



COVID, Campus, Cameras, Communication, and Connection

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Abstract

In Spring 2021, at a university in the north of England, we conducted a student-facing project intended to discover their lived experience of the 2020-21 academic year, as well as surface insights into what the phrase “back to campus” might mean for these students. Students struggled with what their lecturers were asking in terms of visibility (especially cameras). They were also concerned about building and maintaining connections. The desire for effective and transparent communication in a time of crisis was also expressed. We juxtapose the rhetoric about “back to campus” and assumptions embedded in policies around cameras and digital participation with the expressed desires of students for human relationships and care in a time of uncertainty and upheaval. We end with implications for institutions with the certainty that this will not be the last time, as a sector, when we must rely primarily on digital places and platforms for the work of the University.

1. Introduction

In March of 2020 it became clear that the COVID virus was pandemic. International borders closed, governments issued stay at home orders, and universities and schools, along with businesses and other institutions, sent people home. The now proverbial “pivot” to online in UK Universities was swift and, in some cases, merciless. Staff and students were encountering each other almost exclusively in online places such as Zoom, Skype, MS Teams, and VLE environments such as Blackboard. Lectures were delivered live and also in recordings. Students encountered each other in group chats as well as in online classes, and their lecturers in emails, one on one video calls, and in online classes. The physical campus was still inhabited, but with severe limits. For those who had attended university before, nothing they had become familiar with was the same. For first-year and new post graduates, it was very hard to build any sense of the familiar, because everything was strange and difficult in the pandemic emergency.

In the late Spring of 2021 we developed an interview-based project to learn from the experience of at an English university in the north. By the time we were speaking to students, there was much discussion from university leadership and in the press about “back to campus” as the goal for the start of the 2021-22 academic year (Carr 2021; Lewis et al. 2021; Weale 2021). In that light, we focused our interview questions on what being on physical campuses meant to students, as well as eliciting what their experiences were like when attending university in an almost entirely digital context.

Students struggled with what their lecturers were asking in terms of visibility (especially cameras). They were also concerned about building and maintaining connections with each other, with lecturers, and with their university. The desire for effective and transparent communication in a time of crisis was also expressed. We juxtapose the rhetoric about returning to the physical campus and assumptions embedded in approaches to cameras and digital participation, with the expressed desires of students for genuine human relationships and care in a time of great uncertainty and upheaval. We end with implications for institutions, with the certainty that this will not be the last time, as a sector, when we must rely primarily on digital places and platforms for the work of the University.

2. Literature Review

In the UK and elsewhere, the global pandemic emergency-19 causing the sudden switch in campus-based universities from face-to-face to online teaching presented tremendous challenges for students and staff. One of the biggest changes caused by the pandemic emergency was the restructuring of campus life. No longer were students able to attend activities and lectures on-site, which resulted in some negative perceptions of university life and a desire for students to return to campus (Carr 2021; Lewis et al. 2021). Research has been swiftly forthcoming regarding the higher education (HE) sector responses to the COVID emergency, as well as student and staff experiences of those responses. This brief review is intended to highlight themes emerging from the research landscape that resonate with those we pursue in this article.

Student-facing research has indicated that a significant percentage of students enjoyed aspects of online learning, and a majority wanted a blended mix of online and in-person teaching to survive into future terms. (Watermeyer et al. 2020; Yang 2021). In the 2022 report “Going Back is Not a Choice” Disabled Students UK remind the sector that disabled students have been asking for flexibility and accommodations from the HE sector for years, and that the pandemic emergency provided for everyone what they have been asking for and hope to see continue.

“Our respondents hope that many of these alternatives implemented during the pandemic will remain options, and their status as legitimate forms of gaining and demonstrating knowledge will be raised. In addition, there is a hope that HEPs will become increasingly open to flexibility more generally. HEPs with a more flexible approach have often been better prepared for the many twists and turns of this pandemic. For instance, those HEPs that already provided online alternatives found the move to online-only provision easier when required. (Westander et al 2022, p.25)”

On the other hand, the flexibility offered in online context cannot compensate for the trauma of living through a global pandemic. Results from three different surveys conducted during

November 2020 conclude that more than half of students report that their well-being and mental health has worsened as a result of the pandemic (Tinsley 2022). Although, just under half said that their university was doing well in supporting students with their mental health, awareness seems to still be an issue – students who knew how to access help were nearly three times less likely to say their mental health had declined since starting there (Dickinson 2021). In a survey conducted in both the Spring and the end of 2020 about their experiences at university during that early-in-the-pandemic year, students expressed a desire for universities to communicate clearly. Students wanted to be able to plan for the upcoming calendar year, not just around academic activities, and coordinate logistics with their families. The survey results also indicated that some students hoped their lecturers could play a more significant role in fostering a social environment in virtual classroom environments, in the absence of opportunities to be social in physical places. (WeWork 2021).

