

Poster Abstract Book (All Poster)

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The impact of COVID-19 and distance learning on undergraduate students' resilience and psychosocial wellbeing: A three-stage study to explore, implement, and evaluate effective strategies to build student community

Jake Hilliard, Felicity Sedgewick, Antonia Lythgoe, Charlotte Flothmann, Trang Tran

Abstract: This poster reports on a three-stage study currently being undertaken in the University of Bristol's School of Education (SoE). Its primary purpose is to identify, implement, and evaluate a range of supportive strategies aimed at enhancing students' community building, and/or mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19 and the transition to online learning. In stage one, online focus groups were completed with existing undergraduate students and recent graduates to explore changes in community cohesion as well as challenges to mental health and wellbeing during the shift to remote learning. In stage two, four key strategies that were identified in the stage one focus groups were implemented into two courses in the SoE for a 12-week period. In stage three, online interviews will be undertaken to understand the positives and negatives of each strategy, as well as how they contributed students' sense of community, social support, and wellbeing.

Poster Outline: Background

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students in higher education are facing significant changes to their usual mode of study, mostly via shifting to majority, or wholly, online learning. This shift poses various challenges which may significantly impact students' mental health, wellbeing, and resilience. For instance, many avenues for building relationships, developing a sense of community, and receiving social support can be significantly reduced when learning online (Rovai and Wighting, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic is also thought to have had a negative impact on the general mental health and wellbeing of university students (e.g. due to a lack of interaction and physical contact with friends and family) (Savage et al, 2020). Understanding the different ways in which undergraduate students have managed these turbulent times will provide insight into how their mental health and wellbeing can be supported.

Purpose

The overall purpose of this study, therefore, is to use the experiences of university students to identify supportive strategies for community building and/or mental health and wellbeing whilst

studying online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research context and methodology

This study is being undertaken in the School of Education (SoE) at the University of Bristol. The SoE runs two three-year undergraduate courses in Education Studies and Psychology in Education. Typically, both courses are taught face-to-face; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning adopted online learning approaches.

A three-stage study adopting a qualitative methodology is being used for this research project. In stage one, online focus groups were completed with existing undergraduate students and recent graduates to explore changes in community cohesion as well as challenges to mental health and wellbeing during the shift to online learning. In stage two, findings from focus groups were used to identify and develop four supportive strategies that were implemented into both SoE undergraduate courses for a 12-week period during the 2020/2021 academic year. These included: one-to-one tutor sessions/office hours with teaching staff (*staff support*); beginning and end of the week sessions to help students structure and plan their week (*practical support*); a weekly emotion awareness and regulation survey (*emotional support*); and working with the SoE Student Society to create a structured programme of social events (*community support*). In stage three, online interviews will be undertaken to understand the positives and negatives of each strategy, as well as how they contributed students' sense of community, social support, and wellbeing.

Implications

Although data for the final stage of this research project is still being collected, it is hoped that this research will develop a range of strategies that can be used across faculties and universities to help enhance student wellbeing and resilience.

Poster References: Rovai, Alfred P., and Mervyn J. Wighting. 2005. "Feelings of Alienation and Community among Higher Education Students in a Virtual Classroom." *Internet and Higher Education* 8 (2): 97–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2005.03.001>.

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