

Impact of postgraduate transition through a pandemic student engagement

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial implications for Higher Education students in terms of academic capabilities and private lives (Watermeyer et al., 2021). For instance, COVID-19 is theorised to have increased student uncertainty and stress through the use of distance and blended learning (Plakhotnik et al, 2021). Consequently, this paper explores the effects of student engagement of two students transitioning from undergraduate to postgraduate studies (MSc Forensic Psychology) during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so we will discuss the challenges encountered, our solutions to such challenges and how skills acquired from peer advisors scheme/course representatives facilitated individual and group transitions. Firstly, the term peer advisors must be defined; similar to mentorship programmes, peer advisors consist of experienced student volunteers, aiming to offer a supportive relationship with newer students transitioning to various levels of study socially and academically, with senior peer advisors being individuals continuing the scheme during their postgraduate studies. The programme enables sharing of experiences and knowledge allowing the opportunity for learning via varying perspectives and methods. There has been an increasing bank of knowledge developed on how peer advisors/mentors benefit new students and help with their engagement and adjustment to university life (Yomtov et al., 2017; Lorenzetti et al, 2020.).

An initial challenge encountered was the rapid transition from traditional study methods to adopting new technology. Accustomed to on-campus learning/teaching, the change to online was found to be difficult as we had to learn how to use new technologies which were previously unknown, this was especially challenging as we both lacked confidence in our technological abilities. To mitigate some technological issues, we both recorded live sessions in case unexpected problems arose such as connection difficulty to ensure that we did not miss any vital information. This was enabled by our learning contracts (university's accommodation to students with disabilities) which provided us with assistive software which included recording functions. Although this was beneficial in helping us successfully engage with sessions/content and relieve some anxieties of online learning, we acknowledged that learning may have been more difficult for other students who did not possess assistive software and/or did not have recording permission. Utilising the use of student perspective surveys this issue was resolved through the recording and uploading of sessions on blackboard by lecturers.

However, online recording would create procrastination as some students may keep putting off work and create more stress closer to deadlines. There are also negatives of online sessions which would need to be assessed before deciding which aspects of

learning could carry on online. When at home, individuals may become easily distracted due to not being conditioned to work in your home environment, research has increased recently due to more people working from home, but the findings are not consistent and more in-depth analysis of data is needed to determine a conclusion (Bergefurt et al., 2021; Bloom et al., 2015). Furthermore, having to look at a screen all the time can create tiredness which may overall impact engagement with content as it has been linked in the past with insomnia (Shechter et al., 2018).

Moreover, the absence of in person contact/learning created a reliance on emails for student-tutor communication. Despite tutors generally responding in good time, responses were found to be limited and, on some occasions, we felt like questions were not fully addressed. This often-created feelings of frustration and annoyance when trying to engage with learning materials. Nevertheless, Zoom meetings enabled the facilitation of valuable discussions with staff, these were often within limited time frames and dissimilar to face-to-face responses often received at the end of in person lecture/workshops, these interactions were often essential for summarising learning, receiving reassurance and establishing further research goals (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020).

Throughout the academic year we worked in partnership with other students and staff as course representatives to try and improve student engagement. Consequently, through the distribution of student perspective surveys this issue was also identified and brought up with staff however, staff were restricted in their responses and only able to record and upload teaching portions of sessions and unable to upload group discussions due to privacy issues nevertheless, this was seen to positively impact peer engagement. Although research by Maskell and Collins (2017), found that surveys may not be the best way to find out information about student engagement, due to engagement being an ever-changing construct, surveys were determined to be the best starting point for deeper, more focused questions to students which we could give feedback to the course leaders. Overall, we gained some engagement with the surveys, distributing them on numerous occasions throughout the year and editing the questions from the feedback we received previously. Moreover, informal chats during breaks and group chats were found to be effective at identifying issues with engagement. Ultimately, this created a voice for the students on the course and helped to make changes to the way future block weeks were presented to maximise engagement and learning.

Another key issue associated with student engagement arising from the pandemic relates to interactions and feelings of isolation. Governmental restrictions caused face-to-face workshops/lectures and meetings to be suspended, with programmes being delivered online. Although staff maintained consistent support and elements of workshops and meetings were primarily replaced with reading materials, PowerPoint and Zoom calls, this created feelings of isolation and stress exerted by COVID-19. On campus interactions are convenient and light allowing for rapport building with and obtaining advice from other students over time. However, the absence of on campus

meetings resulted in the complexity/quality of interactions decreasing greatly. This was especially pronounced with the entirety of the master's course being online and consisting of block week teaching meaning we were completely unable to meet our peers aside from via technology.

