

Access and Participation Plan
Student Consultation Group:
The Impact of COVID-19

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a rapid, qualitative review of undergraduate students' experiences at the University of Lincoln (UoL) during the global COVID-19 pandemic period of closures and restrictions (March 2020 onwards). It focuses on the experiences of students who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE) or who self-identify with characteristics of disadvantage. These students come within the remit of the UoL's Access and Participation Plan (APP).

The over-arching research question raised and investigated here was *How did COVID-19 impact on APP students' experiences and learning at the University of Lincoln?*

A total of 11 students were interviewed individually from a small subset of students who had already taken part in previous APP related research. The researchers audio-recorded the interviews and took detailed notes. Qualitative analysis was completed manually and was guided by the following entry level or initial questions:

- *In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic and the university's response, what do you think went particularly well?*
- *What do you feel did not?*
- *What do you think could have been done differently?*

Students' perceptions of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their university experience and their hopes and fears for the future are summarized into two key themes as follows.

Theme 1: Impacts of COVID-19 on APP students' university experiences

- Students felt that they understood less when lectures were delivered online because there was less discussion with peers and some students felt uncomfortable asking questions online. Decreased interaction with lecturers in the online arena was sometimes compounded by inconsistencies in support from personal and module tutors
- While there was some preference for 'live' over 'pre-recorded' lectures, disparity in the amount of lecture recording undertaken on individual modules was a key issue for students with caring responsibilities or employment commitments who missed some sessions and hoped to catch up. Some course materials for students with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) who use literacy support software such as Read & Write were inaccessible while copies of eBooks were unavailable for some subjects impacting on assignment completion and assessment performance
- There were concerns that grades may be inferior (from individual assignments to overall degree classification) and although the Safety Net was considered reassuring, the delay in its introduction was stressful and caused anxiety for students studying accredited degrees for whom it did not apply
- Many students relied on parents for financial help as paid employment opportunities were curtailed however some APP students did not have the fall-back of family support

and were experiencing additional stress over concerns for their future beyond graduation. APP students who had accessed the University of Lincoln Financial Assistance Fund were appreciative of this institutional financial support but expressed concerns that the application process was onerous.

- Students who were also key workers or shared accommodation with keyworkers/NHS staff felt increased anxiety about contracting the virus and most of those interviewed missed the opportunities to see their friends in person in Lincoln as well as the lost opportunities to interact with other students through extracurricular activities.

Theme 2: APP students' hopes and fears for the future

- There were fears that the student experience will be diminished with the move to a blended delivery model in the next academic year and for some, the dislike and inaccessibility of online provision was leading to serious consideration of deferral
- Concerns were expressed about the state of the job market in Lincoln when they return, and whether they will be able to secure part time work which was especially worrying for those APP students who were financially self-reliant. This coincided with uncertainties about paying for next year's accommodation and whether Student Finance payments would be made in time
- APP students were apprehensive about employment prospects post-graduation including missing out on extra-curricular activities such as sports and societies which would support and enhance future graduate job applications.

Based on our analysis, we suggest that many APP students have been disproportionately impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. APP students are not a homogenous group but most of the interview participants were treading a very precarious line as they studied and worked to support themselves often in the absence of a fallback such as parental or family support (whether emotional, financial and/or practical). While some of the participants were able to make use of the institutional financial support on offer, this was reliant on staff referrals and prior experience of the system suggesting that seeking out help requires approval or encouragement from members of staff.

APP students were positive about many aspects of their recent student experience as the main report outlines, but there is room for improvement. The following recommendations are presented in relation to supporting student success and progression.

Recommendation 1: Communication and interaction

Transparent and concise communication incorporating a greater *awareness* of student diversity and increased teaching and learning opportunities for staff-student and student-student interaction:

- A communications plan which is shared with students indicating when they can expect to receive messaging to help address uncertainty which includes next year's graduation ceremonies, the summer vacation, and in case there is a second wave of the virus ensuring messaging from the Senior Leadership Team, Colleges, Schools and programmes are aligned and clearly setting out what students can expect from a blended learning approach
- At programme level, lecturers make regular contact with their students to communicate the plan or the 'structure' for the week and the institution considers a revised, standardised time frame for staff responses which takes account of their additional responsibilities but helps manage students' expectations of when to expect a response in this environment which is shared with students
- An ongoing commitment to involve, consult and communicate with APP students from programme level upwards through existing engagement structures or setting up new ones
- Respond to students' concerns about their future during and beyond Covid-19 by targeted promotion of the Careers and Employability support available and offering online extra-curricular activities to enhance CVs.

