QAA

Student Engagement Guidelines: Learning from innovative practices introduced in response to COVID-19

A collaboration of 10 UK modern universities

Dr George Hulene, Dr Sue Cronshaw, Prof Eleanor Davies, Dr Leanne de Main, Prof Hannah Holmes, Dr Alex Hope, Dr Chris Odindo, Rebecca Page-Tickell, Dr Amit Rawal, Samantha Roberts, Prof Danielle Talbot, Prof Sabrina Vieth, Dr Peter Wolstencroft.

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Executive summary

This project investigates student experiences and student engagement in the post-pandemic world of Higher Education in the UK. It is a QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project involving 10 Higher Education Business Schools who have experienced institutional challenges and developed different strategies to maintain positive student experiences and explore avenues for improvements amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Data was collected through a student survey and focus groups conducted at each of the 10 participating universities.

As a result of the survey, we gathered significant quantitative data on students' perspectives on engagement. Participating students ranked the importance of 31 engagement criteria from 'not at all' to 'extremely' important, indicating their priorities for what they view as student engagement. Additional questions around engagement patterns provided insights into the behaviours and student attributes that shaped these perspectives.

In addition, focus groups provided interesting qualitative insights that complement the survey results, allowing students to express their views and opinions on studying before, during and after the pandemic. This revealed compelling findings that elaborate the changes students have undergone during this period, and the reflections they have drawn from these.

A number of interesting findings emerged from this data. These primarily centre around themes including timetabling and commuting students, the need for physical and virtual communities, the importance of recordings for flexible learning, digital literacy and inequalities, and the need to do more to mobilise student voices. Building on these themes, we discuss their meaning in the context of post-pandemic student experiences and the need to rethink the idea of student engagement to extend beyond the synchronous physical classroom experience.

Highlights

- The pandemic has disrupted what students once perceived as a 'normal' way of engaging with learning and teaching, but also opened up avenues for engagement beyond traditional classroom experiences.
- The complex needs of commuter students pose challenges for institutions, to respond to growing demands for more accommodating campus environments to maintain student engagement.
- The pandemic has impacted students' sense of belonging and increased the need to include both physical (campuses) and virtual spaces (virtual learning environments), as part of learner communities.
- Students showed great appreciation of the efforts universities took to digitise learning and teaching during the pandemic, while acknowledging that there is still room for improvement.
- The rise of online/hybrid learning seems to have caused a dilemma for students between their desires for flexible learning and the expectations associated with it.
- The pandemic appears to have created a 'fatigue' amongst students to proactively engage with enrichment activities that are traditionally linked to campus life, student halls or student unions.
- The pandemic has also caused many students to feel isolated, often missing out on developing peer group friendships and relationships with academics, triggering an increased demand for mental health and well-being support.
- Students' views on engagement appear to have shifted towards a rising awareness that sole attendance is not sufficient to constitute a robust form of engagement.

Participating higher education institutions

Coventry University (lead investigator)
Dr George Hulene, Associate Dean Student Experience, Faculty of Business and Law
george.hulene@coventry.ac.uk

Birmingham City University
Samantha Roberts, Associate Director Education and Student Experience and Head of Department
samantha.roberts@bcu.ac.uk

Coventry University London
Dr Amit Rawal, Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Course Leader
amit.rawal@coventry.ac.uk
Prof Sabrina Vieth, Professor of Learning and Teaching, Solent University (previously Coventry University London)
sabrina.vieth@solent.ac.uk

De Montfort University
Dr Chris Odindo, Associate Professor, BAL Faculty Student Experience
codindo@dmu.ac.uk
Dr Leanne de Main, Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor Education (Transformation)
leanne.demain@dmu.ac.uk

Liverpool John Moores University
Dr Sue Cronshaw, Senior Lecturer in Marketing
s.cronshaw@ljmu.ac.uk
Dr Peter Wolstencroft, Subject Leader Liverpool Business School
p.j.wolstencroft@ljmu.ac.uk

Manchester Metropolitan University
Prof Hannah Holmes, Dean of Business School and Deputy Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, Business and Law
h.holmes@mmu.ac.uk

Northumbria University
Dr Alex Hope, Deputy Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor, Business and Law
alex.hope@northumbria.ac.uk

University of East London
Rebecca Page-Tickell, Associate Professor and Director of Education and Experience
r.page-tickell@uel.ac.uk

University of Greenwich
Prof Danielle Talbot, Professor and Deputy Dean Greenwich Business School
d.talbot@greenwich.ac.uk

University of Huddersfield
Prof Eleanor Davies, Associate Dean Teaching and Learning, Huddersfield Business School
e.davies@hud.ac.uk

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1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic drove significant developments globally across higher education during its peak (March 2020 to November 2021). This period significantly impacted the experiences of learning, teaching and assessment for students as well as university staff. Institutions varied in their responses to the pandemic, with a rapid pivot online shortly followed by a range of models varying from full hybrid (including variations of live sessions from home, the office or the classroom) through to the retention of on-campus, face-to-face learning and teaching. The Made Digital report published by QAA could be used to complement our Student Engagement Guidelines.

In our work, we assume discontinuities between student expectations and experience of students in three specific time periods:

1. Before the outbreak of Covid-19,
2. During its peak times, characterised by a series of lockdowns in the UK through 2020 and early 2021, and
3. During the long slow tail of the apparent decline of Covid-19 from mid-2021 to present.

The expectations of students and their patterns of engagement likely varied across these distinct periods. For example, at the peak of the pandemic, during intermittent periods of lockdown, the personality of the academic delivering live sessions may have been more important for students, with 'understanding' as a compassionate response and a crucial element of engaging in learning and teaching (Tharapos et al, 2022). There were fewer opportunities for in-session feedback due to the distance impact of the lockdown as well as the loss of informal communications.

In addition, the pivot to online driven by the pandemic propelled both innovations in the use of technology and in learning and teaching, but also exposed technological inefficiency and faults that can have a significant detrimental impact on engagement levels for students. In areas with higher levels of poverty, students often needed to share devices and internet access with other members of their households, which could result in intermittent access to the internet. Certainly, the impact of differential access to digital learning suggested the need for an 'ecosystem of learning support' to support the engagement of students (Summers et al, 2023).

The scope of this project is to better understand the impact of the pandemic on student expectations of their learning, teaching and assessment experiences. Research was undertaken by 10 modern universities across the United Kingdom. We were keen to understand commonalities among our student populations and to spot patterns in their expectations to which we could then respond. This is particularly valuable as it supports the onward response to shocks and discontinuities in higher education. For example, students and staff are currently struggling with cost-of-living challenges and other systemic shocks cannot be precluded.

2 How to use this report

The key findings are summarised in the Highlights section of this report. The report also shares good practice examples of how the participating Higher Education institutions identified key challenges of the pandemic and introduced interventions to address decreasing student engagement during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The report includes student quotes, recommendations and reflective questions ('Food for thought') to allow the reader to reflect on their own practices.

The findings of this report are intended to start discussions around effective interventions for Higher Education providers who face challenges in student engagement and success. The report can also be used to inform curriculum reviews, programme evaluations and planning, and staff and student development.

We expect the report to have a wide audience, including academic leaders, managers and developers, educators, researchers, professional services staff and quality teams, whose collaborative efforts are fundamentally important for providing positive student engagement and learning experiences in a post-pandemic world.

3 Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed methods approach across two phases of data collection (survey and focus groups).

To begin with, a survey comprising of 14 questions, as per Appendix 1, was released to all students in 10 UK universities between May and July 2022. As Appendix 1 shows, questions one to seven collected student demographic characteristics while questions eight to 14 focused on in-depth information regarding student engagement preferences. The survey received ethical approval at Coventry University, which was then rolled over to the other nine universities. The participating student sample represents a diverse mix across the participating 10 Higher Education providers regarding gender, disability status, national status, post or undergraduate status and ethnicity. Of the respondents, 60.5% were female, 38.9% were male, 0.3% non-binary and 0.3% preferred not to specify their gender (Figure 1).
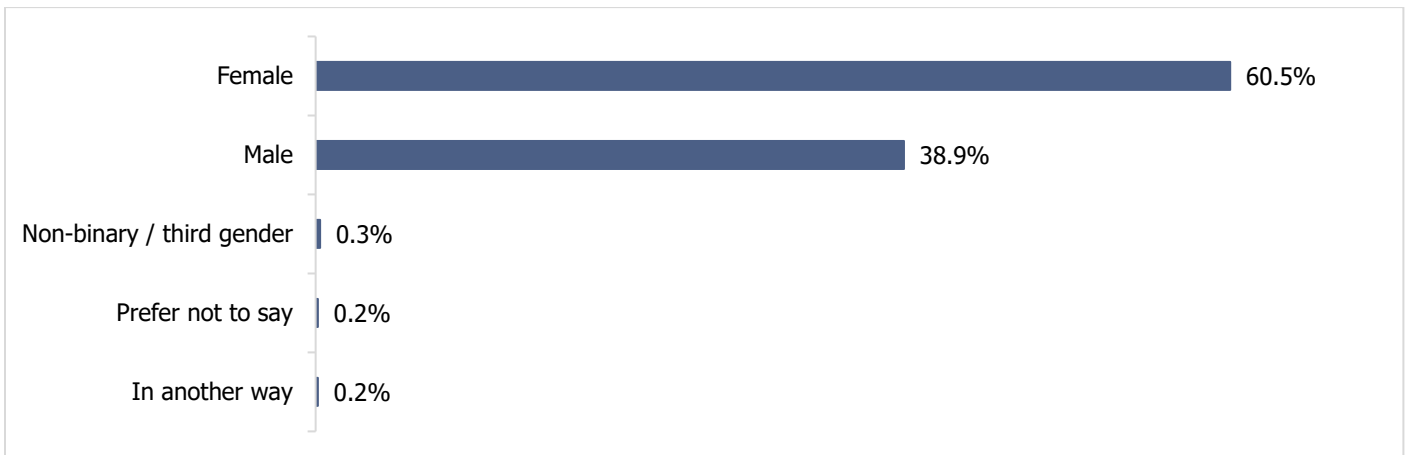

Figure 1: Self-declared gender of respondents

Further, 5.5% of respondents considered themselves to have a disability while 92.6% did not, with 2% preferring not to answer this question (Figure 2).
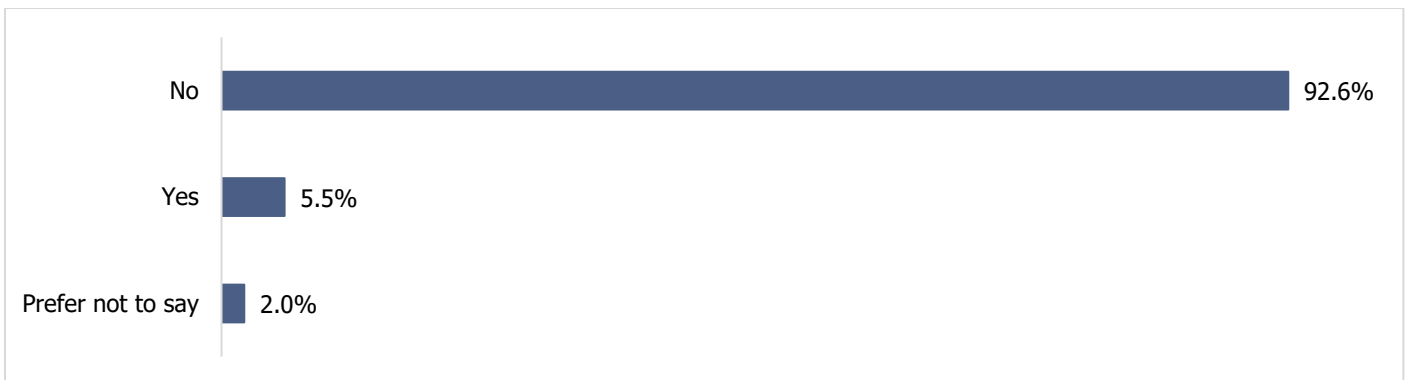

Figure 2: Self-declared disability status of respondents

Undergraduate students represent 63.6% of the respondent population, whereas 36.4% of respondents are postgraduate students (Figure 3).
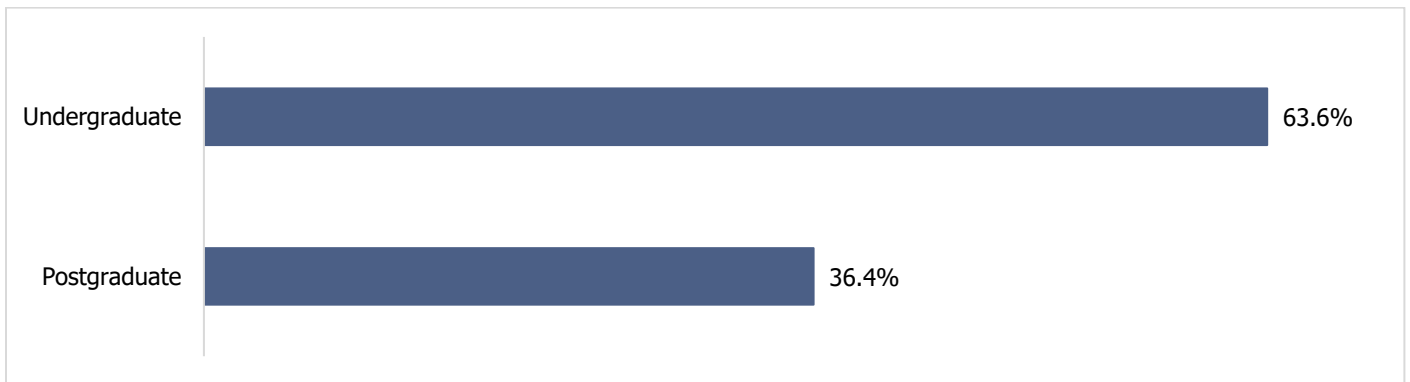
Figure 3: Undergraduate or postgraduate respondents

British/Home students made up 50.5% of the respondents, and 37.3% were international and 12.2% of students were from European countries (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Self-declared national status of respondents

Finally, Figure 5 summarises the spread of ethnicity in our respondent sample, including 35.5% white, 17.2% Asian or Asian British (Indian), 13.1% Black or Black British (African) and Asian or Asian British (Pakistani).

