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Starting university during the COVID-19 pandemic

A small-scale study of first-year education students' expectations, experiences and preferences

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ABSTRACT

In early 2020, universities across the world ceased face-to-face teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article explores the experiences of first-year UK university students during this time. Four main themes were identified in the data. Regarding course delivery, students valued the flexibility of blended learning, which involved attending some live sessions while working on others in their own time. Student interaction was mentioned to be critical for learning and how the use of webcams and breakout rooms can facilitate or hinder it. Regarding staff, continuous communication, availability and online drop-ins were highly valued and had a positive impact on satisfaction. Finally, while students benefitted from a coherent use of online tools provided by the university, they also valued the flexibility of using less-regulated tools, including social media.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, digitalisation of universities, higher education, online teaching and learning, students' experiences

In late March 2020, universities across the United Kingdom were required to close their doors and cease face-to-face teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote delivery was quickly instigated. While it was initially considered a temporary solution, it became apparent that such methods would need to be upscaled for the next intake of students. The transition from traditional delivery of face-to-face courses to the delivery of courses via online spaces has required considerable adaptation of teaching materials



and, for some staff, training on how to use online platforms. Unsurprisingly, concerns have been raised about the quality of provision and whether students are receiving value for money (Watermeyer et al. 2020). While international researchers have sought to establish students' experiences of transitioning from face-to-face to online learning spaces (see, for example, García-Planas and Torres 2021; Ghazi-Saidi et al. 2020; Julien and Dookwah 2020; Martínez et al. 2020; Tolman et al. 2020; Zacarias Flores and Salgado Suárez 2020), only one UK study had been published at the time of writing (Khan 2021).

In the absence of physical learning spaces, asynchronous online and online blended approaches are suitable alternatives to face-to-face teaching. Asynchronous online courses are characterised by the very essence that a physical classroom is replaced by an online space, and learning can take place at any time or place. In contrast, online blended approaches can also be conceived as a combination of online synchronous face-to-face instruction and asynchronous resources (Hrastinski 2019). The popularity of online courses has increased considerably over the last decade, and it is estimated that in the United States approximately 30 per cent of all students now actively choose online courses (National Centre for Education Statistics 2019). Essential to their popularity are the advantages of being able to study in a flexible fashion, their suitability for international students and their seemingly good value for money.

Despite their advantages, we must acknowledge that there is a distinct difference between actively choosing to study in this way and it being imposed for health and safety reasons. Consequently, a substantial amount of research has sought to understand how students have responded to this change, specifically in relation to their overall satisfaction and the perceived comparability between online and traditional face-to-face delivery. Emerging international evidence seems to suggest that students who supported and understood the reasons for the implementation of online methods were more likely to report high levels of satisfaction and perceive their course as effective in meeting their learning needs (Agarwal and Kaushik 2020; Beltekin and Kuyulu 2020; Demuyakor 2020). However, recurrent evidence seems to suggest that students who have previously experienced face-to-face teaching may perceive online learning to be inferior or less effective (OfS 2021). Kesavan Elumala and colleagues (2020) found that students' perception of 'quality' was correlated with course design and content, technical, social and administrative support, and instructor and learner characteris-



tics. These findings appear to support what is already known: teaching and learning are more than just the format in which they are delivered, and experience is a complex interplay between the instructors, content, students and their peers, as well as the activities that occur outside of the classroom (Nortvig et al. 2018). The key issue for the COVID-19 era is to understand how students experience the alternative learning environment and what difficulties they face. Currently, our understanding is limited to students who were already in receipt of face-to-face teaching.

Within the existing COVID-19 literature, perceptions of the quality of course delivery and subsequent student satisfaction appear to be mostly driven by the type of course being undertaken. Students of professional degrees, where practical skills form part of the experience, are most likely to report reduced satisfaction in course delivery and assessment. Research studies with students of medicine, dentistry and mechanical engineering have all recorded concerns regarding the transition of practical modules to online spaces, suggesting that knowledge transfer within the latter environment may be detrimental to their mastering of competencies (Agius et al. 2020; Cuschieri and Agius 2020; Syauqi et al. 2020). Concerns regarding the appropriateness of the online environment for assessment also appear to be more salient for practice-based courses where assessments are undertaken in laboratories or out in the field (Kedra and Kaltsidis 2020).

