

Living on the edge: The impact of COVID-19 on under-represented student groups in English Higher Education

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Report

In this article we report on a recently completed small-scale qualitative review of undergraduate experiences at the University of Lincoln during the global COVID-19 pandemic period of closures and restrictions (March – June 2020), focusing on those students who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE) or who self-identified with characteristics of disadvantage and fall within the remit of the university's Access and Participation Plan (APP)¹. Of the eleven students interviewed:

- 9 self-identified with more than one characteristic of under-representation and/or disadvantage
- 7 were first in family to attend university/Higher Education
- 7 had at least one disability including a mental health condition
- 4 were from lower socio-economic status backgrounds
- 1 was a Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) student
- 1 was an estranged student and 1 partially estranged
- 1 was a mature student

Overall, the students were positive about many aspects of their recent student experience and there was consensus around the swift transition to online provision and the helpfulness and flexibility of staff offering support across the range of professional support services. However, the review also highlighted that some of those interviewed were treading a very precarious line as they studied and worked to support themselves often in the absence of a fall-back security net such as parental or family support (whether emotional, financial and/or practical).

In order to complete this research in the timeframe requested, and to adhere to ethical approval, students were recruited from an existing student contact group already associated with the university's Access and Participation Student Consultation Network and other prior projects with underrepresented students. In

¹ According to the Office for Students, data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access, success or progression to “*students from areas of low higher education participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status; some black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students; mature students; disabled students and care leavers*”. Also included in their definition of underrepresented groups are “*carers, people estranged from their families, people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, refugees and children from military families*” (OfS, 2020, np).

addition, a recruitment email was also sent to the Student Wellbeing Student Advisory Board. As this study was an iteration of the Access and Participation Student Consultation Network, participants received a voucher in recognition of their contribution. With their permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken by the authors. With time constraints in mind, the interviews were not transcribed verbatim for the purpose of detailed content analysis, but relevant quotes from the recordings are provided in support of the themes identified. Each individual interview was guided by the same central questions.

During the course of the discussions, the living arrangements of the participants were found to vary in wake of the restrictions rolled out as a response to the spread of COVID-19. There were those who had returned to their family home or stayed with a partner, almost immediately, but some had decided to stay on campus or in private rented accommodation in Lincoln. For those who had returned to their family home, this had sometimes been a challenge: “(it’s) *hard to have people in your space all the time*”. One found the lockdown a shock and, in his rush to return home, did not take enough learning materials with him. Another described how she had left all her belongings in Lincoln. Some of the students, who stayed with family or a partner, did so because they were worried about contracting COVID-19 and being ill on their own in student accommodation but there was a lot of uncertainty in March about the best course of action: “*Then the university went through a phase of to-ing and fro-ing*”. Participants who stayed in Lincoln had very different lockdown experiences. One estranged student did not have the option of a family home to return to. She had been on her own since March as her flat mate returned home. The main impacts of lockdown for the participants included having to make decisions about where to stay very quickly, loss of income from part time employment and their continued financial commitments including rent. Two students were able to continue working part time but one found that she has had no paid work from March which affected her ability to pay the rent. Speaking about her last instalment of funds from Student Finance: “*I’m very aware of the fact that this is all I have*”. The students felt quite differently about how they were getting on at present (late May/early June 2020). Whilst most of them felt they were coping well (“*I’ve got used to it now*”), a few participants were struggling and mentioned feeling anxious or worried. Some acknowledged that the last few months had been a period of great adjustment in many ways including, for most, in relation to their living arrangements as well as in relation to their mode of learning.

Worry and uncertainty prevailed among most of the participants when they first heard teaching had to be moved online as a response to the spread of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions in March 2020. Most of the students were concerned about the lack of physical contact with their peers and interactive communication with staff:

“I was really worried about it because the nature of our course being one quite small social science, a lot of our learning comes from classroom discussion and interaction... the less structured debates we had where we learn most of

our subjects... So, with it [teaching] being moved online, you lose nearly all of that. This is now sort of one-way teaching."

Two participants did not feel concerned because they did not usually seek support from academics: "*Would there be that much difference?*" The first thought one of the students had to the announcement was about 'value for money' in terms of the large amount of tuition fees she has paid to study:

"My God. I've already spent a fortune to pay for the university tuition to... actually attend the class physically. But eventually it [teaching] was moved online."

Participants felt that, for the most part, academic staff had been responsive during lockdown and they felt supported. Almost all participants acknowledged that most, albeit not all, of their lecturers had done the best they could to maintain the quality of provision during this unprecedented period and so, for some students, the quality of online teaching was just as good as it was before:

"Under the circumstances, [the quality is] more than acceptable."

