

A look inside the University of Suffolk with new distancing measures

What will life be like for freshers starting higher education in the county this month? **Danielle Lett** finds out more

University of Suffolk – which has campuses across the county and also in Great Yarmouth – will open its doors to over a thousand new students, alongside those returning for their continuing studies this autumn, with its Freshers' Week taking place between Monday September 21 and Sunday October 4.

While no one could have predicted back in March that this September's welcome events would be taking place mostly over Zoom, the team at University of Suffolk's Student's Union has spent the last few months putting together a number of activities to ensure this year's starters still have the time of their lives as they become acquainted with their new peers.

Chief executive of the University of Suffolk's Students' Union Sarah Tattersall said: "We would normally have a six-month plan in place when it comes to events - things like the Summer Ball and Freshers' Week are big

annual events that we plan for all year. We had assumed that'd we be running a very similar plan to previous years - which would include lots of face-to-face events, such as a big Freshers' Fair; a bar crawl, and lots of societies and sports teams 'give it a go' activities. But it quickly became apparent through March and April that we'd be likely running a predominately online Freshers' Week."

With the Student Union's president Dan Goulborn and vice president Mauro Cardoso both elected in March and assuming their posts in July, the two, along with the SU events team, quickly needed to re-strategise and come up with a new range of events ahead of September that were the right balance of both socially engaging and socially distanced - all while working remotely.

"We've been in contact with the SU team and everyone during lockdown - it's been really weird starting and not being in the office," explained Dan. "I



remember when lockdown began back in March. I was working in the SU shop, and I came in on the Monday morning after the elections, just as everything was starting to close down. People were so sad to see the campus close - it was awful. In common with other Universities, we had to cancel all events, including the Summer Ball.

"At the time, we were always hoping we'd be able to host something in person by May, as face-to-face contact is always going to be better. But I think by the time Mauro and I came into post, we realised that was going to be really difficult to do."

Putting their heads together, the team got their thinking caps on and came up with a number of Covid-friendly events that they hope will prove both fun and safe for all involved.

"We had to be quite creative in thinking of these ideas - it's not just quizzes," explained Dan. "We've got to do something interesting, and a bit more special really - especially for the freshers, as it's a big, important part for the new university starters."

"A lot of ideas have come from when Dan and I have networked with student unions from

different universities," added Mauro. "We've worked closely with a lot of people who are also in our position, so we use some of their ideas, and they take some of ours - it's a really good relationship to have."

Events that University of Suffolk students can expect to take place over Zoom this month include a 'meet our societies and sports teams' day, a mindfulness session, two separate comedy nights, a coffee masterclass, a cocktail making workshop and a cook-along. But how exactly will these translate online?

"For instance, with the cook-along and the coffee masterclass, we haven't tried those before, but we've seen them done and we hope we're able to make them really interactive and fun. Part of the plan is that people will get a box that will include all the ingredients they need, and the instructions to follow for the cook-along. We're hoping we can keep people engaged throughout so they can meet other students, even though it's virtually," said Sarah.

"We've also always done comedy, and we have contacts who we believe can make it work online because we've met them before in person, so there's some strong

relationships there. It will certainly be interesting to see how that goes and how many people attend."

But how worried are the team, in regards to the numbers of people actually logging on and attending these virtual events? Not very, according to Sarah, as the University has already trialled one of its first online shindigs with its student and staff awards earlier this spring, which turned out to be a great success.

"We had our student awards ceremony online in May, and we'd always had a big event previously, with a sit-down formal dinner for our most high achieving students, and those who put the most into student life and sports. This year though, it was held online. We had 75 people attend - and we were really pleased with that."

While a mostly-online Freshers' Week may not have been what the majority of students who applied for university this year had in mind, the team has recognised that there is a fraction of the student population who may actually benefit from this new way of doing things.

"We're hoping that students with social anxiety for example can join a call with their camera



ESX Vice president Mauro Cardoso with president Dan Goulborn, pictured with some of the new social distancing measures ahead of the start of the 2020 academic year



SU vice president Mauro Cardoso, chief executive Sarah Tattersall and president Dan Goulbourn. University of Suffolk has put social distancing measures in place around campus for when students return this month
Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND

off and microphone off, just so they can attend the events still and feel part of that community," said Dan.

"We also know that student parents and mature students who might not have attended our face-to-face events previously might be free in the evening for a Zoom event, so we're going to monitor that quite closely. But Dan is right, there's all sorts of reasons people might not participate, so we're quite looking forward to seeing if that changes virtually," added Sarah.

As restrictions have slowly been easing over the course of the summer, the Students' Union has also been able to add in a handful of outdoor events to its schedule, enabling students to meet in person as well, at a distance.

"As things have improved, we have been able to organise a couple of socially distanced face-to-face walks, including one in Christchurch Park and one on Felixstowe Beach. We'll be following government guidelines, with a maximum of 30 people in attendance," said Sarah.

"We've thought about the logistics, and we will have as many staff as we need on hand to make sure people stay in their

bubbles, and that they remain distant. We're dealing with adults, everyone is over 18, so we want to give people the opportunity to do something face-to-face, and it felt like those outdoor activities were the best option for this September."

As the team continues to look towards the future, the Students' Union is also aiming to potentially host its first physical events of the academic year later down the line, dependent on government advice.

"We really hope that if government guidance has changed by February, then we'll have a refreshers period, where we will be able to hold more in-person events, and we might be able to do more for people who just want to physically come to an event."

On top of the meticulously planned events that the team has put together, the university has also worked hard to make sure that the campus is following all necessary precautions that are needed once term officially begins.

With signs everywhere reminding students and staff to keep their distance, there are also a number of sanitising stations across campus, screens in front of desks, a one-way system in place

and socially-distanced bookable work spaces throughout.

"In addition, we're giving out branded face coverings as part of freshers too," added Sarah. "We are awaiting guidance on whether they will be mandatory across campus but we know many of our students and staff prefer to wear them and we support that. They'll also be required to access shops around campus."

As higher education students commence their studies, they will be met with a mixture of online and in-person classes - with lectures happening virtually, and smaller sessions such as seminars taking place as normal.

"There is a bit of unease and perhaps some unanswered questions, but that's quite natural at this time of year anyway, especially for people coming straight out of sixth form," said Dan.

"It's a massive change, but I'm really excited to get into the meat of this and get started properly. I'd really love to be talking to students in-person all the time, but we are still here working, and we've not actually closed at all."

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Floor signs reminding students and staff to stay socially distanced



SU vice president Mauro Cardoso using one of the many sanitising stations around campus



Floor signs - one of the many ways University of Suffolk is helping remind people the importance of social distancing