Underpinning the entire online learning experience is the students' accessibility to and use of technology. While sustaining an adequate internet connection has been reported as one of the biggest challenges to students studying in an online environment (Demuyakor 2020; Roy et al. 2020; Serhan 2020), their general competency with using technology is also considered to be a significant contributor. Students who self-report greater levels of digital literacy, or who have previous experience of studying within an online environment, are known to be more positive and satisfied with online learning (Beltekin and Kuyulu 2020). Furthermore, Marion Händel and colleagues (2020) suggest that high levels of digital literacy are a potential protective factor against social and emotional loneliness as students are able to effectively use technology to establish and maintain social relationships which are key to creating a sense of belonging.

Within an online environment, a cohesive learning community is fundamental to student engagement and subsequent achievement. Within the COVID-19 literature, many studies report that students believed that their social interactions with peers and instructors were harder to replicate once

they transitioned online (Kedraka and Kaltsidis 2020). Specifically, students reported that in-class discussions were not as effective and that their learning had been compromised as a result (Ghazi-Saidi et al. 2020). Furthermore, students have consistently reported psycho-social ramifications following the move to online spaces. For example, the interruption of their social interactions has led to feelings of distrust (Branquinho et al. 2020; Serhan 2020), stress and anxiety (Cushieri and Agius 2020), boredom and depression (Ghazi-Saidi et al. 2020), and reduced concentration (Lovrić et al. 2020), thereby creating a poor learning atmosphere. Despite this, research has suggested that the quantity and quality of support that instructors provided to students at the start of the pandemic potentially played a protective role in the latter's transition to online environments. Specifically, students reported less isolation and anxiety, enhanced understanding and subject knowledge, and increased interaction with their peers when instructors made themselves fully available to the students and actively encouraged communication within sessions (Lovrić et al. 2020; Unger and Meiran 2020). Collectively, these findings reinforce the importance of the social aspects of the learning environment and highlight how instrumental instructors are within the educational context. Moreover, these findings appear to confirm previous suggestions that, while technology can be a tool for learning, it cannot replace face-to-face interaction (Miller et al. 2020).

Despite this wealth of knowledge, we do not fully understand how newly enrolled students, who have not received any formal higher education input, experience learning in the online mode. This current study seeks to address this issue by exploring the expectations, experiences and preferences of first-year undergraduate students within a school of education at a university in the United Kingdom. The courses were originally designed for face-to-face delivery, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic they were taught online from the start of the academic year.

Methodology

The research presented in this article is the first phase of a larger, mixed-methods study embracing an exploratory sequential design as described by John Creswell and Vicki Plano Clark (2007). Phase one of the research aims to explore the lived experiences of a small number of participants in order to form the basis of a survey designed to capture the experiences and satisfaction of a wider university student population.



Design

The overall aim of phase one was to elicit the experiences of first-year university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining their experiences of starting a degree delivered online, the expectations they had and their preferences. A qualitative design with semi-structured interviews was adopted in the present study. This approach was used because it provides 'a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions' (Kvale 2008: 9).

Participants

Nine students studying on an undergraduate degree at a school of education in a university in Northern England were recruited through convenience sampling as defined by Louis Cohen and colleagues (2018). We invited students to participate from three courses on teaching, childhood and educational psychology to broadly represent the variety of fields of study in the school of education. The research was introduced in seminars, and an invitation email was sent to all first-year students (n=102). Participants volunteered by responding and agreeing to be interviewed for the purposes of the research. All participants mentioned in this article have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Each participant had a similar experience with regard to the delivery of teaching for their course. During this first year of study, each participant's degree courses were delivered online in line with the university's response to COVID. Teaching consisted of asynchronous online lectures and synchronous online seminars. Meetings and interactions with staff (such as tutorials) also occurred synchronously online.

