

Examining the engagement of undergraduates in their first semester of university-level study in the post-pandemic era

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Covid 19 represented a pivotal moment, however academics are still debating what comes next. A University in southwest England, with a diverse student body, introduced guidance to support the embedding of online learning to promote sustainable online practice. This created a timely opportunity to explore how current first years engaged in their first semester at university. Using two online surveys we captured data from students on patterns of engagement and perceived benefits on online learning. Staff reflected on their practice at key time points, programme design and factors determining practice. They also reported perceived benefits. We will explore the extent to which academics have changed their practice and the potential impacts on student engagement. We will also examine relationships between student demographics, engagement, and benefits of online learning. This could have implications for the delivery and support provided for students in an increasingly diverse student body.

Full paper

Covid 19 represented a pivotal moment in HE, however what follows on, is the subject of debate. Prophecies of sweeping changes as we emerge into a 'pathway to a new normal' (Murphy, 2020: 500) have been made; others call for a more muted future, where there is

resistance to transformation in favour of a return to pre-covid practice, protecting against the loss of 'education as an embodied and communal experience' (Ertingfield, 2021:146).

At a university in southwest England, we are witnessing the rehearsal of these arguments. The University introduced guidance to support the embedding of online learning into practice, with a view to promoting sustainable online practice (Babatunde Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Student engagement is central to these discussions, which as Trowler (2010: 7) highlighted is as about 'more than involvement or participation' but also attitudes and experiences.' It was from this perspective this study was designed.

This University is recognised as diverse, which impacts on online learning and student engagement. As well as attracting 'traditional' university student relocating for their studies, it has a higher-than-average number of students from widening participation backgrounds.

This study sought to examine how the current first years engaged in their first semester at university. We focused on this cohort, as not only is the first semester at university recognised as formative (Krause & Coates, 2008), but they have not experienced the disruption of previous years. Specifically, the study was framed by these questions:

- What are the benefits of online learning reported by academics and first year students?
- What are the relationships between student demographics, student engagement and perceived benefits of online learning?

Data collection

Two online surveys, one focused on academic staff and one student focused, were administered in February 2022. These surveys drew directly on validated and peer reviewed data collections tools which underpinned the JISC Learning and Teaching Reimagined report (JISC, 2021), and research into first year student engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008). The student survey provided data on academic, peer, intellectual and online engagement, as well as inviting students to specify the opportunities they had to engage with teaching and

learning activities associated with their course. They also reported perceived benefits of online learning and provided demographic information (e.g. postcode, gender). Academics were asked to reflect on their practice at specific time points (pre, during and post Covid), reflect on current programme design, the resources and technology used to support their practice / engage students, and consider factors that shape their practice. They too reported perceived benefits of online learning. The surveys were hosted in JISC Online Surveys and disseminated via academic schools. In total 11 of the 14 academic schools participated in the study, with a 20% response rate obtained from Academics and 13% from Students. Data were analysed using a series of Chi-square tests to establish differences in responses according to role (staff/student) and demographic category.

Initial findings

We are currently analysing data; however, initial outcomes have highlighted notable trends. Interestingly, despite local rhetoric staff had not fully reverted back to pre-covid teaching / student support practices (Table 1). Academics reported determining the approach taken to teaching, assessment and student support as influenced by signature pedagogies of their discipline (93%), available resources (93%) and technology (92%), student feedback (88%) and planning by the programme team (87%). Experiences of teaching online during the pandemic (90%) also informed practice. This presents a teacher/discipline-centred approach, further supported by only 53% of Academics reporting considering student demographics as they planned their teaching, assessment and student support.

Table 1: Extent of in person delivery

	Lectures	Seminars	Tutorials
Pre-covid	87%	87%	80%
Post-covid	50%	44%	38%

Staff and students highlighted benefits to online practice. Students

were more supportive of the gains associated with online delivery (see Table 2) – an area we plan to interrogate further according to student demographic profiles. Academic staff realised benefits in terms of promoting flexible learning, yet showed limited recognition of the potential to enhance student experience.

Table 2: Reported benefits (%)

	Students	Staff
Better learning experience	48	21
Improved Learning Outcomes	48	16
Improved Skill Development	51	26
Promotes flexible Learning	88	82
Levels the playing field	67	37

Initial analysis indicates residential status impacts perceptions of online learning and student engagement - this will be considered further in the paper. We will conclude by considering the implications for the first-year experience, indicating where there are opportunities to enhance engagement through online learning, and where a balance needs to be struck between the expectations of the ‘new normal’ for students and academic staff.

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