Figure 5: Self-declared ethnicity of respondents

All survey participants had experience of studying at their respective universities before, during and after the pandemic. The survey closed on 1st July 2022 and the data was analysed to identify areas that would be worth exploring further.

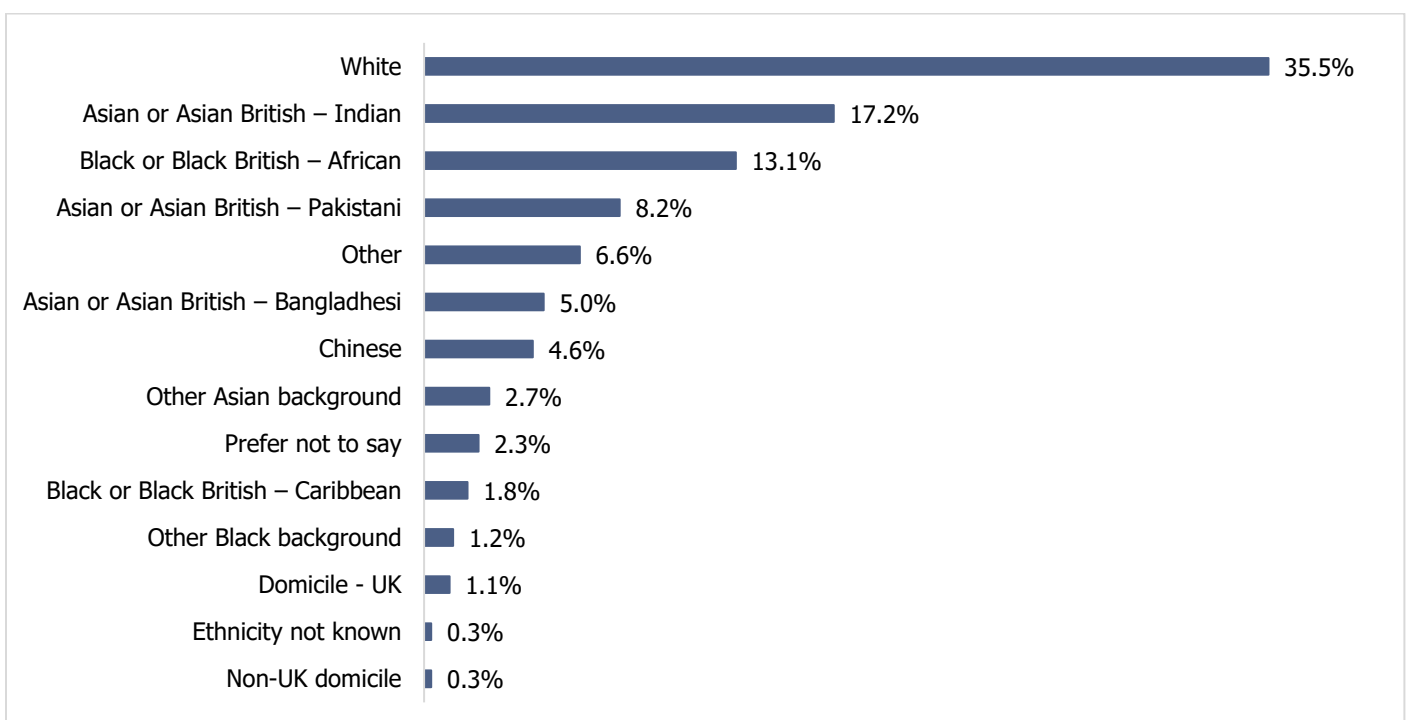In addition, we conducted focus groups at each participating institution to explore students' feelings and experiences in greater depth. Consent forms and information sheets were provided, and students were advised that they could withdraw from the process at any time. Using questions outlined in Appendix 2, students were able to express how they felt about university life during and after the pandemic, providing a joint construction of meaning around the concept of student engagement.

The focus group questions focused on how students define student engagement and how they experienced learning and teaching during the pandemic (primarily March 2020 to September 2022) but also their preferences with regards to what they wish universities had done differently during the initial stages of the pandemic. The focus groups typically consisted of between six to eight participants. The questions were answered confidently by students, who were keen to share their experiences and there was little need for prompts. Follow-up questions were asked when required. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed, and themes then linked and consolidated across the 10 institutions.

4 Findings

Our survey asked students to rate the importance of 31 student engagement criteria. Table 1 summarises these criteria and the distribution of student responses from 'not at all important' to 'extremely important'. This data provides students' perspectives on and priorities of student engagement; focus group data adds qualitative insights. We include student quotes where appropriate.

"No-one has had the normal university experience you expected – meeting people, socialising etc."

Both data suggest that students' views on engagement have been significantly affected by the pandemic, with common acknowledgement that it marked a disruption of what was once perceived as a 'normal' way of engaging with learning and teaching (e.g., attending classes in person, being on campus, socialising with others). However, it also suggests that this may have opened new avenues for engagement (e.g., flexible learning, virtual communities of belonging). Overall, our findings indicate that student engagement is an increasingly complex concept that needs to take the different views, experiences and backgrounds of a range of stakeholders into account.

Engagement criteria	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important	Total number of responses
1. Submitting assessments	0.5%	1.1%	3.1%	22.5%	72.8%	636
2. Asking questions when I don't understand something	1.2%	3.6%	10.9%	39.0%	45.3%	644
3. Attending classes	3.1%	6.8%	12.6%	34.5%	43.1%	650
4. Attending classes on time	2.4%	4.7%	11.7%	41.8%	39.4%	634
5. Doing my own research when I don't understand something	0.6%	6.1%	17.1%	45.0%	31.2%	642
6. Using the online university library	4.3%	11.3%	22.3%	31.9%	30.2%	636

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7. Actively participating in groupwork	4.5%	9.7%	20.1%	37.6%	28.1%	641
8. Responding to university emails	6.6%	12.9%	20.9%	33.9%	25.7%	635
9. Reviewing resources as directed by Lecturers	2.5%	11.1%	23.5%	39.0%	23.9%	639
10. Preparing for class (e.g., through study and reading)	2.3%	9.1%	26.8%	37.9%	23.9%	641
11. Actively participating in classroom activities	4.4%	10.3%	24.9%	36.6%	23.8%	642
12. Enjoying seeing my fellow students	11.5%	12.7%	26.5%	26.5%	22.8%	637
13. Using the campus university library	9.1%	13.8%	24.0%	31.6%	21.5%	637
14. Enjoying seeing my lecturers	11.5%	14.4%	24.3%	29.1%	20.7%	633
15. Seeing my personal tutor	10.5%	16.9%	24.8%	28.3%	19.5%	640
16. Talking about assessments with fellow students	5.0%	10.0%	28.8%	37.0%	19.2%	640
17. Talking to my course director / programme leader	7.5%	17.2%	23.9%	32.6%	18.9%	641
18. Enjoying spending time on campus	16.5%	14.8%	26.0%	24.1%	18.6%	635
19. Supporting other students who struggle with their assessments	8.2%	17.2%	30.3%	27.3%	17.0%	634
20. Speaking up when others don't (e.g., breaking silence in the classroom)	12.2%	16.1%	26.5%	29.2%	16.0%	638
21. Encouraging others to complete assessments	18.5%	17.9%	23.2%	27.7%	12.7%	638
22. Joining a WhatsApp/Facebook group with fellow students	17.6%	18.7%	24.0%	27.6%	12.0%	641
23. Encouraging others to engage with their studies	15.1%	21.6%	25.1%	26.3%	11.9%	638
24. Speaking to non-academic university services (e.g., Well-being, School Office, Student Union, etc.)	15.8%	23.1%	28.8%	21.7%	10.6%	640
25. Raising concerns on behalf of my fellow students	18.4%	23.4%	25.8%	22.1%	10.4%	637
26. Spending time at university outside my timetabled classes	31.1%	20.3%	23.7%	14.9%	10.1%	637
27. Involvement in student societies	23.6%	22.9%	25.7%	18.6%	9.2%	639

28. Volunteering in extracurricular activities	23.3%	22.5%	25.4%	19.8%	9.0%	635
29. Being a course/student representative	34.1%	22.6%	19.8%	15.7%	7.9%	637
30. Posting about my study progress on social	61.7%	15.2%	13.2%	5.5%	4.4%	637
31. Engaging with my university's social media posts	39.2%	21.9%	24.0%	11.2%	3.7%	645

Table 1: Engagement criteria rated by respondents

4.1 Timetabling and the commuting student

The survey results uncovered interesting attendance patterns of students during the 2021/22 academic year. Figure 6 indicates that only 12.2% of students attended campus for four days, while 33.2% attended for three days and 25.4% attended for two days, demonstrating that attendance on campus is not a five-day activity.

"People do not always attend class, because we start at eleven and finish at six thirty and we only have thirty minutes for lunch."

Many of the universities included in our study are regional study hubs that attract students from a significant catchment area around their main campus, such as Coventry University and Birmingham City University, including students from Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Leamington, Warwick, and Leicester, as well as De Montfort University, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Huddersfield, the University of East London, and Liverpool John Moores University.
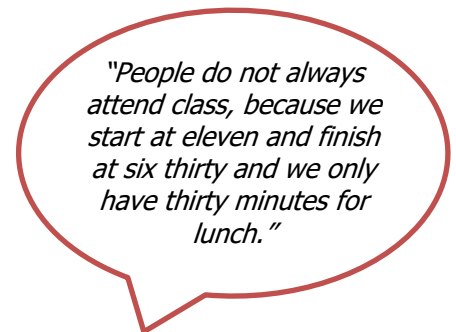
In our survey, more than 70.2% of students stated that they commute to campus in an hour or less, with 38.7% commuting for under 30 minutes (Figure 7). Many of these students are likely to be considered 'commuter students' (usually defined as students who have the same term-time address and home postcode) and may face logistical challenges related to travel, parking, food costs on campus, and security.

The rise of commuter students presents a number of challenges for institutions to address. There is a growing demand that the campus environment is accommodating, including providing spaces for students to make drinks, heat up and eat food, lockers for storing bags, coats, and books, and so forth. Some institutions are also investigating partnerships with public transport providers to assist with transport challenges during peak hours.

Focus groups revealed that students have individualised preferences regarding timetables including:

1. Some students do not like early (9am) starts, especially if they have to travel.
2. Equally, late finish times (5pm) are not preferred, particularly during the winter months when it is dark for fear of security.
3. Long breaks during the day are not well received.
4. Students do not like compressed teaching within the day, especially if they are required to move location within that period.

It is very apparent that timetabling which meets the needs of all students is a challenge. Institutions are likely to have to consider alternative approaches, perhaps by allowing students greater opportunities to personalise their timetables as well as make full advantage of the Virtual Learning Environment. The full use of online delivery during the pandemic was welcomed by some students, as it allowed them to use their commuting time more efficiently, although this approach was not without its disadvantages.