Data collection

Data were collected using online semi-structured interviews to 'explore a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respect the way the participant frames and structures the responses' (Marshall and Rossman 2016: 149). A semi-structured interview guide was developed by us and included questions to elicit student expectations, experiences and preferences. Questions focussed on their current experience in online learning during their first year at the university, the benefits and

challenges they faced, what they expected and what their preferences were. Example questions included ‘*What are the differences between what you expected and what you are experiencing?*’ and ‘*What barriers do you see that may impact on your learning this year?*’ Topics and questions were based on the literature review and discussions that we had with one another. All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams in the autumn of 2020 and lasted about thirty minutes on average. To avoid power relationships coming into play, interviews were conducted in such a way that the participant was not a student of the researcher conducting the interview.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify, analyse and report themes. The six-step process described by Virginia Terry and colleagues (2017) was applied to strengthen the trustworthiness of the present study. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data. Second, each of us immersed themselves in a group of interview transcripts and generated initial codes. We then shared the initial codes with each other to discuss the appropriateness of the analysis and increase coding reliability. Third, after the codes were generated and agreed, we discussed potential themes. Fourth, the initial themes were then reviewed against the interview data. Fifth, we discussed the suitability of the themes and agreed on their final terminology. Finally, the report presented in this article was produced.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the university’s ethics committee, and the British Educational Research Association’s ethical guidelines (BERA 2018) were followed. Prior to the interview, each participant was sent a summary of the study and their signed consent was obtained. At the start of the interview, the researcher explained that participation was voluntary and confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without having to give any reason and without detriment to their studies. The researcher who conducted each interview transcribed and anonymised it before analysis.



Findings

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of the data: course delivery, peer interaction, staff and technology.

Course delivery

Students had different understandings of the way their course would be delivered. Some students expected to receive the same experience as if they were on campus. They expected to have the same number of live lectures and seminars and staff and peer interactions. One student, Byron, mentioned that being online should not have been detrimental to him and his colleagues and that they should have got ‘their money’s worth’. On the other hand, some students expected their course to be structured and delivered in the same way as a traditional distance learning course. Erin, for example, said:

I think I was expecting it just to be some sort of video recordings. I would just watch a lecture and do my own reading and then do assessments. I wasn’t really expecting it to be very interactive.

On distance learning courses, students are expected to work on the content of the course independently and be supported by the posted resources (e.g. reading materials, videos and online tutorials) the university provides with minimal staff and student interaction. However, as Felicity explained, some of the students’ experiences exceeded their expectations:

It’s been interesting, it’s different. It’s not what I expected at all. Part of me expected a bit of an ‘open uni’ course where you are very much on your own, but it’s not like that at all. You know there are sessions you have to attend online, so yeah, it was an online course, but it isn’t. It isn’t like physically, it’s online, but there’s a lot more lectures. There’s a lot more stuff going on. There’s a lot more things happening, so in that sense it is very different.

It seems that the blended (synchronous and asynchronous) teaching and learning approach satisfied students. Students enjoyed and benefitted from live seminars where they had the opportunity to interact with staff and peers. At the same time, the fact that lectures and seminars were recorded

was highlighted as a positive, since it gave students the opportunity to go back to the content and discussions held in the lectures and seminars. As Amelie said:

I actually get most from both because I like the recorded lectures as well because you can listen back to what was going on and you can access it anytime. And I like the seminars because [the tutor] asks us questions and then he puts us into groups and then [the tutor] collaborates in those groups and if you got a question, we can ask him what's going on and stuff like if we need help or anything.

However, some students commented on some of the limitations that they faced. Most students acknowledged that although they enjoyed the small collaborative group work and discussions, the fact that they were held online had negatively affected their quality and quantity. They said that online group work focussed only on the content and tasks to be completed and missed all the small interactions and multiple conversations that would occur in a classroom. They also mentioned that being in the same room would oblige all students to participate and that being behind a screen made it much easier to remain silent. As Byron said:

It's difficult at times to get the group work going. Some groups get very stagnated. I can tell that a lot of people just hide behind the laptop. I've been in groups under Microsoft Teams, but you know, we go into those side meetings, no one says anything for ten minutes.