These increased expectations for academic staff sit alongside evidence that the corporate response to the pandemic emergency has worsened their work environment and intensified an already existing sense that academic work is undervalued and under-supported for what is being asked. (Watermeyer et al. 2021). The overwhelming need to support students struggling with social isolation and mental health issues occurred while professional service and technical staff were furloughed in many places. On the other hand, academic library workers reconfigured and expanded services and support for students, extensively leveraging digital places and platforms to do so (Connell, Wallis, and Comeaux 2021; Delaney et al 2020; Murphy et al 2021).

Academic staff themselves did not necessarily know where to direct students for help, and they themselves were struggling with the same issues. (Watermeyer et al. 2020; Idris et al. 2021). The literature emerging since 2020 reveals shared concerns from both staff and students about the impact of the emergency shift to online-only education on their experiences and education. For example, in an editorial for the *Croatian Medical Journal* (Poe 2020), Georgia Poe reflected on the experiences of the College of Public Health in Athens, GA, USA. She made the point that one of the overwhelming obstacles to delivering online education during the pandemic emergency was the lack of training overall for academic staff who had to deliver education online, when they were accustomed to delivering it face to face. Staff required adequate training so that pedagogical integrity would be maintained, re-establishing reasonable expectations for student work, equitable evaluation of all student work, and maintaining student-staff relationships. In depth interviews with academic staff in the UK revealed that even with the possibilities for online educational experience, they had concerns about the diminishment of the student experience because of a lack of face-to-face contact, and the accompanying “dearth of possibilities for practical work” (Gourlay et al. 2021, 382).

Being removed from the locations designed for practical work in labs and in the field was a concern shared across several disciplines. In public health and medical contexts in Brazil and the UK, there was a particular concern about the loss of access to practical, lab-based educational opportunities, and an overarching worry about the current inadequacies of digital tools and places to replace the physically present face-to-face experience (e.g., in Moretti-Pires, Otávio et al. 2020). A qualitative study of post-graduate engineering students in the UK revealed concerns about lack of access to practical lab experiences, as well as the overall loss of opportunities for informal interactions with peers on campus (Piyatamrong, Derrick, and Nyamapfene 2021). Crick, Knight, Watermeyer and Goodall (2020) reported on Computer Science lecturers’ reflections that while the pandemic emergency did seem to provide opportunities in online practices, they shared concerns with colleagues across the sector

concerning the need for attention to pedagogy, the impact of online practice on their workloads, and the overall fragility of their position in a precarious professional UK higher education context.

The emerging literature about the experiences of teaching and learning during the COVID emergency reveal concerns about how it highlighted and exacerbated existing inequities in HE access. Students from privileged backgrounds, and who had the confidence generated by being explicitly prepared for university environments continued to have an advantage over their less-prepared peers in asking for support, and in being perceived as engaged while navigating their coursework online (Strong 2022). Unequal and uneven access to technology is one of the three main reasons that students are believed to avoid turning their cameras on during class, alongside student privacy and issues of accessibility introduced by technology (Gilmour 2021, Turner 2022). There is a stated need for institutions to take responsibility for the necessary work to reach students who need support in navigating university practices, and who do not always have easy access to technology and bandwidth, but particularly during an emergency that sent people away from on-campus spaces (Macgilchrist 2021, Strong 2022).

3. Methods

In 2021, students were recruited with the help of a university in the North of England, for a convenience sample of 18 students: 8 undergraduate and 10 post-graduates, including 5 PhD students and 5 taught Masters' students. The sample of undergraduates included students in their first, second, and third years. Several of the post-graduate students had also been undergraduates at that university. The students included those who were studying in business, sciences, arts, engineering, humanities, and subjects related to medicine. Some of the students interviewed were course representatives, and two students who were also teaching undergraduates while they did their post graduate degrees. This sample included students new to the university, as well as those who were familiar with the university pre-pandemic. Students interviewed were from the city in which the university was located as well as from elsewhere in the UK, and from outside of the UK¹. In the results section, we have selected representative quotes from students when discussing patterns that emerged across this dataset but have not necessarily pulled quotes from each student interviewed for the project.