Recommendation 2: Support and accessibility

Flexible to respond to student diversity and acknowledge that some APP students face additional constraints during their time at university and as they prepare to graduate:

- Financial support availability and eligibility actively promoted to APP students in targeted communications that takes into account the delay to the start of the first semester and the immediate availability of some non-discretionary financial support such as shopping vouchers or food packages. Explore financial support packages for students as they transition out of university especially for those without fallback support
- Ensure all students, including those who are disengaged and struggling, can access peer support via their programmes or via signposting from Student Support or the Students' Union. Continue the ongoing support for APP students with mental health issues and reassure all students that mental health is a university-wide priority
- Some students find online delivery very hard whatever additional enhancements are made to content and will need additional support from staff to navigate their learning. Ensure online lectures, learning activities and resources are accessible to **all** students (including those with SpLDs) - staff should familiarise themselves with students' Learning Support Plans and record all live lectures to ensure that students who are key workers or have caring responsibilities are able to access them outside of the traditional working day

- Find out which students are also key workers and provide tailored information detailing the ways in which the university can best support them, their housemates, friends and family if applicable
- Further consider the impact on international students and the unique challenges they face through a similar, qualitative or quantitative review.

1. Background

A rapid and small-scale qualitative review of undergraduate students' experiences whilst at the University of Lincoln (UoL) during the COVID-19 pandemic period of closures and restrictions (March 2020 onwards) was requested by the DVC Professor Liz Mossop in May 2020.

This report presents findings of the interviews undertaken. Moreover, it focuses on the experiences of students who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE) or who self-identify with characteristics of disadvantage¹. These students come within the remit of the UoL's Access and Participation Plan (APP).

2. Method

In order to complete this research in the timeframe requested and to adhere to ethical standards, APP funded staff (Dr. Rachel Spacey, Dr. Xiaotong Zhu and Rebecca Sanderson) submitted an amendment (Ref: 2020-0579) to an existing project which had a favourable ethical outcome (Ref: 2019-0579) in order to draw on existing student contacts already recruited to the Access and Participation Student Consultation Group and other prior projects with under-represented students including:

- *Recognising and Recording the Experiences of Estranged Students* (Ref: School of Education Ethics Committee 2018)
- *Lincoln Equality of Attainment Project* (Ref: 2019-0867)
- *UROS projects – LEAP related* (Ref: 2020-0867).

In addition, a recruitment email was sent to the Student Wellbeing Student Advisory Board and some students were contacted in that way. As this study was an iteration of the Access and Participation Student Consultation Group, participants received a £20 e-voucher in recognition of their contribution. The students who agreed to take part were therefore self-selecting from a small cohort of current and former APP funded and related projects.

The over-arching research question raised and investigated here was *How did COVID-19 impact on students' experiences and learning at the University of Lincoln?*

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

A total of 11 students were interviewed individually using MS Teams or via telephone in late May and early June 2020. With their permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken by the interviewers. With time constraints in mind, the interviews were not transcribed verbatim, but relevant quotes included from the recordings are presented for analysis.

Qualitative data analysis was completed manually and was guided by the following entry-level or initial questions:

- *In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic and the university's response, what do you think went particularly well?*
- *What do you feel did not?*
- *What do you think could have been done differently?*

The questions explored participants' views of their experiences of university in the wake of closures and restrictions brought in from March 2020 as a response to COVID-19 in relation to their programme of study and also investigated their perceptions of the university's response to the pandemic and their hopes and fear for the next academic year (2020/21).

The APP research team analysed the interviews together. The analysis was supported by Rhianne-Ebony Sterling-Morris, a Student Engagement and Experience Graduate Intern from the College of Social Science who undertook to complete a rapid review of the literature including social media content relating to the impact of COVID-19. This was incorporated into the Discussion and Conclusions section.

