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"It's like laying bricks on lava": The impact of Covid-19 on student academic experience of creative degrees

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Abstract: This paper details the outcomes of a mixed methods research project to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the academic experience of students taking creative arts degrees. In presenting the outcomes from student focus groups across a range of small and specialist HE institution, we suggest the shift to a predominantly online and remote mode of delivery raised particular issues for the teaching of creative arts degrees, which often relies on a pedagogy with essential interpersonal, kinaesthetic and collaborative components difficult to replicate in a virtual space. We also report student concerns about the impact of remote delivery on their potential to gain industry-specific work experience and build professional networks. We conclude by making recommendations for priorities in rebuilding the delivery of creative courses post-Covid.

Paper: "It's like laying bricks on lava": The impact of Covid-19 on student academic experience of creative degrees.

The need to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spring 2020 led most Higher Education Providers (HEPs) across the United Kingdom to rapidly pivot teaching and assessment activity towards remote or online delivery (Watermeyer, 2021). While current literature tends to focus on the affective impact of this shift on students, with, for example, The Office for National Statistics(ONS 2020) noting the negative impacts on student social and mental health, the impact on academic experience is less clear, with discussion often mediated through satisfaction metrics; the Student COVID Insights Survey (SCIS) reported 29% of surveyed students as dissatisfied with their academic experience (ONS 2020).

Although there is a growing body of literature focussing on adaptations to existing learning and teaching approaches demanded by the pandemic context (e.g. Bao 2020; Bryson and Andres 2020; Watermeyer et al 2021), research considering the potential long term academic impacts of the pandemic-driven shift to remote learning and teaching is still emergent. Currently there is also limited consideration of the impact of this online pivot on student academic experiences within particular disciplinary contexts.

Since April 2020, researchers in the Specialist Evidence and Evaluation Research (SEER) service, based in Applied Inspiration, an educational advisory organisation, have been working with partner institutions to explore the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on degree level students studying across

nine small and specialist HEP partners. In particular, in this paper we focus on the experiences of students studying creative arts disciplines, including photography, fine arts, film-making, architecture, animation, and creative media.

Our research is both cross-sectional and longitudinal; we surveyed whole student populations across our partner HEPs in June and July 2020 and repeated the survey in October and November 2020. We also carried out semi-structured focus groups with a sample of students from each institution. We were particularly interested in exploring how students and staff were adapting to remote learning, the challenges and successes of online delivery, and the impact of lockdown and social distancing measures on the wider student academic experience. This paper focuses on student academic experience, drawing on data from 10 focus groups (n.33 participants) carried out in February 2021.

We analysed this data in two phases; the first taking an inductive open grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin 1997) and adopting a more deductive approach in the second, coding the data through a thematic framework (Braun and Clarke 2006) derived from a literature review of HE pedagogy in creative arts. This dual approach enabled us firstly to explore students' own experiences in an unmediated way and then to recontextualise these experiences, where appropriate, within the dominant pedagogic themes identified in the literature. In particular, we draw on key concepts of relationship, praxis and authenticity (Connelly, 2007; Dinham, 2013; Belluigi, 2020).

Our findings reveal that students of creative disciplines were often negotiating specific challenges as a consequence of the nature of their disciplines. The pedagogy of creative subjects often has an integral and essential interpersonal, kinaesthetic and collaborative component (Burke, 2021), is studio or place-based, and personally driven (Orr et al 2014; Wilkinson 2020), with group work and collaborative peer relationships particularly salient to the creative learning process (Gaunt and Treacy 2020). These aspects often cannot be easily translated to online and remote forms of learning and teaching.

In addition, we found focus group participants acutely aware of the impact of remote learning on their ability to engage in industry-specific work experience and therefore to establish networks of professional contacts and grow their employability capital. Many students were swiftly having to confront the limitations of remote and online learning modes, and explore mitigating strategies to protect their academic experience and their future employability options.

Our findings about the specific challenges raised by the pivot to online learning for creative arts students are particularly important and relevant as HEPs, particularly those offering creative disciplines, consider future delivery options and the role of blended learning. We offer recommendations for priorities in rebuilding the delivery of creative courses and we raise concerns about the longitudinal impacts on creative arts students, who may carry employability capital and experiential detriments with them for a number of years as they graduate and negotiate the post-Covid employment landscape.

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