

Exploring the experiences of student engagement of a final year social science student in the role of coordinator for Sheffield Nightline during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Within this paper, I reflect on my observations of student engagement through my experiences as a final year undergraduate student at Sheffield Hallam University. I explore these observations through the lens of my own experiences of online learning, completing a dissertation, and my experiences as the coordinator for Sheffield Nightline, a student run listening and information service similar to the Samaritans. In my role as coordinator, I was able to examine varying levels of student engagement, alongside wider impacts of the pandemic on the Nightline service in Sheffield. This article does not use quantitative data or statistics of volunteer numbers, or the types of contacts handled by Sheffield Nightline, but instead offers my own experiences and observations. Firstly, the paper addresses student engagement related to academic experiences involving online learning, and the positive and negative impacts of this on my learning, engagement, and dissertation project. The second half of the paper explores the experiences of the pandemic specifically related to Nightline. The article focuses on the time frame between March 2020 until June 2021.

Academic life during COVID-19

I began studying in Sheffield in September 2018. During my time at university, I did not experience online teaching until September 2020, when I returned to Sheffield for my final year because my teaching ended in March 2020. Despite this, many universities converted to remote or online teaching, which continued to September 2020 (Ihm et al., 2021). As my course, Criminology and Psychology BSc, did not require practicals, I did not have any face-to-face teaching during my final year. I observed this change of learning experience to impact the engagement of myself and the students around me. On a personal level, online lectures and seminars gave me more time to fit in meetings and university work within my schedule, as I did not have the travel time to get to lectures or seminars, I could leave a zoom seminar and immediately join a meeting for my job or for my voluntary role as Nightline Coordinator.

Online teaching and remote learning made it easier for me to engage with lectures and seminars in many ways, as recorded lectures allowed for material to be covered over and over again, to increase understanding of topics discussed. In addition, during the stresses of the pandemic, being able to attend a seminar from the comfort of home was sometimes a reassuring experience as it removed the fear of contracting the virus from teaching, and made learning more accessible for students with disabilities,

illnesses or long-term health conditions. Despite the positives, remote learning also brought many challenges.

As a child of divorced parents, one household contained a family of 6, with 3 university students remote learning, 2 parents working remotely and 1 A-level student, and the other a household of 3 with my parent teaching from the kitchen, our WIFI could not support everyone attending online meetings at once, which was not a unique experience. It was a regular occurrence for students to drop in and out of seminars as the temperamental WIFI services used by students, which are often cheaper packages than those used by people in full time employment, were ill-equipped to support multiple concurrent online meetings. Research found that online learning had mixed satisfaction results within student bodies (Horita et al., 2021). This was shown to be particularly prevalent in cases where technology or internet connection was inadequate (Ihm et al., 2021).

Online live seminars also brought the challenge of engaging with students you may not have met in person, and who may not have their camera on. This would often result in being assigned to a breakout room with 1 or 2 other students with no cameras on, which significantly limited the opportunity for discussion. My observed experiences led me to conclude that the way the seminar was run by the staff member impacted the level of engagement from the students within the group. For friendly staff where there was an existing relationship with the students in the group meant that students may join without their cameras on but would begin to turn them on the more comfortable they felt. This was also impacted by feeling guilty for the staff member if they commented about the lack of cameras on. In addition, when a staff member began each seminar by checking in with each student individually, this increased engagement from the group. However, for staff who took a more formal approach and did not have non-academic related discussions with the group or individuals, they had lower levels of engagement and saw lower numbers of attendees to the seminar.

Furthermore, the pandemic had an emotional toll on the population, which in some ways may have had a larger impact on students. Firstly, the financial issues faced by students, where they were often paying for accommodation they weren't able to live in, and paying full tuition fees for a very different learning experience than expected. Secondly, students often work in part time jobs to support their studies, which are typically in the service or hospitality industry (Ihm et al., 2021). Personally, I worked in the service industry on a zero-hour contract, which during non-COVID times was beneficial as I could pick up shifts that suited my busy schedule, however during COVID my workplace closed, and I was ineligible for furlough. Cross-cultural research indicates the detrimental impact of financial stress on student mental health and academic outcomes in the United States and Bangladesh (Aucejo et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020).

Secondly, completing university work during the pandemic could sometimes be an isolating experience. The lack of social contact with other students, disregarding friendships, on a regular basis, removed the opportunity to share concerns or worries about assignments, and it prevented the sense of community. The stress caused as a result of the pandemic alongside the stress caused by civil unrest at the time,

particularly in the Western political sphere, as described by Ihm et al. (2021), made 2020 a difficult year for students. Statistics show that over half of university students experienced worsening mental health in 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

The COVID-19 regulations also impacted my dissertation project, as I undertook empirical research. This research had to occur online, and I was utilising a mixed methods approach. My interviews were conducted online over zoom, which was a challenge to form a rapport with the interviewees, and also occasional technical difficulties. However, my questionnaire, which would have been conducted online regardless, was very successful, which I attribute to more people being online and present on social media, since this was the distribution method. I did not consider changing my methods of data collection and was not advised to by my supervisor. On personal reflection, I believe I did not consider changing as it was my first experience conducting a study, and therefore had no prior experience of 'normal' to compare to. Despite these positives, it became more difficult to access certain materials, as the university could not reopen after the Christmas break, we were unable to view the copies of previous dissertations at the university since these only exist in paper copies.