The rise of commuting students is also having an impact on the social environment of universities. Commuter students in the focus groups observed that they maintain their existing relationships at home (family, friends, work commitments) and so may be less likely to develop social or studying relationships on campus. This pattern may make the relationship between the student and the university more transactional, reducing participation in 'extracurricular' activities and potentially having a detrimental impact on the social environment for learning.
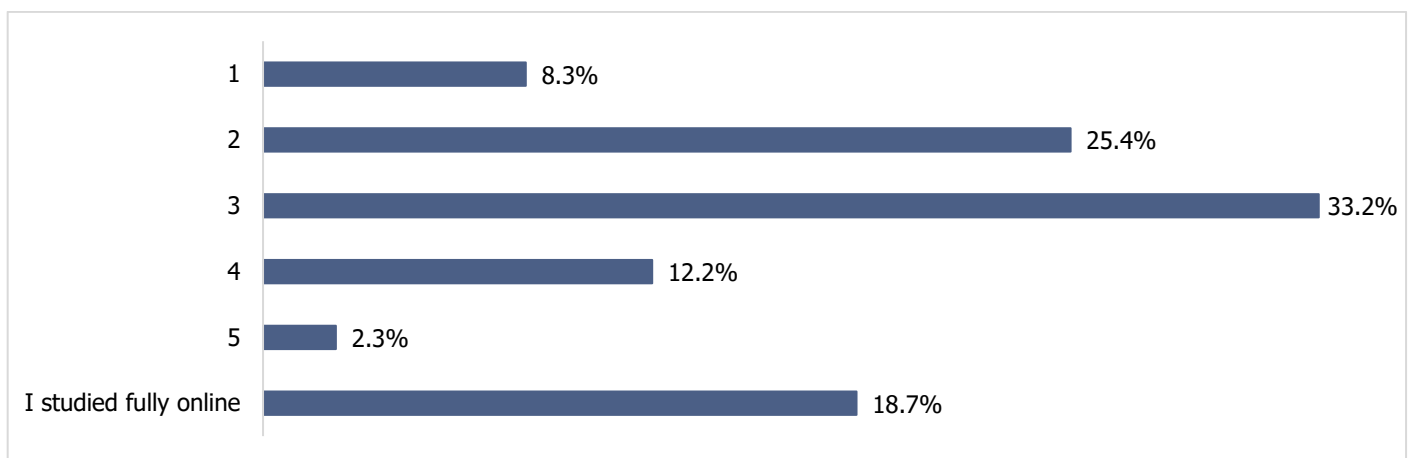

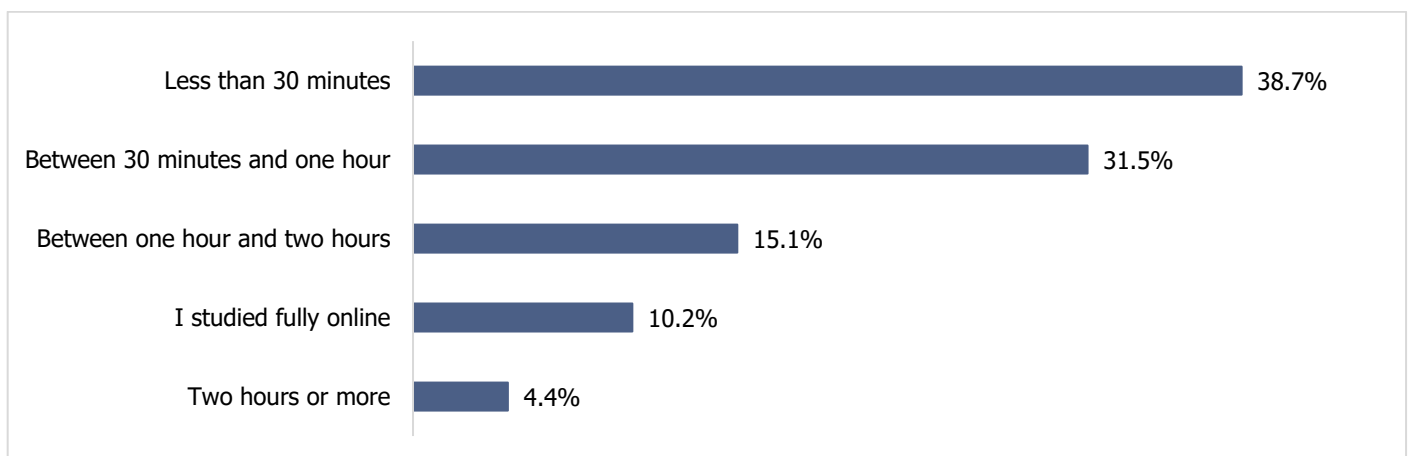*Figure 6: Average number of days respondents spend on campus*

Figure 7: Average time respondents spend commuting to campus
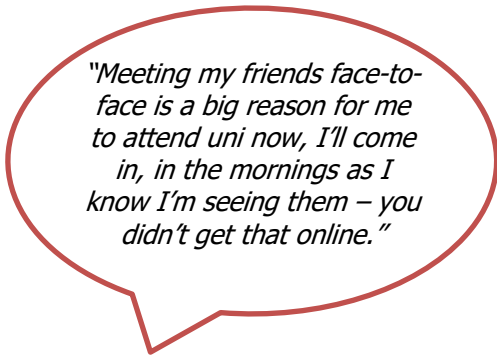
Food for thought

- Are we doing enough to ensure that the timetabling of learning sessions is considerate of students' commuting times?
- Is there any scope for flexibility to have start and end points outside of peak travel time?
- How can we help commuting students to use time spent traveling to campus more effectively? Short, revision focused videos or 'podcasts' may be a great way to engage with students while travelling to campus, while reading long documents or PowerPoint slides is not.

4.2   Physical and virtual communities of belonging

Our findings show that more than half of our respondents (51.4%) find it not at all or only slightly important to spend time at university outside of their timetabled learning sessions (criterion 26). In addition, 56.2% of respondents find it very or extremely important to talk to fellow students about assessments (criterion 16) and 51.5% to talk to their course/programme leaders (criterion 17).

Yet, 39.6% of respondents recognised the value of joining an online conversation group (e.g., WhatsApp or Facebook) by saying they find this extremely or very important (criterion 22). Furthermore, 61.1% of students find it not at all or only slightly important to engage with their university's social media posts (criterion 31), while 76.9% find it not at all or only slightly important to post about their study progress on social media. Additionally, our focus groups revealed that some students are adamant to link their social media presence and their student experience.
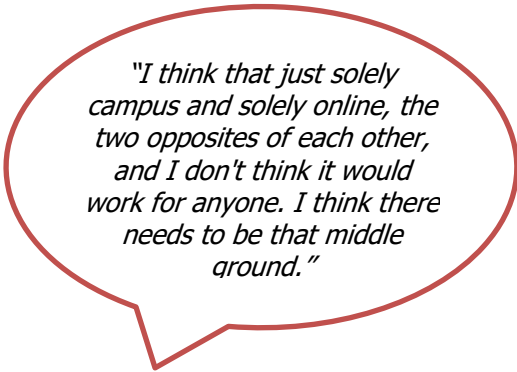
"Meeting my friends face-to-face is a big reason for me to attend uni now, I'll come in, in the mornings as I know I'm seeing them – you didn't get that online."

These results may pose concerns for those involved in shaping student experiences linked to being on campus, exacerbated by the pandemic that caused students to spend less time at physical locations on campus and many community building activities to move to virtual spaces. This may have affected students' need to build a sense of belonging through physical togetherness. Thus, extra-curricular activities such as on-campus guest lectures, student representative meetings or group assessments may simply not be sufficient to create a sense of belonging in a post-pandemic world.

Instead, there are opportunities for universities to shift their ways of thinking about student belonging by moving away from a mentality that restricts belonging to physical spaces on campus and adopting holistic approaches that extend definitions of student belonging to physical *and* virtual spaces. This also accentuates the importance of effective Virtual Learning Environments, which are becoming more relevant to a student's learning experience. These are equipped to give students space to collectively communicate with their peers and educators, discover shared interests and be able to co-create knowledge (Lim, Shelley & Heo, 2019). The effective use of Virtual Learning Environments is imperative to create a curated space for modules, whilst enticing students to still engage by physically attending classes. Consistent with the literature on communities of inquiry (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020), a fine balance is required between campus and online contemporary learning environments to maintain student engagement.

In line with this desire to take a more holistic approach to community-building, our results suggest that universities need to alter their current approach to social media. Specifically, attempts to use social media platforms (such as LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) to communicate to new and existing students (Le, Dobele & Robinson, 2019) may not be as fruitful as anticipated. This is due to students showing signs of reservations to use such channels in connection with their studies.

"I think that just solely campus and solely online, the two opposites of each other, and I don't think it would work for anyone. I think there needs to be that middle ground."

Our results suggest that, rather than posting on social media platforms to develop visibility and engagement, universities should re-visit not only how they use their social media channels but why they do. Universities should be cautious that students may have very different expectations about the information which they expect to get from engaging with their university's social media accounts. Moreover, this sparks the question whether students are inherently more prone to communicate about their studies via their own social media platforms as opposed to their institution's platform. This could be linked to the 'norms' that expect students to use 'traditional' ways of communicating about issues that relate to their studies.

4.3 The importance of recordings for flexible learning

Our survey showed that 37.4% of responding students were in favour of learning exclusively face-to-face, while 14.8% preferred to study fully online and 46.1% preferred a mix of both (Figure 8). There was strong consent among students in the focus groups that having access to recordings of online learning sessions was very important. This may be a sign of students' need for more flexibility as to when, how and where they study. For example, 34.8% of students responded that they prefer to engage with their studies in the evenings and 23.2% late at night (Figure 9) – a time when learning sessions are unlikely to take place. This indicates that fixed timetables do not give all students the flexibility they need to succeed at university.

Face-to-face teaching — 37.4%
A mix of both but with more face-to-face teaching — 26.9%
A mix of both but with more online teaching — 19.3%
Online teaching — 14.8%
I have no preference — 1.7%
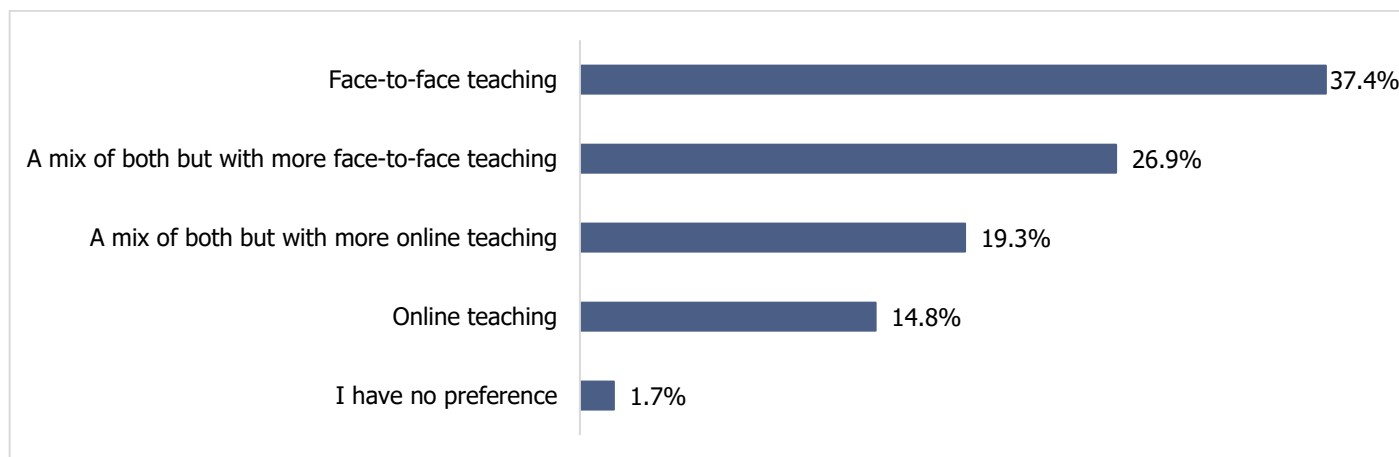
Figure 8: Respondents' preferred teaching delivery mode