Each interview was conducted with the guidance of a shared set of questions. Each student was interviewed for about an hour, and interviews were conducted on Zoom by the project team, over the course of 2 months, yielding a total of approximately 20 hours of interview data². Once interviews were transcribed, Lanclos and Price coded the data with a specialized codebook adapted from the larger set of themes generated by Phipps and Lanclos during previous projects on teaching and learning experiences (Lanclos and Phipps 2019)

This interview-based project was designed to elicit not just a picture of student and staff practices during the pandemic, but also to get information about how the current experiences compared to their previous encounters or expectations of the university, before the pandemic emergency. As with other qualitative approaches, the priority is not to arrive at generalizations about populations, but rather to help recognize and interpret patterns of behaviour, to generate insights.

¹ In this article, we identify students quoted with their year at University, and a number if there is more than one student in that year in our sample.

² We would like to thank members of the project team who conducted the interviews along with us, including James Clay (Jisc) and Sam Thornton (Jisc).

4. Results

We wanted in this project to gain insight into what barriers and enablers the students encountered in their digital university experience, and how the narrative of the need to return to campus resonated (or didn't) with students. In addition, we wanted to try to surface the complicated relationship between the desire for flexibility that some online options offered, and the isolating experiences of studying (and doing everything else) online during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. We focus therefore on the following emergent themes: campus, care, cameras, and communication.

4.1 Back to Campus

The phrase "back to campus" or "return to campus" was used by leaders in universities when talking in Spring of 2021 about their intentions for Autumn 2021 (Carr 2021; Lewis et al. 2021; Weale 2021). As of the writing of this article, the start of the 2021-22 academic year for all educational levels is under threat from the delta variant of COVID, as well as the continuing UK government's lack of clear messaging, and refusal to put in place effective track and trace, vaccination, and mask mandate policies. Over the course of the interviews, we asked students directly what was important to them about being on the physical campus of their university. For the students who spoke with us in Spring of 2021, a return to campus meant getting back the interactivity, spontaneity, and fun of the higher education experience.

...you know, it's going to lectures and stuff and face-to-face meetings with lecturers and seminar tutors. I think, you know, not having a chance to do that ...I feel really sorry for like the first years and stuff. Cause it's hard for me now in me fourth year. but like, I had three good years of in person. You know what I mean? So I do feel sorry for those people who've missed out on like the first years.

Masters#4

In the perfect world. I think it will be more ...entertainment along with the, along with the intensity of studies right now... Study has become a painful act, not enjoyable. ..

Masters#2

We heard that being on campus meant the mundane stuff of being out in the world, such as grabbing a coffee, socialising, and having a regular routine away from home. Accessing the materials (lectures, readings, etc) that students needed online did not seem to be a struggle, but students were missing the sense that they could be seen effectively by their tutors, especially if they were confused or struggling.

Where there's the live interaction with the teachers where you can pick up on the feeling and the emotion of what's being taught. If a question comes here, you can ask it straight away and get the feedback and just the general sense, right, of being back amongst my friends, being able to enjoy the, the laughter and everything that goes with it as well, the good feeling in the classroom and getting out the house.

Second Year#1

I think being able, like, so we'd have an office for the PhD students, so we'd be able to chat and things in there. Just like it is stressful, so being able to just like let off steam in person, cause sometimes like in the chat you don't want to like bother other people, but if you're in

person, you can see someone's struggling. It's a bit different and being able to like, just go get a coffee or something together, go work in a different environment.

PhD#1

Students spoke at length about the practical learning they needed to do, especially group work and problem solving, and the extent to which being in physical places with other people makes that work easier and more effective. First years were struggling with the idea that they had not met any of their classmates face to face yet. They felt that made it difficult to make friends in their course, because most of their online experiences focused on content delivery and consumption, rather than engagement and interactivity.

One student noted that even though they participated in online chats with other students in the past, that the online interactions were embedded in a larger context in which they also had in-person encounters on campus. They mentioned “ice-breaking” in person, as a way to foster richer interactions online, and how the loss of being on the physical campus meant for a more transactional and perfunctory online experience.

On the face-to-face campus? It was,...much easier to communicate over WhatsApp because, so if we needed something or so we have the interaction, the physical interaction between each other, we broke the ice. So there is ice breaking between everyone. So now online, okay. Maybe there are a few people that maybe they are also international people. They are from the same region, or we take this, we talk the same language. We might have some ice breaking, but it's not really the same as, as attending the classroom and the stuff. So definitely we had, we had the, the WhatsApp group, but it's not the same. So now here, we only use it for, for formal things.

Masters#5

Being on the physical campus also meant having access to spaces that allow for focus. Students who do not live alone and who need to go to campus to have quiet, or to have the physical as well as mental space to do their academic work spoke of the importance of the library and other study spaces. Other students pointed to the ways that being on campus, in setting the expectation of study and engagement with their course and fellow students, helped them focus, even if they had a dedicated space at home where they could hypothetically study.

