# **LOOK UK Webinar: Back to Uni: Q&A for Visually Impaired Students Webinar 26th August 2020**

**In association with Thomas Pocklington Trust**

# Challenge:

We know that many of you have questions and concerns about what life at Uni is going to be like in the "new normal", and we want to help.

# Objective:

During this event we hope to be able to answer some of your questions about what to expect when you start or return to university, especially during the current situation we find ourselves in. VI students will have many obstacles to overcome over the next few months as we return to some kind of normal and we would like to help you as much as we can.

Every university will be different in their approach, but by coming together we can start to make sense of what higher education will be like for most people over the coming months.

# Introduction:

Elin: Hello, I am the events coordinator for LOOK. LOOK is a small, national charity supporting visually impaired children, young people and families through peer mentoring and confidence building events. Through lockdown we’ve been quite fortunate that the online mentoring has been able to continue as that is on an online platform anyway. We have transferred all of our other events into an online format and that has been working really well. In terms of our work with students, our mentoring service is run by connecting visually impaired young people with older visually impaired mentors, so a visually impaired adult. For students, we have a specific strand of the mentoring for university students where we match the VI young person who is thinking about university, or they might just be about to start, with a visually impaired graduate so they can have all the support from someone who has been through it all. At the start of this year, we started to develop our university handbook and our ‘Get Uni Ready’ events. The university handbook is available on our website. Our ‘Get Uni Ready’ events were designed to give VI young people a flavour of what it might be like to go to university. They have been put on hold for the time being, but we are hoping to pick those up again in the future. Through our work with young people going to university, we know there is a lot of uncertainty and questions at the moment around either starting or going back to university in September.

Tiri: I am a visually impaired student; I am just going into my third year at Oxford studying Medicine. On top of doing my degree, I also chair the Oxford SU Disabilities Campaign, which is a student-run campaign within the university representing disabled students. We do a bit of campaigning within the university as well as within the city of Oxford. We also arrange socials for disabled students.

Panellists:

Will: I am an Access and Outreach Coordinator at the university of Winchester. My role entails supporting students, mostly before they get to university. I do a lot of going out into the community, talking to people from different backgrounds, who may or may not want to go to university. I talk to them about the support that is available there to them. I am not visually impaired, but I am hearing impaired so I have some experience of being in those meetings that can be quite nerve wracking at times. Also, when you’re trying to get your message across around the support and advice and guidance that you need. In a previous role, I was involved in Student Union work, I was the Equality and Diversity Officer whilst I was at university. Also, from a young age I have been a public speaker and advocate for anything to do with representation, making sure that absolutely everybody has a fair and equal opportunity to go on and succeed in whatever they want to go and do. In terms of universities and the current climate that we’re in, it is a mixed bag. I hope you do take something away from this event, hopefully ideas and information that you can use, whether you’re a student or a professional. This is a great opportunity for us to all come together with one voice and make sure that we all understand the challenge that is ahead of us but also how we can together overcome that. We hope to be able to support students especially throughout this period. Universities are all going to be dealing with things differently, but hopefully we’ll be able to give tips and pointers for what routes they should be going down.

Molly: I work for Thomas Pocklington Trust Student Support Service. We’re a new service, we launched in April 2020. We are a national service who aim to support students entering and throughout their time in further and higher education. Our overall aim is to help you get the most out of your time in higher education. There are lots of different elements to our service, we started by building up a bank of resources for students, for their families, for universities and for other professionals. We wanted to provide some guidance and a reference point to some of these issues that we are all facing and to share best practice because we are firm believers that coming together and sharing these ideas is a strong way forward. We also have an email inbox and support line where we can offer one-to-one support. If you have a specific query or a case that needs one-to-one support, we can provide that for you. We also hold events, such as this, and we have a Facebook community which is a good platform to share information on or to just have a conversation with someone who has experience of being in a similar situation to yourself. Lastly, we have a policy and campaigning side, where, when we identify an issue that is affecting lots of students, we hope to elevate that voice of students with vision impairments, consult on government proposals, or raise awareness of the issues. We collate evidence so that we can argue for improvements that are needed. I began working with TPT a few years ago, I have just completed a Ba in business management, so I have first-hand experience of being a student and studying in this current environment. I look forward to sharing any tips that I can.

