

Research Article

‘COVID sucked the soul out of all things decent’: A qualitative exploration of student experiences of online education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 restrictions had a significant impact on higher education in the UK, with the majority of teaching moving to online delivery. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 students who were studying at universities across the United Kingdom in order to explore student experiences of digital teaching in the wider context of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the results. Two key themes with associated themes were identified. The first theme explored students’ experiences of the move to e-learning, the support that was offered, and the perceived impact on their academic performance. The second theme explored the wider impact on students, in relation to opportunities for work experience, social relationships, future prospects, and mental health. The results illustrated that the sudden move to online learning left many students feeling disengaged from their learning; worried about their future prospects, socially isolated and experiencing poorer mental health. Implications for the provision of online education are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19; students; online education; qualitative

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the introduction of 'Lockdown' measures across the globe, in an attempt to reduce the spread of the coronavirus and its associated devastating health consequences. In the United Kingdom (UK), restrictions on unnecessary social contact were first introduced on the 26th of March 2020 (UK Government, 2020) and people were only able to leave their homes for essential activities, including exercise and work. Subsequent lockdowns were introduced at national and local levels throughout 2020 and 2021, with the main restrictions ending in England in July 2021. In December 2021, guidance to work from home where possible was re-introduced in England.

Higher education was also significantly impacted. All but essential workplaces were closed meaning that opportunities for university facilitated work experience and placements were significantly curtailed. In addition, most university teaching moved to online delivery. Online education can afford valuable opportunities for innovative, creative, and engaging ways of teaching (e.g., Bayne et al., 2020). It can offer greater flexibility, convenience, cost-effectiveness, wider learning opportunities, and opportunities for students to pace their work (e.g., Serhan, 2020). Achieving these benefits, however, assumes access to suitable technologies and infrastructure, and a level of digital literacy in staff and students. It also requires time for a level of thought, preparation, and scaffolding that wasn't always available to academic staff who had to quickly pivot to online education during a global crisis. While many academic staff have had experience of using some limited forms of online education, the move from predominantly face-to-face teaching to e-learning was sudden and unexpected. The change frequently required an extensive redesign of the delivery of course materials, within a short time period, and by staff who did not necessarily have expertise in online education (see Daumiller et al., 2021) or an understanding of the ways in which different mediums create and constrain the pedagogical approaches that can be developed (Cousins, 2005).

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that research, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, has indicated that students have not always responded positively to the transition to online learning. While the benefits of e-learning, such as flexibility, and self-paced learning were highlighted by some students (e.g., Bączek et al., 2021), many believed that online learning was less enjoyable, resulted in a less valuable learning experience and as a result, reduced their motivation to engage with it (e.g., Garriss & Fleck, 2020; Serhan, 2020). Some of the factors that contributed to a poor online learning experience in the context of the pandemic included problems with technology and connectivity, feelings of social isolation, and compromised learning environments (e.g., Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). Poor mental health was also common, with students experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety (Husky et al., 2020) and loneliness (Bu et al., 2020).

Much of this research, however, relates to specific universities or to specific subject areas. A broader picture emerged from the 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey, conducted in the UK (Neves & Hewitt, 2021). This surveyed over 10,000 undergraduate students who were studying at UK universities and found a picture that was largely consistent with research from other countries. In particular, the responses highlighted that many students considered that their university education, during the COVID-19 restrictions, represented less value for money due to reduced in-person contact and teaching; lost opportunities to engage in practical elements, such as placements; and a sense that the quality of online teaching was lower than that offered by face-to-face delivery.

The broad picture drawn from the survey requires further in-depth exploration, particularly as digital education is often viewed in isolation from the wider context in which it is situated. As Bayne et al. (2020) argue, teaching and learning are multifaceted, contextual processes that bring together 'people, digital technologies, curricula, work and study spaces, and artefacts of assessment' (p16). The COVID-19 restrictions offered an opportunity to explore student experiences of digital teaching in a context where they had not chosen this mode of learning and where the wider academic, economic, and social contexts within which they were being taught had radically shifted. For this reason, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore student experiences of digital teaching in the wider context of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Method

A qualitative approach was used for the study, with data being obtained from semi-structured interviews (conducted between January and April 2021) with university students. The context of the research was the experiences of students moving to online learning at higher education institutions in the UK during the COVID-19 restrictions. The study received ethical approval from Northumbria university ethics committee and all participants provided informed consent.

