

School of Politics and International Relations

Student Guide to Blended Learning

September 2020



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Welcome



Welcome back to our returning students, and a very warm welcome to those of you joining us for the first time. I hope you and your families have managed to stay safe and well. As you all know, the coronavirus pandemic has forced universities around the world to change the way they teach their students and Queen Mary is no different. Our campus is simply not large enough to accommodate socially-distanced classes, and so we have had to rapidly transition to online learning. These changes are designed to keep our students and staff safe until the pandemic has subsided. In the School of Politics and International Relations, we will continue to offer some educational activities on campus, for those who can and wish to attend. But the core of your

education will, for the time being, be delivered online. This guide tells you what you need to know and do in order to prepare for and to thrive in this new environment. Please read it carefully and follow all of the advice. Your lecturers have been working incredibly hard for many months to prepare and are ready to support you through this new learning experience. There are certainly challenges for you and for us. It will not be what any of us are used to, and no doubt there will be bumps on the road ahead. But the School remains dedicated to providing you with the world-class education that you deserve. I wish you every success with your studies this year.

Dr David Williams

Head of the School of Politics and International Relations

Jargon busting

Blended learning – a mixture of online and in-person learning. This is the term Queen Mary uses to describe its educational approach in 2020/21.

Synchronous – educational activities that take place live, in real time, at specified times. This may include: live-streamed lectures; one-to-one consultations with lecturers in their Advice and Feedback Hours (also known as office hours); online seminars (also known as webinars), etc.

Asynchronous – educational activities that are not scheduled at particular times, or are scheduled over extended time periods (e.g. 24hrs) during which the activity should be completed. These activities can be supervised or unsupervised. They require students to plan and manage their own work. This may include: watching pre-recorded lectures; posting in online discussion forums; reading and preparation for seminars; planning and writing coursework, etc.

What to Expect: How Blended Learning Works

Queen Mary's blended learning approach involves two strands:

- **The core of your education will be delivered online.** Whether you come to campus or prefer to stay at home will not matter. Everything you need to succeed educationally will be provided through our virtual learning environment, QMplus, and associated applications.
- **Some educational activities will be delivered on campus,** for those who wish to participate. In SPIR, we are designing these activities such that they will enrich your learning experience, but not be essential to your success – so as not to disadvantage those who cannot or choose not to attend campus during the pandemic.

The Online Core

Your primary interface to all of your modules will be QMplus. Each module page has been comprehensively redesigned to provide a standard and easy-to-follow “learning journey” each week. They will contain:

- Comprehensive instructions on what you are expected to do for each week/ topic, including asynchronous preparation (e.g. reading, worksheets, posting in forums);
- Details of and links to the synchronous activities for that week (lectures and seminars);
- A backup discussion forum for those unable to attend a seminar (see more details below);
- Reading lists and additional resources, with all sources fully accessible online, predominantly via the Queen Mary library;
- Details of how you will be assessed, the criteria used for assessment, and how and when you will receive feedback.

Synchronous sessions will be timetabled. You will receive your personalised timetable electronically. You must attend your timetabled sessions. If you are routinely unable to attend at the specified time (e.g. because you have a clash, work in paid employment at that time, or are in an awkward time zone), you must contact SPIR's timetabling manager, [Jason Salucideen](#), to request a transfer to a different group. We will try to accommodate students in distant time zones in the most appropriate slot available, but timings are necessarily limited by the working hours of UK-based staff. **If you are persistently unable to participate in synchronous sessions for any reason, you must contact the student support manager immediately** to discuss your options:

- Undergraduate Year 1: [Jason Salucideen](#)
- Undergraduate Years 2 and 3: [Bronwyn Murphy](#)
- Postgraduate: [Alex Foster](#)

If you cannot attend a synchronous session due to a one-off difficulty (personal or technical), the following are available to you.

- **Lectures:** all lectures in SPIR will be either pre-recorded or live recorded, or have an alternative way to catch up, e.g. extensive lecture notes.
- **Seminars:** these are the core of your educational experience at university and there is really no way to “catch up” if you miss them. Seminars also cannot be recorded as this would entail recording students, not just staff, and this may inhibit free and open discussion of the sensitive topics often discussed in SPIR, which would damage your education. Instead, as a fallback, all modules will offer an asynchronous discussion forum with details instructions for that week.

