My Covid-19 Experience

Mya Imogen Taylor, Sheffield Hallam University, C0041648@hallam.shu.ac.uk

Abstract
In this paper, I discuss how my engagement at university during the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on other aspects of my life. Before attending my current university, I was attending university in Texas on a sport scholarship for running and I never planned to cut my degree in the USA short. Leaving the USA because of the pandemic however had a positive impact on me in terms of my mental health and my running. Because of the pandemic, I ended up re-starting my 1st year at another university in another country, and I have managed to build from this demoralising experience and get on the right track with my life again.

Present Day Reflection
The following Journal article was written around 2 years ago when I had completed my first year of study at Sheffield Hallam. The piece acted as a form of reflection and allowed me to learn from my previous experiences facing the challenges I had head on. This taught me I'm someone who doesn't give up and keeps pushing until there's nothing left for me to give. I have now completed my Undergraduate Degree in BSc Psychology and will be graduating in November with 1st class honours. In October I will be starting a PhD conducting research into Developmental Psychology, specifically Developmental Language Disorder. Regarding my Athletic achievements in May I completed the first televised competition where I was classed as "Elite" standing shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Hellen Obiri which was a dream come true. This piece really allowed me to reflect and grow, and as I now reflect on the past years success (and of course struggles) I know I can learn from them and, with hard work, reap the rewards in years to come!

Introduction
Keeping busy, it is something that I have always done. I'm a runner. I have been for 10 years; I train every day and I compete most weekends. I hold family very close and have always made the effort to visit them when I can. I am currently studying for a BSc Psychology full time at Sheffield Hallam University, and at the time of writing I am about to start my second year of study. I love to help people, and from a young age have volunteered at my educational institutions to help my peers in many ways. I have a part time job as do many other students. I am always busy! Having such a full schedule requires support: support from friends, family, work, coaches, lecturers and anyone else who is involved in my life. I did not understand the extent to which a lack of this support network would impact my life until I lost it. This piece is not to discuss my personal loss in the Covid-19 pandemic but more so my regain of the support network I didn't realise I needed.

Pre-Covid Pandemic and the Beginning

In January 2020 I returned to the US to start the second semester of my sophomore year at the American University I was attending in Texas. The COVID-19 pandemic was contained to China at this time and I didn't think it would go any further. I was in the USA studying Bachelor of science Psychology on a sports scholarship for athletics, but my experience was not the American dream, more like a nightmare.

In terms of athletics, I wasn't doing too well due to multiple injuries since I had started at the university. The injuries and lack of support from coaches and other staff members at this institution left me unable to compete successfully. After unsuccessful races, coaches 'talked down' to me, saying things that made me feel like I was incapable and embarrassed me at group training and competition which made me begin to dislike my sport. Alongside my injuries and lack of rehabilitation, my training was broken and took precedence over my education.

As a student from England, I found it difficult to adapt to the way of learning in the USA. I was enrolled in classes such as American criminal justice, of which I had no idea whatsoever. I struggled in these classes academically. When seeking out help in those subjects, it was not provided. This is something I had never experienced before, and when I inevitably didn't succeed in them, I was informed of sanctions against my scholarship. This was difficult to understand as I had tried my hardest and requested help. Thus, in some ways, I felt a sense of neglect toward my education and began to feel anxiety before exams (something which was entirely new to me).

I went to the USA at 17 years old to start university; as a result of this I had no A-levels, so upon having my scholarship put at risk I began to get anxious before competitions. I began to stress, I began to hate something that I had loved for 10 years. Unsurprisingly these unfortunate situations, an extreme lack of support and much more, resulted in me finding myself at war with my mental health, I lost sight of who I was, I had been broken down to a stressed, panicky, highly anxious shell of my former self. I didn't want anyone to know that's how I was feeling, I didn't want to quit, I didn't want my family to panic. I kept working hard in my classes excelling in psychology subjects, while I continued to struggle in non-psychology subjects.) I kept working hard in training even when met with negativity and bad results time and time again, I had it in my head that I had to "conquer America" and to do that I had to get back to being myself. To begin to replace the bricks I needed help, but I felt as if there wasn't really help available.