# Chapter One – Learning: How you will access the academic material

# **What are the benefits of the blended approach?**

# Tiri: Most universities are thinking about having a blended approach to learning, this means a combination of in person and online teaching. Personally, I have found doing the Summer term entirely online, there were some pros. There were recorded lectures, before, if I missed something in a lecture, it was gone, and I never got to learn that bit of information. These I can stop and rewind and because they are synced with the PowerPoints, I can see and hear the lecture at the same time. Normally I would sit in a lecture and listen then later try and write up notes and combine what I think I remember hearing with the PowerPoint I can now see on my laptop. So, this was an improvement for me. We have been trying to get recorded lectures at Oxford regardless of Coronavirus for many years, so we’re really hoping that this is a change that can carry on beyond when normal teaching returns. There are issues with that, just not being in the room with somebody does make things harder, and people who use notetakers, as many visually impaired students do, it’s hard to know how to use a note taker when you’re both accessing something online.

# **With some lectures having moved online, how do you anticipate note takers, such as those provided through DSA, to be able to best support visually impaired students?**

Will: It really does depend on you as an individual as we move across to recorded sessions. There may be other ways that you can use things such as the DSA, also how much you anticipate using a note taker. It might be that you feel that you actually want a note taker present more so in the face-to-face learning sessions and everything that is done online you’re happy and you’re confident to do by yourself. That would involve a conversation with your university. The universities will still try and put together a package that works best for you, so it’s vitally important that if having a note taker is important to you that you have that conversation and that you start having that conversation as soon as possible. It’s worth noting as well though that the use of note takers in any of the physical spaces will have to be included in any numbers or capacities when it comes to rooms. Universities will be developing their timetables, thinking about the capacity of a room and so it’s very important when talking to your university, and saying whether or not you need a note taker, that you do follow up and say that this is another person that’s going to be present. Also, thinking about how are you going to work with a note taker online, if you are both accessing a resource online, are you then going to arrange another point to meet socially distanced apart to discuss anything, or are you just going to rely on anything that is going to come from the note taker to you, as it would normally happen. It’s important to start thinking about when is best for you to have a note taker.

1. **For in person sessions, as visually impaired students, how will we go about finding a socially distanced seat, how will we go about changing classrooms and, for those who have useable vision but need to get closer to things to see them, how will be sure we can get closer without breaking social distance guidelines?**

Tiri: I personally hope that there is going to be enough support from the staff giving the seminars that they can direct people to seats, although this is hard to do while maintaining social distancing. In that, there is also the issue with note takers that we have already mentioned, as well as other non-medical helpers. Note takers are those that are most likely to be directly involved in learning, but some people have specialist support and I know most people who have that already have moved it online. Whether you can get the same level of support online is an issue. People who are starting new at university who are due to have training with new technology, our understanding is that it’s not going to be something that can happen face-to-face. Clear Links, who are one of the biggest companies that provide non-medical helpers in this sense have said that they won’t be doing any face-to-face contact until at least January. How can we make sure that students are getting the most that they can out of all of their lectures and teaching even if that’s in person, when they may not have a note taker who can go with them to all their lectures?

Will: Every university is going to be different, there are going to be things that some universities do that other don’t and that could be a very wide range of things. For example, at Winchester we are going by the 2 m rule, but a lot of people are suggesting it’s the 1 m plus, which is where it’s 1 m plus mitigation, others are going down a purely online route. So, there’s a great mix. As well as room layouts and making sure that everyone is distanced in a room layout, that is one thing that universities are doing, another thing is timetables. When you do have a face-to-face session, it might be expected that you will be going into buildings and leaving buildings at different times to everybody else. This could mean that your sessions are starting and ending at funny times. On top of that, the technology that is available in the rooms as well, it might be that some sessions that are delivered in person will also be recorded so it’s important that you have a conversation to discuss where you feel is safe. You may not fit under one of the high-risk categories, but it is all about where you feel safe so make sure you have that conversation with somebody. Because with you going in, it might be that everything is okay, but if you don’t feel comfortable there, then it’s you’re learning so you need to make sure that speak to someone about how you’re feeling about it. It’s not all about the physical side of things, you might not even get to that stage if you have anxiety about it or something like that.