The findings from the analysis are presented below and includes students' perceptions of the COVID-19 global pandemic from March onwards - the impact of lockdown on their student experiences including their views of teaching, learning and support, and their hopes and fears for the future. They include a summary of 1) what went well 2) what did not 3) what could be done differently.

The Recommendations section includes suggestions to help improve provision for students who experience or self-identify with characteristics of disadvantage.

3. Results

3.1 Characteristics of the participants

The eleven undergraduate students who participated in this study presented background characteristics which included:

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

The features of the participants were as follows:

- S1: Female, first in family, disability, second year, College of Social Science (CoSS)
- S2: Female, BAME, second year, CoSS
- S3: Male, first in family, lower socio-economic status, second year, CoSS
- S4: Female, disability, second year, CoSS
- S5: Male, lower socio-economic status, disability, partially estranged, third year, College of Science (CoS)
- S6: Female, estranged, disability, third year, College of Arts (CoA)
- S7: Female, first in family, lower socio-economic status, second year, CoSS
- S8: Female, first in family, lower socio-economic status, second year, CoSS
- S9: Male, disability, mature, second year, Lincoln International Business School (LIBS)
- S10: Male, first in family, disability, first year, CoS
- S11: Female, first in family, disability, first year, CoS.

*During the interviews it emerged that S2 is an international student rather than Home/EU. The APP's remit includes Home/EU undergraduate students. However, we felt it was important to include the testimony of S2 (see Recommendations). Similarly, two of the participants were third years and whilst they will soon be graduating, we were mindful that APPs covers the whole of the student lifecycle from pre-arrival through to degree completion.

3.2 Impacts of COVID-19 from March 2020 onwards

3.2.1 Living arrangements

The living arrangements of the participants varied in wake of the restrictions rolled out as a response to the spread of COVID-19. There were those who had returned to their family home

or stayed with a partner, almost immediately, but some had decided to stay on campus or in private rented accommodation in Lincoln. S9, for example, is a mature student and felt that staying on campus was safer than trying to return home in March whilst S6 is estranged from her family which means her accommodation in Lincoln is her main and only home.

For those who had returned to their family home, this had sometimes been a challenge:

“(it’s) hard to have people in your space all the time” (S8).

S3 found the lockdown a shock and in his rush to return home did not take enough learning materials with him. S7 described how she had left all her belongings in Lincoln. Some of the students, who stayed with family or a partner, did so because they were worried about contracting COVID-19 and being ill on their own in student accommodation but there was a lot of uncertainty in March about the best course of action:

“Then the university went through a phase of to- and fro-ing” (S5).

Participants who stayed in Lincoln have had very different lockdown experiences and have remained there for different reasons. S6, for example, is estranged from family so did not have the option of a family home to return to. She has been on her own since March as her flat mate returned home whilst in the house S5 shares, most of his flat mates stayed in Lincoln with just one returning home immediately.

The main impacts of lockdown for the participants included having to make decisions about where to stay very quickly, loss of income from part time employment and their continued financial commitments including rent. Two students were able to continue working part time – S5 works in a shop and found his hours actually increased and S9 was able to work from home but S6, for example, found that she has had no paid work from March which has affected her ability to pay the rent. Speaking about her last installment of funds from Student Finance:

“I’m very aware of the fact that this is all I have” (S6).

The students felt quite differently about how they were getting on at present (late May/early June 2020). Whilst most of them felt they were coping well (S7: *“I’ve got used to it now”*) a few participants were struggling and mentioned feeling anxious or worried. Some acknowledged that the last few months had been a period of great adjustment in many ways including, for most, in relation to their living arrangements as well as in relation to their mode of learning.

3.2.2 Pivot to online teaching and assessment

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

“I was bit concerned... obviously because it is quite nice to have face-to-face interactions. Obviously if you are at university, we can pop into their office and see them... now we have to rely on them replying to you or your email” (S1).

“I was really worried about it because the nature of our course being one quite small social science, a lot of our learning comes from classroom discussion and interaction... the less structured debates we had where we learn most of our subjects... So, with it [teaching] being moved online, you lose nearly all of that. This is now sort of one-way teaching” (S3).

Two participants did not feel concerned because they did not usually seek support from academics. S8, for example, wasn't worried as she does not ask for help ordinarily:

“Would there be that much difference?” (S8).