The asynchronous forums should not be considered an optional alternative to seminars (or an optional extra). They can never replicate the interactive learning experience of a seminar, nor the disciplinary and interpersonal skills or social contacts that come through working in a group of students. To contain student and staff workloads, the forums must also be strictly time-limited. SPIR limits the length of forums to 24 hours. Your module page will explain when the 24-hour period starts and ends. Students must complete all of the instructions during this period, and staff will post briefly in response to student input during the same timeframe.

You will also be able to contact your lecturers and your Advisor (the staff member responsible for providing you with general academic and pastoral advice) online. Individuals will explain how best to reach them – most prefer an email (see [here](#) for guidance on writing emails to academic staff). All tutors will hold regular Advice and Feedback Hours (also known as “office hours”), where you can drop in to discuss your work, get advice on how to improve or what to do next, and get additional feedback on your work. Information about the timings of these sessions will be posted on the QMplus Undergraduate and Postgraduate Information Zones and the module pages.

On-Campus Activities

These will be of two kinds:

- Sessions relating to your level of study, i.e. whole-cohort sessions provided to everyone in your year group. SPIR’s Senior Tutor and Director of Education will write to you about these in due course.
- Sessions designed to enrich your experience on a particular module. Your module convenor will explain whether any sessions have been scheduled, what they will involve, and how to access them. These may not be provided on all modules, as sometimes they may not be considered useful for your education, and some staff cannot attend campus for health reasons.

Queen Mary is strictly abiding by government guidelines to keep students and staff safe on our campuses. You can read more about what that involves [here](#). These guidelines include “social distancing”: keeping individuals two metres apart to reduce coronavirus transmission. This radically reduces the capacity of our teaching rooms. For example, with two-meter distancing, only six rooms on campus can hold more than 40 students, while our seminar rooms can no longer hold more than ten people.

This necessarily limits our ability to offer in-person educational activities. In addition, students with health concerns (or with at-risk people in their household) may be unable or unwilling to attend campus. Obviously, we need to respect students' decisions and not disadvantage them.

Accordingly, SPIR's on-campus activities will necessarily be limited in number and capacity, and will involve booking systems to ensure social distancing. SPIR's policy is that these sessions must be designed as optional extras: they will enrich your learning experience, but they are not necessary to attend in order to succeed on your course. Wherever possible we will find a way for off-campus students to participate in these activities.

Get Ready: Essential Preparation Before Term Starts

It is important that all students get ready for blended learning before the start of the academic year, so that Welcome Week and teaching can get underway promptly, and you do not miss vital sessions.

1. Get the Right Equipment

Queen Mary has [specified](#) that to access blended learning, all students must obtain the following equipment.

A laptop or desktop PC with the following specifications:

- 8GB RAM
- Windows 10
- 256 GB SSD (recommended but not essential – a standard hard drive is also fine)
- Webcam
- Microphone (consider a headset – you will be able to hear, and be heard, more clearly, and isolate yourself from surrounding noise)

A tablet will not be sufficient and you must definitely not try to rely on a smartphone. You do not need to purchase a new computer. One purchased in the last 4-5 years should work fine – but do test the webcam and microphone to ensure they are working properly.

Details of discounted equipment for students can be found at [Student Beans](#) and [UNIdays](#). If you cannot afford a PC, Queen Mary can provide up to £500 via its Financial Assistance Fund. For more details click [here](#).

A robust internet connection, either:

- A broadband link with at least 10Mbps download speed and at least 1Mbps upload speed, or
- A 4G unlimited data plan PAYG SIM, using your smartphone as a data hotspot.

Broadband is obviously preferable as it is more reliable and likely to be faster. A cable connection to the router is also more reliable than WiFi. If you are renting accommodation, be sure to ask about broadband access.

2. Get Set Up in Your Working Environment

To make the most of your educational experience, you will need to be able to concentrate, to listen, and to speak, especially during synchronous sessions. That means you will need a quiet and undisturbed place to work. Where computer equipment and broadband connections are shared, you'll also need to secure access to these. We understand that all of this can be difficult in crowded households, so please discuss this with your family/

housemates to make the best possible arrangements, especially during timetabled synchronous sessions.