Evening — 34.8%
Afternoon — 25.1%
Late night (i.e. after 10pm) — 23.2%
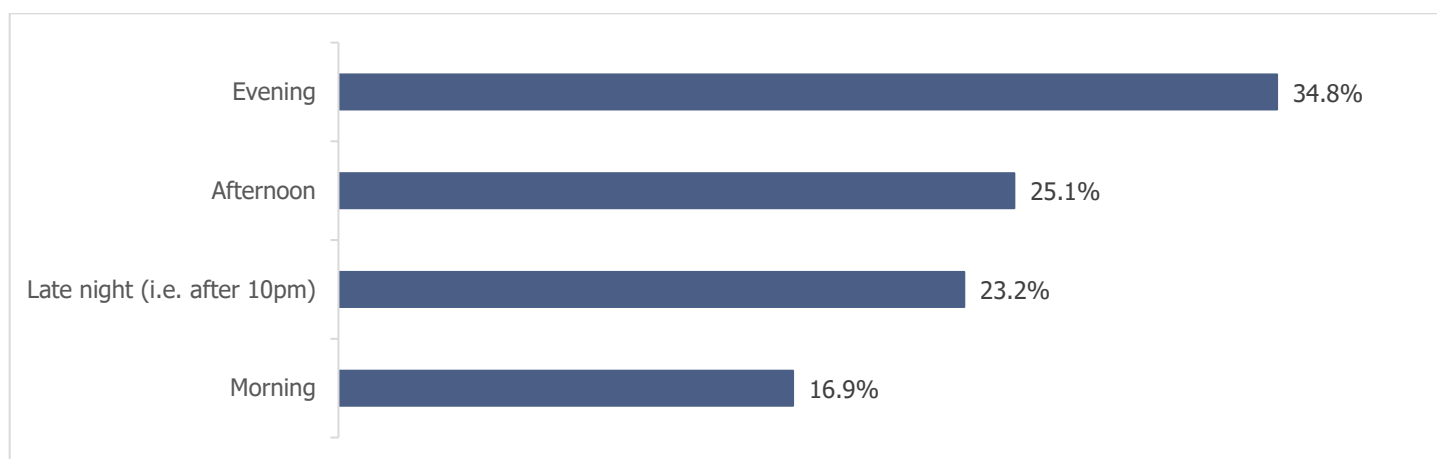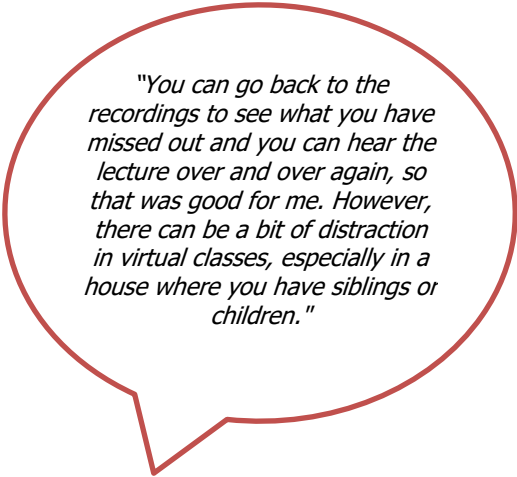Morning — 16.9%

Figure 9: Respondents' preferred time to engage with studies outside timetabled classes
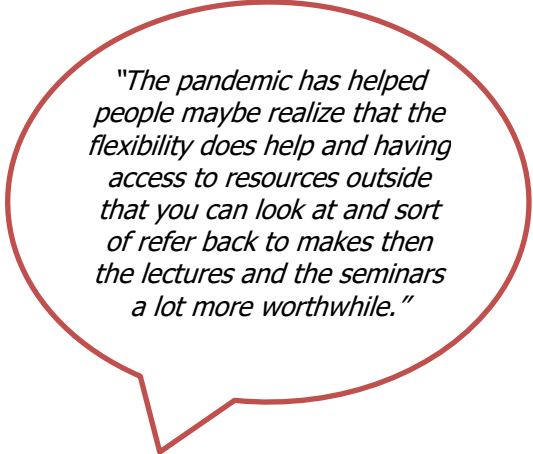
> *"You can go back to the recordings to see what you have missed out and you can hear the lecture over and over again, so that was good for me. However, there can be a bit of distraction in virtual classes, especially in a house where you have siblings or children."*

This is particularly interesting against a backdrop of discussions about the use of recordings and their possible detrimental effects on student engagement. We recognise that providing a recording will not necessarily have a positive impact on student attendance of timetabled classes, but students' views suggest that recordings add significant value to their learning experiences. This might be an indication for higher education leaders to start viewing student engagement more holistically than we currently do, spanning its definition beyond issues of class attendance and into spaces that recognise students as independent learners who access materials when or where it is most convenient for them.

However, while the value of recorded sessions is undeniable, it is worth noting that the format of these matter immensely. Students in our focus groups expressed clearly that they preferred short and concise recordings, feeling negatively about overly lengthy recorded lectures which they considered to be boring and disengaging. Thus, educators must think carefully (and strategically) about the use of online recordings, ensuring that they aim to cover 'key concepts' rather than whole learning sessions. It may also be worth considering breaking recordings down into micro units that allows students to access them individually.

> *"The pandemic has helped people maybe realize that the flexibility does help and having access to resources outside that you can look at and sort of refer back to makes then the lectures and the seminars a lot more worthwhile."*
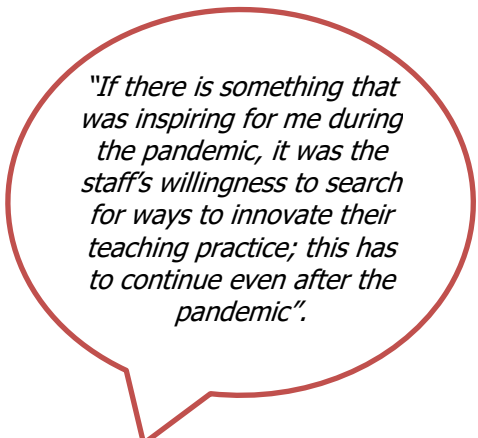
In the recently updated QAA Subject Benchmark Statements (e.g. Business and Management, March 2023), the distinctive features of a Business and Management degree include a high level of flexibility with regards to the mode of delivery, specifically to ensure courses are designed with inclusivity in mind and that they are offered in a variety of learning modes to suit students' learning and needs. QAA's recommendation, which confirms our findings from as early as the summer of 2022, is that courses in Business and Management should be designed to enable students from all backgrounds to realise their potential.

Food for thought

- How long is too long for a recorded learning session?
- How can we ensure that learners can study when and where they like?
- Are fixed timetables a thing of the past?
- Which elements of a learning session should be recorded, and which can safely be left out?

4.4 Digital literacies of students and staff

With 60.9% of responding students stating that they prefer full online or hybrid modes of learning (Figure 8), it is not surprising that many universities are embracing hybrid delivery as a long-term learning solution. Additionally, while most students (90.9%) access learning materials via desktop computers or laptops, a small but significant number of students (8.4%) now primarily use their mobile phone or tablet devices to study (Figure 10). Thus, students and staff, more than ever, must master the digital skills to handle various technologies that come with hybrid learning and teaching.

> *"If there is something that was inspiring for me during the pandemic, it was the staff's willingness to search for ways to innovate their teaching practice; this has to continue even after the pandemic".*
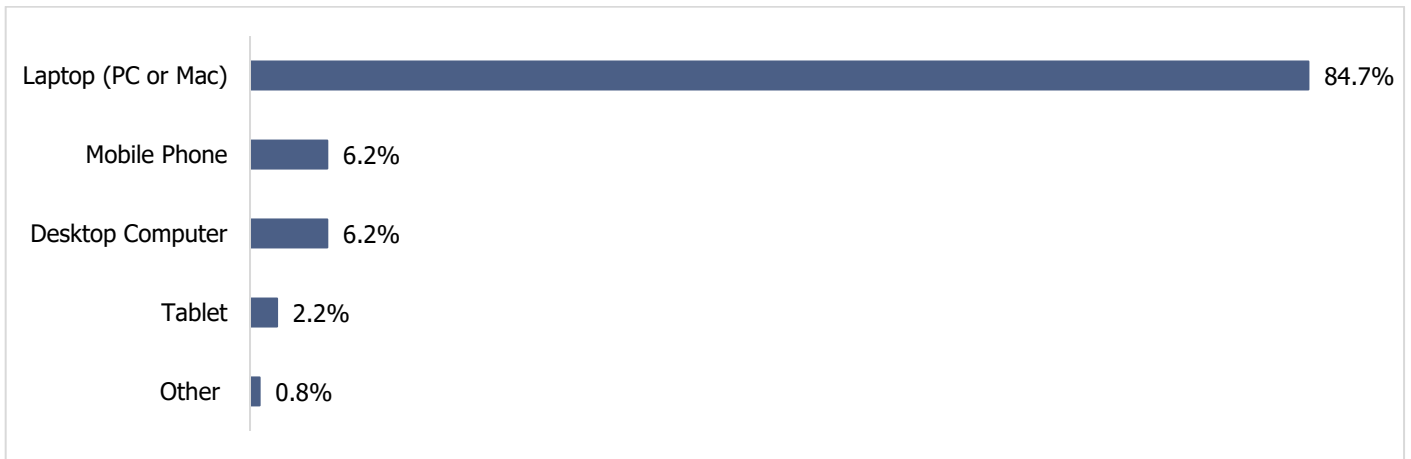
Figure 10: Devices respondents use to access online materials and/or classes

Our focus groups revealed that students were appreciative of the measures their educators took to digitise their classrooms during the pandemic, with many searching for (technologically) innovative ways to improve their teaching practices. But students also stated that there was and still is room for improvement in this area, urging staff to maintain the level of knowledge, skills and abilities they developed during the heights of the pandemic. It must be recognised, however, that staff need to be supported in this process, as there is some nervousness utilising digital platforms due to a lack of digital confidence, often as they are teaching students who are considered to be 'digitally native' (Kirschner and De Bruyckere, 2017: 136) and already have advanced digital capabilities.

"There has to be a balance of what infrastructure is available for students and take into account that not everybody may have the fastest computer or internet connection to do online activities or complex tasks."

Students expressed that the pandemic exposed a widespread lack of appropriate hardware and software resources that should allow staff and students to effectively engage in hybrid learning. Thus, despite many decades of technological investments by UK universities, it appears that many universities still fall short in meeting their students' expectations around digital resources for hybrid learning and teaching in a post-pandemic world.

In light of this and rapid technological changes, it is imperative that universities do not let the development of digital literacies of staff and students fall off the radar. There has to be a consideration of students struggling from the digital divide, lacking access to high-speed internet and reliable devices. This inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where and how an individual needs to, is a reflection of the digital poverty experienced by many students across the UK who are often from minority backgrounds or lower socio-economic groups. This can lead to a reliance on public computers or mobile devices which is limiting when needing to access lectures, seminars and resources online. Universities need to work to reduce this inequality in digital capabilities as a matter of urgency.

For future planning, staff may benefit from targeted development programmes that focus on the design and delivery of hybrid learning content and online assessments as well as the optimal use of the university's VLE and digital platforms such as Padlet and PebblePad. Students, on the other hand, may benefit most from the integration of digital skills in their course curricula and assessments, as well as additional support to access the digital resources necessary for hybrid learning.
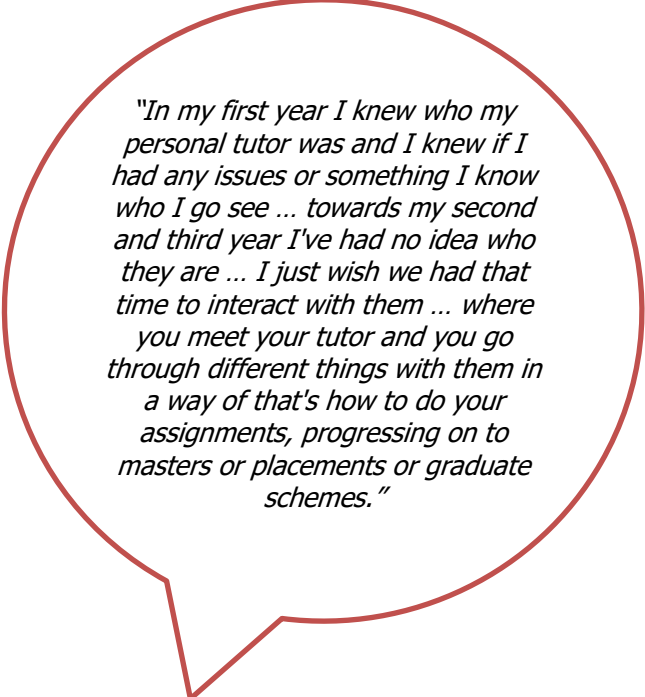
Food for thought
- Are we doing enough to integrate digital literacy in the learning outcomes of our modules or courses?
- What can we do to use the momentum of digital upskilling during the pandemic to develop sustainable long-term learning solutions for students?
- What else can we do to tackle digital poverty amongst staff and students?
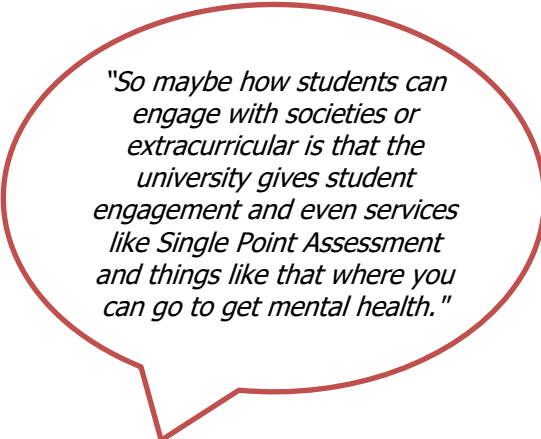
4.5   Mobilising student voice

Our survey revealed that 46.5% of respondents find it not at all or only slightly important to be involved in student societies (criterion 27), 45.8% to volunteer in extracurricular activities (criterion 28) and 56.7% to be course/student representatives (criterion 29). These findings suggest what many educators probably anticipated: participation in activities to represent the opinions and views of students tends to be low. This may have been exacerbated during the pandemic when many students were forced into isolation and, consequently, experienced a substantial lack of physical interaction with their peers and course teams.