So if I'm home and there's a major course, major modules that I'm taking, maybe a notification on the phone, I just lose my focus or anything. So the, the, the environment and the classroom is really different than the environment in my bedroom while having my computer in front of me.

Masters#5

So there's a lot of discipline, which is required when you study from home. And especially when you are living with a family, then that discipline is very difficult. And I have set up my own table, like there's extra screen, there's one laptop and the keyboard own table where I study with different screens and reading online book... and when I am studying, then I'm not allowing any, any kid to enter the room.

Masters#2

And just having that like quiet study zone to be able to go to, which obviously is in the library. I know that's aside from technology itself, but it's important.

Third Year#1

Students wanted to encounter their lecturers, in lecture halls and other physical spaces, because they wanted the chance to engage, to be seen as understanding or confused by lecturers, and to be able to ask spontaneous questions.

I find it easier when I'm in person, because they can pick up on the tone as well, and they can see if there's anything that's really getting to you. Plus online, they can't always pick up on who's struggling. Whereas in the lecture room, they'll see that.

Second Year#1

I'd love to be able to, if I had a problem, just knock on their door and just say, "this is my problem. Can you help me?" And then be able to sit down with me rather than having to send an email or schedule a Zoom or something like that. It's just, and then it's trying to meet, schedule time, you know, it's inconvenient for them and then probably inconvenient for me. Whereas if it was just over there, I might be able to just pop in the door and say, "can you help me?"

First Year#1

4.2 New to Campus

Students who have never been to university before have a particular struggle in that they do not know what they should be expecting--even those who have experience at a different university do not necessarily show up knowing what is possible at their particular, current institution. First year students traditionally are recognized as not knowing what their university is like; this is why there are Freshers' Weeks and Welcome Days. The sense that first years don't know what they don't know was particularly acute in the pandemic emergency.

I don't know, to be honest, because this is it. I don't know what university is supposed to be like either because if there was a book and you could read it and read it before you went and say, you know, I'm not getting what I'm supposed to get. This is what you supposed to get sort of thing. I know universities go well, yeah. We're giving you lectures and we're giving you this, we're giving you that but for a first-year student, I don't know what I'm supposed to get. And I feel, I feel like I'm not getting what I'm supposed to get. But I don't know what this is.

First Year#1

Postgraduate students doing one-year degrees are also often new to the university, but don't have the time that first year undergraduates do to figure things out eventually.

How does it work? So I'm not really sure, but yeah, it was, it was a bit confusing. I just moved here for the education. So I came from a different mentality. So, and just was put here for a new experience. I'm enjoying it. I'm loving it. Definitely. I'm enjoying it to the maximum. I love what I'm doing. It's just the transition. That was a bit difficult.

Masters#5

4.3 Care

During the pandemic emergency, all students were needing to figure out ways to cope. Isolation and uncertainty were core challenges to well-being while trying to navigate doing academic work online.

It was so unfulfilling. I sort of just wasn't getting the same out of any aspect of the uni experience completely aside from like social socializing. Cause I'm not even a big going out person, but there was just no enjoyment in it anymore. Everything was completely exhausting, isolating, you know, it was just, it wasn't good at all.

Third Year#1

Perceived time limitations, lack of motivation, and the restrictions of lockdown meant that it was challenging to get out, away from home, as a way of coping with the stress of studies and the global pandemic.

just being by yourself most of the time stuck on the laptop, you know, it's been really, really, it just hasn't been motivating at all. Really, you're kind of just stuck in your room all the time. You know, it is quite hard to kind of get yourself up and go on. So it has been a really big barrier this year.

First Year#3

Some students wrestled themselves into a routine, but it wasn't easy.

But now, okay, so now I've trained myself. I was like, you know, that wasn't conducive to me and my mental health. It wasn't, a great thing to do. I actually say now I stop, I'll look at emails certain days. So I look at emails now, normally Monday, Wednesdays, Fridays, that's it.

PhD#5

We did not speak to any students who themselves were ill with COVID, but other illnesses and physical challenges were present. Students also expected to continue to be stressed dealing with uncertainties in the future. There was a lot they did not know about what would happen next, and it was difficult to plan with any certainty about the coming year, whether they were continuing at university or not.

Yeah, because you know, I'm not really sure coronavirus differentiates between age groups. So, you know, one day it could be 20 year old dead or whatever, I know the cases are really low, but all it takes is universities to open and it goes rocket high doesn't it.

First Year#1

It's not good. You don't feel hopeful at all. Especially after this year, like I had to go home for five months, you're at home doing it too. So it's just, I hope next year is not the same. It just, it wouldn't be nice at all to be stuck in the room again, doing your work here. It doesn't motivate you either.

