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In 2020, universities shifted to online learning – three lessons from students' experiences

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For young people who were in university at the height of the COVID pandemic, the university experience was suddenly radically different to what they had expected.

Teaching moved quickly online, with students forced to adjust to using digital tools to complete their learning at home. Those looking forward to life on campus instead saw social and extra-curricular activities curtailed. Meanwhile, opportunities for internships and placements were often lost.

It became and continues to be important to understand the implications of these changes on university students. In my research during the pandemic, I've explored the effects of this shift to virtual learning on the student experience.

Here are three key insights from my research, in which I surveyed 349 university students from across the UK.

This article is part of Quarter Life, *a series about issues affecting those of us in our twenties and thirties. From the challenges of beginning a career and taking care of our mental health, to the excitement of starting a family, adopting a pet or just making friends as an adult. The articles in this series explore the questions and bring answers as we navigate this turbulent period of life.*

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1. Students want interactive online learning

One theme that came through from several participants is that online teaching should be more interactive. According to one respondent:

> *It is not sufficient to simply place lecture materials onto a VLE [virtual learning environment] and assume that this is a suitable replacement for a taught experience.*

Another said educators should "be more interactive with students outside of just providing digital lectures", noting this could incorporate online communication tools or video conferencing applications "to ensure there [are] still some sort of personal connections being made".

Similarly, another student flagged creating "more opportunities for student interactions" and "a better online community".

Recent research has shown there can be a lack of motivation among students when studying online. To address this, lecturers could use real-time polling tools such as Mentimeter and Kahoot!, which can make online learning more engaging and interactive.

2. Digital education must be inclusive

Some female students faced greater challenges than their male counterparts with the shift to virtual learning. Mature female students were affected the most, with many noting that additional responsibilities, such as caring for children or disabled family members, made things more difficult.

One respondent talked about the difficulty of "finding the time to do university work in a full, busy and noisy household". Another said:

> The university hasn't been very good with students who have a family. I had exams with a toddler hanging off my hip. It would have been fine if I was a student with no children, but I feel like nobody really addressed the challenges we faced as students with a young family at home.

COVID changed the traditional university experience, at least temporarily. Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock

Some mature female students also didn't feel properly equipped for using online learning tools, commenting, for example, that "the older generation needs to be better prepared technology-wise".

Another student highlighted the cost of devices, and noted that "it seems if you don't have a laptop you will struggle to pass".

Instead of presuming that everyone will be properly equipped, universities should ensure that students have the necessary knowledge, support and digital resources for online learning and assessments. Making sure students have adequate hardware and software, as well as internet access, is essential.

Access to technology must be distributed equitably, with particular consideration given to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and international students.

Meanwhile, universities not already doing so should consider offering flexible learning opportunities, such as the option to attend virtual lectures live or to listen to pre-recorded lectures.

3. International students may need extra attention

The pandemic-induced changes to the university experience were particularly hard on students from overseas.

International students mentioned problems such as a lack of access to suitable study areas, not knowing where to go for mental health support, feeling confined and isolated, struggling to focus, a lack of direction, and the difficulty of being away from their families at home affected by COVID. Comments included:

> *Being away from my family caused me so much stress and depression, I can't focus clearly on my studies.*
>
> *We paid tuition for the assistance, not to "figure it out alone".*

While universities did endeavour to communicate with international students during this period, my research suggests that in many cases these messages were lost in translation and the support was not adequate.

In times of crisis, university communication with overseas students must improve. Universities have a duty of care and a responsibility to international students, which should include helping them to adjust to the academic requirements, as well as prioritising their mental health and wellbeing.

The way forward

Some students wanted to continue with online learning, or at least saw potential benefits in the digital model.

> *In general, it has been rather enjoyable not being on campus as not only did it cut out the hours of train journeys … I am someone who much prefers to work alone, so not having other people as a distraction was good.*

Students who reported having some level of social anxiety, for example, also preferred the digital model.

But a number of students felt the on-campus experience was preferable to online learning. One commented that "human relationships and face-to-face interaction remain the unique trait which the online world cannot reach". Others said:

> *Going fully online would not benefit many students otherwise we wouldn't have chosen the option to come to a traditional university.*
>
> *I like the social aspect of going to university and the face-to-face teaching. [With online learning] I feel like I'm not learning anything, just memorising information.*

Universities have now resumed face-to-face teaching. Some may fully return to on-campus learning, while many may proceed with a hybrid model. Which is best is difficult to know. It's clear from my research and others' that different students have different preferences.

Nonetheless, these insights will hopefully be useful for universities continuing to teach fully or partially online. More broadly, findings about university students' experiences during the pandemic could help universities to better navigate any crises in the future.