Teaching materials and resources, such as PowerPoint slides, were considered easily accessible on Blackboard although there were mixed feelings about the quality of online provision. Some live lectures were offered and were appreciated by students although this kind of opportunity was inconsistent between programmes and some students were not able to take advantage of them depending on their other priorities. Some students encountered technical challenges such as reliance on poor quality Wi-Fi at home to access digital materials or finding that the Library website struggled with the number of users accessing it:

"There were internet problems for some of the people on my course, but I don't know how you're going to get around to that."

For students, whose assessments were essay-based, the move to online assessment did not make a great deal of difference. However, for students whose assessments were exam-based (online time constrained assessment), this had been a very different experience, but the general view of them was positive:

"The way they did the TCAs was pretty good."

Participants had mixed feelings about the Safety Net Policy. While the new policy was perceived as reassuring and helped reduce anxiety, some participants were concerned that other students might be demotivated by it. One was happy about having the policy in place but wanted to use the second semester as an opportunity to work harder for better grades than semester one and was dissatisfied with her assessment performance. Another felt frustrated that he was not performing his best during this online phase, despite the existence of the Safety Net Policy:

“While I will have a grade that is safe and secure, I think normally I could have done so much better. Maybe could have been better than that safety grade. So, I do think I am not being able to perform to my best at all and that is really upsetting despite having a Safety Net grade.”

Most of the participants believed the quality of online teaching was worse than teaching before lockdown. The most frequently mentioned reason was the lack of face-to-face interaction with academic staff and peers, which has made learning more difficult. Communication with academics via email was not comparable with physical contact, especially when explanations of key concepts or topics and support for assessment were needed:

“A whole part of being in university... that experience and that comfort a lot of students get... when you're so detached from that physically and when you are back home, you are away from university and try to switch on and trying to engage the limited materials we have, makes it so much harder to do your best performance.”

Online teaching was perceived as ‘one-way teaching’ by some participants - short of opportunities for interactivity, with less engaging and less interesting learning materials. A first year with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) felt that her learning was stifled during the online phase because she used *Read&Write* literacy support software which allows written text to be read aloud but it struggled to support her when used with PowerPoint slides and diagrams:

“I've found the online learning hard... So, I don't feel like I've done anything really since I left university.”

The lack of face-to-face contact also affected students’ engagement with their programme. One did have some experience with moving to an online platform last year when she was in a Facebook messenger group with 15 other students, so it was something she felt comfortable with. But she felt that it was easier for students to hide away if they were reluctant to engage in group work. Attendance was not always mandatory, which some participants found demotivating and reinforced the sensation of reduced face-to-face contact. Another was concerned about the social aspects of her student experience – she missed seeing her friends, going onto campus, and having different places to study in, such as the Library.

Some lecturers were criticised for using just the lecture slides when teaching online. One third year student felt that because she was coming to the end of her degree programme, tutors were putting lecture slides on Blackboard rather than using Teams to communicate with students:

“Didn't help with the interaction with tutors that you would usually get.”

She described feeling demotivated because she could not 'pop in' to speak to a member of staff and was concerned about 'bothering' them as they worked from home. Sometimes students read through lecture slides on their own without lecture recordings, and the quality of slides uploaded to Blackboard was deemed inconsistent, as was learning in this way:

"I don't learn that well from just reading slides. I got to hear it, read it and write it down to let it go in. An audio would be helpful but that was not provided for all lectures... Some slides are very good. The lecturers obviously have made efforts to make them more informative than they would have otherwise when we are in a lecture theatre. Other ones are still quite vague. And the explanations you usually get, kind of verbally, were not there."

Where lecture recordings were provided online, some staff had used last year's recordings and the content was perceived by participants to be less relevant and topical. One revealed that some of her friends on other courses only had PowerPoint slides or old lectures from previous years. The online provision was described as: "A bit lifeless". For many courses, live lectures were not offered to students. One frustration was when live lectures were not recorded so that students unable to attend the lecture missed the equal opportunity to learn:

"There were a number of times where they had forgotten to record the lectures. Some of us couldn't be there... I don't know why the university didn't think some people are going to be carers or key workers."

Although marks for this semester were not yet available to some of the students at the time of the interviews, many participants were inclined to believe that their grades would be negatively affected. One shared his strong conviction that his grades will have suffered. He did not think that the university's initial assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic considered students who were also key workers. His work shifts increased during the lockdown period because many of his colleagues were self-isolating. Another highlighted that some eBooks for his course were unavailable online whilst an additional participant felt that the limited access to resources definitely affected his grades:

"Because we had such limited resources. We did not have the library. We have very limited books put online. And because when I tried to write about a very small niche area about my subject...for my dissertation proposal for example, there are very limited recourses online for that anyway and it is so much harder to try to access the ones that left because you know, we don't have the range to choose from... So, the really limited resources made it difficult to write assignments."

