Impact Report
2021
Following a year of extraordinary adversity, it’s my pleasure to introduce the remarkable and far-reaching impact of your support on individuals and programmes across the University of Bristol.

Our community of alumni and friends has worked together to support students, facilitate critical research, and help us engage with some of the most pressing global challenges. You have enabled students facing considerable barriers to come to university and thrive, illustrated by Gbemisola's experience of the Sanctuary Scholarship programme on page 16, and Steph's story about the impact of her Futures Scholarship on page 6. Thanks to your support, 40 recipients of the new Black Bristol Scholarship programme started their studies this September. The Black Bristol Scholarship programme will support more than 130 Black students over the next four years in undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Bristol and we were delighted to welcome our first cohort this year.

By lending invaluable time and expertise, you are helping students with their career aspirations and ensuring they get the most out of their university experience. You have also championed projects which will help us better understand and support student mental health (page 2). Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience Professor Sarah Purdy describes some of the incredible volunteering initiatives Bristol alumni have participated in on page 12 and Hamish and Farhan share their experience of Bristol Mentors on page 8.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our lives and you will see throughout the report the ways you have helped us adapt our work and support our staff and students through a very challenging time. You have funded critical research into COVID-19 and enabled us to launch a brand-new Infectious Diseases Research Suite. As you can read on page 10, this will dramatically improve our ability to understand and prepare for the emergence of similar dangerous pathogens in the future.

You have also supported PhD students whose lives and research have been impacted by the pandemic (page 14) and you have enabled vital investigations into other health conditions, such as Amy Holt’s work which could potentially improve the way we treat people living with bowel cancer (page 18).

The climate emergency is at the forefront of our minds and a key focus for the University of Bristol as the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) takes place in Glasgow this month. On page 4, you can read how you have helped us mobilise researchers such as Dr Eunice Lo, pictured on the front cover of this report, who are tackling the climate crisis. It is research like this, supported by you, that is critical to our understanding of the world’s most pressing issues.

As you may know, next summer I am stepping down from my role as Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Bristol to become the new President of Imperial College London. It has been a privilege to lead this great university and work with such inspiring people. I am profoundly grateful for the support of our global community of alumni and friends over the past year, and indeed throughout my time at Bristol. I look forward to seeing how you continue to shape the University and drive its ongoing success in the years ahead.

I hope you enjoy reading about the impact we have made together.
My work focuses on two primary areas: the mental health challenges faced by university students, and the outcomes of innovative mental health policies at the University of Bristol. In 2018, for example, the University launched an ‘opt-in policy’ which invites all students to give consent to the University to get in touch with an emergency contact if there is a serious concern about their welfare. The policy is the first of its kind in the UK and is designed to widen the circle of support for Bristol students. I work with students and staff to understand better how novel policies like this are interpreted and implemented. Approximately 95% of our students opt in, which is amazing, and we are working to understand who the remaining 5% are; without allowing us to reach out to a named emergency contact, they might be at higher risk.

We can’t do better if we don’t know what it’s like for students today. The University’s annual Student Wellbeing Survey, which I co-run, asks students directly: How are you feeling? What challenges do you face? What can the University do to help? We’ve carried out the survey throughout the pandemic so we have good data on students’ experiences before and during COVID-19 and we’ve already made some significant changes to student support in response to survey findings.

I’m also working with Professor Bruce Hood on the Science of Happiness undergraduate course, which explores strategies students can use to improve their wellbeing. My research uses data science methods to analyse weekly diary entries of enrolled students. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the most popular topics people write about is their social lives, which gives us an improving insight into what makes students tick. It was a career milestone to publish my findings in *The Journal of Medical Internet Research* this year and an amazing outcome of this fellowship.

