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Abstract

Covid-19 had an unprecedented impact on daily living and resulted in many restrictions across all areas of life. Consequently, educational establishments in the UK adapted teaching delivery by moving to online or blended learning during the main 'stay at home' phase and many remained online as ongoing restrictions were announced. Many changes made during this period such as a move to online learning are likely to remain, in some capacity, as we emerge from the pandemic. The aim of this study was to explore student engagement with online and blended learning in a Higher Education (HE) institution using a mixed methods approach. One hundred and eighty-two HE sport students completed an online survey and a total of twenty one HE students took part in a series of online focus groups to gain a unique insight into how the move to online learning affected engagement from the student perspective. The findings indicated that although most students engaged with the online materials, many had a perceived negative experience. Students in general would not recommend online delivery to others and an overwhelming majority felt disadvantaged in terms of motivation and lack of community by moving to online learning. There was some positive feedback around the use of some technological tools to facilitate answering questions as well as use of online lectures for delivering content driven sessions. Our results clearly demonstrate that that a one size fits all approach is not appropriate when it comes to online learning.

Key words: Covid-19, student perspective, community, sport

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic began in early 2020, and on March 23rd of that year, the UK government enforced a national lockdown which placed unprecedented restrictions on everyday life. By 1st April 2020, schools and higher education institutions were closed in 185 countries, affecting 1,542,412,000 students (UNESCO, 2021). All educational establishments in the UK had to adapt teaching delivery by moving to online or blended learning, with only a few exceptions maintaining face to face contact (e.g., Medicine). Some universities were more prepared for this than others, such as those with a history of synchronous online delivery. However many universities traditionally limited their online learning to the use of a virtual learning environment as a repository of asynchronous learning resources (Yang, Yu, Chen & Huang, 2014). Rapid innovations were required to ensure that students were able to continue to engage with their studies, especially in disciplines with a practical aspect (e.g., sport and exercise, applied sciences) (Bradford, Farley, Escobar, Heitzler, Tringali & Walker, 2021), whilst maintaining student engagement and sense of community in an online world.

Student engagement is defined by Advance HE (2017) as “the extent to which students are motivated, passionate and curious about their programme of study, the Higher Education (HE) provider community they live and work within and its immediate environs”. Strong student engagement leads to higher retention levels and can be fostered through a culture of partnership between students and their HE provider (Advance HE). Student engagement is largely linked to academic success and positive outcomes, whereas disengagement often results in disruptive behaviours, low attendance and drop out (Quin, 2017). Fostering engagement in HE settings is important for student well-being and sense of belonging (Vallee, 2017). Students who feel part of a community in their HEI (Higher Education Institution) are more likely to persevere, attain positive outcomes and engage with university life (Thomas, 2012). As such it is important that HE institutions are able to give students a sense of belonging despite the potential challenges brought about by online learning and the pandemic (such as technological problems, lack of engagement, knowledge and sense of community). The impact of

online learning on student engagement has been examined by many researchers prior to Covid-19 and during the pandemic, however they do not reflect the change from the students' expectation of on campus teaching to a predominantly, or some cases fully, online experience. Some reasons why the shift to online might influence engagement include the reduction in social interaction (Bali and Liu, 2018), limited familiarity with online platforms (Dumford and Miller, 2018), and access to appropriate technological hardware, software, or connections (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020)