Whilst this battle was going on in my head minute after minute, I had somewhat forgotten about the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020 it began to make itself more prominent. I was hearing more about what was happening around the world, but the coaches played down how the pandemic was spreading in the US. This made it quite a scary surprise when I received the email informing me that university classes had gone online because of the pandemic, and as an international student my student visa would not be valid for the time the classes remained online. I had to leave the USA quickly, before I got into trouble with immigration, and within 22 hours I had packed up

my dorm, gotten all my paperwork signed and was on a plane back to England. The day I arrived home was the day the first UK lockdown began.

I continued with classes online, and had meetings with athletic coaches over zoom, but something was just not sitting right regarding my return to the states in the fall. I was pretty much coaching myself in athletics at this time with the support of my parents, and was beginning to see an improvement in performance, but this wasn't acknowledged. Whether it was the lack of care for the pandemic in the USA, or the lack of health insurance coverage due to the pandemic, or the fact that deep down I knew that the University and its staff weren't on my "team"; I made my decision to remain in the UK and proceeded to apply to university here.

Unexpected Opportunities due to Covid-19
I was accepted to Sheffield Hallam University within weeks of my application. I was so excited to get stuck back into education in the UK. However, I was still struggling with running, and the belief in myself was well and truly hidden. Around the same time as receiving my welcome package from Sheffield Hallam, I received an email accepting my application to the England athletics Junior performance programme, which provides support for up-and-coming athletes. This gave me a slight confidence boost as the University had taken a chance on me (having got no A-levels and only American acceptance exams) and so had England athletics.

Over the next few months, I threw myself into classes make sure I was fully involved. Even though we were remote learning I felt more connected to people than I had in two years. I joined the psychology peer advisor scheme, feeling like I could help other students who may be struggling. My main aim was providing a form of a connection for them to the university. It also helped me, as I was beginning to feel as if I was really doing something to help. Helping is something which I have always enjoyed doing. The peer advisor team had a great response from staff and students, doing regular posts on the Instagram page and producing videos with study tips.

Professors and lecturers really tried to engage with students as much as possible, and offered support, regularly checking in on everyone at a time where we were further apart than ever. My grades were good and I had found a brilliant group of friends who I met up with when permitted. So education and social life wise, I was doing well!

Athletics was still suffering; this anxiety wasn't going away. I was terrified of re-joining my old training group. Although I knew this to be the best option, I wasn't the same athlete as I had been before my venture to the United States. In January 2021 I was put in to contact with a Psychologist through the England athletics program who helped me understand this anxiety and how to overcome it. I had a discussion with staff members at Hallam University regarding an upcoming race and my sessions with a psychologist came up in conversation. The staff were extremely understanding and explained how the university had support available, which even though I did not use it was more than I had been offered in the past. Even them just checking in once in a while through email demonstrated the support Hallam has for its students.

Back on Track

For me everything falling into place and being so involved as a student really helped to come through my struggles. I am happy to say that the Psychology peer advisor team was awarded the "We are Hallam" award for contributions to the university and its students. My end of year exams went exceptionally well, achieving grades higher than I had anticipated. By the end of summer, I managed to have built up the courage to re-join my coach in the UK and begin training with my old team. I recently was the silver medallist in the Senior women's 1500m race at the Yorkshire championships.

Conclusion
Without the Covid-19 pandemic I would not have had to come home from the United States early and applied for university in the UK. Sheffield Hallam took a chance accepting my application, a young woman with GCSEs, the American equivalent of A-levels and two years at university in the United States. They didn't know why I was returning, they just took my word for it and trusted me. If it was not for Sheffield Hallam University giving me the opportunity to begin studying in the UK once again: I would not have had the confidence to apply for the England Athletics Junior Performance programme; I wouldn't have met the supportive staff at Sheffield Hallam who could see my potential, I would not have been given the chance to help others as I did with the peer advisor scheme; I would not have found help for my state of mind surrounding athletics and self-belief; I would not have re-joined my old running coach. My engagement, and the support to make it happen, was key to all these things.
In order to operate effectively when there are so many things happening in one's day to day schedule it is important to have a supportive team surrounding every aspect of life. If any one of those aspects isn't functioning properly it causes the whole tower to fall with it. I only realised this when rebuilding my tower throughout the pandemic. Sheffield Hallam taking that chance on me and providing opportunities for me to work and share with others gave me a small confidence boost that maybe I still had the same abilities that I had prior to going to USA. If it hadn't been for the Covid-19 pandemic, I'd have never applied to study at Sheffield Hallam University and I would not have had the opportunity to grow from my previous experiences.