Participants

Participants were aged 18 years or older and were studying, or had been studying, at a UK university during the initial COVID-19 restrictions. Sixteen people participated, of whom 4 were male and 12 were female. Not all participants provided all of the demographic information requested. Based on those who did, ages ranged from 21 to 24. Eight were in their final year of an undergraduate degree and 1 was completing a one-year Master's degree. The topics being studied included Psychology, Law, Art, Psychology and Criminology, Criminology, and Education. Only one participant (P3) had originally chosen an online distance learning programme. Participants were

studying at universities across the UK, in the South and North-East of England and in Scotland.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online through social media websites, student forums, university student groups and emails. A study advert provided a brief overview of the research and a link to an online site where more detailed information was provided, including researchers' email addresses, to enable potential participants to contact them with any questions. Those who wished to take part were asked to record their consent and provide contact details to enable a suitable interview time to be arranged with them. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing software, or phone according to participants' preferences. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer. Potentially identifying information was removed or altered during the transcription process.

An interview schedule was developed to structure the interview, while allowing flexibility in exploring topics that appeared relevant to particular participants. This was designed to explore students' experiences and perceptions of the move to online education, including benefits and drawbacks, and the impact of this transition. The topics that were explored were based on areas that had been identified in previous research as potentially being important, and included sources of support, the impact on academic performance, future plans, and mental health.

The interviews were conducted by CM and LF, both of whom are psychology graduates from Northumbria University. The combined data were analysed by KM. The researchers adopted a constructivist approach to the data.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, based on the guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020). This is a flexible method of analysis, that does not dictate a particular theoretical approach, and which can allow the researcher to synthesise and interpret multiple, subjective perspectives of participants, in order to identify relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017).

As a first step, each transcript was read in detail before being combined with the others to form a single dataset. All transcripts were then re-read and related sentences and phrases across the dataset were collated and labelled with the same codes as an initial step to developing potential themes. These coded extracts were subsequently grouped together as themes and subthemes, which identified areas which were relevant across the dataset. The final analysis was shared with the wider research

team, to ensure that it reflected the content of the interviews and that the themes were relevant, internally coherent, and consistent. The themes and subthemes were then supported by illustrative quotes from the transcripts. Grammatical errors and colloquialisms in the quotes have been left uncorrected.

Results

The analysis resulted in two main themes. The first ('Structure! I would love structure!') explored the participant experiences of the move to online learning, the support offered by their universities and the perceived impact on their academic performance. The second theme ('COVID sucked the soul out of all things decent') explored the wider impact on participants, in terms of work experience, social contact, employment prospects and mental health (see Table 1 for themes and associated subthemes).

Table 1: A brief description of the two main themes and their associated sub-themes

Theme	Subthemes	Brief description
Structure! I would love structure!	'Decided it wasn't for me'	The focus here is on how the students engaged with e-learning and its associated advantages and disadvantages.
	'I'm just doing everything from my room'	This explores the impact of the restricted access to the physical campus in the context of the wider social restrictions imposed as a result of COVID-19.
	'I literally could not do it'	This reports on the impact on students' motivation, concentration, and academic performance.
	'It was obviously not going to be a smooth road'	The focus here is on the way in which the move to online education was introduced and supported by the students' universities.
COVID sucked the soul out of all things decent	'It is not the same as talking in person'	This subtheme explores the impact on the participants' social support, relationships, and interaction.
	'I am not going to be able to put that on a CV'	This explores the impact of the move to e-learning and the COVID-19 restrictions on the future plans of participants.
	'It's a lot more stress, more constant'	This explores the largely detrimental impact of many of the areas which were identified in the previous subthemes on the students' mental health.

Theme 1: “Structure! I would love structure!”

The first theme explores the ways in which the students experienced the change to online learning, in the context of the wider restrictions that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. The associated subthemes are described in more detail below.

