

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Higher Education Learning Experiences Pre-, Peri- and Post-COVID-19: What Will Evolve, and What Will Survive?

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has stimulated a ‘Cambrian Explosion’ of innovation in Higher Education teaching and learning approaches. Teachers, students and universities are all actants, each having interests in sustaining valuable learning experiences. Its unpredictability defines the pandemic, yet it is characterised by ongoing commitments to educational values supported by beliefs about educational experience. Learning ecologies and networks have been disrupted, and new learning assemblages continue to emerge.

2021/22 final-year undergraduates are uniquely positioned to reflect upon and evaluate pre-, peri- and post- pandemic learning experiences. Through Level 6 students at one mainstream UK HEI, this study will use survey and focus group methods to present an analysis of pedagogical and ontological strategies from formal and informal learning environments, considering educational and demographic sub-groups of the study population. We aim to produce recommendations for Higher Education post-Covid-19, melding the best pre-pandemic practice with the best of what the pandemic has brought forth.

Paper: The Covid-19 pandemic has presented notable challenges to the Higher Education (HE) sector, requiring rapid responses. Front and centre among these challenges has been the need to redesign educational delivery to meet lockdown and social-distancing constraints while still meeting necessary student learning outcomes and maintaining a high quality of student experience.

The period from March 2020 to the present has therefore witnessed change, experimentation and idea generation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that is faster and more widespread than the historic norm for a sector that is traditionally thought to evolve at a stately pace. To use a Biological analogy, sudden and significant change and disruption in the external environment has brought about a ‘Cambrian Explosion’ of open innovation and fluidities in HE educational paradigms, which currently co-exist in a recently formed and potentially labile ecosystem (Barnett and Jackson, 2020; Tejedor, et al. 2021).

Some phenomena are borne almost entirely of necessity (Khanal, 2021). The manifestation of others is characterised as the acceleration of planned and – arguably – desirable change, for which policy

was already set (Coonan and Pratt-Adams, 2018). Emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic is therefore a time of rich, rapid reflection and evaluation, as policymakers seek to restore the best of pre-Covid HE, blended with the best of those educational approaches that have evolved by virtue of pandemic pressures.

Students undertaking the final year of their degrees in 2021/22 will have experienced HE in three sets of circumstances: a.) pre-pandemic, b.) peri-pandemic, and c.) emergent from the pandemic. This cohort is therefore singularly positioned to compare meaningfully and offer feedback upon the range of current educational approaches, networked communication and knowledge flows, and transitional pedagogies proliferated by Covid-19 in a way that earlier and later cohorts will not be able (Castells, 1998; Tejedor et al. 2021). This study seeks to capture the ontological reflections and wisdom from this rare, time-limited group (Colomer et al., 2013), toward recommendations for the future of HE.

Participants will be Level 6 students at Anglia Ruskin University. Where on-campus educational provision was permitted during Covid-19, students each had the choice to study in blended-learning mode or in online-only mode.

We aim to capture as much diversity as possible among our participants, and draw categorisations within our overall study population. While it will not be possible to remove heterogeneity from proposed sub-groups completely, we propose to analyse responses by:

- Personal characteristics of participants;
- Subject discipline group;
- Full-/part-time study status;
- Choice of study mode during Covid-19.

We expect that analysis by these groupings will yield valuable insight into the breadth of experiences, engagement and expectations across disciplines and learning environments (Siemens, 2008; Middleton, 2018). It will also illuminate the advantages and disadvantages experienced by students in different demographic groups. These findings will strengthen the study's potential impact by providing a basis upon which to recommend approaches towards reimagined, innovative learning experiences and spaces that do not exacerbate increasing inequalities in accessing educational opportunities for 'Generation Covid' (Major, Eyles and Machin, 2020).

Objectives:

1. Gather and understand reflections of 2021/22 ARU Level 6 students on their learning experiences throughout their undergraduate journey, including the evolution of their views and experiences throughout the 2021/22 academic year.
2. Explore and evaluate educational approaches that have been used before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, with respect to effectiveness for student learning, building positive learning communities and overall student satisfaction.
3. Investigate the effectiveness and value of different educational approaches for different sub-groups within the study cohort, including intersectional considerations.
4. Produce recommendations for formal and informal educational approaches to be utilised in future HE, and disseminate to policymakers and stakeholders throughout UK HE.

Methodology:

A mixed-methods study is proposed. Phase One will involve a survey distributed to all ARU 2021/22 Level 6 students, aiming at a 10-20% response rate.

Direct and multivariate quantitative analysis, plus qualitative analysis of free-text responses, will be conducted. Correlations and themes arising will form the basis of hypotheses about effectiveness/overall desirability of different formal and informal educational approaches. These hypotheses will be explored deeply in Phases Two and Three of the study, involving focus-group conversations.

Three five-person focus groups will be formed from survey participants who indicate willingness. Groups will meet once in students' first term of 2021/22 (Phase Two) and again toward the end of students' final term of 2021/22 (Phase Three). This longitudinal approach is intended to capture the richness of participants' reflections emerging from the pandemic and throughout their final year of study.

Semi-structured interview outlines for Phase Two will be created, drawing upon Phase One findings. Focus group data will be analysed thematically, particularly seeking contrasts and parallels between different participant subgroups.

Findings from Phase Two will inform and shape the interview outlines for Phase Three focus groups, together with particular emphasis on how participants' experiences have evolved during 2021/22.

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