Most of the participants felt less supported when working on their assessments and were upset about not being able to perform to their best or learn as much as before.

Although one spoke highly of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) online, he thought it would have been better to have these online before the exams:

“There was a lot of flapping around.”

Five of the participants accessed services from Student Wellbeing (SW) and continued to do so once lockdown was implemented. One, for example, had dyslexia and physical disabilities and was in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). She felt that SW were very supportive during the early stages of the lockdown when her Wellbeing Advisor got in touch to see if she needed any extra support if she were to stay in Lincoln. She was very happy with the support she had received and felt that the services had adapted well by offering online drop-ins: *“They've still been brill.”* Similarly, another participant on the autistic spectrum and in receipt of a DSA was having counselling with SW before the lockdown. He had already had four in-person sessions and the remaining two were over the phone. Although, there was a period of adjustment to this mode of delivery, he was satisfied:

“It was pretty much the same experience.”

For some, the move to phone calls for counselling was an improvement on in-person delivery:

“I have to say I think they've been brilliant.”

Some of the participants also accessed the Student Support Centre. One, for example, was a course rep and asked staff in the Advice Service for help with a complaint she was making about her programme of study:

“The Advice Centre has been really, really good.”

Another had been in contact with Student Support as she made an application for extenuating circumstances and found them very helpful, but she found academic staff were not very well informed about this procedure. She described *“being passed from person to person”*. Two of the participants had applied for the University of Lincoln Financial Assistance Funds (ULFAFs) during the lockdown period. At least one was signposted to the fund by his Wellbeing Advisor and following application, received £150, which he used to pay for petrol and food for family members who were shielding during the pandemic:

“I'm really thankful for that money.”

While one participant applied for a ULFAF having applied for one in the past, she thought that without already having that experience of successfully applying for money, she would not have applied this time. While both students were pleased to receive the monies they felt that the fund itself could have been promoted more widely and that the application process might be more user-friendly. Participants who

did not access SW or Student Support services had not accessed them before lockdown but were aware of them and their online offer. However, most of these participants accessed the Library and/or Careers and Employability prior to lockdown. Whilst some of them expressed disappointment at the closure of the Library in terms of loss of study space and its impact on their motivation, they found its online resources helpful. Some students did have trouble viewing Library webpages. Opinions of the Careers and Employability service were consistent in that almost all participants felt that they had received a very similar service both before and during lockdown. The helpfulness and flexibility of staff in terms of arranging meetings and calls was commented upon by several participants. One participant, for example, had been due to start his placement in July and when this fell through, Careers and Employability helped him contact the employer.

Communication emerged as a theme throughout the interviews with the students in relation to their early experiences of COVID-19 restrictions, the pivot to online provision and their student experience. However, there were differences in students' perceptions of how successful the university had been in communicating to its students. In general, the students valued the communications they received from the Vice-Chancellor and other members of the Senior Leadership Team:

"I have to say Mary Stuart [VC] was sending out the occasional email and that was really nice to read. So heart-warming. It was nice to hear from those higher up saying 'well done.'"

However, it appeared that communications from Schools and/or Colleges varied with some students feeling that their School or programme leader had been very clear and supportive, whilst others felt disappointed at times. For some, the communications were overwhelming – there were too many and/or they revealed the uncertainty of the situation – which some students liked to see and found reassuring but others did not. One participant would have valued a communication asking students who were key workers to identify themselves whilst another student felt that the communications, she has received were all rather procedural and not very empathetic. As an estranged student she observed that all the communications were standardised phrases from the university. She described how there had been an email from the university to say, 'go home' which was then followed by one from SW which said, 'this doesn't apply to you'. She did not like the way it was phrased as she felt it singled her out but "*in the wrong way*".

Concerns about the next academic year 2020/21 were focused on mode of delivery and commencement dates and their related impacts on accommodation and finances as well as future employment prospects. Some of the participants were clear that whilst they understood the pivot to online provision, they had not really enjoyed the experience such that two students were considering deferring next year:

"I don't think I will get the grades to pass."

“At the end of the day, we did not sign up to online courses. Some people may prefer to take a year out. They may want to wait until everything is back to normal because they don’t feel they can learn effectively online.”

There was some confusion about when students should return to campus in anticipation of the next academic year and how the delayed start to Semester 1 would impact on the duration and timing of accommodation tenancies and their alignment with Student Finance maintenance loan payments. One was worried about paying her rent which was due before she would receive her maintenance loan.