By supporting early career researchers like myself, alumni and friends are helping academics make what is otherwise a very difficult transition from finishing their PhD to establishing a career in academia. This fellowship has given me the space not only to work on publications but also to develop new skills and expand my networks, allowing me to work holistically on my role as a researcher. It has also enabled me to apply for additional grants, which helps me take my research in different directions and bring in more collaborators. Since the pandemic, for example, my work has evolved to explore the opportunities and harms that technology poses to young people. Our lives have become so digital and we have to be mindful of the pros and cons. I was drawn to researching young people’s mental health because of increases in levels of distress among young people, and growing pressures facing the next generation. When I was studying for my undergraduate degree I experienced my own mental health difficulties, so I’m familiar with what it’s like to feel unwell and out of place at university. I want to help ensure institutions are as well prepared as possible to support young people and make universities places where people can thrive.

‘I want to help ensure institutions are as well prepared as possible to support young people and make universities places where people can thrive.’
Tackling climate change

Dr Eunice Lo describes the impact of seed funding on developing vital climate research.

My research explores what climate change means for extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, and how they impact human health. If we can understand the adverse impacts of a changing climate then we can make plans to avoid devastating outcomes, by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting our society.

Even though the UK has a temperate climate, we still experience heatwaves. In 2003 we experienced a heatwave which caused more than 2,000 excess deaths in England alone. When the body is exposed to high ambient temperatures, it has to work harder to maintain an optimum body temperature and this can be particularly challenging for older people and people with cardiovascular or respiratory conditions. For some, it can have fatal consequences. It is easy to think extreme weather only affects other places or future generations but it’s not true. We are feeling the impacts of it already and climate change is making extreme heat worse.

I’m a member of the University of Bristol’s Cabot Institute for the Environment, which is a diverse community of over 600 experts, addressing global environmental challenges. Through the Cabot Institute, I’ve been exposed to much more environmental research, and I’ve formed connections with epidemiologists, civil engineers and public health experts who I work with.

Originally, I was exploring heat-related mortality in 15 cities in the US. I examined the relationship between temperature and mortality counts and applied that to climate projections for the future, to project the number of extreme heat-related deaths in each city. I found that if the global average temperature rise is limited to two degrees Celsius, as set out in the 2015 Paris Agreement, then hundreds to thousands of lives could be saved per city. Based on the current policies of nation states, we are headed towards a three degree rise in global warming. This research provides explicit evidence for the real-world implications of this rise.

Part of the original funding for this project came from the Cabot Institute Innovation Fund, which provides seed funding for interdisciplinary environmental research. The research has since been supported by international partners and broadcast on global media, which would not have been possible without the initial funding. Speaking about my research live on BBC World News was one of the most extraordinary experiences I’ve ever had, and it made me realise that connecting climate research with health outcomes is more relatable to the wider public than environmental research alone.

Seed funding is so important because it allows you to explore whether an idea works or not before applying for bigger grants. It also provides vital resource for bringing the right people together – my role was directly supported by this seed funding. By supporting the Innovation Fund, alumni and friends have helped extremely important and impactful research that allows us to more fully understand climate change and how it affects us all.
When I found out I was a recipient of the Futures Scholarship I was over the moon. It was such a big relief. It confirmed to me that Bristol was the place I was supposed to be. I’m a Pharmacology student, and about a month after the pandemic hit, COVID-19 was on the syllabus. It’s been fascinating to study something so relevant to the wider world.

Last year the café I worked at closed because of the pandemic and I lost my job. The funding from the Futures Scholarship helped pay my rent over the summer and enabled me to put down a deposit on a house for my second year of university. During a really scary time, this support was invaluable because it took a lot of pressure off and made me feel in control of my finances.

This year, I’ve had regular meetings with Laura, the Futures Scholarship Coordinator. She has been so available – I just send her an email and she will make time for us to speak that week. It’s been very reassuring to have her look at my CVs and job applications.

I’ve recently used some of my scholarship employability funding to do an online internship with Bright Network, who connect graduates with employers. We were introduced to different organisations to find out what employers are looking for from graduates. It was so useful to hear that you don’t have to do the same profession forever. To learn from other people’s experiences and know that you can do different things further down the road was inspiring.