First Year#3

Part of the anxiety expressed by first year students emerged from the fact that they still didn't know what being at university was supposed to feel like, because their first year has been entirely online under the extraordinary circumstances of the global pandemic.

So currently there's just a big group chat at the minute with like everybody in it but I feel like, I feel like next year was going to be really awkward as well because no one's really saw each other and we just kind of text over phone, but next year, you know, you'd be able to see people face-to-face have, you know, a conversation with people. It will be a lot better, you know, and actually see who people are because I'm working with people in like groups

and I don't even know what they look like, you know, who they are. So it would be nice to actually see people.

First Year#3

Some students did find some aspects of being online helpful in terms of mental health and well-being, for example, taking exams online rather than in halls. Some described ways that their programs were engaging in mental health and well-being programming online, clearly finding such help accessible and useful.

One student described a situation where a member of academic staff was very stressed about not being able to see students on camera during lectures. This lecturer was also new to the University and was likely experiencing stress in a variety of ways in the pandemic emergency.

I think he made it into more of a big deal than it should have been. It was like he took it personally and no that didn't, that didn't really help us because he was making us feel uncomfortable because he was making such a big deal out of it. And it was kind of like shouting at people going, you know, saying people's names like, yeah. Yeah. Why haven't you got your camera on, yeah, turn it up, turn it on. ... So I think it's the fact that, you know, they, this teacher in particular didn't bother to ask people why they haven't had the cameras on or, you know, it was more of kind of making us feel guilty and feel bad because we didn't have our cameras on. It's like, you know, most, you know, most people probably didn't have a reason. They just didn't want it, but you know, some of us did.

Third Year#2

The lecturer's lack of control was clearly difficult for them, and it resulted in them being upset with students for not having cameras on.

4.4 Cameras and Class Participation

Students choose not to turn on cameras because of lack of bandwidth (especially in shared households), and privacy concerns (for themselves and partners/family members), as well as to avoid feeling weird for being the only one with their camera on in a large class. One student's concerns about being bullied led to them not turning the camera on. Students can be reluctant to speak up during virtual lectures, especially when the class sizes are big and when no one has their cameras on.

Yes so like there's like 300 people on my course that like nobody turns the camera on. You don't want to be like the only one to put your camera on. It just feels weird. So everyone just turns it off and all you can see is the lecturer and like the PowerPoint. So it's quite isolated as well. Like you just don't feel—you don't like you do group work and it's on, like Snapchat and stuff. And I just, wasn't feeling the same at all.

First Year#3

We worried about what we sounded like, what we looked like, how we all, you know, that sort of thing over the internet. Because whereas when you're in a physical building about you, you can't change it,...I think it's just an image thing on the internet isn't it? With young people socially. I think it'd be very hard for the universities come over that boundary. But yeah, I think there's a whole image thing about the internet and that's why people, people never turn the cameras on.

First Year#1

The class experience of students who are willing to turn on their cameras is affected by their classmates' reluctance to be on camera:

We'll, we'll learn a bit of theory and then we'll have to split off into small groups. And it's so much easier to just turn around and talk to the person beside you, as opposed to doing a breakout room on Zoom, where they have the camera and their mic off. And they're not talking, they're not speaking, like I'll flip— there's so many times where I've switched mine on and be like, okay, are we doing this task. And then it's just like crickets. There's, no one answers, then their little like image will just pop away and they'll have left the call. So they can't exactly do that in the classroom they can't really run away from the tasks.

Third Year#1

So if people are sat there with the cameras off and the microphones are then, you know, you're not really going to get that, you know, that energy off each other...

Third Year#2

Some of the students we spoke to were also instructors, and they were aware of their students' struggles. And they also encountered those struggles among colleagues. They spoke about not being able to see their students, and trying to adapt to teaching that way, when they were accustomed to having students visible in physical spaces on campus to gauge engagement and comprehension.

And even when I first started, when I taught last year and the last few sessions online, I only had maybe three students out of 20 and none of them had the cameras on or the microphones on. And I was really convinced that this year I was going to say to everyone, you know, make sure your cameras on, make sure. And that first, like I just couldn't bring myself to do it to people because I thought I can't really push them in a position to be so visible online when, you know, they're just getting used to this the same as everyone else. So I've had to find a way to just get used to talking to a blank screen.

PhD#3

Many students reported that they are reluctant to speak up during online, live lectures. They felt intimidated and self-conscious due to the size of the classes and the fact that very few other students had their cameras on. As a result, students felt they were missing out on important discussions, and failed to ask questions when they were struggling. They were used to the idea that lecturers in physical classrooms would see them, pick up on visual cues indicating that students didn't understand, and respond in the moment. They did not know how to translate those expectations into a digital environment where there were no visual cues like what they remembered from classrooms on campus.