Another missing aspect that students highlighted was the lack of practical sessions. Some students mentioned that some aspects of the syllabus were clearly designed to be more hands-on where students would be managing and creating educational resources and they would practice using with peers. For example, students were to use resources that were available on campus such as children's books, number blocks or phonics cards. However, they said that their experiences were not completely positive because in some instances staff tried to recreate the session online that they had planned to deliver face-to-face and that it did not translate well.

Most of the students in this study preferred the blended online teaching (synchronous and asynchronous sessions) they were currently experiencing. They enjoyed the flexibility of having recorded lectures, and at the



same time they liked the live seminars where they could interact with peers and staff. As Grant mentioned:

Definitely be a blend of the two. They've been such a help 'cause if you forget something you just jump back and you can watch them. It's been really, really good. The discussions that we have within our group are great and obviously if you can't keep note quick enough you can just jump back and find the later bit. So, I think the blend of the two have been perfect. I mean you can watch it half an hour before your actual seminar where you can sit and discuss what you've just seen. I think more than anything it makes it for me personally a lot easier.

Students suggested some changes to the way some modules were being delivered, particularly regarding group work and the use of webcams. They said it would be beneficial for small group collaborative work to assign specific roles to students in order to facilitate discussion and the work on the tasks. Having the webcams on was also considered by some students as a critical aspect that should be enforced. They said that with their webcams on they would be more focussed on the session and their participation an engagement would improve.

Peer interaction

Student expectations of peer interactions within the online learning environment were mixed. Some reported that they believed everything was going to be friendly and professional, whilst others reported that they expected to have no social interaction and would probably not make friends. Similar to the course delivery expectations, it seems that some students were unaware of what they would encounter when they started their courses and the way the courses were structured and delivered. Iris stated:

I just wasn't sure whether I'd like make friends or feel comfortable in a completely new city. I didn't know whether I'd be stressed from that and like want to drop out.

Student experiences of peer interactions were mixed. As we just mentioned, students reported that the lack of camera use provided the biggest barrier to their interaction. Students reported that the online environments were not

particularly facilitative of group discussions and group work because many students chose to sit in silence or not contribute verbally. As Byron said:

I know that a lot of people hide behind the screen. They kind of just . . . They don't participate. I assume they're taking notes. But there's lots of people who I've never seen or heard this far. Strange that way.

Students also reported that peer interaction was hindered by the lack of opportunities to engage in social bonding activities that would normally happen in face-to-face scenarios, for example going for a coffee after a session or going to the library. The students suggested that experiences of periods of interaction during online sessions followed by abrupt disconnections contributed to feelings of isolation. As Claire said:

Sometimes it can feel a little bit isolating being online, like when you're actually usually on a course, your expectation is you know you're going to mingle with your peers and you're going to form relationships and when you're doing essays, I think it would be more natural to talk about them. Now it's very much the lecture ends and then everyone just disconnects.

Despite these barriers, the students did report positive experiences of peer interaction within the online environment. They suggested that the online live sessions facilitated group discussions and peer interaction and that they were aware that they were becoming more confident and more comfortable interacting with their peers, particularly because they had experience working within small groups within breakout sessions to begin with. As Hannah mentioned:

It's quite intimidating with twenty people sitting there. So, I think breaking it down to sort of five people in one call means I felt a bit more confident speaking and then the more that you go into different groups with different people eventually you do make your way around the whole group. Then one thing leads to another. So, once you become more comfortable with those people, you're happier to contribute in the main session, so it's not as intimidating to speak in the main group.