Thanks to the internship, I applied for a two-week teaching placement at Bristol City College to help prepare science lessons and observe classes, to see if teaching is something I want to pursue. I also started a part-time job with the University of Bristol’s Careers Service in September, working in employer engagement. This placement and new job opportunity have already been helpful in allowing me to branch out and try something different. I am so grateful for the Futures Scholarship as it has given me the financial security and confidence I needed to explore my career options.
Creating opportunities through mentoring

Chemistry student Farhan Khawaja, left, and alumnus Hamish Beeston (BA 1992), right, were paired up by the Bristol Mentors programme.

FARHAN

I’ve always been interested in both science and the media and I’m hoping to enter a career path which combines those interests. Getting into the media industry is challenging because a lot of it is about who you know and getting your foot in the door. That’s why I applied to the Bristol Mentors programme during my third year. I wanted to connect with someone in the TV and film industry and learn more about the path they took to get there.

My mentor, Hamish, has always been very friendly, considerate and happy to help me. It’s been so useful being able to speak to him while I’ve been applying for graduate jobs and internships. I was especially grateful to be given the chance to complete an internship at Hamish’s company. I got to try out lots of different things while I was there, such as interviewing people on camera and using drones to capture aerial footage. Getting that hands-on experience was brilliant and that would never have happened without the Bristol Mentors programme.

After taking part in the mentorship scheme I feel a lot more confident.

HAMISH

I spent 15 years making documentaries for the BBC before setting up my own video production company, Beeston Media. When I was thinking about getting into television as a student, the University connected me with alumni in the industry who were happy to give advice. Many of those contacts gave me useful guidance which I really appreciated. I’m now at a stage in my career where it felt like the right time to give back by becoming a mentor myself.

The Bristol Mentors programme is specifically targeted at students who are underrepresented in the University population in some way. By offering my time, I hoped I could help a student who might not necessarily have a set of industry contacts or family connections to turn to.

I was matched up with Farhan, and we started having one-hour online mentoring sessions. In these, we’d chat over cover letters, look through pieces of editorial work or talk through interview tips. Farhan even came to intern at Beeston Media and we got him involved in as many parts of the filming process as possible – from going out on shoots to sitting in on edits. Farhan is such a bright student and it was great to work with him and help build his experience. It’s been lovely to mentor a Bristol student, especially after I was given that help myself while I was at the University.
Investigating COVID-19 response in infants

Research led by Dr Anu Goenka has shown how babies are protected from severe COVID-19 infections.

As a Clinical Lecturer in Paediatric Infectious Diseases and Immunology, much of my clinical and research work is carried out in the Bristol Royal Hospital for Children. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we weren’t sure how the disease would impact the young children and infants in our care.

Babies are very vulnerable to other respiratory viruses, such as the flu and RSV (respiratory syncytial virus), so initially we thought that they may also be susceptible to severe COVID-19. It soon became apparent, however, that the four babies at our hospital who had tested positive for coronavirus were only mildly affected by the disease, with all of them recovering after just a few days.

At the time, there was very little data available which could explain this unexpected immune response. So we set about finding answers in the laboratory. We obtained blood and saliva samples from the infants and their parents, who had since recovered from COVID-19, so that we could examine their antibody and cellular immune responses.

What we found was that the immune response of infants was markedly different to the immune responses of their parents. In the saliva and blood of infants, we found much higher levels of antibodies and immune cells which could protect against COVID-19. Through our research, we were able to understand the specific make-up of these antibodies and immune cells which could protect against COVID-19. Through our research, we were able to understand the specific make-up of these antibodies and immune cells which could protect against COVID-19. Through our research, we were able to understand the specific make-up of these antibodies and immune cells which could protect against COVID-19. Through our research, we were able to understand the specific make-up of these antibodies and immune cells which could protect against COVID-19.

The team felt privileged to be able to conduct this study; working with families and turning our bedside observations into clinical data was extremely rewarding. A collaborative spirit has run throughout the University’s SARS-CoV-2 research, and that was very much true of our research. We hope that the organisations and individuals who came together to fund our work feel a strong sense of pride; you’ve really helped to push our understanding of COVID-19 forward.