Some students mentioned that they only felt able to ask questions after a lecture on a one-to-one basis. The way online lectures are currently configured, that does not seem to many students to be an option, so they either have to book an appointment to see a tutor, wait for an email response, or choose not to ask the question.

It is an issue yeah. I would normally wait until a few people kind of go off. I feel like most people do that and then you're left with kind of people asking questions at the end. So it is an issue. Whenever you see a big number of 300 on the bottom of your screen, and you're like, I'm not asking questions here. You just feel so under pressure.

First Year#3

4.5 Communication

Overall, we found students connecting to each other independent of university systems, via WhatsApp and Facebook, but only if they were invited to the groups, or already a member of a group because of being at university the previous year. None of the belonging was facilitated or coordinated at a course or school or university level. During the pandemic, when their only interactions with each other was online, student communication tended to be about classes and logistics for academic work only. A couple of students did note some attempts at quiz nights and other purely social activities, but for the most part communication among students was functional and focused on studies.

For some students, COVID restrictions have concentrated communication to academic work exclusively. Social or informal conversations did not exist for many students during the pandemic emergency, especially those who are new to university and who did not have social networks in the city already. Students we spoke to noted that if they did not already know the people in these group chats, the content of the chats was largely operational, focused on information about due dates, finding sources, interpreting instructions from lecturers, and so on. More social uses of social media were difficult if they were not already comfortable with the people in the group chats—in particular, unless they had already had a chance to meet them face to face before the pandemic emergency. That lack of connection meant that first year students, and also Master's students who did not study at the university as undergraduates did not necessarily experience social media as a way to connect socially in a meaningful way with their classmates.

To be a member of the group chats/social media groups, students need to be added to the groups to be able to ask the questions—and they aren't always added, because this is for and by students. In physical spaces, when students are asking and answering questions amongst themselves, others can overhear and learn too. This overhearing (and learning) is less possible in digital places, when not everyone is present in the same way.

Many of those who do have access to the group chats definitely find it helpful.

*It's helped me innumerable times whether it was just, Oh my God, like it's this assignment this time or that time, or just check in like, how's everyone getting on with this assignment because you know, sometimes when you're struggling yourself, you just want to know that everyone else is struggling. So it sounds cruel, but if I'm struggling and I ask, Hey, how's everyone getting on and I'm actually quite struggling, you know? And I'm like, Oh same. You know, it's, it's sorta like, at least we're struggling together. You know?
Masters#4*

Communication with lecturers was facilitated by an online portal, but students experienced some confusion about how much time they can book for any given meeting with their lecturer. Some students felt confident in being able to communicate and connect with lecturers, especially those who had already attended the university the previous year, or who know they are going to be at the university for more than one year.

To be honest, they put it through email, or we can go through the internal Canvas site. Even within the lectures, they'll happily stay as long as they've got time. They'll stay at the end and answer questions as well. So they have been approachable and available when we've needed it.

Second Year#1

Yeah. I think purely for things like that, one-on-one with tutors again, I think that may be a bit more, I know we do have the thing on [University] See my Tutor, where you can book in things with your tutor, I haven't availed of that because I have a fairly small course. There's 10 of my course and two lectures. So if I ever have an issue, they'll jump on a Zoom with me or they'll reply to an email quite quick.

Masters#1

While having non-responsive lecturers is a struggle for all students, if a student was new to the university, and only going to be there for a year, they had acute problems because they did not have the time or capacity to develop networks outside of their specific course program. In particular, taught master's students arriving from other locations had to learn everything about how to be at their university and complete their course within one year. Students who had been at the university before could make connections to more people than just their advisor or course lecturers, and therefore felt more engaged than those who were new to the institution.

Sometimes the availability of lecturers didn't match up with students' own availability--which surely happened before the pandemic, when everyone could theoretically meet on campus. But it was pointed out that it is much harder to drop in on lecturers in digital places--even if official office hours on campus were not convenient for students, they could usually find time to stop in at a lecturer's office or grab them before or after lectures in the hall, to ask questions. Students felt that their lack of ability to ask questions in the moment during online class, and the subsequent need to remember to ask the questions at a booked appointment, impacted negatively on their learning experiences.

But I found that a lot of their availability coincided to when I was in class. So it was very hard for me to find time, like I do I just, not attend my lecture to be able to speak to this different lecturer or do I miss out on an opportunity to speak to him because I have to go to class like, this is what I mean, like not being, not being face to face. I could have slipped into their office, like on my way home, which it was on my walk home where now I'm having to try to like filtered through my availability, to work with their availability online. And it's not the same.