Subtheme 1: “Decided it wasn’t for me”

This subtheme highlights the ways in which the students engaged with e-learning and some of the associated benefits and difficulties that they experienced. There were mixed views about the move to online learning. There were a number of benefits which were identified, including the opportunity to engage with external experts: *“we’ve had lots of extra-curricular stuff, which is with external people and that’s been good”* (P13), to learn in more independent and flexible ways: *“erm I think that it is quite nice you can go at your own pace, like if today you wanted to do a different lecture to the timetable that’s fine”* (P11) and in a context with fewer distractions than usual: *“...probably fewer distractions to be fair cause there’s times in lectures like me and my friends have a chat sometimes and miss some of the things that is going on”* (P1).

In general, however, the online learning during the pandemic was viewed as being less structured, which had a negative impact on motivation: *“structure! I would love structure...like I set myself up but then I just sit there and do nothing for hours”* (P15), and productivity: *“[the work] doesn’t really get done because there’s no proper structure”* (P12). The reduced structure also resulted in worse time management for some students: *“I think probably time management more than anything because [you] are really left on your own”* (P11).

There were also particular aspects of e-learning that many students disliked. Some found the online materials and formats less engaging: *“I did [attend online workshop] once because I thought I had to, but it was just, like, boring”* (P16), and preferred in-person lectures: *“I’d prefer face-to-face lectures, it’s easier to engage with rather than sitting and listening to someone’s voice over a PowerPoint”* (P11). Others disliked the impersonal nature of the online contact: *“I think it’s the de-faceless communication, you’re not speaking to someone, you feel like you’re speaking at something”* (P10). This was particularly the case when the format required them to interact with people that they didn’t know: *“I was just like in a chat with these randoms. It just wasn’t for me. Like, I’m not shy, but that’s just, like, weird.”* (P16).

Problems with technology and a lack of structured ways to help the cohort connect were seen as making the situation worse:

“When you go for a drink or meet as a group you find a way to break the ice, but online it’s very hard to get a grasp of people and it’s just really awkward, when connection breaks or you interrupt people, etc.” (P13).

Having to interact online with strangers caused many of the participants to feel anxious: *"I think [breakout rooms] personally for me make me feel really nervous because no one wants to be put on webcam with random people they don't know, and I think erm it's just nerve wracking because its people you just don't know"* (P9). This anxiety was exacerbated when expectations about participation were unclear: *"I feel like I get anxious every time before a seminar online because I don't really know what to say, what they are expecting me to say"* (P12).

As a result of their discomfort, many participants disengaged. Some did not participate fully in the session, being reluctant to ask questions: *"when you are sat in your house alone and things aren't being explained properly, obvs you can ask question on zoom or whatever, but it's a lot more scary because you just don't know each other and things like that"* (P11), or respond verbally to questions: *"I find the online stuff so awkward, like I usually pretend my mic is broken so I can just like type my answers"* (P15).

Others avoided sessions altogether, for example, by cutting off communication about when they would take place: *"I didn't know when we even really started to be honest. I like turned me notifications off on my emails because they were getting on me nerves"* (P16), or by simply not attending: *"to be honest I have stopped going to some, but that's because I'm like too nervous to go on"* (P12). This was despite recognising the importance of the sessions for their learning:

"Well, in all honesty, I just don't attend them. I know they are important and that, but I just can't bring myself too. I think I've attended like one all year and decided it wasn't for me". (P14).

Subtheme 2: "I'm just doing everything from my room"

The second subtheme explores the impact of the restricted access to physical campus facilities, such as libraries, on the students. Many participants reported having a less-than-ideal study environment. While many universities had library facilities open, the associated procedures for accessing them put many students off: *"the library has too many restrictions"* (P12). These restrictions and the associated uncertainty about access, meant that many participants simply stayed in their home, and often their room, to study: *"I think you can go to the library, but I'm not too sure erm, but I'm just doing everything from my room"* (P14). This created a sense of being trapped and there being no distinction between study, work, and home life: *"So, I sit at my dining table because I don't actually have a desk in my room and I do my work for my job in the same place, which makes me feel like I am constantly sat here"* (P11).

Many participants experienced stress as a result of their study environment: *"knowing you can't leave the environment to go somewhere else after to de-stress makes it more stressful"* (P9). For some, however, the option to move home improved their study environment:

"When the pandemic first started like a year ago now, I think it really helped me because I went from my student accommodation to back home which I think for me is a lot better study space. I was doing all my assignments and like my exams in a space that I feel like I thrive in more academically" (P12).