Funding new research facilities

Alumni and friends of the University have pledged more than £1.25 million towards a brand new Infectious Diseases Research Suite, which will include two high-security Containment Level 3 laboratories for virology and bacteriology. These facilities will support vital research into COVID-19 as well as future pandemics and endemic diseases such as TB. In these labs scientists will also strive for solutions to antimicrobial resistance, which is one of the biggest global issues we face.

‘Donations from alumni and friends of the University like you provided a huge boost to our COVID-19 research.’
Giving back through volunteering

Chris Edwards (BA 2015) shared his expertise with students by volunteering as a panellist at an alumni careers event.

I graduated from the University with a degree in Italian and Spanish six years ago, and I now work for the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In my role, I look at how we can partner with the private sector to support the growth of start-ups across Africa and Asia. These businesses have a huge impact on the low-income groups they serve; they provide critical products and services at affordable prices, from clean energy to safe water, hygienic sanitation, digital healthcare and beyond. We work with them to expand this impact and become financially sustainable.

Last year, I volunteered as a panellist at a careers event for current Bristol students and recent graduates with an interest in the third and public sector. Speaking about career options appealed to me as I know first-hand that there are many different paths that can lead you to the job you want. After I graduated, I worked for a big consumer goods company on a management graduate training programme before transitioning into a public sector role. Speaking about career options appealed to me as I know first-hand that there are many different paths that can lead you to the job you want. After graduation, I worked for a big consumer goods company on a management graduate training programme before transitioning into a public sector role. Speaking about career options appealed to me as I know first-hand that there are many different paths that can lead you to the job you want. 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Championing PhD research

Lucy Parnall, Head of Bristol Doctoral College and Research Strategy, illustrates the way legacy gifts have helped PhD students during the pandemic.

"During the pandemic these legacy gifts for student support have been vital."

There was a lot of concern from students that they wouldn’t be able to achieve their PhDs within the required timeframe. This is where the foresight of our legacy donors really showed its strength. With the gifts that donors had given to support Bristol students in financial need, we were able to invite PhD students to apply for additional funding so they could extend their research. Legacy funding supported 142 students from 40 different programmes, enabling our students to work towards fulfilling their ambitions and successfully completing their PhDs.

It has been so positive to hear that during the pandemic students have been able to submit their theses, present their vivas, complete their PhDs and contribute to excellent research across all faculties. It would have been devastating for Bristol and the wider research sector if we had a cohort of PhD students who were unable to complete their studies.

If the pandemic has taught us anything it’s the importance of planning for an uncertain future. Legacy gifts help Bristol to meet whatever challenges and opportunities may lie ahead with resilience and optimism. By leaving a gift in their Will, legacy donors have supported students in these unprecedented circumstances, and contributed to Bristol’s vibrant research.
Providing Sanctuary Scholarships

Gbemisola Ogunlade (MSci 2020) explains how the University’s Sanctuary Scholarship programme changed her life.

I was born in Lagos, Nigeria and I arrived in the UK when I was eight years old. It took a while for me to integrate into a new culture and make friends, but I had really supportive teachers which helped. My teachers used to tell me that I’d be a good doctor because I loved science, especially biology. But when I did my A Levels I studied psychology and fell in love with the subject. I got to learn about so many theories and philosophies that I could apply to my own life. I could see how I would be able to use it to help others and make a change in my community.

I’d always wanted to go to university, but I had no idea that my immigration status meant that I wasn’t eligible for student finance. I only found out at the last minute, after I’d made my university choices. My head of year suggested that I apply to the University of Bristol Sanctuary Scholarship programme, which provides funding so that students from refugee and asylum-seeking communities can study at the University. I applied and was overjoyed when I was offered a place. I called my mum, and she was screaming down the phone saying, ‘Well done Gbemisola, I knew you would get it!’ I was so glad because that was the only option I had left. It would have been heartbreaking to see my friends go off to university knowing I wouldn’t be able to.