The participants mentioned that they would prefer staff to facilitate further the interaction between students when in collaborative breakout groups. Some discussed the benefits of assigning roles to students within



breakout rooms so they would feel more at ease to talk and make suggestions without the worry of how they would come across:

If I were to add anything to this, it's assigning group leaders. You know, so I think that would be possibly leaving a little less. . . . I know this sounds almost infantilising, but less for the students to decide, especially in this environment with so much physical distance.

Staff

Some students commented that their expectations regarding university staff did not align with their experiences. Overall, the participants' experiences with staff were more positive than their expectations. They seemed to have the conception that at university staff essentially deliver lectures and students are left on their own. However, as Iris put it:

There's actually a lot of help and of guidance from staff. I didn't think we'd get as much guidance because the teachers in my sixth form, they really stressed the independence and no help whatsoever. So, I was expecting for staff to give us the content and then we have to do everything ourselves. But the staff in the course give us a lot of support or tell us that they are there if we need them and additional activities to help us with our work.

Several aspects regarding staff were highlighted as key: guidance, extra support and accessibility. Some students discussed how beneficial explicit guidance during seminars and for assessments was. They also mentioned that they felt better supported when staff explicitly shared in detail what they were expecting from them, when guidelines for tasks and assessments were shared and when tutorials were put in place. Some of the students also mentioned that they valued the occasions when staff went the extra mile to attend to the personal needs of individual students – for example, recommending readings and tasks to do according to what the students were focussing on. Similarly, staff availability was highlighted by most of the participants as a critical part of their satisfaction with staff. Several students mentioned how crucial the opportunity was to meet with staff without having to book an appointment. Staff have weekly online drop-ins where students can just turn up to ask questions and receive support. Hannah said:

Things like the fact that lecturers have drop-in sessions that you can go to. I think that's really helpful 'cause it feels a lot easier to just call in on one of them than it does to actively email the lecturer. It feels a bit more sort of casual, and so I think that's really useful.

Some participants mentioned that the nature of online seminars, where there is only one conversation happening at any given time, made them more reluctant to ask for help and try to solve their questions. For this reason, they valued the drop-in sessions where staff were available and they were able to have a more private discussion without having to book one in advance. Similarly, accessibility to other support staff was also highlighted as very beneficial for their overall experience. Iris said:

I thought the support system it would be harder to access because in secondary [school] and in college, it's not like accessible unless you have certain requirements you need to meet before they then put you through the support system. I think it's a lot better in this sense because anyone can have access to it. It's not, or you must meet these standards to then have the support you need.

Several students commented on the benefits of accessing in-house pastoral support without having to complete an assessment of needs and meet certain requirements. It seems that the opportunity to occasionally access pastoral support has made a difference, particularly for those students who otherwise would not have been able to access the support. Felicity, for example, said that although she did not need regular pastoral support, she still had access to it and found it very beneficial when she was struggling with academic work. She said:

She's [pastoral staff officer] like, I don't wanna say [a] cheerleader, but she is literally like that. She is that person that says: 'You can do this stuff, stop being so hard'. So yeah, she's been really good, that's been really helpful.

Technology

In terms of the students' experiences with technology, several issues were raised. Some of them spoke about the limitations of establishing meaningful human connections due to the barriers created by use of the online spaces. The most frequent issue reported was the lack of camera use amongst students within live sessions. The participants reported that not being obli-



gated to turn their cameras on created several barriers, both in terms of establishing relationships with their peers and their tutor, and in terms of their overall learning. In addition to this, it was suggested that the perceived lack of visibility within sessions meant that students were less inclined to engage in discussion and participate with one another and/or the tutor. Furthermore, the participants reported that despite originally using their cameras they felt unable to continue their use as most of their peers chose to switch theirs off. They suggested that this made them feel uneasy, specifically because they were visible to everyone else while they were unable to see them. As Byron said:

I think people not putting their cameras on changes the dynamic that you can have. From the very beginning, I put mine on, but when I'm the only person who would put mine on, I stopped doing it because I don't want to be only face [on screen] whereas if everybody did it, I think you get to see everyone else.