Tiri: For anyone using the Sonocent Audio Notetaker software. Normally you'd have the Recording Source set to microphone. For an online lecture changing the audio source to "microphone + speaker" works really well. Will mentioned talking to faculties, I think the most important thing is identifying what you as visually impaired students are comfortable doing. If you’re all expected to go in person to a seminar but you don’t feel comfortable with that, even if you’re not clinically in the shielding group, I think that has to be respected. It is harder to social distance when you can’t see how far someone is away from you. I have personally already been in contact with my faculties to discuss how I’m going to go about getting to places and doing things while keeping myself safe and also everyone else safe. Luckily I am spending most of the term in labs so I will be with a small group of people in quite a clinically clean environment because everyone will already be wearing masks and gloves, so that has been really helpful for me. I know of friends who do humanities subjects where they are almost entirely in lectures or seminars where they are more worried about that. I would advise getting in touch with people at your university as soon as possible, even if you don’t think there are going to be any issues for you, just to make yourself known and to let them know that this could potentially be a problem.

1. **If new exam platforms are being used online, have they been tested with the appropriate tech, e.g. speech software? How do we make sure everyone can access their exams in a suitable format?**

Tiri: Hopefully most people will have their exams in the Summer, so there is plenty of time to get this sorted. However, there are some returning students who had their exams from this Summer postponed so they are coming up soon. Whenever your exams are, I would recommend bringing it up with your faculty now, asking what their current plans are with exams and also making sure, especially if you’re a new student, that your access needs are well understood by the faculty or whoever is providing the exams.

Molly: This is arguably the biggest area of university life that has had to change in terms of your academic work. Lots of assessments have previously been paper based or presentations have been done in person and all of these things have had to change quite quickly. One of the ways that universities have moved learning online is to use online portals. There are lots of different ones out there, BlackBoard is a popular one. Some of these aren’t accessible, we’ve had students who haven’t had the visual cues when submitting or uploading work, as a result they have then not been aware that their work hasn’t uploaded properly. We have had students who have had trouble with presentations because they haven’t been sure how to set up the camera or the microphone to the correct requirements needed by the exam board or regulators. Lots of remote exam platforms, they say they are accessible, but they might not be compatible with the technology that you currently have and are used to using. Just because they’re accessible, doesn’t mean they’re easy to navigate and in a stressful situation, such as an exam, that is very important. I would like to second Tiri’s points to make sure you communicate well in advance. Make sure you know the plan and make sure you know all of the systems the university is considering using and that they understand what you need in terms of reasonable adjustments and why, because that helps them to go through and filter out any options that they are considering that aren’t going to work for you. If you can, test out these methods as soon as you can. If you find them difficult to navigate, ask for someone to run training, to run through the key commands that you are going to need to know. That will then help you feel comfortable and confident going into these assessments and then if there are any issues, such as if it just isn’t accessible or compatible, we have plenty of time to work through and find an alternative, fair solution so you can compete on an equal platform for your assessment.

Will: For any professionals, it’s not about approaching visually impaired students and saying that you must help them. It’s about making sure there are clear methods for them to get in touch and that your door is open to them. That goes for all students, not just visually impaired ones, they need to know they can come to you with any concerns they might have.

1. **I’m on a course which involves a physical placement, I have an educator who at first helps me round before I can get used to the layout of wards. I also have to sit quite close to see what they’re doing. Do you have any suggestions for adaptations I can do to achieve my placement without having to get too close to either patient or my educator?**

Tiri: I’m a medical student so I relate to your concerns. I have started to ask questions about if I can wear more or higher quality PPE so that if I am closer it is less of an issue. I am also looking to get reassessed by the low vision support team who can provide me with a monocular and things like that so I can achieve the same level of vision but from further away. I haven’t used a monocular before because I would normally just get closer to the thing I’m wanting to see, but that is not always going to be an option now due to safety.

Will: I would suggest you find alternatives, and make sure you talk to any patients and everyone in the room to make sure they feel safe.