Much of the literature on student engagement during the pandemic has analysed the staff voice in subjects such as medicine (Klasen et al. 2020; Villela et al. 2020), accountancy (Ali et al. 2021), and broader laboratory-based subjects (Gamage et al. 2020). However, the student voice is rarely presented, and whilst the reasons for this would make an interesting article (e.g. were staff reluctant to further burden students during the pandemic or were ethics applications for Covid-19 medical studies receiving priority, etc.?), it must be considered as it is important to ascertain any incongruence between the view of staff and students is not missed. Biswas et al. (2020) used a survey to identify the opinions of using mobile phones for online learning during the pandemic across several Universities in Bangladesh, however only 4/18 questions were specific to COVID-19, and the others were on areas that might have been the same pre-pandemic e.g., *'the use of mobile is flexible to learn anytime, anywhere'*. They also used closed restricted answer questions which do not allow the student to provide a detailed response. However, Petillion and McNeil (2020) surveyed second year chemistry undergraduates (n = 64) and did follow up with a subset of interviews thus giving the student the opportunity to elaborate on their answers (n = 7). They reported some negative perceptions of engagement after the initiation of emergency online teaching, but a major focus of the recommendations related to assessment. Therefore, more research is warranted to offer implications for student engagement when learning online during the pandemic.

Sport and exercise programmes provide a unique insight into how the move to online learning affected engagement from the student perspective. Several learning outcomes and experiences historically

relied upon two features lost due to the pandemic: (i) interaction with others such as running events, delivering sessions or attending placements, and (ii) in person practical learning such as in a laboratory or sports facilities. There is previous work discussing advice for moving a sport course online (Rayner and Webb, 2021), pre-pandemic negative views of online learning in sport (Willett et al. 2019) and general difficulties of replicating laboratory experiences online in other disciplines (Gamage et al. 2020), but these are only from the staff perspective. Batez et al (2021) did investigate the perceptions of sport students, but this was related to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) skills and not the aforementioned learning outcomes. Understanding the experience of higher education sport students and their perception of engagement is important to inform educator practice in the case of another move to emergency online teaching or inform broader considerations for the purposeful design of online courses.

The aim of this study was to explore student engagement with online and blended learning in a HE institution using a mixed methods approach. Many articles have focused on the move to online delivery from an institution or teacher perspective, but to our knowledge, there are no studies have explored sport student experiences of online learning during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Methods

A mixed method design was adopted and ethical approval granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. First, an online survey was distributed to all undergraduate and post-graduate taught students, studying sport related programmes (Foundation Year, BSc Applied Sport and Exercise, BSc Sport Coaching, BSc Applied Sport and Exercise Science, BSc Sport Management, BA Sport Development, BSc Sport, Exercise and Nutrition, BSc Physiotherapy, MSc Strength and Conditioning, MSc International Sport Management, MSc Clinical Exercise Physiology), at a university in the north of England. The survey was delivered via the Online Surveys platform and was sent as an email link to students' university email addresses. The survey was completed in November 2020, towards the end of the first semester, so all students had the opportunity to engage with the online/blended content.

The content was delivered via Blackboard Ultra online platform and ranged from live streamed online seminar and lecture sessions, to uploaded, pre-recorded video footage of lab activities, lectures or workshop materials.

All participants were kept anonymous, and students only had to identify their programme of study and their year group (level). No other demographic information was taken. All students provided consent to participate and were assured that their answers would be kept confidential. A total of 182 responses were collected, representing 18% of the total number of students. See table 1 for breakdown of students by programme/year.

The survey aimed to measure responses to blended and online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Initial questions addressed how often students accessed online sessions and resources and the ease with which they were able to do so. The remainder of the questions were based around a number of scale-based questions which addressed: Student Engagement, Sense of Community, Assessment, Employability and Content and Delivery. This paper focuses on the engagement and sense of community questions. Space for qualitative comments was provided to allow students to explain their answers if they wished to do so although responses were limited and have not been reported within this paper. The questions were answered on a 7-point Likert Scale with anchors of 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree and a middle value of 4 = neither agree nor disagree.

Following the survey, students were invited to take part in a focus group in order to discuss their thoughts in more depth. Focus groups were advertised during taught sessions, through announcements made via the online learning portal and by email to all FHEQ (Frameworks for Higher Education) Level 3 (foundation year students) to FHEQ Level 6 (final year undergraduate students) as well as Level 7 MSc students across all sport programmes. Expressions of interest in participating in the study were received from 30 students (7 at Level 4, 4 at Level 5 and 19 at Level 6). Unfortunately, no expressions of interest were received from Level 3 or Level 7 students. Of those 30, 21 students ultimately participated: all seven of the Level 4 students, three of the four Level 5 students, and 11 of

the 19 Level 6 students.