In summary, my academic experiences were varied but by adapting to an online environment I learnt new skills such as resilience, and because of the online environment I was able to better manage my time. My ability to better manage my schedule allowed me to have more time to put towards extra-curricular activities, which mainly constituted of volunteering for Nightline. As I took on more responsibilities in April 2020, overall the academic experiences were positive for me, but did come with a number of challenges.

Nightline experience during COVID-19

In contrast with the negative impact on academic life experienced by most students, for student engagement with Nightline as a volunteering opportunity, we saw double the number of applicants from the previous year, from approximately 40 applicants in the 2019-2020 academic year, to over 80 applicants in the September 2020 intake. We also had multiple prospective volunteers reach out before the recruitment campaign began, asking about volunteering opportunities, suggesting that it was more than an increase in publicity that may have influenced this increased engagement.

Nightline volunteers in Sheffield are recruited bi-annually and typically remain with the organisation until they graduate. I have classified the varying levels of volunteer engagement in Nightline from my observations.

- **High Engagement:** For volunteers already in the organisation, some, like myself, immersed themselves with volunteering, and had maximum possible engagement with the society. This characterised the behaviour of approximately 20 volunteers out of 60.
- **Medium Engagement:** There was a middle-ground of engagement, which fluctuates depending on factors such as personal and academic demands,

such as around assessment seasons, which was the majority of volunteers and is typical for a year without COVID-19.

- **Disengagement:** The final behaviour type was volunteers who became completely disengaged with volunteering. This is typical of one or two people throughout a non-COVID year, but the number of volunteers who displayed this disengagement was higher during the 2020-2021 academic year than usual.

This change in engagement levels may have been the result of a combination of factors, such as online training sessions as opposed to in person ones. The in-person training offered the opportunity to talk to friends, and there was typically a social activity afterwards. In comparison, it was harder to talk to friends in the online social, as conversations could be overheard by all group members, but it was also harder to generate friendships online, as the usual 'small-talk' could not happen.

Stakeholder relations were sometimes easier to build over the pandemic, as there was some increased connectivity online. It was easier to meet with a wide range of contacts through online meetings, and it was also easier to initiate conversations with new contacts. This was because the pandemic brought the conversation of young people's mental health to the forefront of some discussions (Blackall & Mistlin, 2021), and with an increased media focus on student suicides during this time (Mussen, 2020), support for students became a priority.

The pandemic was an exceptionally challenging period, which was traumatic for many people, and can result in psychological distress (Manzar et al., 2021), and an increased risk of suicide (Devitt, 2020). Despite this increased concern, preliminary studies did show that there was not an increase in suicides as a specific result of the first lockdown (Appleby et al., 2021).

I felt it may have been easier to initiate professional discussions rather than initiating friendships due to the professional discussions or conversations having a specific purpose, and therefore a prescribed area of conversation. Conversely, for initiating friendships online, the potential conversation prompts for lectures were more limited. For example, attending university in person may mean you can sit next to a new person, and this can inspire 1-1 conversation that cannot be had during online learning. Also, there is the opportunity to ask social questions that you may not ask to the group in an online seminar (E.G., "I like your shoes, where did you get them?").

Conclusion

To conclude, my observations are that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic experience of students appeared to be mainly the result of online learning. The online learning had both positive and negative impacts, the positive impacts of which included increased time efficiency, increased accessibility from recorded lectures, and increased opportunity to recruit dissertation participants. The negative aspects included unreliable or overstretched WIFI making it harder to engage with live seminars, and also the emotional toll of the pandemic, which resulted in increased

stress. Researchers have commented on the varying nature of the impact of the pandemic on students, as it had both positive and negative impacts on their learning experience (Ihm et al., 2021), but acknowledge the impact of increased stress from a number of sources on student mental health. Ihm et al. (2021) commented that the long-term impacts of the pandemic are yet to be understood, and several researchers mentioned the impact of increased fear as a result of the pandemic (Pedrosa et al., 2020). Que et al. (2020) say that improved availability of mental health support is necessary to help mitigate the mental health impact of the pandemic and also to prevent suicides, which emphasises the growing need for services such as Nightline. I feel that, based off my experiences and learning from the last year, peer mental health support is more valuable than ever – to prevent feelings of isolation, and to remind students that their experiences are shared. I do think that the pandemic shone a spotlight on a pre-existing problem of student mental health, and I hope that this inspires widespread support for services like Nightline, which help to bridge the gap between experiencing emotional challenges and mental health support. Despite such a challenging final year, I was fortunate enough to graduate with a high first-class degree, which I believe was partly enabled by the lack of a social life imposed by the pandemic, and partly due to the skills, such as resilience and time management that I learnt from these experiences.

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