Molly: I have been working with a physics student recently who has a similar situation where they have to get close to things and when they are using equipment such as a Bunsen Burner, it’s not possible to physically get closer. To overcome this, they have used the camera on their iPad to zoom in and enlarge the screen to get a close-up view. They also found that having a conversation with whoever is around you that are providing some sighted assistance, whether that’s a specialist provider or just the people you are working with in your group, having a conversation early on about what kind of things you like to know about what is going on or for them to point out to you, that can be really helpful so that people know what kind of descriptions you need and any verbal instructions that might be helpful to you.

Tiri: With really specific scenarios, often the answer is just going to be for you to go and have these discussions with your university. I hope that a the very least it is reassuring for you to know that other people are having similar worries and that it’s not just you who is worrying about something.

1. **Can a note taker access the online resources?**

Molly: Non-Medical Helpers, especially specialist support providers, to deliver remote support, they may require access to the online portals and recorded lecturers. We have had a few say that some universities are reluctant to do this, one reason being copyright. I think it’s important to remind students to ask for their university to communicate with the support provider in advance to make arrangements that enable both parties to work effectively and support the student. Students have had support cut off at the end of last academic year because of this so it would be good to get this sorted before the beginning of the coming academic year.

# Chapter Two – Orientation and Mobility:

# We are talking about mobility support, especially for new university students who are yet to have any mobility training around where they are living and their campus. We will also look at the changes within cities and local areas because, although you’re a student, you also need to go to the shops and go to the bank, so you need to be able to manage those activities too. We will consider changes on campus, including one-way systems and Perspex screens, which can be a challenge for visually impaired individuals, and lastly, we will talk about some guide dog specific challenges that have come up recently.

1. **How are sighted guides going to work with social distancing? What should people do if they need a sighted guide?**

Molly: This is a big concern and a lot of providers are saying that no face-to-face services are going to run at all for this academic year. There is a lot of technology now that can be really helpful, see the resources chapter below for these and any relevant links. There are also mobile apps that can be helpful. It is worth saying that, even if a sighted guide cannot work within close proximity to you, it might be useful for you to arrange form someone to meet you at certain destinations on campus and just walk with you and give verbal instructions. If possible, you could keep this down to within your social bubble, or just with one member of staff as there is a concern for increased risk to both parties.

Will: There will be scenarios where you might not feel comfortable with a sighted guide, or the sighted guide might not feel comfortable and it is about making sure that everybody feels safe. Have a think about the places where it is going to be most useful to you to have a sighted guide. Certainly, early on if you are starting at university or you are returning to the campus, it might be a good idea to arrange some time with a sighted guide to get yourself used to the university campus. I would also say that technology is great, and you should use as much as you feel comfortable using, but we as universities completely accept that not everything can be replaced by technology.

Tiri: I am going into my third year, so I already know most of my routes. I am living somewhere different this year and normally I would call Guide Dogs as I have a guide dog and they can provide mobility training. Although Guide Dogs are still providing some mobility training, I am reluctant to ask and feel that I could maybe achieve the same thing myself. I can ask friends who I already have at university to walk the routes with me, personally having already been there for two years, I don’t think I need specific mobility training, I just need somebody to walk the route with me the first few times. This can be done with people that I am already having to social bubble with anyway so there is no need for social distancing. Alternatively, you could ask a family member to go around with you to begin with. I know that it is not really ideal to have a family member instead of official mobility training, but it is better than nothing. You might be able to visit your university with a family member before the start of term so you can walk through all the routes in advance of the start of term. The main thing would be to get in touch with anyone providing mobility training and see what they are currently able to offer. I would recommend you do that as soon as possible.

1. **A lot of universities and town centres have introduced one-way systems. These tend not to be accessible as they are usually just painted on the ground or notices stuck to lampposts. There are also Perspex screens being used to separate either side of a pavement or a corridor, these are often totally unmarked and are very easy to walk into so pose a safety hazard. How can we navigate these?**

Tiri: I have personally sent emails to relevant people within my university to ask what they are planning on doing for social distance marking and if they have considered how these can be made accessible or best adapted for visually impaired people. I hate the ones that are a long line because I see them in the corner of my eye and then I think there must be a step that I haven’t noticed before and so I jolt my leg as I prepare myself for a step that isn’t there. A lot of places are using the same tape that they use to mark stairs. For me, the most useful ones are the large spots on the ground so you can see where your spot is and if you move 2 m away there is another spot. Of course, this depends on your level of vision and what type of useful vision you have if any. Tactile markers would be very useful and so it is important that you get in touch with your university as soon as possible because if they haven’t already put social distancing markers in, you might be able to influence how they are going to do that, especially in your department or where you’re going to be living.