The first thought an international BAME student had to the announcement was about 'value' for money in terms of the large amount of tuition fees she has paid to study in Lincoln:

“My God. I've already spent a fortune to pay for the university tuition to... actually attend the class physically. But eventually it [teaching] was moved online. Obviously, if the class is online, I don't have to fly to the UK. I just need to follow it from indoors” (S2).

3.2.3 Quality of provision

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

“Under the circumstances, [the quality is] more than acceptable” (S9).

“Same but just a bit different” (S8).

3.2.4 Availability of learning materials

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

“There were internet problems for some of the people on my course, but I don’t know how you’re going to get round that” (S4).

3.2.5 Online assessment

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

“The way they did the TCAs was pretty good” (S10).

Participants had mixed feelings about the Safety Net policy. While the new policy was perceived as reassuring and helped reduce anxiety, some participants were concerned that other students might be demotivated by it. S7, for example, was happy about having the policy in place, but wanted to use the second semester as an opportunity to work harder for better grades than semester one and was dissatisfied with her assessment performance. S3 felt frustrated that he was not performing his best during this online phase, despite the existence of the Safety Net policy:

“While I will have a grade that is safe and secure, I think normally I could have done so much better. Maybe could have been better than that safety grade. So, I do think I am not being able to perform to my best at all and that is really upsetting despite having a Safety Net grade” (S3).

3.2.6 Opportunities for interaction

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

“A whole part of being in university... that experience and that comfort a lot of students get... when you’re so detached from that physically and when you are back home, you are away from university and try to switch on and trying to engage the limited materials we have, makes it so much harder to do your best performance” (S3).

Online teaching was perceived as ‘one-way teaching’ by some participants - short of opportunities for interactivity, with less engaging and less interesting learning materials. S11, a first year with dyslexia, felt that her learning was stifled during the online phase because she used Read & Write literacy support software, which allows written text to be read aloud but it struggled to support her when used with PowerPoint slides and diagrams :

“I’ve found the online learning hard... So, I don’t feel like I’ve done anything really since I left university” (S11).

The lack of face-to-face contact also affected students’ engagement with their programme. S6 did have some experience with moving to an online platform last year when she was in a Facebook messenger group with 15 students, so it was something she felt comfortable with. But she felt that it was easier for students to hide away if they were reluctant to engage in group work. Attendance was not always mandatory, which some participants found demotivating and reinforced the sensation of reduced face-to-face contact. S7 was concerned about the social aspects of her student experience – she missed seeing her friends, going onto campus and having different places to study in, such as the Library.

3.2.7 Lecture slides and recordings

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

“Didn’t help with the interaction with tutors that you would usually get” (S6).

She described feeling demotivated because she couldn't ‘pop in’ to speak to a member of staff and was concerned about ‘bothering’ them as they worked from home.

Sometimes students read through lecture slides on their own without lecture recordings, and the quality of slides uploaded to Blackboard was deemed inconsistent, as was learning in this way:

“I don’t learn that well from just reading slides. I got to hear it, read it and write it down to let it go in. An audio would be helpful but that was not provided for all lectures... Some slides are very good. The lecturers obviously have made efforts to make them more informative than they would have otherwise when we are in a lecture theatre. Other ones are still quite vague. And the explanations you usually get, kind of verbally, were not there” (S4).

Where lecture recordings were provided online, some staff had used last year’s recordings and the content was perceived by participants to be less relevant and topical. S7 revealed that some of her friends on other courses only had PowerPoint slides or old lectures from previous years. S5 described the online provision as: *“A bit lifeless”*. For many courses, live lectures were not offered to students. One frustration was when live lectures were not recorded so that students not able to attend the lecture missed the equal opportunity to learn:

“There were a number of times where they had forgotten to record the lectures. Some of us couldn’t be there... I don’t know why the university didn’t think some people are going to be carers or key workers” (S5).