This may have caused a participation 'fatigue' amongst students whose drive to proactively engage with enrichment activities that are traditionally linked to campus life, student halls or the student union is dwindling. Thus, more investigation is needed to identify the patterns and purposes of enrichment and engagement activities that mobilise student voices, and how its traditional reliance on physical meetings can be modernised to also foster virtual forms of student presentation. In addition, greater understanding of the diversity within student voices rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' to co-creation or a homogenous interpretation of student voices may be an important consideration.

"In my first year I knew who my personal tutor was and I knew if I had any issues or something I know who I go see … towards my second and third year I've had no idea who they are … I just wish we had that time to interact with them … where you meet your tutor and you go through different things with them in a way of that's how to do your assignments, progressing on to masters or placements or graduate schemes."

Effective ways to mobilise student voices need to take into consideration the frequency of student voice mechanisms, value and purpose to all stakeholders, accessibility, diversity of student voices that are captured, and how voice loops work for sustained conversations and clarity of outcome. Student advisory boards can be an effective way of building sustained conversations for longitudinal perspectives. Establishing these in a supported and constructive environment is important to realise positive outcomes, and engagement with the Student Union as a method of support for students and to legitimise the spaces may be useful.

"So maybe how students can engage with societies or extracurricular is that the university gives student engagement and even services like Single Point Assessment and things like that where you can go to get mental health."

As well as establishing specific groups, student voices should be considered as part of a governance structure to see where and how student voices are being centred as part of decision making within institutions. This can include identifying where students can be part of a committee to actively collaborate with academic and professional services colleagues. Further work could be undertaken to identify examples of good practice of where student voices have been effectively mobilised to drive and shape positive change and improve outcomes.

The results from the survey outline the challenge institutions face in effectively engaging student voices. They are of concern not only for universities that run student/course representation systems but also for student unions whose purpose is to embody the student voice. Our findings suggest that we may need to rethink how student voices are mobilised. Student representation systems and student unions offer great opportunity for representation, but their historical reliance on 'being heard' may not be sufficient anymore. Instead, we call for a more pro-active approach that puts student partnership at the forefront of everything we do, allowing students to partake in course-level decision making, co-produce research in collaboration with academics, engage in institutional problem solving and co-create solutions for student experience interventions. Such approaches should be inherently collaborative and may also involve students' involvement in curriculum design and review, recruitment, quality assurance, enrichment and other aspects of the university ecosystem. Through proximity and solution-focused engagement there may be greater opportunities to deliver student experience that are enriching for students and staff.
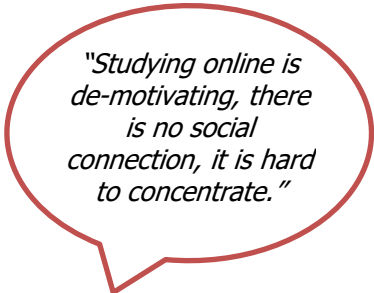
5 Discussion

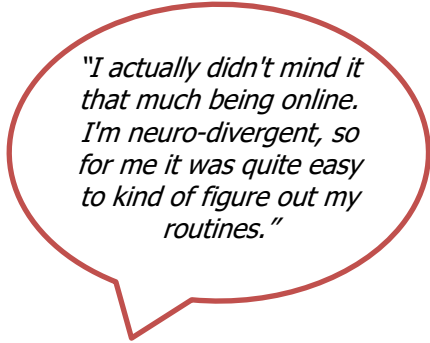## 5.1 A post-pandemic student experience

The pandemic has undoubtedly shaken the higher education world, with considerable impact on student experiences in the UK. It was apparent from the focus group data that students across the 10 participating UK higher education providers did not feel that they had what they described as a 'typical' or 'normal' student experience during the pandemic. Students highlighted the lack of or limited social interaction and the inability to socialise with other students and staff during this time.

"Studying online is de-motivating, there is no social connection, it is hard to concentrate."
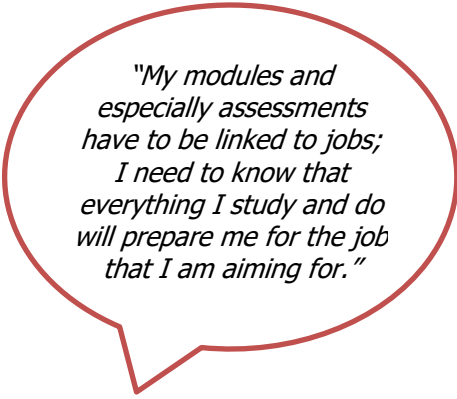
A key theme emerged around students' views that the university experience should be inherently social, but that the pandemic deprived them of a student experience that thrives on interaction, connection and togetherness. However, despite feeling somewhat disadvantaged as they had to miss out on important social aspect of their student life during the pandemic, many students expressed much appreciation for the efforts academics made to deliver their teaching amidst an unprecedented number of restrictions imposed by the government. Our findings show that students enjoyed the many creative ways in which academics started using online platforms to create a sense of belonging to a learning community.

Students in our focus groups expressed a range of practical suggestions they believed should be part of an excellent student experience in a post-pandemic world of higher education, including more creative ways of using enabling technology, the inclusion of real-world examples and fast IT support for any issues related to blended or online delivery. In particular, it emerged that students want short, digestible learning sessions instead of lengthy PowerPoint-heavy lectures, combined with complimentary asynchronous learning content (e.g., recordings) that provide students with opportunities for flexible learning as well as interaction with others when it is needed. Offering opportunities for flexible learning works towards the promotion of inclusivity and removal of barriers to learning

"I actually didn't mind it that much being online. I'm neuro-divergent, so for me it was quite easy to kind of figure out my routines."

and adheres to the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement on the need for "flexible educational approaches". Almost without exception, students argued that the recording of learning sessions needs to be the norm going forward, albeit the quality of the recordings must be considered and improved where necessary.
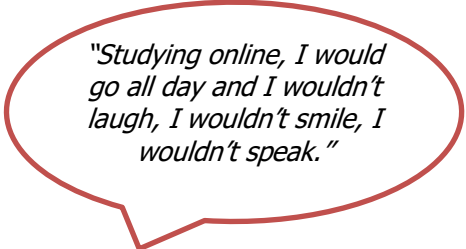
Furthermore, it appears that the pandemic has exposed many inadequacies in current learning and teaching practices but also opportunities for change and innovation in blended/hybrid models. Having moved to online and subsequently hybrid delivery, many students have become increasingly aware of the role (digital) assessments play in preparing them for their careers. For example, there is currently a drive in the sector to move away from written exams to more "authentic" alternatives. It is our view that discussions and experimentation must continue in this area, mindful of what we are actually moving towards and what we are capable of supporting students to achieve.

"My modules and especially assessments have to be linked to jobs; I need to know that everything I study and do will prepare me for the job that I am aiming for."

While assessments help determine whether subject-specific learning outcomes have been met, they should not be thought of in silos. Rather, they should be viewed holistically within wider course assessment strategies that offer opportunities for real-world learning, blended learning, inclusion, a balanced mix of independent, guided and collaborative learning, and the development of digital literacies. The challenge of the increasing availability of artificial intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT and Google Bard, and its role in teaching, learning and assessment strategies in HE demonstrates the need for universities to embrace technology and train staff accordingly. We believe that students can benefit significantly from incorporating AI into their learning journey to prepare them for its inevitable use in the workplace.

Additionally, students expressed great need for mental health and well-being support, for example in the form of individual counselling or check-ins, to keep abreast with stresses caused by an increasingly fast-paced learning environment. The notion of mental health and wellbeing, for the purposes of this research, focuses on positive emotions expressed by our population rather than any diagnosis of a mental health condition.

"Studying online, I would go all day and I wouldn't laugh, I wouldn't smile, I wouldn't speak."

Many students expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of opportunities to develop peer group friendships and relationships with academics during the pandemic. Richardson et al, (2017) found that increasing levels of stress, anxiety and depression have been linked to loneliness, a challenge which significantly increased during the pandemic. The comments from focus groups indicate that students found services very difficult to access during the pandemic. A lesson for institutions here is to ensure that, although many services have returned to the campus, strategies and resources should also be directed to online support services. A multi-pronged approach as advocated by a trauma informed education would support students and staff in enhanced awareness of service provision, as well as developing skills and provision through personal tutoring systems to offer mental health support at point of need within the institutional ecosystem.

5.2   Rethinking student engagement

Our findings suggest that attendance is not the top priority for students when considering their engagement. Attending classes was rated very or extremely important by 77.6% of respondents (criterion 3), while almost one in 10 respondents (9.9%) find attendance not at all or only slightly important. This aligns with findings by Times Higher Education (THE, 2022) that post-pandemic student attendance and in-class participation are now at lower levels than before the pandemic, suggesting that there may have been a significant cultural shift among students in their perception of engagement and the attendance of physical classes.
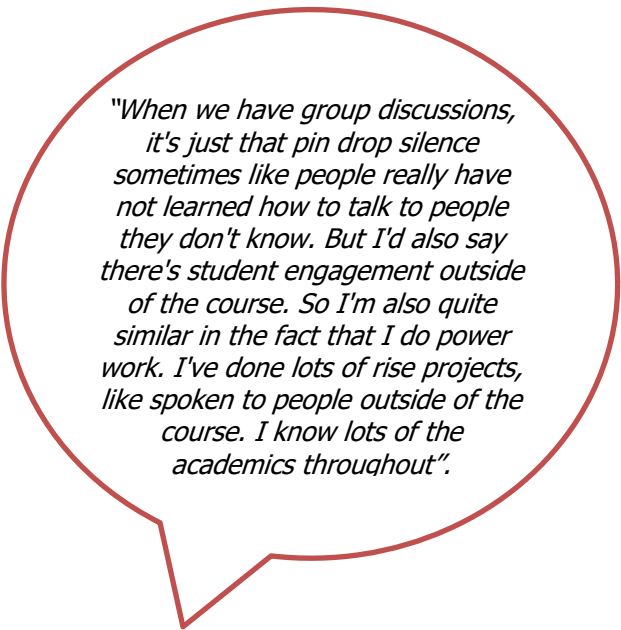
"Engagement is both the social and academic aspects, it is more than just attending."

Students may consider alternative ways of engaging in their studies that do not necessarily include the attendance of timetabled classes. For example, 84.3% of respondents said they find asking questions when they do not understand something (criterion 2) a very or extremely important indicator of their engagement, and a 76.2 % of respondents said that they find doing their own research when they do not understand something (criterion 5) very or extremely important. This is somewhat divergent from previous research. For example, in 2017, Thomas and Jones' report on student engagement suggested that UK students often thought of engagement as synchronous attendance rather than as a cohesive spectrum, while educators tended to view it in much broader terms.

However, our post-pandemic findings suggest that this view may have begun to shift towards students' rising awareness that sole attendance is not sufficient to constitute a robust form of engagement. This leaves us with open questions. For example, do students use non-attendance-based engagement strategies to compensate for not attending classes, or do they view them as complimentary to class attendance? If a

student does not attend classes but communicates with educators or peers to achieve learning success, should they be considered (fully) engaged?

> "When we have group discussions, it's just that pin drop silence sometimes like people really have not learned how to talk to people they don't know. But I'd also say there's student engagement outside of the course. So I'm also quite similar in the fact that I do power work. I've done lots of rise projects, like spoken to people outside of the course. I know lots of the academics throughout".