Third Year#1

There were some students who recognized the possible toll it would take on teaching staff to be as responsive as they have been during the pandemic emergency.

I would probably say I might've communicated more this past year with, with my supervisors and with the director of Academy being online, because there's been more occasions when I can attend events and there's been more opportunities, quick meetings, whereas arranged in person might've been different. So in terms of what I'd like it to happen, I'd still like that availability, that online availability that everyone is online most of the day to be able to be, to be carried over so that you know, that you can kind of get hold of people and you can kind of deal with things quite quickly, which is definitely a positive. But then I know that's a lot to ask for the staff.

PhD#3

[the lecturer] would always reply at ridiculous hours as well, like to be on our emails. So you'd always get a quick response, especially this year has been incredible.

Third Year#2

Communication with staff other than lectures was also mentioned as important, as was the case with this post-graduate student, who valued the connections they had with library workers.

Because at the minute, you know, we've got librarians that are available, you know, quite quick, quickly available, you know, some couple of librarians have been that great they're like, yeah, are you free in an hour? And it's like, wow. You know, you probably wouldn't, I don't remember getting that when I was ..., doing my masters or an undergraduate student face-to-face because they had, you know, they had other stuff to do. They weren't available. They, so for example, they were like, you know, one could be like, well actually I need to be here today. I'm not available to walk away from here and, you know, teach you for two hours about systematic reviews because I need to be on hand, you know, to man the desk or be there, you know, and stuff like that. PhD#5

Undergraduate students, when talking about who helps them succeed, primarily mentioned lecturers and other students. The relative invisibility of any other support staff to students is striking. Students in crisis described being unsure about where to go for help outside of their own personal tutor--how and where to communicate about needs when in crisis was unclear.

The students we spoke to made an important distinction between the communication they had with their lecturers and how they felt the university as a whole was communicating with them, as well as with their lecturers. The empathy they extended to overloaded lecturers around communication and attention was not similarly extended to the University, from which they expected answers and clarity--which they did not always get.

I think my major thing is just the communication about what is going on with like campus and stuff like that. Cause a lot of it is just like, they just keep saying we're in talks we're talks we're talks but at the end of the day, we've been in a pandemic now for like ages and like the government have released a road map and everything. So I really, there should be some kind of indication of how it's going to pan out because at the minute, we are on track with it, there's nothing that's, even with things opening up again, they're still saying like it's going well and we're at the lowest point. So I think there should be some kind of indication it's mostly, it's just frustrating because the government have said and like they've released when people in higher education can go back, but then the Uni aren't saying anything. PhD#1

Both postgraduates and undergraduates expressed their concerns about the lack of clarity from the university about their plans for the future.

I know nothing. There's been, nothing said yet about what's happening next year. Anything. So I'm hoping to hear something maybe August time. I'm not too sure what way they're going to work it, but I haven't heard anything for next year at all. First Year#3

Students' concerns when it came to COVID-19 tended to be about the future implications around the coming terms and the communication from the University in terms of changes/shifting to online. They expressed their concerns about the current (Spring 2021) lack of clarity from the university about their plans, with the main worry being that 'nothing will change'. Students were also frustrated at the government response to COVID, and many

recognized that the university was at the mercy of what the government did or did not do. Some students living at home and with family expressed health concerns and worry that if measures aren't carried out properly on campus that they could pass on the virus to their family.

5. Conclusions

As of this writing, in Spring of 2022, we are still very much in the “during the pandemic” phase of the pandemic. Political rhetoric is attempting to frame this time period as “post-COVID” but the case numbers in the UK put the lie to that, with 1 in 13 people infected with Covid-19 (Office for National Statistics, 2022). The lessons we draw from student experiences in 2020 and 2021 will continue to be relevant not just as long as this pandemic continues, but also in a future guaranteed to contain emergencies and other circumstances that require remote and online options for students and staff alike.

The “reopen” and “back to campus” rhetoric tends to obfuscate the fact that campus buildings were closed but the operations of the campus persisted in digital places. The digital campus has been continuously inhabited by those who could access it easily (not all of them could). The campus that students might go “back” to is the physical one, the digital one never left. We have focused in this article on the challenges that students encountered, especially around communication, feeling connected (to teaching staff, the institution and to each other), and to getting the care they needed, especially for their mental health. These challenges during the global pandemic are not unique to the higher education sector, and they also have particular implications for what universities plan to do next.

We led this project with questions about what “back to campus” meant for students largely because versions of that phrase were being used in the media and in some communications from university management teams, and it was unclear if there was a shared sense of what that phrase might mean to students. We found that, for the students we spoke to, a return to campus implied access to fun, spontaneity and interaction with peers, lecturers, and other staff members. Even as students did talk about the flexibility that online places and platforms afforded them around attending lectures, and taking exams, they also highlighted their need for the physical spaces of the university campus to facilitate their focus, as key locations for group work (particularly important in undergraduate second years), and for socializing.

