students, teachers and parents with regard to these vital assessments as well as to the issue of whether schools and college's should really be open when they are advising the general population to self-isolate.

In the absence of clarity from the government with regard to final assessments I urge all students to continue to prepare as if these will go ahead as expected. We will try, if it is at all possible given issues relating to staff and student health and the exam boards' requirements, to support coursework, practical assessments and the like.

Looking ahead

I'd like to finish by reminding everyone that for the vast majority of people the effects of COVID-19 are expected to be mild. There is some evidence that young people are less likely to be infected, and if infected may be affected less others more generally. Even where there are underlying medical conditions that place us at higher risk if we take the steps advised by the Government with regard to self-isolation and receive appropriate medical support if required then the risks to our health will be minimized.

I also know that in Worcester and more generally across our part of the West-Midlands we benefit from strong family connections and a sense of commitment to our community which means we can support each other and be well-placed to resume our lives once the virus has been defeated.

In the meantime I will continue to provide whatever information I can and the teachers and staff at College will endeavour to support students to the best of their ability.

Yours sincerely

Ed Senior
Principal