3.2.8 Marks and degree outcomes

Although marks for this semester were not yet available to some of the students, many participants were inclined to believe that their grades will be negatively affected. S5 shared his strong conviction that his grades will have suffered. He doesn’t think that the university’s initial assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic considered students who were also key workers (he works in a post office in a shop). His work shifts increased during the lockdown period because many of his colleagues were self-isolating. S9 highlighted that some eBooks for his course were unavailable online whilst S3 felt that the limited access to resources affected his grades:

“Because we had such limited resources. We did not have the library. We have very limited books put online. And because when I tried to write about a very small niche area about my subject...for my dissertation proposal for example, there are very limited recourses online for that anyway and it is so much harder to try to access the ones that left because you know, we don’t have the range to choose from... So, the really limited resources made it difficult to write assignments” (S3).

Most of the participants felt less supported when working on their assessments and were upset about not being able to perform to their best or learn as much as before. Although S5 spoke highly of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) online, he thought it would have been better to have these online before the exams:

“There was a lot of flapping around” (S5).

He acknowledged the challenges faced by the university, but still felt frustration, stressing that:

“I’m paying nine and half grand a year for you to flap about” (S5).

3.2.9 University support services

Five of the participants accessed services from Student Wellbeing (SW) and continued to do so once lockdown was implemented. S11, for example, has dyslexia and physical disabilities and is in receipt of Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA). She felt that SW were very supportive during the early stages of the lockdown when her Wellbeing Advisor got in touch to see if she needed any extra support if she were to stay in Lincoln. She was very happy with the support she has received and feels that the services have adapted well by offering online drop-ins:

“They’ve still been brill” (S11).

Similarly, S10 who is on the autistic spectrum and in receipt of DSA was having counselling with SW before the lockdown. He had had four in-person sessions and the remaining two were over the phone. Although, there was a period of adjustment to this mode of delivery, he was satisfied:

“It was pretty much the same experience” (S10).

S6 felt that the move to phone calls for counselling was an improvement on in-person delivery. S5 found that his need for support from SW increased during the pandemic from every other week to weekly contact. He spoke to a Wellbeing Advisor on the phone or via MS Teams and found the support invaluable:

“I have to say I think they’ve been brilliant” (S5).

Some of the participants also accessed the Student Support Centre. S11, for example, is a course rep and asked staff in the Advice Service for help with a complaint she was making about her programme of study:

“The Advice Centre has been really, really good” (S11).

S6 had been in contact with Student Support as she made an application for extenuating circumstances and found them very helpful but she found academic staff were not very well informed about this procedure. She described *“being passed from person to person”*.

Two of the participants had applied for the University of Lincoln Financial Assistance Funds (ULFAFs) during the lockdown period. S5 was signposted to the fund by his Wellbeing Advisor and following application, received £150, which he used to pay for petrol and food for family members who were shielding during the pandemic:

“I’m really thankful for that money” (S5).

S6 applied for a ULFAF having applied for one in the past. She thinks that without already having that experience of successfully applying for money, she wouldn’t have applied this time. While both students were pleased to receive the monies they felt that the fund itself could have been promoted more widely and that the application process might be more user-friendly as S5, for example, struggled to upload all the relevant documentation online and would have liked some help over the phone.

Participants who did not access Student Wellbeing or Student Support services had not accessed them before lockdown but were aware of them and their online offer. However, most of these participants accessed the Library and/or Careers and Employability prior to lockdown. Whilst some of them expressed disappointment at the closure of the Library in terms of loss of study space and its impact on their motivation, they found its online resources helpful. Some students did have trouble viewing Library webpages. Opinions of the Careers and Employability service

were consistent in that almost all participants felt that they had received a very similar service both before and during lockdown. The helpfulness and flexibility of staff in terms of arranging meetings and calls was commented upon by several participants. S9, for example, had been due to start his placement in July and when this fell through, Careers and Employability helped him contact the employer.

3.2.10 Communication and information

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

"I have to say Mary Stuart was sending out the occasional email and that was really nice to read. So heart-warming. It was nice to hear from those higher up saying 'well done'" (S5).

However, it appeared that communications from Schools and/or Colleges varied with some students feeling that their School or programme leader had been very clear and supportive, whilst others felt disappointed at times. S9, for example, was very pleased with the email from the Vice-Chancellor but felt that communication from his College - LIBS - was rather perfunctory and he would have liked more.

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

"[I]n the wrong way" (S6).