Interestingly, the students reported to some extent that the more technology was used to support online learning and build relationships, the more it served to create further detachment. The students reported issues in the online environment in terms of establishing fluid conversational turn-taking with their peers. They suggested that the online environment (possibly due to a lack of social cues and active webcams) meant that many students spoke over one another. As Hannah mentioned:

When two people do speak, it's like 'Oh no, you speak. You speak'. It's kind of awkward. I think that puts people off trying to talk, or I think it also puts people off just sort of jumping in and adding to the conversation.

The students spoke of not receiving instant feedback from staff as you would in a face-to-face environment when asking questions after sessions. As the students would need to do this via email, they reported that this created a feeling of being a burden on staff. As Grant said:

I'm probably missing out on the ability to quickly ask someone something rather than having to remember it, write it down in an email and wait for them to come back. 'Cause as much as they do get back to you really quickly, it's not instant and it's not right when you need it. I find that if I can sit down and just double check something through someone face to face, and just the ability to physically show them something that I've been doing.

The students were particularly positive about the use of Microsoft Teams and its built-in facilities which allowed them to work in breakout rooms during sessions. Breakout sessions were suggested to help with building friendships within the cohort. They also recognised that having sessions on an online platform removed many of the stressors associated with face-to-face interaction, for example arriving ahead of the session or knowing which room to go to.

The students drew our attention to the use of social media as not only a means of establishing a community within the cohort, but also as a valid learning tool. Use of social media as an additional tool outside of the session was a frequently reported facilitator. The participants reported using a number of platforms including Snapchat and WhatsApp. As Erin said:

We've got a WhatsApp group for all the students on my course, and then I've also got like a Snapchat group with the people in my group project. So, I definitely feel like I've got people there to reach out to if I'm struggling with anything or, you know, like that we can talk to.

Discussion

This aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of first-year students to understand their expectations, experiences and preferences for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that, overall, students' experiences and satisfaction were primarily focussed on how the course was delivered, their interactions with peers and staff and the use of technology.

The mixed understandings reported by students of what to expect regarding how their course would be delivered suggests that clearer information and guidance is necessary to inform students about the structure and methods of delivery on their course. In the context of the present study, some students may have applied to study at university expecting face-to-face delivery, as that was how the degree routes were initially promoted before the emergence of COVID-19. However, overall, the students were satisfied with the online learning experience provided to them. It is possible that those students who were less satisfied with how their course was delivered did not support or understand why the course was delivered online, as found by Enes Beltekin and Ihsan Kuyulu (2020). At times, finding the balance between working within public health guidelines and achieving student satisfaction is a challenge, and universities should be prepared to manage expectations in that regard.



A reported benefit of the online course delivery was the interactions with staff and peers in live seminars. The hybrid approach of synchronous and asynchronous teaching sessions was complimented by students. Participants highlighted that asynchronous lectures gave them control of their own learning as they could view the recorded lecture in their own time and rewatch content for clarification. Therefore, it is reassuring that the university's shift towards continuing with asynchronous online lectures as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be well received by students.

Despite peers and staff not being in the same physical learning space, it is evident that peer and staff interaction in online sessions is seen as a significant component of student satisfaction in other studies. Katerina Kedraka and Christos Kaltsidis (2020) found that transitioning to online teaching created barriers for staff and peer interaction. A major contributing factor towards negative perceptions of peer interaction online originates from difficulties in small breakout groups. In line with previous research (Ghazi-Saidi et al. 2020), participants in our study reported that students were reluctant to turn their cameras on or contribute verbally without being prompted, which stifled discussions.

Responses from participants indicate that having cameras on is important to aid interaction and that group work and discussion were made easier when cameras were used. Interestingly, participants indicated that they would be happy with cameras being made compulsory, as it was felt that they aid learning through the additional interaction with their peers. However, it should be recognised that not all students would be comfortable with this, as it would require them to give peers access to their home environment, which is something that is not customary in face-to-face interactions with peers with whom they have yet to form friendships. To further encourage interaction between peers, we suggest that tutor-led activities be designed with outcomes that facilitate discussion amongst group members. As originally reported by Elisabeth Cohen and Rachel Lotan (2014), we have also found that modifying tasks to have direct outcomes (e.g. to include explicit questions or tasks to complete) or directions for how the tasks should be completed (e.g. allocating specific roles to group members, such as group leader, note-taker, spokesperson) has been well received by students, who report greater levels of interaction when working in small groups.