Molly: Every university is going to have their own approach. We have recommended to universities using tactile techniques. You can get tactile tape, but even if they can’t get that, we are discouraging them from using the yellow tape that is normally indicates a level change because, like Tiri previously mentioned, it is just confusing. For blocking out seats, we are recommending physical objects so there is a tactile barrier there and not just a sign which could be easily missed. In terms of the routes around campus, we are asking them to be as consistent as possible. It is helpful to everyone if there is some kind of consistency, such as always staying on the same side of the corridor. It is also useful for them to give advance notice of any changes that are being made. If you are a returning student there are going to be routes that you used to take that you can no longer take and there are likely to be entrances that close or open at different times which means you might not be able to rely on the same route that you would normally use. We are encouraging everyone to communicate these changes as early as they can. Some universities have set up Facebook groups so they can post on there any changes that are made on site or campus. Others have offered to email students to let them know if there are any changes or new measures introduced. If you think that is something that will help you, reach out to them and ask what their plans are. Don’t be afraid to ask for someone to email you to let you know about or to describe changes that have been made, just so you are prepared.

1. **I struggle to find an empty seat even without social distancing. Do you have any recommendations for finding a seat in a socially distanced manner?**

Tiri: This links to the advice of universities using tactile markers to block off areas. Firstly, I would ask the university to be consistent with what seats are in use throughout the year so you will know which seats are available. I would maybe suggest asking to have the same seat throughout, find one that is accessible to you and compatible with any other needs you have, such as sitting close to the front. This way you will know which seat is yours so you should be able to get there without having to bustle past everyone else or struggling to find an empty one. They can put a sign on it so sighted people can see that it is your seat, so they know not to sit there.

Will: A lot of it is going to be about the initial orientation. It is probably going to feel quite overwhelming in the first instance, certainly trying to get used to any one way systems and identifying where you’re going to sit when you get to your destination is going to be a challenge. There will need to be a lot of communication there so do talk to your universities around what your needs are and how you would suggest helping. Universities and any organisation really should be listening to you and listening to what you believe is best for you and then coming up with a solution. It might be that in each scenario you aren’t able to get exactly what you want each time, but by talking to them you can maybe say that when you go to this space, can I reserve a table or can I reserve a chair? What can I do to make sure there is going to be somewhere for me to work? Alongside that as well is making sure you know the safest routes as well, everything I have seen so far is completely inaccessible in terms of social distancing so it is worth remembering that the quickest way to get somewhere or the most convenient way may not be the safest route for you. So, think about the safest route for you and where the safest place for you is. If you are planning to sit somewhere is a room and you have no idea what is going on around you then you might want to sit to one side or you might want to sit somewhere else within the room that is more convenient for you. It is worth pointing out as well that the use of face coverings in certain areas may be mandatory so that might influence where you want to go to do your work, such as the library or other learning spaces. Each university is going to be different in their approach to that so make sure you find out what is happening at your university.

1. **Advice for Guide Dog users during Coronavirus.**

Tiri: As a guide dog user, I have had more guide dog refusals and issues with my guide dog. I have had to be strict with people and inform them that the law hasn’t change in respect to guide dogs. I have had to stick up for myself more than I have had to before Coronavirus. I know some people have found they have had fewer access refusals because people are less likely to come near you. Universities should know better but, if you are a guide dog user, I would recommend that you contact you university and ask them to send emails round to all the places you’re going to be going to just remind them that your guide dog is allowed to go everywhere with you, with certain laboratory exemptions. This is something I have done this year, even though I am a returning student, just to remind people that the law hasn’t changed in that respect at all. It has been suggested to use the Sunflower lanyard to show others you struggle to social distance. The lanyard is not directly linked to Coronavirus, it was set up well before to show that someone might need extra help due to something which could be an invisible disability. Some visually impaired people do not use a guide dog or white cane, so it is not immediately obvious that they struggle to social distance. However, some people may not be comfortable identifying themselves in that way. A few universities are setting up their own system or encouraging people to use the sunflower lanyard so if you are comfortable and confident in using that, it can be a good tool.

Will: We have recognised that a global pandemic puts a spotlight on certain issues and potential solutions, such as the sunflower lanyard. I have noticed a big uptake in people using these lanyards and so, if you are concerned about wearing something like that and announcing it to the world as it were, be aware that you are not the only one in that situation. Also, find out what your university if recommending people use.

Molly: There are a number of these tools, the lanyard is the big one but there are also cards and badges. People can get annoyed if you’re not social distancing so it can be useful to have a visual cue to explain why you are not sticking to the social distancing rules. However, it Is completely understandable if you don’t feel comfortable wearing one and you shouldn’t feel pressured into wearing one.

# Chapter Three – Socialising and Accommodation:

Here we are going to discuss issues around socialising and accommodation. Universities are planning different ways to achieve social bubbles, e.g. one flat or one staircase will socially bubble. This has implications for things such as who cleans shared spaces and who is responsible for keeping them tidy. There are also more risks to someone who is visually impaired if something isn’t clean, but they can’t see that it’s not clean, or if someone leaves bleach out and they knock into it. For all students, not just those with a disability, there are also questions about how they can socialise when they can only bubble with a small number of people. You can of course see other people, but only with social distancing measures in place so it is not the same. Social opportunities more generally, especially for students who are just about to start at a university, are going to be very different.

**1. I am the list for a Guide Dog, and I am concerned about being refused for my house.**

Tiri: This is an issue even without Coronavirus. It is something that a number of people have found that with a guide dog getting housing can be more difficult. Although you’re not allowed to be discriminated against, it doesn’t mean that Landlords don’t try because they don’t really want to have a dog in their property. That being said, some people are really nice about it, so I can understand your worries. I would say the moment you know more about when you will be getting a guide dog you should talk to someone from the Guide Dogs’ Advocacy team if they can help you because they’re really good at talking to places like shops and things and educating them so I imagine they could do the same with a landlord.

Molly: This is an issue for not only Landlords, but also student in shared accommodation. We have had students complaining about there being a dog around with some saying they’re allergic or something like that because they’re not comfortable having a dog in the shared area. This has caused issues; it is about knowing that the law is on your side. Guide Dogs is a brilliant organisation so if there are any issues like that, get in touch with them. They have teams of people who can work with these people to work out any kinds of issues or if there are changes that can be made. If somebody does have an allergy, then they can help arrange for either them or you to move location to avoid contact. There are lots of different solutions that can be implemented, it’s about reaching out and getting that support and knowing that there are people that are on your side. It can’t be that you are refused, it’s just about finding a way around it.

Will: It is also worth discussing now that a lot of student accommodation is going to be available and in terms of university accommodation, it is going to be slightly different when you arrive. There may not be the same level of support when you arrive, such as student helpers. Also, with the bubbles and households. Trying to find a group of students who are on the same course and the similar extracurricular activities means it is very difficult to create social bubbles that you’ll be expected to go around with. For a lot of universities, it will be a case of treating them as households, like how the government tends to treat them. So, if you are in a household where it is just you, you are able to bubble with another household as a support bubble. That is the situation where you can have that close contact support bubble though.

**2. What is happening with societies and clubs?**

Tiri: Normally there would be a freshers’ fair and you’d be able to see all the different societies and clubs that you can join. I assume that most universities aren’t running normal freshers’ fairs because they are very busy with lots of people in a small space, so they are the worst thing for social distancing. There are lots of ways around this, Oxford for example are doing an online walk through type freshers’ fair. This should be more accessible than the normal one because you’ll have a list that can access of all the different societies rather than having to look out for the stall. Equally, this is a new website so there may be issues with digital accessibility.

Will: Winchester are also going to run a virtual event, and it is worth noting that you can do social activities with other people outside of your household as long as you follow the social distancing guidelines. IT’s all going to be very new and there are certainly going to be some interesting changes made, we won’t see the same activities such as quizzes because you’d have to be 2 m away from your team mates as well as from other teams so you wouldn’t be able to whisper any answers. We also don’t expect to see the same night life activities which are usually part of the initial freshers’ events. Some of these are being replaced by daytime events that can take place outdoors so you’re in a ventilated area. This could be better for people who don’t feel comfortable in the night-time activities, there will actually be some alternative activities rather than just the night-time events we usually see as people meet others for the first time. A lot of student unions are already promoting what events there are going to be so you can already start planning what events you want to go to and arrange what would need to be done for you to be able to get involved because we definitely don’t want anyone to feel that they can’t get involved.

**3. I am worried about how safe my housemates will be. I am worried about peer pressure to go out too regularly in both nightlife and shopping. I worry there will be pressure to do that even when I am not comfortable to do so. Do you suggest anything to help with this?**

Tiri: Peer pressure is definitely an issue, although the guidelines from the government about social distancing are relatively clear now, people have different interpretations of that and people are more or less worried than other people with that so then they are more or less likely to stick to the regulations. I know that is something that I am worried about, I am concerned that my friends who I am social bubbling with might go out and not tell me, then they might be ill and bring it back to the flat. Also there is the peer pressure for me to go with them when it’s something that I am not comfortable to do, right now I am not comfortable to go out to an indoor bar because you don’t have the space to move away from somebody and I feel that when some people have had a drink, they are less likely to stick to the social distancing guidelines. Unfortunately, I don’t really have any advice on this, but I do want to say that I really do sympathise with you as it is a big issue for a lot of people, and it’s not limited to the VI world, there are people who are a lot more nervous about it than others and that means that people act in different ways. Under this, we also identified that students who don’t have a visual impairment but who are worried about coronavirus might not understand why a visually impaired student get’s too close to them. We might have to prepare students to have more conversations with people where they explain why they might have been too close and what you can do to prevent it happening in future, i.e. verbally letting them know in a polite manner that they are getting too close.

Will: Everyone is at different stages; I have been talking to lots of colleagues over the past few months. As we open up, staff members are also returning to campus as they have all been working remotely as well so it is not just students who will be feeling this anxiety, it is the staff as well, it is everyone together as a community. When it comes to others that you are with, if you feel confident and up to it, then it might be best to have a conversation about it early on with them. Don’t ever feel pressured that you have to have this conversation, but it might be helpful to outline some basic rules that you would like to have in your house, sort of like a little agreement. A lot of people do this anyway in terms of who is going to do the cleaning, who is going to take the bins out etc, so you can just add a few more things into that and agree on what extra things need to be considered, e.g. extra cleaning and where cleaning products are going to be stored. Do share your concerns with someone you feel comfortable with. We recognise that there are going to be all these challenges around the physical world that we’re all going to have to go about, but there is also our mental health and our wellbeing that we have to prioritise as well and this is going to be a time when things like our mental health are going to take the spotlight at different times and we must make sure that we do something about that, whether that something is a meditation, is speaking to somebody, or is going out for support and help. Do make sure that you reach out and that you have those conversations. It is difficult at times, but we are all going to be slowly going through this together so just know that you are not the only one, there are others out there who will be feeling similar pressures and similar anxieties and there are people out there who can help.

Tiri: Looking after your mental health is definitely important. Most universities have some kind of counselling service or some sort of system where you can access student counselling. Do take advantage of that if it is something that you can access because these are difficult times and when you’re having to manage all of the changes that everyone in the world is having to manage on top of your disability, it can be quite a lot to deal with. Just having a chat to someone about that can be a positive thing to do.

**4. I’ve seen how social distancing and staying safe does not work in all social setting and I am concerned about this.**

Tiri: This is something that I have noticed as well. The one-way systems that have been set up in Oxford city, no one follows at all because often they are on the wrong side of the pavement to access a certain shop. Partly I was concerned because there was less social distancing, but part of me was also relieved because it meant that if I got the one-way system wrong, I wasn’t the only one getting it wrong. It helped me in some ways because I felt a little bit less pressure to follow all these new systems when lots of people who can see them perfectly well are not following them. Ideally, we want everyone to socially distance properly, but I felt more relaxed knowing people were less likely to have a go at me. Universities are advertising to encourage students to follow guidelines and stay safe as much as possible, but at the end of the day, people will make their own individual decisions and if people are not social distancing and that is something that is really uncomfortable for you, especially if they’re people that you live with, I think the only way to handle that is to have a conversation with them.