If you do not have suitable space at home to access your classes, QMUL is providing bookable study spaces on campus that you can use. Click [here](#) for details.

3. Get the Right Software

You will need to download and install the following programmes.

- **Google Chrome:** this is the best browser for accessing all content and sessions at Queen Mary. Mozilla Firefox is also supported but can be less reliable. We do not recommend any other browser. Download Chrome [here](#).
- **Microsoft Teams:** this is an application that allows you to chat and video call anyone within Queen Mary, share files, and more. Lecturers will often use it to communicate with you, and to set up social spaces where you can chat and collaborate with other students. Download, installation and usage instructions are [here](#).
- **Microsoft Office:** you will need these applications to communicate by email and to complete your coursework. As a Queen Mary student, you can obtain this software for free [here](#).

4. Test Drive Your Kit

SPIR is offering several practice sessions in the week commencing 7 September (see below for joining links, and drop-in times), where you can test whether your hardware and software is working correctly, and get support to fix any problems. **We strongly urge you to use this opportunity.** This will ensure that all technical issues are ironed out before Welcome Week and teaching starts, so you will not miss any of your education.

Drop in times:

- Monday 7 September, 10am-12pm
- Tuesday 8 September, 1pm-3pm
- Wednesday 9 September, 10am-12pm
- Thursday 10 Sept, 1pm-3pm

Links to join the drop-in sessions

- [Blackboard Collaborate Drop-in](#)
- [Links for MS Teams Drop-in](#)

5. Follow the QMUL Guide to Blended Learning

Queen Mary has provided a detailed set of web-based lessons on online learning. It includes introductions to QMplus, Blackboard Collaborate, and Microsoft Teams, as well as many

hints and tips on how to get the best out of the learning experience. You can find it [here](#). Please work your way through the lessons before the start of the teaching semester.

Get Going: 5 Top Tips for Learning Online

1. Act as You Would on Campus

These days we spend much of our lives online, chatting to friends, tweeting our thoughts, commenting on Instagram, or making TikTok videos. It can be difficult to separate those informal activities from the more formal, professional work of university life. A good rule of thumb is to conduct yourself online as you would do on campus. In SPIR, we discuss sensitive and controversial subjects, and we want a free, open, and robust exchange of viewpoints. Disagreement is an essential part of a university education, and self-censorship is discouraged. However, all students and staff naturally expect everyone to communicate politely and respectfully, using formal written English. The same applies online – but this often takes more thought. Online, we miss body language, facial expressions and the easy rapport of face-to-face interaction, so jokes, sarcasm and so on often transmit less well. Try to reflect on how others might interpret your communication – and treat others as you would like to be treated. The usual regulations still apply – see the [Code of Student Discipline](#) and [IT Policy](#) for details.

2. Turn Off the Distraction Machine

The internet and computers make online learning both possible and difficult. Combined with smartphones, they have rightly been referred to as a “distraction machine”. They constantly tempt us to stop the important (but perhaps difficult or even boring) work we’re doing, and flip onto something more exciting: check that inbox; refresh that social media feed; browse that online store; read that news website... the list is endless.

Accordingly, when learning online, you need to make even greater efforts to turn off the distraction machine. That means:

- **Always closing down every other browser window and app, and turning off your phone, when attending synchronous sessions.** The temptation to flick between screens will otherwise be overwhelming, and you’ll miss vital learning.
- **Carving out hours in your schedule which you devote to Internet-free working.** It’s a good idea to schedule all the asynchronous work you have to do (class preparation, coursework, etc) into your diary, so you can manage your time effectively. But now, more than ever, you’ll need to discipline yourself to do this work without online distractions. Wherever possible, disable your internet connection, or at the very least close down all other tabs, windows and apps likely to distract you.

If you’re interested to read more about the negative impact of the internet on our brains and attention spans, check out Nicholas Carr’s book *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way we Think, Read and Remember* (available online via the [QMUL library](#)), and for more tips on overcoming these problems, see Cal Newport’s *Deep Work: Rules for*

Focused Success in a Distracted World (available in print, via [QMUL library](#)'s "click and collect" service).