With 95.3% of students rating it very or extremely important, the submission of assessments is found to be the most favoured engagement indicator from a student perspective (criterion 1). Only 1.6% students said that they find this criterion not at all or slightly important. However, 56.2% find it very or extremely important to talk to other students about assessments (criterion 16), 45.2% to encourage others to complete their assessments (criterion 21) and 44.3% to support other students who struggle with their assessments (criterion 19). Thus, while students seem incredibly assessment-driven in their views on engagement, they are less interested in achieving this through collaboration with other students. Instead, students value independent research when considering engagemen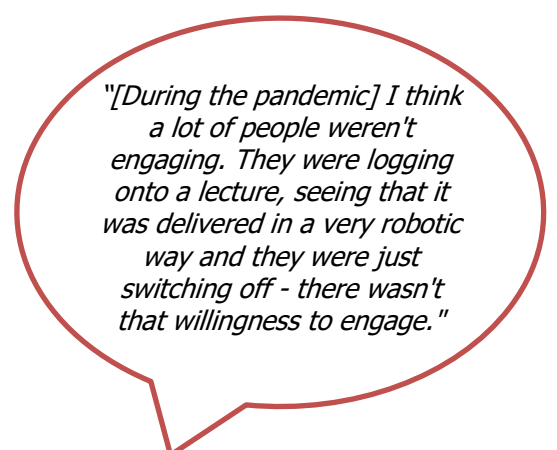t, with 76.2% saying that they find it extremely or very important to do their own research when they do not understand something (criterion 5) and 62.1% to use the online university library (criterion 6).

Supporting this, our focus group data indicates that students find collaborative aspects of engagement increasingly challenging in online settings. One respondent suggests that some students have missed out on the opportunity to 'learn' how to engage with others, further adding that this has worsened with the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic may have amplified existing shortages in students' abilities to collaborate online, also confirmed by previous studies such as McFaul (2020). We should also acknowledge that this may apply to educators, too. Students in our focus groups expressed clearly that they found it more difficult to connect, collaborate or network with their peers and educators when learning online, thereby igniting feelings of isolation and disconnection from others.

This may explain why the drive and motivation to engage in such contexts is often low. However, students may not have entirely lost their appetite for interacting with their peers as 65.7% of respondents say that they find active participation in groupwork (criterion 7) extremely or very important for engagement. Thus, in a post-pandemic world in which hybrid forms of learning are likely to sustain, we should evaluate carefully what drives and inhibits students' motivation to collaborate online before addressing the skills to do so. This may be initiated by leveraging students' assessment-driven perception of engagement and linking assessment strategies with elements of collaboration and co-creation to generate enjoyable and productive learning environments (e.g., Vieth and Lewis, 2022).

Our data also suggests that 49.3% of respondents find it very or extremely important to find enjoyment in seeing fellow students (criterion 12) and 49.8% in seeing their lecturers (criterion 13). While other criteria explicitly refer to the efforts it takes to engage, these two criteria link to the satisfaction or pleasure students get from engaging with their communities at universities. Students do not only have inherent needs but also desires to be part of communities of learning and feel connected to their educators and peers. However, our findings suggest that students struggle immensely with this aspect in the context of online learning, with some comments indicating that the experience of learning online has had detrimental effects on their willingness to communicate with their educators to ask questions and on their mental wellbeing.

> "[During the pandemic] I think a lot of people weren't engaging. They were logging onto a lecture, seeing that it was delivered in a very robotic way and they were just switching off - there wasn't that willingness to engage."

Students also stated that they often feel uncomfortable engaging in classroom discussions and that they find the continuous use of single approaches to facilitating them (e.g., the use of breakout rooms) discouraging. This suggests that students can often reflect educators' reluctance to explore alternative (and more innovative) ways of collaborative learning. They also described that an overall lack of motivation to participate in online classes, expectations around camera use and technical limitations made it harder to

contribute to online learning sessions. It is, therefore, not surprising that students in the focus groups expressed clearly that they welcomed the return to campus to socialise with others. However, it is somewhat surprising that over half of the responding student population find these enjoyments only moderately, slightly or not all important (criteria 12 and 13). Our survey data also suggests that only 25% of students find spending time on campus outside their classes extremely or very important for their engagement (criterion 26).

It appears that students' need for belonging is incredibly complex and ambiguous: while students want to be part of physical communities to feel that they belong, they struggle to see how this contributes to successful student engagement. Is it possible that negative online learning experiences have somehow skewed students' views on belonging and engagement? Such reservations should be taken seriously, especially when considering that a majority of our respondents are in favour of a continuation of online or hybrid teaching (Figure 8).

Students seem to be facing a conundrum between their need for flexible hybrid learning and their weariness of the expectations associated with it. Educators and academic leaders should therefore be mindful not to mistake students' reservations about online learning for a lack of interest or willingness to engage, but instead understand that it may stem from a genuine state of disarray on the students' part. It may, therefore, be most appropriate to include students in decision making about online and hybrid delivery to create solution with and not just for students.

5.3   Summary

Surveying students from 10 different 'modern' universities in the UK and moderating a number of focus groups, helped us collect clear evidence that the pandemic has disrupted what students used to perceive as a 'normal' way of engaging with learning and teaching and that for many of them engagement now goes beyond their traditional classroom experience. There seems to be a genuine need for institutions to more closely align their practices to the wide range of students they recruit (such as those from disadvantaged background, commuter students, etc.) and potential investments in university campuses environments could be needed to maintain student engagement. It is clear from our research that the pandemic has impacted students' sense of belonging and a new paradigm is needed to identify ways in which communities can be built, effectively, such that they include both physical and virtual spaces.

Flexible learning seems to be naturally accepted by most students at the 10 universities who show great appreciation for all the efforts made by HE institutions during the pandemic and beyond despite them arguing that there is still room for improvement. The dilemma they face, many have said, is what expectations should they build with regards to flexible learn, an area we believe worthy of a great partnership between academics and students.

Despite students' views having shift towards a rising awareness that sole attendance is not sufficient to constitute a robust form of engagement, the pandemic seems to have created a 'fatigue' amongst students to proactively engage with enrichment activities that are traditionally linked to campus life, students halls or student unions. Saying this though, many students argued that the pandemic has also caused them to feel isolated, often missing out on developing peer group friendships and relationships with academics, triggering an increased demand for mental health and well-being support.

The change we currently observe in student engagement, potentially irreversible, is a challenge for the HE sector that cannot be solved unless strong partnerships between students and academics, institutions are established. The latter two stakeholders ought to identify the diversity of their student population, their lived experiences and learning preferences and ensure that they work together to ascertain the best teaching, learning and assessment strategies that will ensure a good student engagement. We believe projects such as this one area key in more formally identifying changes in students engagement at a sector level with potential outcomes that can help HE sectors across the UK and hopefully more widely as well.

6 Good practices of student engagement initiatives

6.1 Birmingham City University: Enhancing online VLE engagement through embedded interactive content

To support the transition to online learning, a number of additional resources were embedded in our VLE site (Moodle) and this site was used regularly in online teaching sessions. Prior to the move to online delivery, Moodle was used primarily as a file repository for module resources, teaching materials, assessments and further reading. Delivery via Microsoft Teams during the first lockdown required a rethink of the activities and materials. The module leader introduced the use of electronic flashcards, Padlet with answer gardens, crosswords, audio books and actively engaging in Moodle discussion forums outside of scheduled class times. Lectures were provided in a voice over PowerPoint format and additional short videos with embedded knowledge test questions were made available in addition to the online live scheduled delivery session.

In order to gauge student engagement with the module resources, Moodle statistics were analysed and students were asked to complete weekly feedback via embedded links in Moodle.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?

The VLE page became a teaching and learning tool as well as an instrument for assessing student interaction and engagement with the module and its content. By using the pages as an integrated part of the live online sessions, the VLE site became more visible and normalised as part of the learning requirements of the module.

Students appeared to become more independent in their learning and took greater ownership as staff were not available in a face-to-face capacity and access to staff was more restricted than under normal circumstances. The additional resources provided students with the tools to build their learning and encouraged online discussions through the forums which, prior to the pandemic, had seen little to no engagement from the students.

How did it support student engagement?

Feedback from students demonstrated that the Moodle page was exciting and fun to use. Furthermore, the module pass rate was 94.4%, with only one student receiving a failure mark of 35%. Students reported that they felt the flashcards, Padlets, videos with questions embedded and forums were the most useful tools for learning:

- "Flashcards - Tasks to complete are best for me for learning - constantly questioning what I have just learnt helps me remember it"

- "Padlet - The answer gardens are interesting as you can apply your learning to a question and also see other participants' answers."

- "Forums - I am able to see what everyone has researched and research more into their answers if it is something I find interesting. It allows more topics on a certain subject."

A questionnaire was sent to students towards the end of the module through the Moodle page to specifically identify which areas of the Moodle page they had felt had supported their learning. Heatmaps embedded in the Moodle page were also analysed to assess student engagement with the different elements of the page.

What would you do differently?

Moving to online delivery at such speed meant the first few sessions were clunky and the resources took time to build. It demonstrated the importance of keeping ahead of the curve and engaging with students in their own space.

Since first running the module in 2020, the module has been delivered two more times, including fully face-to-face delivery. Most of the materials which were embedded during COVID, particularly as post-session work, have been kept and built upon. The recorded lectures have been removed as the experience was that many

students were using these rather than attending class and therefore attendance and engagement in the classroom was affected.

Each year, students have commented on their enjoyment of the flashcards and videos; however, in 2022-23 engagement has been poorer within the forums. This could be because students are receiving and participating in discussions in class and find less value in the online discussions. As we move further away from online delivery, students are quickly adapting to being back in the classroom. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we build on the successes we saw in the online delivery space whilst also giving students the on campus experience they expect.

6.2 Coventry University: Flexibility and student choice on delivery approaches and ways of learning - An innovative lecture approach, allowing student choice for lecture delivery

The aim of this project was to think more creatively on how large modules could be delivered to support student choice and needs. One of the areas considered was how could delivery be more efficient and effective for both the university and the student cohort? For example, a large lecture would require the flexibility and student choice on delivery approaches and ways of learning. It was an innovative lecture approach, allowing student choice and ways for lecture delivery based on the traditional on-campus delivery which students signed up for and attended, and a blended approach where there were independent and interactive study materials created for students to work through that covered the same content as the lecture. Students also had the choice to do both, which was advantageous to students who were struggling and felt they needed more support on the lecture content.

From a course strategy perspective, it meant timetabling two large lecture theatres to deliver one lecture weekly could be reduced to one lecture only, thus ensuring more efficient allocation of resource. This was also helpful when the pandemic hit and everything was locked down, as the independent study materials were useful alongside the live streamed lectures. This meant there were additional resources ready prepared to adapt when supporting colleagues and students for the delivery requirements during the pandemic.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?
By working with our Curriculum Development Team, it allowed the focus on teaching to be focused on the content and not attendance. As module leaders, with the support of the learning technologists and Curriculum Development Team, we had the opportunity to trial innovative ways of delivery and learning. This included bespoke video content andquizzes or gaming approaches, like matching or drag and drop. It brought many modules, concepts and theories to life for students as it gave them interactivity in a time and space that suited them and their own personal needs.

It was also an opportunity for students to go over their lecture learning, by reviewing their understanding with the independent online interactive resources. Students whose second language was English found this particularly useful. It was also a step forward in supporting students who had to miss classes for example through illness or due to caring responsibilities. Lastly, some students found these materials helpful with assessment revision or research.

How did it support student engagement?
Previous data had shown that although the course numbers were too big for one lecture to run weekly, the two occurrences of the same lecture weekly were not particularly well attended, which was common across large course modules. This meant resources could be saved but at the same time having a pedagogical driver for this, through student choice and expectations. It mapped to a number of drivers around supporting students and testing innovations to improve engagement.

What would you do differently?

This pilot worked well and many students loved the choice element and the additional resources, if they chose to go to the lecture and do the independent study. However, the University processes around attendance for the purpose of Home Office monitoring and engagement made this difficult. Further work on how systems could accommodate this approach would be beneficial if this was to be attempted again as for a school and faculty of our size, in particular with the number of international students we have, it is the number of external limitations that often restricts us from introducing truly flexible learning methods and approaches.

6.3 Coventry University London: Community building through the introduction of a community feed on VLE (Aula) and a timetabled course hour

In 2020, Coventry University London developed their approach to building communities amongst students, educators and wider members of the staff in two ways. First, a VLE platform called Aula was introduced during the COVID pandemic. A prominent feature of Aula is the platform's community feed, which is a forum-like page that allows educators and learners to share posts, comment on each other's announcements and react with emojis and emoticons. Crucially, this informal written style of communication is intended to complement other forms of communication, namely formal written emails and face-to-face interaction.