As a Bristol student, I loved going to lectures, meeting new people, joining clubs and going to events. I also volunteered to be the student Sanctuary Scholarship representative, which meant I worked alongside the programme organisers to shape the scholarship offering for future students. As student representative I got to go to events and share my story with alumni who donate to the programme. Knowing that there are alumni and friends of the University who care about us and who want to help other students meant a lot. Their support literally changes lives. For lots of people, going to university might seem like a completely normal thing. But for some students, there can be significant barriers that get in the way.

I graduated last year, and I recently started a new job as an assistant psychologist, working with young people with eating disorders. It’s a challenging but rewarding role and every day I’m learning more about how to support young people and their families. In the future, I hope to go on to study for a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, which would enable me to become a clinical psychologist.

Things would have been so different if I hadn’t received a Sanctuary Scholarship; it has opened so many avenues for me and I’m just so grateful. My life is moving onwards and upwards and that’s only possible because of the scholarship I received. Every day I wake up and I think – I’m happy to be here. There’s nowhere else I would rather be.
I’ve always found cell biology fascinating: the way that cells work, how they build us as human beings and how they can cause disease. It’s what drew me to studying cancer. By learning about what goes wrong in cancer cells, we also learn a lot about normal cells and how they should function.

Bowel cancer has one of the highest mortality rates of any cancer, because it’s often detected at quite a late stage. Researchers have established that taking aspirin for long periods of time decreases your risk of developing bowel cancer. But what we don’t know is exactly why that is. Throughout my PhD, my research group and I have been exploring how aspirin influences cellular functions to make cells less likely to become cancerous and to slow the progression of a cancer.

One of the really interesting things that I have found is that when you treat cancer cells with aspirin, they appear to become more sensitive to drugs that target metabolism. As an idea it makes a lot of sense: cancer cells metabolise differently to normal cells, so if you could find a way to target that process then in theory you could treat the cancer. Our data suggests that aspirin might sensitise cancer cells to a drug called CB-839, which is showing some success in clinical trials at the moment. If we could combine these two drugs to increase their effectiveness, then we could potentially improve treatments for people living with bowel cancer.

‘It’s hard to put into words the impact that philanthropically funded PhDs can have.’

One of the best things about being a PhD student at Bristol is being able to work with so many incredible people. I’m part of an amazing research group and my supervisors, Professor Ann Williams and Dr Emma Vincent, have been so supportive. There’s no doubt that doing a PhD is challenging, so having that group of people around you who are genuinely interested in what you’re doing and want to help you makes all the difference. My PhD has been funded through the generosity of University supporters John Maynard (BSc 1969) and Bridget Maynard, and by the James Tudor Foundation. It’s hard to put into words the impact that philanthropically funded PhDs can have. Laboratory research is extremely expensive and we wouldn’t be able to do what we do without the backing of the University’s brilliant supporters.

When you support funded PhD projects you don’t just provide an incredible opportunity for a student like me, you help train scientists for the future and contribute to important areas of research that ultimately could save lives.
The year in numbers

Donor numbers 2020/21

5,100 Total number of donors

35 Countries where donors live

328 First-time donors

Alumni donors by graduation decade

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Volunteer numbers

2,433 Total number of Bristol Volunteers

100 Bristol Mentors

1,015 Bristol Connects Career Experts

87 Countries where Bristol Volunteers live

Funds raised 2020/21

£11,668,726 Total cash received

£26,697,852 New funds raised

All pledges and new gifts made in 2020/21

Funding sources

- Alumni and friends £3,108,950
- Legacy and in memoriam gifts £2,138,631
- Partnerships £6,421,145

Impact areas

- Scholarships and student opportunities £1,905,377
- World-class research £7,934,713
- Campus and civic ambition £1,196,078
- Areas of greatest need £1,536,558

Unrestricted gifts enable Bristol to respond quickly to the areas of greatest need across the University.
Thank you for keeping Bristol brilliant

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