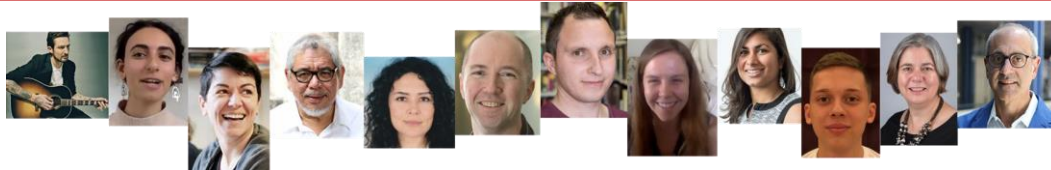# During a lockdown, how does a campus community cope?

A series of vignettes from different members of the LSE community

Woodland walks, zoom backgrounds, and the 'new norms' of teaching online

Dr Edgar Whitley, Associate Professor in the LSE Department of Management, discusses what's changed (and what's stayed the same) while campus has been closed

LSE Higher Education Blog

Which part of your day to do you most look forward to?

We've ended up looking after two dogs for a friend who was briefly in hospital before lockdown started and who's now self-isolating, so we all look forward to our daily exercise - us and the dogs! A morning walk in the woods near us, watching things grow and blossom on a daily basis. We're also fortunate that we've got a nice garden, and the dogs love running around in the garden as well.

What have you found challenging during lockdown?

With friends and colleagues based in Italy, I was anticipating moving to online teaching in advance of the School's online announcement and therefore was busy kind of thinking through the plans that we'd make depending on when we actually needed to move to online teaching. Fortunately the transition went surprisingly well and the students really appreciated the way that we were able to keep pretty close to the existing structures, although we had a number of activities planned, such as a debate for one course, peer review of essay plans, guest lectures for another, moving those to online didn't actually cause too many problems, a bit of behind-the-scenes preparation, but from the student side that worked surprisingly well. It also helps, of course, that our students in Information Systems are particularly comfortable with the use of technology, so when things were not quite working, they were able to move around that very, very rapidly. I've written some short reflections on these experiences for the Eden Centre, for examples on the online teaching page.

How do you keep in touch with the LSE community?

Like everyone else, we've been doing a lot of Zoom meetings with family and friends, typically family quizzes, and sort of catch-ups and gossips with friends. The department has also organised a number of wellbeing coffee mornings, and they have been a really nice way of keeping in touch with colleagues from the department and having those kinds of conversations that you would typically have when you're walking into your office on a regular day, and you just kind of pass the time of day

and say hello to a few people, literally as you walk past people going to your own office. We've also obviously had regular faculty meetings to discuss how we look after ourselves and our own wellbeing, as well as how we make sure that the students are having a good experience. In terms of research, again, collaboration online, but many of those kinds of activities have been happening already, because we've been working with people around the world, so no big change there. Perhaps a little bit more time for some of us, certainly those who don't have childcare commitments and caring commitments at home, but no real difference there.

What do you miss most about being on campus?

Well, one of the things I particularly noticed during the teaching at the end of last term, was the kind of changed nature of the interactivity in the lectures and seminars. So I think that we were particularly lucky that we moved to online teaching at the end of the academic year, where students already knew that I was very comfortable with being asked questions, interrupted, challenged about some of the things that I was saying, throughout the lectures. So the students themselves continued to be happy to do that, continued to be happy to ask questions, interrupt, ask for clarification, etcetera. Although the changed nature of the interactivity meant that those kind of questions more typically arose when you would pause and ask if everybody's okay, if everybody's following, if anybody has any questions, whereas in the lecture you can kind of see if somebody's perhaps looking a little bit puzzled, give a little bit more explanation, or you can see a hand sort of half hovering, coming up, rather than anything else. For the lectures and for the seminars we found that most students were switching off their videos and muting themselves, up until that point they wanted to interrupt, or ask a question, or whatever. I think in part that was to do with band-width, because we did have some students who were struggling with the connectivity, and obviously having video running at the same time as the lecturer speaking could be more challenging for their internet connections. So, although you can see the advantages of looking at everybody and seeing how they're reacting, it's also very understandable why people switch off their video connections particularly, and also muting when they know that somebody is speaking. Again, with the dogs, if the doorbell rings there's always a risk that the dogs will go crazy and we rapidly have to mute my connection so I don't disturb everyone else. It will be interesting to see how, in the new academic year, we both instil and maintain this idea that the lectures and seminars are very much intended to be interactive and that we expect people to ask questions, and engage, and challenge the lecturers as they're speaking. As I say, it was easy to continue to do that because the students had appreciated that that was the norm, but building that in from the very start may be quite a difficult challenge. But who knows? By the beginning of the next academic year this may become closer to the new norm for students as well.

Would you like to share some words of advice or your personal mantra that gets you through lockdown?

One little thing that I've been doing to kind of keep myself sane, particularly for the students, is I've been using the Zoom virtual backgrounds to provide a range of different images for the lectures and for the seminars. I've been using photos from our garden – at the moment I have a photo of one of our rhododendron bushes. And it was quite interesting, because you need to find an image that works when your head is in the middle of the screen, so it's actually quite a good distraction activity to kind of choose photos that work, or to take new photos where you're off-centre or the focus of the image is off-centre so that it actually works. And the students, I think, appreciate having a slightly different image every time they come to a lecture or a seminar on a different day.