It seemed that “back to campus,” for the students we spoke with, invoked everything outside of the classrooms and lecture halls. One exception to this was the stated desire for access to campus spaces to do their practical work, in labs, and to field sites for some courses of study. This is also reflected in the literature ((Crick, Knight, Watermeyer and Goodall 2020; Moretti-Pires, Otávio et al. 2020; Piyatamrong, Derrick, and Nyamapfene 2021).

Students we spoke with suggested that their physical presence on campus gave lecturers opportunities to see them, and more effectively perceive when they were struggling and needed help, as well as to tell when they are being successful and engaged (Strong 2022). The need to be able to perceive students certainly pre-dates the pandemic, but the sudden switch to online-only university experiences requires careful thinking as to how “visible” students are, whether they are on campus or not, and how legible the systems are that can connect them to the help and encouragement they require.

Too often, perceiving students such that they can be understood and helped is interpreted as literal visibility. The assumption that students' literal visibility is essential to teaching and learning success is both ableist and incorrect (Greenvall et al 2021, Marquart, Shedrick, and

Ortega 2021, Reinholz and Ridgway 2021, Reutlinger 2022). The literature makes it clear that there are many ways to engage with students in online spaces that do not require cameras (Day and Verbiest 2021). In our interpretation of our interview data, we note the persistent anxiety around cameras in digital places, whether they are on or off, and how, without cameras (either because they are absent or because they are off), lecturers will be able to see their students. In terms of lecturer concerns about “seeing” students, this speaks to a need for more support for staff to create and find spaces to engage that do not require visual cues and aids (Joosten, Cusatis and Harness 2019; “Engaging Students Online—Queen Mary Academy” 2022).

Students have reasons for leaving their cameras off, including privacy concerns, lack of bandwidth. Some are taking action to protect themselves in part because they don’t know what protections might be offered by the university. What students are asking for, rather than enforced visibility and camera-enabled surveillance (Caines 2020), is transparency, communication, and connection. They want to be informed, they want to know the logic behind institutional decisions, whether it is about pandemic emergency policies or student fees, and they need more ways into institutional systems so that they can truly be informed and engaged. This desire for transparency is shared by staff, who are not getting that from the government or from their institutions who are subject to government decisions about funding and pandemic responses.

The students we spoke to were aware that support was available somewhere at the university but tended to ask their tutors first about what they needed. The practical implications of students trusting their tutors meant that the lion’s share of student support work of all kinds, not just academic, was being done by teaching staff. The primary staff members mentioned in our data as helpers/contacts were tutors, teaching staff, and library workers. If there are other people in the network who might help students, they are less visible. Students appear to have a narrow range of people at the university they turn to for help and guidance.

Our results suggest multiple avenues for further research and discussions about what to do now. What are the implications of the relative invisibility of support staff, including counselling, disability services, and technicians, to undergraduates? The post-graduates we spoke to clearly communicated with and valued library workers. Where are the opportunities for library workers as well as other support and technical staff to be widely perceived as partners in educating undergraduates, rather than providing services and space? Online portals that provided a way to book appointments with lecturers were mentioned throughout the interviews and appear to be an effective way of connecting students to tutors. Could this portal model be used to make more visible/connected the financial aid, accommodation, mental health services? To what extent does the disconnect reflect not just a lack of information for students, but also a lack of awareness by academic staff about what is possible in term of support and services for students?

It is worth considering what the impact of academic staff members being new to a university has on their ability to help and support students who are also new. What programming does any university have to orient all new members of their institution, whether they are students or staff, to the campus and its physical and digital provisions? What should it have? Universities need to pay attention to the culture of courses, and of the schools, and make clear the path to accessing services available for students for support.

The current digital university environment has collapsed the network into a single node: the individual teaching staff member. One thing that being on the physical campus did was provide possible opportunities for students to encounter other people and services that might help—

signs or fliers pointing to counselling, for instance, or extra tutoring, or even chatting with fellow students who might be able to tell them where to go for help with financial worries, or housing needs. The digital campus, as yet still feels difficult and obscured for some students, lacking the well-established paths and cues that are familiar on a physical campus. For the digital campus to realize the potential and possibilities exhibited on the physical campus, universities need to find ways of enabling greater transparency so that students can tell where the pathways are to meet and engage with their peers, and with staff who can teach and otherwise support them. If we are going to continue to cycle through times when we are only in digital places for university education --and it looks like that is likely--we must find ways to make visible and accessible the entirety of the potential support network.

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