Subtheme 3: "I literally could not do it"

The third subtheme reports on the students' experiences in relation to their perceived motivation, concentration, and academic performance, in the context of the pandemic and move to e-learning. Most reported some reduction in motivation: *"it was fine at the start but now I am getting a bit sick of everything, no motivation to do anything"* (P12) and concentration: *"I start doing something and I just like cannot concentrate"* (P6). There was a sense of being disconnected from the university as an institution: *"it just feels like I am not at uni. It is like I am just watching these videos"* (P2) and the related expectations: *"I just feel like there's no motivation because, like, if it's on the computer you can just put it off till like never"* (P9). Some participants also missed the motivation that they obtained from being taught in person by enthusiastic lecturers:

"It has just made it a bit difficult to actually learn anything or get the motivation to learn anything per say, like for instance like um face-to-face teaching you receive the energy of the teacher you can stay concentrated because there is no other distractions". (P6)

By contrast, a few participants identified aspects of e-learning that helped to improve their motivation, such as pacing the release of materials and structuring the content:

"When the lecturers are doing things like seminars and Q+A's it gives you a bit more motivation to keep up and you understand the lecture ready for the Q+A as opposed to releasing all the content and being like "there you go."" (P9).

Most participants felt that their academic performance had been weaker as they studied during the pandemic: *"I was not getting any work done and I had to ask for extensions because I literally could not do it"* (P2).

Some felt that their development had been put on hold during the pandemic:

"I just personally do not feel like I have learnt a lot in the past year or improved. I think that has really put me out of focus and I just like do not have the drive anymore, I guess". (P8).

Some explicitly attributed this to the move to online learning: *"I would say I'm more productive and proactive when I'm not online, which has actually reflected in my grades"* (P10).

There was also a sense that the quality of teaching had reduced during the pandemic: *"the quality of education has gone down so much this year, like I am constantly worrying about how well I am doing and if I am putting enough in"* (P8) and that online teaching was poorer, as compared with face-to-face teaching: *"the teaching isn't as*

great as what I would've expected from face-to-face." (P11). As a result, many felt that they were having to put in extra effort to maintain their progress: *"I have been putting in a lot more effort to try and compensate for the decreased quality. Which is just more stress on my end"* (P12).

Subtheme 4: "It was obviously not going to be a smooth road"

The fourth subtheme reports on the students' experiences of the way in which the move to online education was introduced and the support that was available to them during the process. The sudden and unexpected nature of the changes meant that many of the students felt unprepared for the change to online learning. There was a general sense that the universities could have supported the students better:

"I feel like it was just so abrupt that it was obviously not going to be a smooth road. It was like attending actual uni was just cut off. I would say considering how long they had over summer to sort of organise themselves it could have been a bit better". (P14).

Many students, however, also acknowledged that universities had put policies in place to try to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19:

"I think like last year the "no detriment policy" put a lot of people's minds at ease because then you aren't going to get the same grades as learning face-to-face but the policy takes the stress off having to achieve normal expectations." (P9).

Individual support was provided by academic staff: *"the lecturers are quite supportive, and you can speak to them whenever"* (P12) and additional information was available, for example in relation to student wellbeing: *"I think they do offer mental health support"* (P13) and careers advice: *"well, they do send out a lot of emails about these employability things, right?"* (P6).

There were, however, a number of barriers identified to accessing this help. This might be due to timing issues: *"it's like all these employability things for long-term, like actual careers, just seem to be like at quite awkward times for me"* (P6), or difficulties with motivation:

"You have to find it [support] on your own and email people and when your mental health is suffering you can't really be bothered to go through all that. So, I mean the help is there, but I don't have the motivation to seek it out". (P13).

Many participants also viewed themselves as people who found it difficult to ask for help: *"I think the help is out there if I seeked it, but I'm not really the type to ask"* (P14), or to accept it, when offered: *"I mean I know the help is there, like. I don't think I'll ever like use it like... not me personally like. I don't really like to use the help anyways"* (P16).

There was also an acknowledgement from some participants that the pandemic was unprecedented, and that the negative consequences were frequently out with the

control of staff: *"well, I suppose it's not really their fault I can't work elsewhere"* (P14). Staff were seen as making attempts to keep students updated with information:

"I mean they are doing the best they can aren't they? I mean like they are trying, I got like an email everyday telling me what the current situation was in terms of like COVID." (P15).