A total of five student focus groups were conducted, two with Level 4 students and three with a mixture of both Level 5 and Level 6 students. Level 4 students were invited to separate focus groups to the students at other levels as they were new rather than continuing students and may therefore have had different experiences/perspectives to those whose university studies had originally taken place in person. There were two to five participants in each of the Level 4 focus groups and four to six participants in each of the Level 5/6 focus groups.

The focus groups focused on open questions pertaining to a range of issues related to online learning, including their overall university experiences (e.g., 'In general, how have you been finding university life during Covid), experiences of online learning (e.g., 'Have your experiences of online learning matched your expectations?', 'What type of online learning activities do you find most engaging?'), connections with others (e.g., 'How has online learning impacted on your relationships with academic staff/peers?'), and wellbeing (e.g., 'Do you think any changes you have experienced in your wellbeing have affected your learning, and if so in what way?'). Prompts such as requests for examples and elaboration on responses were used where appropriate. Finally, participants were offered the opportunity to contribute any further thoughts on the topic of online learning and/ or ask any questions.

Focus groups took place via Microsoft Teams in March 2021 and were audio recorded to allow for transcription and analysis. One member of staff facilitated the Level 4 focus groups, and another member of staff facilitated the Level 5/6 focus groups. Both facilitators were female and had taught some but not all of the students involved in the focus groups. Questions were asked to the group as a whole, with participants using the 'raise hand' function to indicate if they wished to provide a response or to follow up on another participant's comments, creating a dialogue between the participants whilst also avoiding crosstalk. Facilitators invited quieter participants to contribute where appropriate. The focus groups lasted between 51 minutes and 25 seconds and 63 minutes and 23 seconds.

The focus groups were analysed through an interpretivist perspective in order to capture the 'lived experience' of students engaging with online learning during an unprecedented global pandemic. A thematic analysis approach was used based on the (newly labelled) reflexive six-phase process devised by Braun and Clarke (2022). To provide some context, we have included a brief summary of the analysis process undertaken. Two qualitative researchers (and lecturers) known to the students conducted the focus groups. Data were transcribed by an independent transcription service and analysed by one of the authors. As the data was collected and transcribed by other people, familiarisation was an important first phase. Transcripts were read several times before codes were identified (phase 2). Phases three, four and five included generating themes, developing and reviewing themes and then embracing the mess of reordering, reorganising and renaming those initial themes. The sixth phase involved 'writing matters for analysis' (i.e., writing up the analysis for dissemination) (Braun and Clarke, 2022). In order to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used during the transcription and analysis phases (e.g., P3, L5 (participant 3, level 5 student)).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics showed that 52% of respondents said that they had accessed all of the online sessions available to them, while 38% reported that they had accessed most of them. Only 5% of students said they had accessed under half of sessions and 5% reported they had accessed just over half of the sessions, see figs 1 and 2 for descriptive statistics. All quotes that are discussed in this section are from the focus groups only which are solely comments made by undergraduate students.

Student Engagement

Motivation to engage with online learning during the pandemic

Motivation is a clear theme within the qualitative data and appears to be the biggest factor relating to engagement with online content, or rather, a lack of engagement, during the pandemic. One level 6 student told us in the focus groups about the impact of online learning on their studies: *'I think, in general, from my experience in speaking to friends and other people, motivation is taking a massive hit. I think yeah, whether it takes a hit and maybe you don't do as well in some assignments because there's just not that drive'* (P8, L6). Whilst another level 6 student was more explicit about their engagement: *'Maybe halfway through, I definitely felt disengaged because there was that New Year vibe, with all this new content, the main assessments are so far away, so there's a bit in the middle where I was just, there's a lot on again and just not understanding the reason of what you're going towards, towards the assessment and forming a knowledge'* (P9, L6). It is not unreasonable to believe that some of these experiences occur as part of a normal university year, e.g. as the novelty of the new year wears off; however, the home learning element of this particular pandemic year appeared to explain at least some of the motivation issues: *Personally, it motivates me being side by side [with friends] because we all have a common interest, generally. But when you're sitting behind a laptop screen, especially with our cameras off, it's just a load of words and the lecturers face. So, in terms of being sociable, it does take away from the uni experience and it distracts me a bit from work. So that's why I think there needs to be a targeted blended learning approach moving forward'* (P3, L6).