3. Check Your Emails

Students often complain that they receive too much email from Queen Mary; staff often complain that students don't read their email and so miss vital information. The fact is that email is now essential to the functioning of a modern university, and dealing with large numbers of emails is a vital life skill, however much we might dislike it (you should see the volume of email your lecturers get!). Students should be checking their email at least once daily – no ifs, no buts. See [here](#) for guidance on writing emails to academic staff.

4. Follow Webinar Netiquette

Most online seminars and meetings follow a similar process to make things manageable.

- **Shut down all other sources of distraction.** See Point 2 above!
- **Keep your microphone muted unless you want to speak.** Otherwise, everyone will talk over each other or we'll hear too much background noise. If you want to contribute, use the "raise hand" function and the tutor will come to you. The exception to this rule might be in small breakout rooms – with only a few people, it'll be easier to manage, and discussion will be more fluid with all mics on.
- **Use the camera if you can.** Learning online can be very isolating, and communicating without being able to see someone's face can be difficult – so try to keep your webcam on, if you can. Do consider your environment and don't have anything on show you wouldn't want others to see. If you have privacy or other concerns, you can of course keep your camera off. Another exception might be if you or other students are struggling with their connection – then your tutor might ask you to switch off cameras to minimise bandwidth. Voice is more important than video.
- **Avoid using the chat except for urgent or technical problems.** It can be very distracting to try to follow an oral discussion *and* a separate, parallel discussion in the chat. For that reason, you should avoid using the chat function during synchronous seminars/ lectures except to raise urgent problems, e.g. you cannot hear what is being said. Some tutors may ask you to post in the chat at particular times, e.g. to ask or answer questions – then it's fine, of course!

5. Reach Out

Learning online can be very isolating. We miss the social interactions in, before and after classes, and the extra-curricular activity that makes university life so rich. This makes it all the more important to reach out to others. Do:

- Participate in student societies' online activities: see the [Queen Mary Student Union website](#) for details.
- Participate in our social media channels @qmpoliticsir: [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#)

- Use the online MS Teams established for your cohort – details will be available on the [QMplus School of Politics Landing page](#). Everyone in your year group in the School will be added to your cohort Team. You can chat to everyone, find other students and chat to them directly, work in small groups, and so on.
- Participate in module-related activities. For example, some convenors will establish MS Teams groups for their module, where you can chat informally to fellow students and/or collaborate on your work. Do make use of these opportunities to get to know others, share your knowledge, and develop your skills together.
- Reach out to other students individually, by email, or on MS Teams. Everyone is in the same boat, and will be happy to be contacted.

Where to Get Help

Inevitably you will feel a bit lost at times – but please, never suffer in silence. Routing your query to the right person will ensure you get help as fast as possible.

Technical Problems

If there is an issue with a module's QMplus page, such as a broken link or missing resource, or you don't understand the content, you should email the module convenor. For all other technical issues, such as problems with your PC or difficulties accessing seminars, etc, academic staff cannot assist. Instead, contact QMUL's IT Services on 020 7882 8888, by email at helpdesk@qmul.ac.uk, or via 24-hour live chat [here](#).

Module-Specific Academic Queries

All questions relating to academic matters on a particular module should be sent in the first instance to your seminar tutor and, if they cannot help, the module convenor. They can answer specific questions about the module content, coursework, etc. If for any reason the convenor cannot help, you can contact SPIR's Director of Education, [Dr Madeleine Davis](#).

General Academic or Pastoral Queries

If you are struggling academically on a number of different modules, or suffering personal problems that are impeding your ability to study, it is a good idea to speak with your Advisor, who can try to work out what's going wrong, advise you on what to do next, and route you to central support services. If you are not sure who your Advisor is, check on the QMplus Information Zone. You can also speak to the student support managers:

- Undergraduate Year 1: [Jason Salucideen](#)
- Undergraduate Years 2 and 3: [Bronwyn Murphy](#)
- Postgraduate: [Alex Foster](#)

The Academic Skills Enhancement Team also offers a course to support transitioning to university and a short online module on studying online.

Other Support Services

Queen Mary provides a wide range of support services, from learning development to languages, from disability and dyslexia to careers and enterprise. See the "Where to Get Help" section on [SPIR's Welcome Week QMplus page](#) for more details.