Students reliant on paid employment while they study were concerned about the potential impact of COVID-19 on the local job market in Lincoln. Concerns were also expressed about securing extracurricular opportunities to enhance CVs ready for job searching post-graduation if restrictions are still in place. Uncertainty was expressed around issues like data collection for third year dissertation projects if social distancing measures were still in place.

Based on the analysis presented, some APP students were certainly disproportionately impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. APP students are not a homogenous group and, for example, the experiences of estranged students, students with a disability and first in family students in just this small group contrast with some of their peers who benefitted from a family network and as a result appeared to be less anxious, particularly about their financial situation. Two of the students in this study, experiencing estrangement, remained in Lincoln, highlighted that returning home was not an option or was a potentially dangerous option if the estrangement was a result of abuse. Students experiencing ongoing mental health concerns felt well supported during the period but the pandemic had heightened many of their anxieties. In the absence of their usual support networks of friends whether they remained in Lincoln or went home, most of the participants felt the need for extra support from their peers and some of them looked to their programme staff and course mates for this and were disappointed when the interaction with them was minimal. While the pivot to online provision was a necessary reaction to the situation, some students struggled with this mode of learning (the two students who disliked online study had a SpLD). Accessibility for students with SpLDs should also take some priority as a global equity issue:

“Students with disabilities are amongst the most affected as they require specific support and teaching tools that are not always available in distance learning” (UNESCO, 2020, np).

Recent survey research of more than 2000 UK students found that 63 per cent of respondents were most worried about their grades (Save the Student, 2020) and this was certainly evident in our interview narratives. Moreover, this may be of particular concern to BAME students who *“are consistently given lower marks and less favourable feedback than their white counterparts”* (Singh, 2020a, np). The loss of

the Library as an alternative study space to a bedroom in student accommodation was felt keenly by students and lack of space to study in the family home whilst not an issue amongst our group of interviewees, may be greater for students from lower income backgrounds (Langella, 2020). Assumptions are often made about what students may or may not want or need based upon a stereotype of a 'typical' student (for example, white and middle class - Burke, 2011) and there is a danger that some students will fall through the cracks of the support structures Lincoln has in place. There is also a reluctance to engage with the thorny issue of finance in HE as a fully marketised system where students pay for their education (Benson-Eggleton, 2019), but that obfuscates the issues of those students, particularly APP students, who work to support themselves often in the absence of any familial financial fall-back. While some of the participants were able to make use of the discretionary institutional financial support on offer, this was reliant on staff referrals and prior experience of the system, suggesting that seeking out help relies on students "*having an awareness of eligibility*" and "*active application*" (Pollard et al., 2019, p.54). Indeed, BAME students may be particularly vulnerable financially during the current crisis because the systems we have rely on students coming forward to pursue support when some groups of students may be reluctant to tell anyone about their situation or seek help (Singh, 2020b). A recent survey by Save the Student found that one third of students surveyed (n=2185) had lost income from part time work (Save the Student, 2020) and the main ways in which they were making money were by applying for or extending their overdrafts (32 per cent) or asking parents for help (31 per cent). Over half of their respondents said that they would not use the university hardship fund (53 per cent) suggesting that there may still be stigma around accessing these sources of help. Similarly, research by YouthSight for the Sutton Trust exploring current UK undergraduate students' perception of COVID-19 (n=895) found that around a third of those surveyed had seen a reduction in work hours, had not been paid for the work they had done or had lost their jobs, and around a fifth said that their families were less financially able to support them because of the impact of the pandemic (Montacute and Holt-White, 2020).

Our interviews reveal that APP students were positive about many aspects of their recent student experience and there was consensus around the swift transition to online provision and the helpfulness and flexibility of staff offering support across the range of professional support services but communication, in particular, was one aspect of the response to the crisis where students' opinions greatly digressed. Students had received a lot of communications from the university, the Students' Union, Student Support and Student Wellbeing and their Schools or programmes but these were sometimes inconsistent and there were disparities in students' perceptions of the success of the university's communication strategy. For the most part the communications were welcomed but they were perceived as fairly standardised, suggesting a need for more "*emotionally intelligent communication, that responds to the needs and circumstances of all*" which can, of course, be very difficult when it is not face-to-face (Sharples, 2020, np).

Recommendations arising from the review are primarily based on the students' responses to questions relating to what could have been done differently and their suggestions for the next academic year. These included:

- Transparent and concise communication;
- Support and accessibility to services, flexible to respond to student diversity
- Access to peer support via programmes or via signposting from Student Support or the Students' Union;
- Acknowledgement of online delivery difficulties (use, provision and interpretation);
- Support for students who are also key workers.

The review, including its recommendations, were shared with several COVID-19 working groups led by members of senior management in June 2020. Fortuitously, by that time, some were already being contemplated and implemented particularly in relation to accessibility.

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