Home environments also had other issues that impacted student learning: *'I know obviously everyone's working from home, but the background noise and they'll [staff/lecturers] have families who are also home, especially when schools weren't open. But being able to hear stuff going on in the background like kids or music and stuff like that, it is off putting, and you find that you end up listening to that rather than what they're saying. I know obviously it is something where it's nit-picking because we've all been thrown in this situation. If they're at home, they're at home, and they probably can't tell their kids to shut up, but that is one of the things that's a slight challenge, whereas obviously you would never have that in university because the families aren't there'* (P1, L6). The intrusion of humans and pets into online learning spaces was something that the students discussed in the focus groups, but it

is also something that has been identified as a cause of disruption or at least a diversion to online learning during the pandemic (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Manfuso, 2020).

Another example of some of the challenges was from a level 6 student: *'I get distracted far too easily, and I'll give myself a break with any excuse. If I go into the library if I was in uni or in the lecture, I wasn't looking at my phone because I would be fully focused, but at home I'm rubbish at looking at my phone or finding any excuse to shop online or something. There's nobody looking at me to say what are you doing? So, I'm pretty much the opposite of [another student] in terms of I find it hard to be a productive because there are so many distractions, and I'm being at home that's your comfort place, not your workplace'* (P2, L6).

Engagement with online learning and related online materials during the pandemic

Eighty percent of survey respondents stated that they found online teaching less engaging than face-to-face. Of this 80%, 39% strongly agreed with the statement. Nine percent of students were not sure and 11% disagreed with the statement. The survey suggests that students therefore preferred face-to-face teaching compared to the adapted online delivery during the pandemic. However, the following qualitative focus group data suggests that for some students the online delivery was more engaging as highlighted by one level 5 student: *'compared to usual lectures where we would be in uni, just in general they're more engaging because people, even if it's not using a microphone, they'll be typing in the chat box. Whereas if that question was asked in like a real-life setting, people wouldn't put their hand up in a lecture hall full of people and answer the question. So I think in general they're just more engaging'* (P1, L5). Although a level 6 student explained that online lectures and seminars made it easier to not engage during the pandemic: *'in general lectures might have slightly less engagement in terms of people asking questions or adding to the chat box full. But in terms of seminars, probably the only thing which I would sometimes notice is that I think it's a bit easier to hide if you really can't be bothered to engage. So, because they're smaller groups anyway, it might be the*

same three people answering the questions. Once upon a time when you were in a classroom, the lecturer might have pinpointed on someone and say can you maybe give me the answer, but that doesn't really happen now' (P2, L6).

It seems that from a student perspective, the lack of visibility and the ability to remain somewhat anonymous was important in generating engagement in lessons as one level 6 student articulates: *'I think seminars were similar to what they used to be, because obviously they're smaller groups anyway, but I would probably still say that some seminars are probably even more engaging in terms of interaction with other students than real life setting seminars would be ... I don't know if it's just because some people don't want to speak up [in face-to-face seminars] in case they get the wrong answer, or they just don't want to ask the question. Whereas obviously on Blackboard Collaborate we don't necessarily all have our cameras on, so to everyone else you're just a name, there aren't any photos. So, if you want to type something in the chat box, no one's necessarily paying attention to who is asking that particular question. ... [The whiteboard is] the same, it's anonymous' (P2, L6).*