In general, staff were seen as doing their best: *"I think there's not much they can do given what's going on... but I do think they are doing the best they can"* (P13).

Theme 2: "COVID sucked the soul out of all things decent"

This theme explores the wider impact of the pandemic and move to online education on the participants. The subthemes explore this in terms of their social interaction, opportunities for work experience, employment prospects, and mental health.

Subtheme 1: "It is not the same as talking in person"

This subtheme explores the impact on participant social relationships and interaction. In many cases, the move to online education, in tandem with COVID-19 restrictions, meant loss of social contact and a sense of social isolation: *"I'm like withdrawn from like normal life...I do feel just so, like, isolated"* (P15). Technology offered some ways of providing social contact but was seen as inferior to face-to-face contact: *"I think maybe, just, I feel really isolated and like it has been good for things like Zoom and FaceTime like, I am still able to talk to people, but I would just say it is not the same as talking in person"* (P1). The opportunities for informal social contact that campus facilities offered were lost: *"obviously we can't go and attend lectures in person. Personally, I find it a lot more motivating to be like around the people who also do the course rather than just sitting in my room"* (P1).

Even when facilities, such as libraries, were open, the changed circumstances meant that students were not motivated to use them, and lost social support as a result: *"I would say I'm quite a social person... I would be seeing my friends or at the library, which now going to the library is a bit of a chore"* (P10).

Subtheme 2: "I am not going to be able to put that on a CV"

This subtheme explores the ways in which the participants future plans were impacted as a result of the pandemic. For some, the experience of online education led to a decision to no longer pursue an advanced educational qualification because they viewed it negatively: *"I was thinking about doing a Master's [degree] after I completed third year, but I just needed a break from online learning"* (P2). For others, concern about the lack of employment opportunities led to the decision to undertake additional

study: *"I feel quite scared about going out into the world and getting a job...it just seems safer to go with a Master's [degree] because I think there's just less opportunities out there"* (P8), even if this meant further online education: *"like I have already done two years of corona learning, what is another year?"* (P6).

A significant concern for participants in relation to their future prospects was the impact of the move to online education on opportunities for work experience, such as placements and internships. In many cases, these were cancelled: *"I've had, like, opportunities kind of taken away or cancelled that would have really added to my CV"* (P7), or no longer being offered by external organisations: *"they will not accept work experience because of the whole COVID situation and I feel very negative about the future"* (P2).

Participants were worried about these lost opportunities and that it would reduce their value in the employment market:

"opportunities that I possibly would have had, like say an internship, I am not going to be able to put that on a CV and that's kind of worrying for me...I feel like I would not blame a future employer if they saw that a year of my university was just online, I would just throw out my CV at this point. Like, the quality of uni has decreased so much this year, like, I do not think I'd be as employable as someone who graduated a year or two earlier" (P12).

There was also concern that the lack of placement opportunities would make the participants less attractive candidates for postgraduate study: *"when I first found out I was not able to do the placement or could not get one, I kind of did worry about whether I'd be able to get onto a post graduate course without having any experience"* (P5).

Some participants took the opportunity to gain experience in the context of the restrictions, by volunteering online: *"I am a digital volunteer: I talk to people who just want to talk or want advice in support services"* (P2). Online opportunities for experience, while welcome, were, however, seen as being of less benefit than in-person experience:

"I applied for a placement um... and I can definitely say that has helped, but it would have been a lot more beneficial if I could have done it in person. I think that would have made me a lot more employable" (P1).

Subtheme 3: "It's a lot more stress, more constant"

This subtheme explores the impact of many of the areas which were identified in the previous subthemes on the mental health of participants.

Many experienced a sense of social isolation and loss of their social support, whether family (if remaining in university accommodation), or friends, if they had moved back home: *"I do live with my parents, but they are both key workers, so I am spending a*

lot of time on my own and obviously not seeing my friends and things like that, so I think that's the hardest part" (P5). This loss of in-person contact and support had a significant negative impact on the mental health of many participants:

"I think mentally I have really struggled with the lack of social...I obviously was not seeing anyone because it was lockdown and I really missed like my friends, who I see at least twice a week, I really struggled (laughs). God, it was awful" (P3).