In addition, a timetabled course was introduced. The course hours endeavoured to build a sense of community between course leaders and students and to encourage communication and collaboration among learners. These sessions included activities such as a six-week extended induction for new starters, course community-building activities and 'out-duction' activities, as well as providing students with Academic English support. Importantly, the community tab on Aula is utilised in course hours to recognise student needs and signpost important information to students about various services available to them. To that end, these two forms of community building provide an inclusive course experience by allowing students from all backgrounds to engage with their learning community both in person and virtually.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?

Course hours are learner-focused as they allow learners to communicate to their course leaders what they would like these hours to focus on. For example, learners can express what topics matter to them and why, which activities they would like to participate in and the types of external speakers they would like to engage with. In doing so, learners are actively involved in the organisation of learning outside their classrooms. Additionally, the course hours enable the closure of the feedback loop between learners and educators. Specifically, learners can actively participate in or initiate conversations with their course leaders about student survey results, which improves their ability to understand the purpose and structure of learner feedback and how it is implemented to improve the learning on their courses. This enables learners to grasp how and why they learn the way they do, and how their voice forms part of an ongoing process of making learning accessible to all learners.

How did it support student engagement?

The use of Aula encourages communication between learners and educators, but also between learners. The latter provides room for peer-to-peer learning. This can potentially improve confidence in students with low engagement levels, as they can observe how their peers engage with educators and other learners, how to write effective posts in a suitable way, and how to quickly find answers to questions. By referring to Aula in course hours, students are given the opportunity to discuss what they have shared in an open and relaxed environment. In doing so, students feel that they can embrace a culture in which their voices are heard and valued as they can ask questions, raise concerns and continually share their experiences with each other. Ultimately, this builds a student's confidence in their communication skills and abilities to engage with their learning community. This can subsequently transpire to other areas of their course and work also.

What would you do differently?

Issues may arise in the form of inconsistency in the design and the delivery of course hours across the institution. This may be due to different levels of course leadership experience and learners' familiarity with the course hour concept, as well as the size and subject area of the courses. To that end, a consistent

framework must exist that clearly defines the purpose, structure, and organisation of the course hour. All course leaders must also receive sufficient training to understand the expected standards for the course hours, while leaving room to respond to the individual needs of the learners on their specific courses. For example, some learners may enrol late on their courses, causing them to miss out on essential activities early in the semester that are important for community building. Facilitators of course hours should, therefore, carefully plan to make room for those enrolling at different stages of their course learning journey. This may be addressed by actively involving learners who joined earlier in the semester in helping late-enrolling learners as they welcome their peers to the group, explain the purpose of the course hour, answer questions, and provide friendly support.

6.4   De Montfort University: International business conversations YouTube channel

YouTube channel 'International Business Conversations' features academic content and interviews with prominent academic and industry experts, such as Marc Tarpenning (Tesla Co-founder), Shripriya Mahesh (founder of Spero Ventures), Prof Peter Buckley (International Business). The channel strengthens the delivery of business subjects at De Montfort University (DMU), promotes modern pedagogic approaches and scholarship, and contributes to DMU's strategy of Empowering University.

The channel was established in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting shift in approach to education practice. The channel helped students and educators at DMU to stay connected with experts and bring their knowledge to academia in an accessible manner when other methods were off limits (e.g. bringing a guest speaker to the classroom). YouTube is accessed by 2.6 billion people daily, so creating high-quality videos and keeping videos on the platform is an advantage as a greater number of students can benefit from these resources.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?
Our teaching practice continually evolves and changes, but the pandemic has dramatically accelerated the pace of this change and altered the expectations of our students. The technological aspects of education are becoming increasingly more important, and students want their formal education to be on par in terms of contemporary alignment with the broader standards of how information is delivered in modern society.

We have several types of videos on the channel, including interviews and explainer videos. Our initial focus was on the interviews as we wanted students to engage with industry experts but make it in a more accessible format. Recently, we started to develop a taste for explainer videos where we explain a particular concept using bespoke visual tools. In addition to the video, we also supply bespoke supplementary materials that students can use.

How did it support student engagement?
Students appreciate the accessibility, relevance and contemporary nature of the videos. Some students commented that they use YouTube as a resource for assignment preparation, and the videos are beneficial as they cover a wide range of business topics.

As one student commented in feedback: "Foreign direct investment has been a common practice in companies that want to lower their labour and production cost. It's fascinating to learn what businesses really care about when they invest in another country. I liked this video because it gave examples of every kind of business and why they invest in other countries. Also, I did some research and found that BMW developed the entire X series in the U.S because it was aware that American drivers particularly have a strong preference for crossovers and SUVs."

What would you do differently?
We started the channel to respond to the 'isolation' that pandemic lockdowns brought to the education practice and society. We wanted to get current expert knowledge closer to students and to promote good teaching and learning practices in a more accessible manner.

Looking back at how the channel evolved and the feedback we received from our students, we realised that we could also create more videos that teach students some specific concepts (e.g. explainer videos) in addition to interviews. Many students commented that shorter videos and videos explaining concepts are desirable. So, we followed the 'student's voice' and kept the channel flexible to allow it to evolve with the requirements of time and education practice. At this point, we are focused on creating content that reinforces the 'completeness' of our International Business/Business education with videos relevant to undergraduate and postgraduate students throughout their studies and beyond.

6.5   Liverpool John Moores University: The Coffee House

This is a live case study that is used throughout a level 4 module on the Marketing BA (Hons) programme. The company, The Coffee House, is an independent chain of 11 coffee shops operating in the North of England and employs over 120 people. They aim to open new stores in locations where they feel they can make a difference - often neglected high streets in areas of social deprivation. As this is a real-life business, the module uses it as a case study as it can include every aspect of business and management, from supply chain to people management. This fits closely with the module objective, which aims to introduce marketing students to business functions and management, including leadership. The company provided relevant material for every week of the module, and this was used to illuminate how theory relates to practice. The students learnt the theory then observed how it translated into a live business.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?
This is very much a partnership approach between the module leader, the company and the students. The Director of the Coffee House was involved in planning module content and the company created bespoke material and videos to use in teaching. The Director also came in to talk to the students. During seminars the students worked on things like the organisational structure of the company and their ideas are were fed back to the company. Using a real-life business also meant that we could discuss how the external environment directly impacts the internal running of a business. For example, in class we talked about how increasing energy costs impact every aspect of the company and the Director then spoke to them about finding solutions to these problems.

How did it support student engagement?
In using the case study as the focus for assessments, it meant that there was a clear link between teaching, learning and assessment. A coffee shop is very relatable for students and being able to talk to students about what needs to happen to get a cake onto a customer's plate meant that the topics really came to life. The students appreciated having the chance to meet and talk to the Director of the company and then built this into a group work assessment based on leadership. This was followed up with an individual report looking at the external and internal issues facing the business and how this related to theoretical aspects of business and management.

What would you do differently?
There is so much scope in working with one company in detail that tight control needs to be kept on focusing on the module aim and learning outcomes. In using one type of company, there is a risk that students do not understand how this relates to other sectors, although they are encouraged to think about how business structures and management styles will vary in other businesses. This is very much a work in progress and the company are keen to be involved in the on-going development of new material for the module. We are discussing how the company can get more involved in assessment.

6.6   Manchester Metropolitan University: 'Netflixing' your unit - a learning framework to engage and empower students

With the rapid pivot to emergency remote teaching, the University wanted to release the pressure on the programme teaching team and students by removing complexity and confusion around block teaching and online learning. The University did so by creating a Unit Learning Framework (ULF), using a technique called 'Netflixing.' Once developed, staff worked with students to co-create and sense-check before launching and

to revise as necessary during unit delivery. Throughout the quest to find a simple solution, the concept of 'bookending' was used. This provides an obvious beginning, middle and end, enabling students to feel as though they have been part of something meaningful. What started out as a simple Excel spreadsheet, evolved into a simplified, visual, 'cut out and keep' guide for students and tutors. Consequently, the term 'Netflixing a unit' was born.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?

This process of 'Netflixing a unit' solved a fundamental challenge, as it was born out of the need for clarity and structure during a crisis when we all faced the unknown. The first lockdown provided the perfect opportunity to revisit and redesign how we could tell the story of a subject and communicate more effectively online only, particularly with non-cognate and/or international students in mind.

Arguabl,y this demonstrates innovation in social pedagogy, i.e. where the focus is on building trust and confidence rather than on the technology that facilitates learning. Effectively, a cognitive and visual welcome mat to clearly outline the story of the unit each week and the associated learning and development activities. An accessible, uncomplicated, flexible point of reference to provide clarity and a real sense of direction for both colleagues and students alike.

How did it support student engagement?

As educators, quite apart from managing our own responses to online learning, we also have to be very aware of the potential for it to marginalise our students and increase their anxiety around learning. As such, student engagement is arguably best evidenced with the student voice insight collected – e.g.

- "I like the ULF – it really sets the tone, the story, how things fit together," where feeling comfortable with the subject fosters confidence. And "Feels like there's more participation now because people are starting to see how well set up this unit is," indicating an appreciation of how 'Netflixing a unit' can drive a positive learning experience.

Ensuring students are comfortable at the outset and as a unit progresses is something we can all do to help mitigate confidence issues. In addition, there was a marked increase in the overall cohort grade profile (Ave grade 65 vs. 60 for 2019/20). Plus the unit achieved a Mentimeter survey satisfaction score of 5.9/7.

What would you do differently?

Reflecting on the design and implementation, we would highlight three key aspects that require ongoing focus:

1. **VLE (Moodle) engagement remains a challenge.** Even though students may be clear on how the unit is structured and what they will learn and practice each week, they still may not access the hand-picked resources on the VLE. One solution to help mitigate this is to incorporate weekly reading tasks in the ULF and to make sure this is signposted during lectures and tutorials.
2. **Netflixing may not be suitable for every type of unit.** However, taking a 'less is more' storyboard/book-ending approach to a unit learning timetable appears to be really helpful for students.
3. **Not every member of the Netflix generation will buy into this way of structuring and delivering a unit**. So it is important to bear in mind you can "lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink"! Generally, though, simplicity and order do seem to support students' grasp and enjoyment of a subject, especially when anxieties may be running high.

6.7 University of East London: Developing conversations across hybrid teaching

This module develops students' understanding of employee relations and employment law in preparation for working in HR. It focuses on both critical evaluation of employment legislation and its application across international organisations, as well as the skills to deliver effective practice. The scope of this module is large and so a case study was written of a multi-national food and beverage company and a range of exercises built around it. Students were put into HR consultancy teams of around 5-6 students and across 6 weeks

responded to a range of issues that were put to them. This included a role play with an actor of a difficult conversation, a response to an initiative to close some factories, and negative employee feedback shared on social media. This process also involved 360 degree feedback to team members.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?
The use of team working through hybrid learning via WhatsApp was an innovation. The teams were set up to be as authentic as possible and the case study formed the central plank of the learning construct. The use of Laurillard's conversational framework (Laurillard, 2002) allowed the learning journey to be intentionally developed for delivery in a hybrid manner. Students were therefore able to lead their own learning, in teams, which allowed a continuous conversation to respond to the case study, making the most of both resources and time. The academic role became one of facilitator, supporting learners in unpacking the resources. This matches the workplace where an HR practitioner will seek additional advice and guidance from both managers but also employment lawyers, particularly in the international arena.

How did it support student engagement?
Student engagement was supported through two key activities. The first was developing a team who communicated through WhatsApp groups and strived to become coherent. Considering that this was a new approach for many, several colleagues found it challenging to begin with.

The second was through a facilitative rather than didactic teaching approach which engaged students in choices around their learning, such as which country employment legislation to focus on. The feedback from students was very positive, with comments that their confidence was improved and their learning on this topic was secure.

What would you do differently?
The actor we worked with was an HR practitioner herself and added significant value. If she was not available then it may be difficult to source someone equally effective and helpful. The room availability is also critical for this module as some students attended online and some face to face, so a room with a good standard of audio visual equipment was essential. Some students found the ambiguity inherent in this approach challenging and so more scaffolding may be needed to ensure that all students feel secure enough to take on the challenges provided in this module.

6.8 University of Greenwich: Enhancing employability - a student-led project using LinkedIn

April 2020 was a time when the whole world was trying to deal with the shock of a global pandemic. All plans for placements, internships and jobs were put in jeopardy. Whilst some businesses pivoted rapidly and enabled remote placements and jobs, most were not equipped to do this.