This appeared particularly true for level 4 students who had never met each other face-to-face and often did not know other people on their course but was also an issue across other levels as well as one level 5 student said: *I think people have felt a lot more confidence in trying to answer the question. If the lecturer has asked and they've said put it in the chat I think people care less about just being able to type whatever to try and answer the question, rather than saying it out loud. Whereas in the past, unless you knew it was exactly the right answer, you wouldn't say it, or at least I know I wouldn't' (P3, L5).*

Although the quantitative data showing the majority of students prefer face-to-face teaching, the subsequent follow-up focus groups appeared to include students who were more positive towards the online learning delivered during the pandemic. For example, one level 4 student told us: *I've quite enjoyed it being online to be honest. the quality of teaching has still been really good and the fact that you can go back and watch the recorded lectures and catch up on anything that you've missed it really*

helpful (P1, L4). One level 5 student said: 'I don't necessary think it would be a bad thing if it was to continue [online]. Especially with modules that aren't necessary practical based. But I do think that you couldn't go fully online for every module, I think there's obviously some that it's pretty vital to be on campus for' (P3, L5). Whilst another student added: 'Personally, I think the only thing that we should keep [online] is the lectures. I feel that for lectures there's pretty much no need to actually have them in person. I feel that if you want that in person like face-to-face contact with a lecturer, then you can have the seminars and your practical sessions' (P7, L6).

Despite many students telling us that they lacked motivation during online learning and found it less engaging than face-to-face learning, over a third of students who completed the survey mostly agreed that online learning materials, adapted for the pandemic, were easy to engage with (35%), and a further 14% mostly, and 7% strongly agreed. As such, over half of the respondents agreed with the statement. Fourteen percent of students had no opinion either way, and 23% of students either disagreed or disagreed strongly (Fig. 1). This was also echoed in the responses to the statement, 'I find online learning not as stimulating as face-to-face classes'. Eighty five percent of students reported that they found face to face classes more stimulating. Only 7% had no opinion and 8% found online more stimulating.

Not only was engagement impacted upon generally, but students across the Sport and Exercise department highlighted the substantial changes made to their assessments, particularly in modules that assessed practical abilities, during the focus groups. Usually, most practical assessments required human participants to be physically active, specialist space and specialist equipment. All of which was not possible due to the restrictions of the pandemic: *Obviously doing sports coaching a lot of the assessments is probably going to be practicals where we would get assessed on our actual coaching, but obviously we can't really do that now, so a lot of them are more essay based. They're still good, but they're not really that practical. I think it would have been better if it was in person (P3, L5).* A level 4 student also highlighted issues with group assessments: *'I guess one challenge will probably be*

groupwork, group assessments. I guess it's challenging in the sense that we could be located in different parts of the country or different parts of the world, that's one challenge. Sometimes when you try and get things started there's no one else to join in, in a way. I think that's one challenge of Covid and online learning and with group work it's a lot more difficult than what it would have been at the beginning, I mean as in before Covid' (P1, L4)

Sense of Community in an Online Environment During the Pandemic

Over two thirds (61%) of students felt that online classes during the pandemic did not make them feel part of the university, whereas 23% did. At a module class level, half of the respondents felt they could interact with others, though only 34% interacted with their peers during online sessions. The students were evenly split on whether they felt part of a group or not, 38% did feel part of the group, whereas 38% did not. One level 4 student told us during the focus groups: *Most of my friends are from societies and student accommodation but I don't know any of my classmates' (P2, L4)* which is clearly problematic when trying to create and establish a course community during online teaching. Whereas a course community appeared to less of an issue at level 6, for example: *I feel like us being third years... I think our community, by third year it's already there. If you know what I mean, like you know who your friends with and who you're not friends with or people who you know who you haven't spoken to. So, I feel like, for me, it wasn't a big issue like the community side of things like going on online because I already had like my close friends who I knew and then people who I didn't speak or did speak to. But I feel like if you're a first year, it might be a completely different story because obviously, you're going to know absolutely no one, so I feel like that's really hard, but I haven't had a problem with it at all (P8, L6).*