The situation also placed strain on existing relationships because people were living in such close proximity with a limited group of people: *"I would have a go at my friends just for the little things like leaving crumbs on the table"* (P2).

Engaging in multiple activities in a restricted environment was experienced as stressful and oppressive: *"I feel as though I am struggling with the sort of stress... like work wise, sleep wise, relaxation wise, I'm just in my room and sometimes it's just impossible to switch off from thinking about uni work"* (P14).

Concern about lost opportunities, poorer academic outcomes and reduced employment prospects also impacted negatively on some students' mental health:

"As the year goes on it is something I am worrying about more and more and I guess just missing out on those opportunities I could have had, it has just made me worried about my career as a whole" (P8).

There was a sense of trepidation and uncertainty about academic attainment and how this would impact on the future prospects: *"it is just like hoping I will end up graduating with the grades I want and stuff, um but yeah it is kind of scary with graduation looming and like the job prospects and everything like that being uncertain and the next steps being uncertain"* (P7).

Discussion

The changes to the environment in which the students in this study were taught, because of COVID-19 restrictions, offered the opportunity to have a greater focus on the wider contextual factors that influenced their experience of digital education. Bayne et al. (2020) note that the multi-faceted nature of digital education offers many opportunities to get it right and allows multiple routes to good practice. The results of the study, however, suggest that, despite the many benefits and opportunities that teaching online can offer, the sudden and unanticipated need to move to digital education because of the COVID-19 restrictions, was largely experienced negatively by the students in this study. The results also have a number of implications for practice, which may be particularly relevant, given the possibilities of future campus closures as a result of a resurgence in COVID-19 cases.

The students identified both individual and structural factors that contributed to their negative experiences of online learning, including the nature of the teaching materials,

the structure and delivery of the teaching, their wider study and support environment, and the reduced or lost opportunities to obtain practical experience through internships, volunteering or placements. The results from the UK 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves & Hewitt, 2021) suggests that student dissatisfaction with their digital education experience was relatively widespread. This both related to the poor quality of the digital content and limitations of processes, such as the timing of assignments.

Our own research highlighted the important role of teachers in digital education. Rather than just facilitating student use of digital technologies, they have a crucial role as subject experts who use their professional, educational skills to engage, motivate, challenge, and inspire students (see Bayne et al., 2020). The loss of in-person interaction, with both teachers and fellow students, led many students to feel socially isolated. It seems that, despite there being many ways to scaffold and support a sense of online identity and community (e.g., Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020), these approaches seem to have largely been absent. This may have been due to the hurried, widespread transition to digital education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It may also reflect limited skill development for academics in teaching online prior to the pandemic, which meant many were likely to be ill-equipped to understand the constraints and possibilities of differently mediated interactions, let alone to fully utilise them to best “perform” that charismatic, inspiring version of themselves they might in person.

Students (and staff) may also hold an idealised image of face-to-face learning compared with e-learning. Research has indicated that e-learning students use the concept of the ‘campus imaginary’ – imagined, positive aspects of the experience of attending the physical campus - as a way of attributing the challenges they face with their learning to being online students (Ross & Sheil, 2017). This is despite many of these challenges also being present for students who receive face-to-face teaching.

This may lead to the comparison of a homogenised “online” versus an idealised homogenised “offline” learning environment. This misses the more nuanced understanding that technology and pedagogy co-produce the educational experience, both online and face-to-face. Different technologies and materialities open up and close down different enactments of education. A lab or tutorial space is very different from a lecture theatre, likewise asynchronous forum posts are very different from a blog, or a video conference. A failure to understand how the social and the material contexts influence education and the view of e-learning as a re-versioning of the face-to-face experience can lead to the use of technology in ways which can undermine pedagogical intent.

Bayne et al. (2020) argue that good digital education can embody the same values that are present in in-person education, such as the provision of good quality engagement and interaction, but they are enacted differently online. Providing all staff with support in how to embody key principles of good quality teaching in their online

courses and how to maximise the particular opportunities that e-learning affords may help to improve student perceptions of this mode of learning.

Many students in the present study also experienced low levels of motivation, difficulty engaging with the online materials and with their time management. Despite this, many were reluctant to seek help. These experiences are not unique to the COVID-19 (Rasheed et al., 2020) or e-learning contexts (see Bornschlegl et al., 2020). A recent systematic review explored the challenges faced by students specifically in relation to the online component of their learning. Rasheed et al. (2020) found that students who voluntarily undertook this type of learning had similar difficulties to those experienced by students in our own study. Previous research has suggested that the development of academic skills, such as motivation, good self-discipline, and time management skills are important requirements for successful learning (e.g., Khan et al., 2019). This suggests a need for all students to have access to support with the development and application of these skills.

The demonstration of such skills, are however, context-dependent. Bayne et al. (2020) argue that a focus on such individual characteristics can ignore the structural constraints or facilitators on the individual exercising such characteristics and the active and interactive role that technology plays in shaping and changing teaching.

Many of the students described feeling disengaged from their studies and their universities. A number of issues raised by them can be mapped on to the four key aspects of student 'belonging' identified by Ahn and Davis (2019): academic and social engagement, surroundings (e.g., living space) and personal space (e.g., life satisfaction, personal interests). As all four areas were constrained by the COVID-19 restrictions, it is perhaps unsurprising that our participants expressed a reduced sense of belonging. This is consistent with the results found by other researchers (e.g., Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020) and highlights a need to address this in the online environment. O'Shea and Dozier (2014) describe the creation (pre-COVID-19) of a virtual dissertation festival to create a sense of shared space and belonging for online students who were based in disparate locations. Such approaches may also have helped to promote a feeling of belonging and engagement during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Many of the students felt that their educational experience had been devalued and lacked authenticity compared with their expectations of campus-based, in-person teaching. 'Campus envy' has been found even in students who have elected to engage in digital education and are happy with their choice, perhaps because of the mechanism of the 'campus imaginary,' described previously (Ross & Sheil, 2017). There is a need to challenge the view that digital education is inherently second class and for academics to develop ways of enabling students who are being taught online to move beyond the physical structure of the campus as being "a guarantor of the authenticity of academic experience" (Bayne et al., 2014, p577).

Many of our participants also felt, however, that their education would be viewed as inferior by potential future employers, reducing their chances of obtaining graduate level jobs at the end of their studies. There has been an increasing perception of education as a means of promoting societal and personal economic growth, with digital education often being seen as contributing to this process by enhancing the digital skills of the prospective workforce (see Bayne et al., 2020). While our participants largely appeared to endorse the instrumental and economic view of education, many viewed their experience of online teaching as detrimental to, rather than enhancing, their future prospects.

In this context, student concerns appear valid, with COVID-19 being reported to have disrupted the career progression for those at an early career stage, and many graduates putting off entering the employment market (Powell & Francis-Devine, 2021). This suggests that universities may need to work with students and future employers to promote the value and benefits of digital learning.

This also highlights the need for a post-digital way of thinking, one where a holistic understanding of educational activities and practices encompasses "the digital and non-digital, the material, and the social" (Fawns, 2018, p.132). Acknowledging that all learning occurs in a wider social and material context with practices co-produced both on- and off-line could help break down the unnecessary, and sometimes obstreperous, distinctions between modes of learning. A recognition and enactment of a post digital perspective opens up possibilities in teaching, policy and investment in technology.

The study had a number of limitations. The digital teaching that was experienced by the students in our study during the COVID-19 restrictions cannot be directly compared to planned online curriculum that they might have undertaken by choice. Despite this, the unusual context in which the teaching was developed and delivered has enabled some important structural issues to be highlighted. A second limitation is, that while qualitative research does not aim to represent all members of a particular group, the experiences of students who were more familiar with digital education may have been different from our own participants. A final limitation was that the interviews took place between January and March 2021, after two main periods of lockdown. Participants may have reported different experiences if the interviews had taken place at a different phase of the restrictions.

In conclusion, the study explored student experiences of online learning and how these were situated in the wider contextual changes that resulted from the COVID-19 restrictions. The results illustrated that the unplanned and hurried nature of the change to online learning resulted in students largely feeling unprepared, de-motivated, and disengaged from their learning; concerned about their future prospects, and socially isolated. This, in turn, led to many experiencing mental health difficulties.

Data availability statement

The interview transcripts on which the study is based are not publicly available in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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