Establishing relationships involves intentional action and numerous stages to successfully communicate to peers and identifying availability to meet (Wang & DeLaquil, 2020), this was found to have an impact on student engagement as it took longer to foster social bonds and networks of support, with it on occasions feeling artificial. Peer social support is amongst one of the most important processes in academic adjustment/outcome (Dennis et al., 2005) and sense of social identity (Lapsley et al., 1990). Moreover, perceived social support from peers is one of the greatest predictors of goal commitment and university persistence (Contreras, 2011). Nevertheless, with peers experiencing similar stressful situations and interests in the course subject enabled peer relationships to be built based on ingroup membership. Active communication via technologies such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Facebook group chats help mitigate against feelings of isolation and build peer bonds. This was instrumental academically as it enabled us to form a core friendship built on mutual respect and study group, enabling the sharing of experiences, notes and work strategies as well as implementing techniques acquired from the peer advisor programme to establish academic support. Furthermore, as there is an increased demand for independence within a master's degree, there was an additional increase in limited academic support through loss of facilities, however, having a support network from peers helped to bridge the study gap created. Especially with a diverse range of skills and knowledge from the other students due to different experiences and abilities.

Techniques applied to help reduce the impact of loss of in person teaching included the facilitation of online working environments/writing retreats (a supportive space to generate draft assessments) and running of writing reviews (peer reviewing pieces of work). This was beneficial in counteracting the obstacles presented by COVID-19 (Lassoued et al., 2020) such as lack of suitable work environment/space and procrastination in terms of increasing productivity, motivation, and morale. There was an array of pros and cons of utilising technology to compensate for the absence of in person learning. Firstly, it made organising virtual learning easier for us as we all lived in different areas of the country. It removed the barriers of needing to travel, allowed for flexibility around individual commitments and created a longer period of time for working. When facilitating writing reviews, work was sent in advance which also helped with motivation and self-regulation as it created miniature deadlines for us to work towards. The reviewing of work opened channels for discourse which was beneficial as everyone had different experiences which allowed for different perspectives to be considered. In line with literature on student learning, our collaborative online learning had a greater effect on remote learning than alone learning (Chiu et al., 2021) as these interactions removed some of the anxieties surrounding assignment comprehension.

Overall, we transferred the skills that we had developed during our peer advisor role including writing retreats and writing circles into group sessions with peers from our master's course. Using these techniques was very beneficial to our learning as it helped us to remain focused and complete tasks ahead of time to gain feedback and support from our peers.

On the other hand, online sessions meant that we were unable to physically sit and talk through any comments that had been made about our work. We attempted to combat this using screen sharing on zoom calls, which seemed to help but did not fully remove the issue and created a reduction in the understanding of feedback which may have implicated applying changes to work. This may have impacted learning/engagement from inducing frustrations of not gaining the full impact of feedback and struggling with applying feedback in the best way possible. Additionally, there were initial concerns regarding plagiarism of work which resulted in initial reluctance to participate. Although the group completing the same assignments allowed the opportunity to read different writing styles and argument perspectives, online writing reviews meant digital copies of our work were distributed. Prior to COVID-19, during our undergraduate degree, only physical copies of our work were used which were annotated during sessions and collected by the author at the end. With the distribution of physical copies boundaries and trust had to be established which was also beneficial in terms of receiving criticism. Implications of this on future student engagement may be the promotion of independent peer study groups outside of classrooms especially in postgraduate students who may be studying part-time or have busy schedules.

In conclusion, experiencing university throughout a pandemic may help to increase future student engagement. There may be the continuation of recording of lectures/workshops/seminars, as this was found to have a positive impact on student engagement. The ability to relisten to sessions offers students the opportunity to reconsolidate their learning as well as to refer to sessions when completing assessments which may help with a deeper understanding and a clearer application of work to assignments. Furthermore, it may lead to the increase of more online sessions which may make attendance and time management better overall for students. Those that commute may be the most benefited due to reduced travel times and having more time to focus and work on assignments. Moreover, making university more accessible to mature students who may have families and other commitments, allowing them to access more support that is offered and allow university to be more accessible. Overall creating more online sessions where possible could remove some of the pressure on students and allow them to enrich their learning. However, online learning could create digital barriers to access learning from home for students who may struggle to access technology. Additionally, issues associated with social isolation possess a barrier to engagement due to the lack of social support and sense of academic community. A possible mitigation against social isolation could be implementation of online socials and social media groups to foster a sense of

belonging. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped enhance our understanding of the benefits of the use of technology/online learning may have in some situations but has highlighted the need for in person learning to still return and create an integrated approach.

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