Student isolation as a result of online learning

Unfortunately, almost two thirds of the survey group felt online learning due to Covid-19 restrictions isolating (59%). One level 6 student in the focus group explained: *'I didn't move into student accommodation because it normally only takes me 45 minutes to an hour on a bus. When I started uni I just thought it was more convenient for me to live at home, so I didn't get that interaction with flat mates etc. So, when I was coming into uni and having lectures or seminars that was my social interaction and that's all gone now. I live with my parents, and I don't have any interaction with anyone my age apart from online'* (P6, L6). Whilst another level 6 told us: *I was literally so upset that we've lost all of the third year and the experience of being in uni. I loved going into uni, I also live at home. I loved going into uni and seeing people and chatting and whatever - we've definitely lost that'* (P1, L6). The same student then shared their experiences of isolation and the impact it had: *I think a lot of people have struggled, but for me I think it's, without getting deep, that you feel quite alone because even though you might be messaging people online about your work, it's not the same as having a physical conversation. If you're stressed about something, you feel as if you're the only person with that problem, or you're the only person stressed about it, or everyone else seems to be coping. I think that's been a massive thing because you are literally just sat in front of a laptop, you can feel quite overwhelmed and quite alone, even if you try and speak about it, it's not the same* (P1, L6).

Communication and community in break out rooms

Breakout rooms are commonly used online to replicate pyramiding or syndicates methods typically implemented / utilized in traditional large lecture formats. It appears however that break out rooms were not always successful and did have an impact on student communication and the development of a community. One student told us in a focus group: *'we all hate breakout rooms because no one speaks in them'* (P10, L6). Whereas another student identified break out rooms as a source of mixed emotions: *'On occasions it has been horrendous when you're just sat in a group of three people and you might not recognise their names, but no one talks and so it's who's going to go first, and no one ever does. So that can be quite awkward, but on the occasions where it does work it is quite good.*

Obviously, some people do want to be with friends and that's fine, but there have been occasions where it might not necessarily be someone's name that I've recognised, but they've spoken to me anyway, and if this was in a group setting and the lecturer said just go in your own groups, I probably wouldn't have spoken to them. So, I suppose in that kind of sense I have spoken to different students that I might not have spoken to before, it just depends on who's actually willing to talk or not' (P5, L6).

Level 4 students also had a mixed reaction to breakout rooms: *'I've seen it when people pop in and out, you just see the notifications, but when you're actually in the break-out room you've got to have that one person that will get things going otherwise it will just be complete silence until a lecturer jumps in' (P1, L4)*, whilst another student followed up with: *'Not every time will students engage with each other, maybe they're too shy or something like that, but it really depends. It's more maybe an okay experience [than a good experience]' (P2, L4)*. The results suggest a mixed-response to breakout rooms and we argue more research is needed to understand what works best when it comes to online interactive sessions.

Overall perceptions of online learning during the pandemic

Most students did not enjoy the online approach taken at this university during the pandemic and would not recommend it to others. These findings are consistent with those from the February-March 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey: following 'improve assessment feedback', the second-most highly mentioned area for improvement in the academic experience of UK undergraduate students was 'more in-person teaching/on-campus activities' (Neves and Hewitt, 2021). When participants from the current study were asked if they would recommend full online delivery to others, 44% reported that they would definitely not recommend the approach, whereas 33% said they would and almost a quarter of students had no opinion either way. Over two thirds of students felt that they had been disadvantaged by online delivery (67%), and very few (10%) agreed that online delivery was

more efficient than face-to-face. Yet just over a quarter (27%) did agree that they had enjoyed online delivery (25% had no definite opinion, and 48% did not enjoy online teaching).

Conclusion

The consensus is that students engaged with the online materials during the pandemic but had mainly a perceived negative experience. Students in general would not recommend online delivery to others and an overwhelming majority felt disadvantaged by it. Only a few students felt online delivery was more efficient than face to face, due to the ability to ask questions and use the chat box, and just over a quarter of them said they had enjoyed online learning. Further research is required to establish if responses would change, without the restrictions of pandemic (i.e., freedom to socialise outside etc).

Whilst over half of students felt that the online material was easy to engage with, they did not find the teaching as engaging, and over 80% of students said face to face teaching was more stimulating. It is interesting to note that students did continue to engage with online materials despite the negative feelings towards them.

Only 23% of students felt that online classes made them feel part of the university and 38% felt part of their group. However, half of the respondents felt they could interact with others, though only 34% interacted peers during online sessions. The interaction and sense of belonging therefore appears to be important, and it is clear that online methods did not foster this for the respondents. Indeed, 59% of students reported feeling isolated by online learning.

Therefore, the quantitative data tells us that students engaged with the materials but did not find it as stimulating/engaging as face to face. They did not feel part of a group and would not recommend the online model to others. Students likely engaged with the materials despite not finding it stimulating due to the need for them to succeed and pass their modules. Indeed, we should acknowledge that accessing materials may not be the same as engaging with them. Students may have opened a file and not read it or may not have completed all tasks set. As such, engagement in future

studies should be more explicit. On the other hand, the qualitative data suggests a somewhat more positive online learning experience. However, we express caution with the focus group data as the students who volunteered to participate were typically conscientious students who engaged well in all aspects of university. Therefore, the focus groups were led by lecturing staff who were known to the students. Whilst this allowed for established rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewees, the presence of a known member of staff may have influenced the student's response.

This study suggests that students' perception of online learning, community and engagement during the pandemic was poor. The challenge for staff is therefore to reflect on what works well and what does not and to work to make a difference to the online learning experience of higher education students. More work is required to establish how to stimulate more discussion within online groups, and how to make lectures more engaging. For example, the qualitative data indicated that the chat function was seen as a way of engaging students who may not otherwise contribute in class. Using more interactive text-based technology may be one solution, though it should be noted that some students felt it easy to "hide" when asked to contribute, especially if the responses were anonymous. In addition, using a blended approach and delivering fewer interactive sessions online (such as lectures) may be a way of embracing online methods while still offering interactive sessions face to face. Students certainly expressed an interest in this route, however some students missed the interaction with others before and after lectures, so more would need to be done to foster this.

The pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to staff within HEIs. Teaching staff had to alter and adapt their teaching methods and assessments in a very short time; this 'hasty transition' has been found to be less effective for learning than established virtual learning at the school level (Kingsbury, 2021), and thereby potentially putting staff under even greater pressure through comparisons between the Covid-19 contingency approach and existing virtual learning providers. Staff were forced into a teaching and assessment model that they were unfamiliar with, and they had to be reactive to the ever-changing nature of the pandemic on both a professional and a personal level,

facing unpredictable working conditions and an increased workload (as acknowledged by students; Neves and Hewitt, 2021). Additionally, staff had to maintain this additional workload, whilst navigating pressures such as reduced wellbeing and potential commitments such as caring for vulnerable family members and home schooling their children. Equally, students had to adapt to this new way of learning along with potentially grappling with the isolation and anxiety as a result of the pandemic and navigating commitments of their own. This paper demonstrates that some of the practices adopted were not enjoyed by students, but there are some positives that have emerged, and these should be considered in the future.

Overall, it is recommended that institutions take a holistic approach to building online content in the future, this should be tailored to the group itself (in terms of class size, level, subject matter and so on) and hasty transitions should be avoided where possible. A one size fits all approach is not appropriate and further research should aim to explore the factors that should be considered when designing and running blended or online learning for sports students. Online learning may be beneficial for classes that are more established (i.e. a community has already been built, such as level 6) and for classes where a lot of content is delivered (for example lectures) – however this was not the focus of the paper and needs to be examined in more detail. In conclusion, institutions should aim to embrace the benefits of online delivery, but they need to be mindful of the isolation and lack of motivation that students can experience when learning online.

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