Discussions with a cohort of postgraduate marketing students in the Faculty of Business at University of Greenwich made it clear that students' offers of placements and internships were either withdrawn or that companies were not planning to take on placement students. Many students were very concerned about how they could stand out in the employment market.

As a response to these concerns from students, ViewPoints was launched in May 2020. ViewPoints is a LinkedIn based blog forum where students of the MA Marketing Suite of programmes share their thoughts and learning with the professional community. The aim of the project was to enable students to showcase their skills to potential employers and develop a professional network.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?
All students on the programme were encouraged to share content in areas of specific interest to them and their future careers. In addition to this, students were also provided the opportunity to become more involved with the project in the following ways:

- **Project Management** – expressions of interest were invited from students who were interested in managing this forum. The project management team worked with the Programme Leader to set parameters on content quality, length, and launch schedule. Their responsibilities included planning and scheduling content, liaising with students to generate content, reviewing and designing the layout of the final publication, and monitoring and reviewing data to make decisions on increasing engagement with the forum. A group of six students worked together to manage the project in the first year and a group of the same size took over the management in the new academic year.

- **Content Creators** – although creating content was open to all students, a formal role of content creator was offered to any student who committed to producing a set number of content pieces during a defined period. The amount and schedule of the content was agreed following discussions with the content creators and the project management team. Examples of content include critique of lockdown themed adverts, impact of the pandemic on Indian retail businesses, and tips on working from home.

- **Special Interest Series Creators** – students also had the opportunity to identify and work on a series of content pieces related to a theme that is topical or is of specific interest to them. This enabled small groups or individual students to take the lead in liaising with colleagues and their wider networks to launch a content series. Some examples of special interest series since the launch of ViewPoints includes a Black Lives Matter series and a Countdown to Christmas series.

ViewPoints was born as a response to a challenging set of circumstances. It was the active engagement and involvement of students that has enabled the project to grow and succeed. Trust students to take responsibility and give them a little guidance, you will be amazed at what they can achieve!

What would you do differently?

LinkedIn was chosen as the primary platform for its professional and career networking opportunities. The inaugural Project Management team subsequently launched an Instagram site for ViewPoints as a way to attract a younger audience to the LinkedIn forum. The subsequent Project Management team have developed plans to launch ViewPoints on TikTok. This was a result of a student content that demonstrated how TikTok is increasingly being used by employers to engage with and recruit candidates.

6.9   University of Huddersfield: Journal Club

During the pandemic, several innovative practices were adopted on a final year core module: BHO0007 'Management, Work and Society'. Most notably, Journal Club was introduced where each week a journal article was identified by the module leader and discussion questions were prepared in advance ahead of a synchronous, online session. Discussion questions such as 'Do you think it is a bad idea to build on past models where work is concerned? If we expect and require change, where should this change come from?' were developed to guide participants ahead of the session. An 1-hour, live session was dedicated to one paper in order to encourage active, focused discussion. This also underpinned a community spirit on the module which was important during the pandemic and a time of social isolation for many.

Journal Club was developed to change the narrative that students do not complete any pre-reading. The intention here was to utilise a digital space to repurpose and reconsider what we do to encourage students to read. Despite this being an additional, non-attendance monitored session, participation increased week on week with most Journal Clubs attracting an audience of 70+ students.

How did it innovate teaching and learning?

This was the first time on a Business Management Course where a dedicated space was created to solely focus on additional reading to support understanding of the module. By focusing on one high quality paper linked to that week, students were able to discuss the paper and then evaluate it and link it to the module content and their own assignments. The delivery of Journal Club was supported by innovative Brightspace resources including discussion boards which students would use to discuss the paper either prior or after the session.

The opportunity to enhance learning thus stemmed from an ability to ignite a passion in the students to read more about the content we were discussing. This often resulted in students suggesting new papers in order

to build counterarguments. The level of criticality seen in the assignments which followed had a notable, positive shift compared to previous years and this could be attributed to this newly found confidence which students had gained. A journal article may appear less intimidating when discussed in a social, relaxed online environment. Most papers chosen were purposely very challenging and yet collectively students were able to break the paper down to enhance learning in this collaborative manner. Students were then bolstering and enhancing their learning journey with high quality papers to support their own assignments. Essentially what was being built here was a collective approach to criticality, with criticality being something many final years recognise the importance of but struggle to grasp.

How did it support student engagement?

When Journal Club was introduced, the pandemic was at its height and there was a real desire from students to create connection with their peers. In most instances, despite keeping their cameras off for large lectures, cameras were on during Journal Clubs, and we had a high level of student participation. Students noted that they enjoyed the sessions and enjoyed the opportunity to discuss a topic in detail away from content delivery.

The attention of students was grasped through the energy created during Journal Clubs and students would participate with pre-reading in order to actively engage with the sessions. Thinking of engagement as a multi-faceted concept, students were immersing themselves in reading and were able to see value which they could then apply to their own learning journey. Levels of motivation increased over the 10 weeks Journal Club ran for, as we saw levels of student participation and attendance increase as the sessions progressed. There appears to be a link here between confidence and engagement, so the more students were able to confidently interact with journal articles, the more likely they were to engage with the Journal Club and the module overall. Engagement was further driven perhaps by attendance not being compulsory. Students therefore felt in control as to whether they engaged or not, but word soon spread that it was worthwhile.

What would you do differently?

Reflecting upon the success of Journal Club, to improve further, we would develop sessions which are student led and, as such are facilitated by a student. Staff would still attend but would be able to see how the discussion develops when it is not guided in any particular direction by the lecturer. This could result in even more open, critical discussions taking place. It would be interesting to see how this pans out. There is also an opportunity here for students to put forward papers to discuss during the club, or they may suggest papers which challenge the original views of a paper discussed during a session. This would encourage students to conduct their own further reading in this area which isn't lecturer led. One final thing which would be to limit the size of the cohort participating. A smaller group environment, whilst potentially limiting community spirit, would allow for students to become comfortable with those they are discussing in front of.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

The findings from this research have provided insight into the experience of students in 10 modern universities across the UK before, during and after the pandemic and how that has impacted their expectations of learning, teaching and engagement. This is an important area to investigate given the novel nature of this post-pandemic period and the extent to which students' expectations of their university experience have changed. This can be useful for colleagues in designing portfolios of courses and associated pedagogies. The value of this research lies particularly in the breadth of the respondents who came from geographically distributed locations. The number and variety of students provided a reasonable expectation that their responses could be generalised to wider student populations.

This research study has helped us to understand how much 'student engagement' is evolving but it has also surfaced further areas that could (and should) be researched in the future. Despite providing us with useful insights to questions we have had, as a sector, for the past few years – not just in light of the pandemic but more generally as well – the study helped us understand that through regular, honest, critical yet constructive conversations with students, we can identify areas of concern and potential development but also ways in which we can improve as a sector.

When asked what piece of advice would they give academics should they have the chance to go back in time to the very first day of the pandemic, many students suggested that they would advise keeping sessions short(er). Many argued that two-hour lectures are not conducive for learning as their attention span is not at this stage.

Another piece of advice they would give is that academics should be aware that they are not alone with the technological challenges or struggles they face. In one student's words, "I could see how much it was affecting my lecturer that he was not prepared for the technological challenges and I wish I could take that pressure off his shoulders as we were struggling just as much; maybe if he knew, the experience would not have been so painful for him".

The final point of discussion was how universities can improve their support of student engagement. The recommendations from the focus groups were wide ranging and reflected the diverse needs of the student population. Some suggestions focused on personal support, requesting more time with tutors and personal tutors. There were then course-based comments, requests for assessments to reflect the mode of study, for there to be no open book assessments, an increase in guest speakers and field trips, as well as the opportunity for students to provide feedback on their module on a weekly basis. More generalised views considered the importance of a flexible timetable that reflects the needs of a diverse student population, sessions to link modules to potential job roles and de-mystify employment terminology, and support for those graduates who are considering travelling, volunteering or training. Moreover, students made suggestions around additional, suitable, online resources being published to complement live teaching sessions.

These findings highlight the broad spectrum of student engagement and how institutions should have/continue to have an open dialogue with their students to identify and respond to the areas that are relevant and meaningful to them across all levels of study.

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Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

1. How would you describe your gender?
    a) Man
    b) Woman
    c) Non-Binary
    d) In another way
    e) Prefer not to say
    * If you selected 'In another way', please specify, if you wish:

2. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?
    a) Yes
    b) No
    c) Prefer not to say

3. Which University are you studying at?
    a) Birmingham City University
    b) Coventry University (Coventry Campus)
    c) Coventry University London
    d) De Montford University
    e) Liverpool John Moores University
    f) Manchester Metropolitan University
    g) Northumbria University
    h) University of East London
    i) University of Huddersfield
    j) University of Greenwich

4. Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student?
    a) Undergraduate
    b) Postgraduate

5. Which year are you in?
    a) UG Foundation Year
    b) UG Year 1
    c) UG Year 2
    d) UG Year 3 (final year)
    e) PG Year 1
    f) PG Year 2 (final year)

6. Are you a home, EU or international student?
    a) Home
    b) EU
    c) International

7. Choose one of the options below that best describes your ethnic group or background
    a) White
    b) Black or Black British – Caribbean
    c) Black or Black British – African
    d) Other Black background
    e) Asian or Asian British – Indian
    f) Asian or Asian British – Pakistani

g) Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
h) Chinese
i) Other Asian background
a) Other (including mixed)
b) Ethnicity not known
c) Non-UK domicile
d) Domicile now know
e) Other
f) Prefer not to say

8. On average how many days per week did you come on campus during the 2021/22 academic year?
   a) 1
   b) 2
   c) 3
   d) 4
   e) 5
   f) I studied fully online

9. How long does it take you to travel to the university campus?
   a) Less than 30 minutes
   b) Between 30 minutes and one hour
   c) Between one hour and two hours
   d) Two hours or more
   e) I studied fully online

10. The following is a list of possible ways a student may engage in their studies. How important are these to you?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Fairly important	Very important
1. Attending classes					
2. Attending classes on time					
3. Submitting assessments					
4. Actively participating in classroom activities. E.g. discussions					
5. Actively participating in groupwork					
6. Preparing for class (e.g. through study and reading)					
7. Doing my own research when I don't understand something					
8. Asking questions when I don't understand something					

9. Reviewing resources as directed by Lecturers after-class					
10. Speaking up when others don't (e.g. breaking silence in the classroom)					
11. Responding to university emails					
12. Using the campus university library					
13. Using the online university library					
14. Posting about my study progress on social media					
15. Encouraging others to complete assessments					
16. Enjoying spending time on campus					
17. Enjoying seeing my lecturers					
18. Enjoying seeing my fellow students					
19. Supporting other students who struggle with their assessments					
20. Spending time at university outside my timetabled classes					

11. The following is a list of further ways in which a student may engage in their studies. Thinking about them, how important are they to you?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Fairly important	Very important
1. Engaging with my university's social media posts					
2. Joining a WhatsApp/Facebook group with fellow students					
3. Talking about assessments with fellow students					
4. Seeing my personal tutor					
5. Talking to my course director/programme leader					

6. Speaking to non-academic university services (e.g. Well-being, School Office, Student Union, etc)					
7. Encouraging others to engage with their studies					
8. Involvement in student societies					
9. Volunteering in extracurricular activities					
10. Being a course/student representative					
11. Raising concerns on behalf of my fellow students					

12. What device/s do you use to access the online material and/or classes?
   a) Desktop Computer
   b) Laptop (PC or Mac)
   c) Tablet
   d) Mobile Phone
   e) Other (please define)

13. Outside of timetabled/scheduled classes, when do you engage with your studies?
   a) Morning
   b) Afternoon
   c) Evening
   d) Late night

14. Given the teaching and learning you have experienced at university so far, which of the following teaching delivery methods do you prefer?
   a) Face-to-face teaching
   b) Online teaching
   c) A mix of both but with more face-to-face teaching
   d) A mix of both but with more online teaching
   e) I have no preference

END OF SURVEY

Appendix 2: Focus group questions

Question 1 - Tell us what your studies have been like in the last two to three years (since the pandemic started).

Question 2 - What does 'student engagement' mean to you?

Question 3 - If you could change anything about how lectures are delivered at your university, what would it be?

Question 4 - If you could change anything about how seminars/workshops are delivered at your university, what would it be?

Question 5 - What did you think about studying remotely/hybrid during the pandemic?

Question 6 - If you could go back in time to the week before the first pandemic, what piece of advice would you give to university lecturers?

Question 7 - What, if any, were the challenges you faced when studying remotely.

Question 8 - Are there things your university could have done better during the pandemic or now, to support your engagement.

END OF FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS