

# An untraditional start to my degree



**Catherine Cutler** describes becoming a Dental Therapy & Hygiene student in the COVID-19 era.

## A peculiar freshers' week

I am thrilled to have just started the full-time, three-year Dental Therapy & Hygiene (DTH) Bachelor of Science degree at King's College London (KCL); however, it has not been the usual introduction to university life for this year's cohort of Year 1 undergraduates. This has been for two important reasons: 2020 marked the opening year of the new DTH degree at KCL and, even more extraordinarily, SARS-CoV-2 became an unexpected addition to daily life worldwide. The consequences have included international students being unable to join the first term of teaching on campus and a very untraditional freshers' week!

I have already completed a neuroscience degree at KCL and so my familiarity with the university, living in London and knowing what to expect from student life has offered me a luxurious safety net to absorb the impact of COVID-19. It has also allowed me to observe how much the virus has changed the process of becoming a student. A-level results,

the logistics of moving into accommodation and teaching formats have all been affected by our adaption to the new normal of 'social distancing'.

This is my experience of becoming a DTH student in the COVID-19 era.

## Application process

My UCAS application was submitted in January 2020 and I was fortunate to be invited to interview at KCL in early February. It was hard to assess how well I had performed compared to all the other strong applicants, but in March, one week after lockdown began, I received an offer of a place to study. I was so ecstatic I cried. It had been years in the making to get to the moment of receiving that offer and I wanted to celebrate with all the people who had helped me on the journey. It was another seven weeks until we could meet members of another household and finally celebrate with a socially distanced toast.

## Offer holders' open day

The offer holders' open day could not take place due to COVID-19. It was replaced with an offer holders' WhatsApp group. Current KCL dental students hosted the group chat and were invaluable in their support answering questions. Not only were they immediate and thorough with their responses, they offered a line of communication with the university.

Government advice to work from home during the pandemic meant that the KCL admissions team, who would usually answer queries from offer holders and applicants, were not accessible via phone lines. Without the option to talk to admissions directly by phone, the WhatsApp group reassured offer holders that we were all in the same boat - receiving the same communications around Disclosure and Barring Service checks and

vaccinations at the same time. The group also offered a great peer-to-peer networking opportunity.

## 2020 A-level results

The government 'U-turn' on A-level results this year resulted in the universities confirming offers and then, very uncommonly, looking to increase their allowance for student intakes. Some students who now met their grade requirements secured a place to study, whilst others lost out as courses were full. I really hope all students who have had their plans changed will eventually end up where they intended to be.

## Mini biography

2007-2009: A-levels, Hampshire, UK

2009-2010: Gap year working in a nursery and then travelling in South America

2010-2013: BSc Hons Neuroscience degree, King's College London

2014-2020: Working in medical communications agencies within the pharmaceutical industry

2020-Present: BSc Dental Therapy & Hygiene, King's College London



### Accommodation

Having studied at university previously, I feel I have 'ticked the box' of living in halls and will be living in private accommodation this time around, although I do feel some fear of missing out on the strong bonds that are formed through living with new friends.

Unusually, many home and international students will not be moving into their residences until the start of the second term in January 2021. Even those who moved in this term were allocated move in dates over several days and the usual welcome events did not take place. As the second lockdown unfolds, it appears living in halls has become a very different experience this year, as documented in the media.

### Welcome week

Welcome week, or freshers' week, is one of the most vibrant weeks of university life where memories are made for life, or just as likely, forgotten the next day!

This year, all events were virtual and accessed through an app prepared by KCL. This was well organised and timetabled, providing structure to access information on what is available at university, from evening language courses, how to access welfare support and how to join the all-important student societies.

On the one hand, it was a shame not to be able to take part in the social events that are renowned in freshers' week, but on the other hand, joining welcome week virtually allowed me to simultaneously enjoy a one-week relocation to Cornwall. However, I believe freshers' week should be held with the same esteem as other important life events and is not something that should be missed. I hope this year's cohort of undergraduates can experience freshers' week the way it is intended at the start of the next academic year.

*'The WhatsApp group chat is full of camaraderie and people going out of their way to share links to content to support each other.'*

### Starting the course

An interesting change to this year's KCL Year 1 curriculum has seen the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) and DTH Year 1 courses completely combined. Dental students and dental therapy students are mixed within the same teaching groups. The level of the Year 1 scientific content can seem daunting for those who have accessed the DTH course via different routes to the traditional A-level path; however, it is a brilliant opportunity to be learning alongside dentists for the biomedical modules and initial clinical skills training. Hopefully, this method of teaching will strengthen the dental team in practice and will translate into enhanced quality of care for patients.

### Online learning

Most lectures have been moved online and are delivered as pre-recorded videos.

#### *The pros:*

This method of teaching allows students to pause and re-watch lectures at our own pace, helping to capture good quality notes. It removes the risk of arriving late to class and helps plan everyday life around learning, allowing engagement with lectures at the time of day one works best.

#### *The cons:*

After two weeks of inductions and lectures, I am yet to meet a course mate

in person, which can feel a little isolating. Opportunities to ask lecturers questions in real-time have also been reduced, and whilst there have been discussion forums set up, in my opinion, it is not a replacement for stimulating in-person debates that you expect from university learning. However, the WhatsApp group chat is full of camaraderie and people going out of their way to share links to content to support each other.

### Looking towards the rest of the year

KCL has had good guidance in place following the emergence of COVID-19, which allowed it to be one of the first dental schools to open to its students, in June 2020. The dental school has been working hard to create as many of the usual learning opportunities as possible for the new undergraduates joining the faculty.

The first term of BDS/DTH Year 1 teaching will focus on biomedical science and the physiology of the healthy body; clinical humanities to learn the skills of careful listening and observation; and dentistry in society, to understand the requirements of the profession. As we move into the second and third university terms, we will learn the anatomy of the head and neck and start participating in more on-campus teaching, as we learn tooth morphology and initial clinical skills.

### In summary

I feel very fortunate to have been able to start my exciting DTH degree at King's College London, despite the challenges of 2020. I am impressed and proud of KCL for getting their dental courses up and running and I am passionately hoping that COVID-19 does not cause delay to the development of clinical skills for the 2020/21 dental cohort, or ongoing disruption to society more widely.

If you would like further insight into the DTH or BDS Year 1 course at King's, please follow me on Instagram via @thestudenttherapist.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0463-1>