Furthermore, teaching online resulted in fewer opportunities for students to take part in social activities and form friendships with university peers.

This is supported by data from the Office for National Statistics (2021), which highlights that 26 per cent of students reported feeling often or always feeling lonely. Thus, university staff could consider further strategies to facilitate peer interaction within and around online sessions. One example could be leaving the virtual teaching room open for students to continue their conversations after the session, which would avoid the abrupt endings that our participants felt added to feelings of isolation. This online space would take on the role of the ‘corridor’ where students would normally engage in conversation when entering and leaving the physical teaching room with on-campus learning.

Perhaps one of the most revealing aspects of the study was the participants’ insights that the university staff provided a lot more help and guidance than they were expecting when they enrolled. There was an expectation from participants that outside of timetabled sessions, lecturers would not offer support to students. As seen in earlier studies (Lovrić et al. 2020; Unger and Meiran 2020), the additional support offered separate from teaching time, such as one-to-one tutorials and frequent e-mail communication, was pleasantly surprising for students and enhanced their satisfaction. Despite now returning to work on campus and having face-to-face interaction with students in timetabled sessions, staff in our school have continued to offer online meetings to students to provide greater accessibility for students who do not attend campus every day.

Not surprisingly, the use of technology was found to impact students’ engagement within sessions and their perceived learning. In addition to participants’ reactions to students having cameras turned off, which we discussed above, there was some negative reaction towards being required to be focussed on a screen for the duration of the teaching time. With the reported issues of online teaching resulting in excessive screen time and impaired sleep (Khare et al. 2021), it could be argued that educators have a duty of care to provide ‘screen breaks’ for students. These windows of time could be spliced within sessions, allowing students to move away from their screens and providing an opportunity for them to digest and reflect on the content of the session.

Conclusion

Our research aimed to gain an insight into first-year students’ expectations, experiences and preferences for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The perspectives of these undergraduate students provide evidence of how our university reacted to meet student expectations, and they enable us to make three recommendations.

First, as the world transitions to a ‘new normal’ post COVID-19, elements of online learning should remain. Students have demonstrated a preference for the flexibility offered by recorded lectures and the control they can have over the pace of their learning. Second, greater consideration by tutors is required to facilitate peer interaction in online environments. Our findings indicate that peer interaction is a key contributor to students’ experience at university, with interactions in sessions and outside of sessions being equally significant. In an online learning environment, there is greater responsibility on the tutor to create opportunities for students to interact, as the ‘natural’ opportunities provided with the face-to-face teaching environment (such as, entering and exiting the teaching room and being seated around a desk) do not occur. It could also be effective to adopt these strategies in face-to-face environments to give direction for how tasks are to be completed and to encourage interaction between students. And finally, the positive reactions to the use of online platforms in a blended learning approach seem to suggest that students who applied to face-to-face courses favour interaction with peers and staff even within online environments. Now that higher education institutions are embracing more digital solutions to teaching and learning, it seems more important than ever to keep elements of synchronous interaction in course delivery.

Looking to the future, there is continuing uncertainty around the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the implications there may be for public health guidelines. Universities have shown that they can be flexible in responding to changes forced upon them, and, in most cases, students are understanding about how this may impact upon the delivery of their courses. Further research could build on the current study by exploring the similarities and differences of students’ experiences from different schools and the potential links to their demographics (e.g. age, gender, socio-economic status and ethnic background). The present study has presented detailed perspectives from students on predominantly theory-based courses in one subject area. The next stage is to examine perspectives from wider cohorts of students, including those on practical, creative and laboratory-centred courses to provide further contextualised information about how expectations and experiences may differ.

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