Molly: We always encourage students to have that conversation in any year. It’s much easier to explain yourself to people up front. Visually impairment is a low incidence disability, you’ll find a number of people who have no previous experience of living alongside a visually impaired person so they don’t understand what it can impact, or what to expect from you especially as there are a number of different conditions that affect people in different ways. It is complex and if you’ve had no experience, it can be intimidating and difficult to know where to start. So, if you have the confidence, it can be helpful to have the conversation early on. In more normal years, we would encourage you to discuss keeping shared spaces clear so there is nothing to trip over and making sure you don’t move other people’s things etc. This is just elevated this year and needs to include more basic ideas so you can make sure you are all safe and you can minimise cross contamination.

1. **What should you do if you think you have Coronavirus?**

Tiri: The government system is that you can go to a testing centre, or you can be sent a testing kit in the post. Both of these have some issues for visually impaired people. If you’re going to a test centre, unless you live right next to one, how do you get there? You’re not supposed to use public transport if you suspect you have Coronavirus, but even those who you are socially bubbling with should distance from you if you think you might have it so they can’t drive you or shouldn’t even walk with you so even if it is within walking distance, if you don’t know the route, how do you get there? On the other hand, the kit that is sent in the post is not very accessible, the instructions are not accessible, and again, the people that you are in a social bubble with may not want to get close enough to you to help with the test, which is fair in these circumstances. This is something that is worrying me, Oxford are running a service where a kit will be sent to your room if you suspect you might have Coronavirus. I haven’t actually seen the kit but if I get one and I’m not able to use it myself, what do I do then?

Will: I’m going to say again that different universities are doing things differently, but one thing that is consistent throughout the UK, is the NHS service. If you request a test, there may be the option to have someone come and administer the test for you. This service does slightly change from region to region, it is typically a nurse who comes out to administer a test for those who are unable to conduct a test themselves or make their way to a testing centre. Before you go to your university, look into what NHS services are available in your area and whether you are able to request someone to come out and administer a test. If they do come out and administer a test, they will be in the full PPE that is available to them such as masks, aprons, gloves. It can be quite daunting to see them so be aware of that. They will then guide you through all the different steps of the test.

Tiri: There is also the number 119 who can help you go through the kit with you over the phone.

# Chapter Four – Closing Comments:

# Tiri: The main take away from all of this is that getting in touch with your university, particularly the disability services at your university, but also your faculty and people involved in your accommodation as early as possible is the most important thing to do. You can have all of the things set up in the world, but if you haven’t communicated it to other people then they won’t know what you need. LOOK and Thomas Pocklington Trust will be happy to help you need guidance or support with this and there are other organisations available too. We have put together a list of resources which are listed below. Also, we all need to consider our mental health; starting university is a big thing under normal circumstances and this year it is going to be even more challenging.

# Chapter Five - Resources:

* + AIPOLY Vision (<https://www.aipoly.com/>);
  + Aira (<https://aira.io/how-it-works>);
  + Ariadne GPS (<https://www.ariadnegps.eu/en/un-app-innovativa-per-la-mobilitaan-innovative-app-for-your-mobility-english/>);
  + Be My Eyes (<https://www.bemyeyes.com/>);
  + Blindsquare (<https://www.blindsquare.com/>);
  + BuzzClip (<https://www.amazon.com/iMerciv-BuzzClip-Wearable-Mobility-Blind/dp/B06ZZS582S>);
  + GetThere (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.LewLasher.getthere&hl=en>);
  + HabVIUK mobility support guidance: <https://habilitationviuk.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-habilitation-mobility-risk-assessment-guidance/>;
  + Nat Sip general guidance for HEP: <https://www.natsip.org.uk/3441-supporting-the-achievement-of-learners-with-vision-impairment-in-higher-education> ;
  + Student space: <https://studentspace.org.uk/>;
  + SunuBand (<https://www.sunu.com/en/index>);
  + TPT Covid-19 Student Support (to be updated): <https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/covid-19-student-support>;