3.2.11 Teaching, assessment and support online: What could be done differently?

Participants were asked to consider how online teaching, assessment and support might be improved. Suggestions were heavily focused on ways to improve communication between staff and students and ways to support and improve accessibility for students juggling responsibilities:

3.2.11.1 Communication and interaction

- Make more opportunities for one-to-one communication with academics such as a MS Teams call with a lecturer
- Lecturers make regular contact with their students to communicate the plan or the 'structure' for the week
- More online seminars and drop-in sessions with lecturers
- More live lectures that are recorded
- Make it clear which communication system is preferable - some tutors seem to check things more on MS Teams whilst others seem to prefer emails
- A supportive peer group to help navigate the stress and uncertainty - more Teams calls with course mates.

3.2.11.2 Support and accessibility

- Consider the Learning Support Plans of students – can the materials be accessed by students with a SpLD?
- Standardise what should be done for online provision
- Keep lecture content up to date
- More interactive and engaging teaching/delivery
- More recorded sessions such as lecture slides with voice overs are *“literally as good as a lecture”* (S8). This is more helpful for those unable to access them in real time
- Some students find online delivery very hard whatever additional enhancements are made to content and will need additional support from staff to navigate their learning
- Awareness of the size of online files because not everyone has enough bandwidth at home to download large files
- Consider the introduction of non-assessed tasks and deadlines to keep students motivated.

However, there was some tension between the concepts of standardisation (see above) with calls for greater consideration of students' individual contexts at College, School, and year and subject level.

3.3 Hopes and concerns for the future

Concerns about the next academic year 2020/21 were focused on mode of delivery and commencement dates and their related impacts on accommodation and finances as well as future employment prospects.

Some of the participants were clear that whilst they understood the pivot to online provision, they had not really enjoyed the experience such that two students were considering deferring next year. If the next academic year is completely online, S10 will take a year out whilst S11

thinks online provision will affect her grades and whilst she doesn't want to defer as she has friends at university, she has really struggled with the online content:

"I don't think I will get the grades to pass" (S11).

S7, currently in her second year was also worried about her final year:

"[It might all be] a bit of an anti-climax":

While S3 went on:

"At the end of the day, we did not sign up to online courses. Some people may prefer to take a year out. They may want to wait until everything is back to normal because they don't feel they can learn effectively online" (S3).

There was some confusion about when students should return to campus in anticipation of the next academic year and how the delayed start to Semester 1 will impact on the duration and timing of accommodation tenancies and their alignment with Student Finance maintenance loan payments. S4 was worried about paying her rent which is due before she will receive her maintenance loan.

Students reliant on paid employment while they study were concerned about the potential impact of COVID-19 on the local job market in Lincoln. S9, for example, was worried about getting another part time job in order to live comfortably next year whilst S2 wondered about securing a graduate job at the end of the next academic year. There are also the impacts of additional labour for those students supporting family members who are ill or shielding, for example, in terms of time and money. Concerns were also expressed about securing extra-curricular opportunities to enhance CVs ready for job searching post-graduation if restrictions are still in place. Uncertainty was expressed around issues like data collection for third year dissertation projects if social distancing measures are still in place.

Participants' suggestions for the next academic year included communication and interaction, support and accessibility:

3.3.1.1 Communication and interaction

- A communications plan to address uncertainty - for next year's graduation, over the summer vacation, and in case there is a second wave of the virus
- Avoid information overload whilst also ensuring communications from the Senior Leadership Team, Colleges, Schools and programmes are in line with each other
- Consider a standardised time frame for staff responses which takes account of their additional responsibilities but helps manage students' expectations of when to expect a response
- Involve students in and during the decision making process for the next academic year:

“Moving forward when decisions are made, I think there always needs to be a reviewing process with feedback from students and staff to make sure our voices are heard. Because obviously we are the ones affected mostly” (S3).

3.3.1.2 Support and accessibility

- Create a protocol for online teaching to ensure consistency in quality
- Ensure online lectures, learning activities and resources are accessible to **all** students (including those with SpLDs)
- Set up more one-to-one meetings with tutors and drop-in sessions with programme staff
- Support and/or facilitate peer discussions (e.g. on Blackboard or MS Teams)
- Ensure all students, including those who are disengaged and struggling, can access peer support and feel connected
- Support students with caring responsibilities both emotionally and financially
- Consider support for students who are also key workers and the implications for their house mates and friends
- Further consider the impact on international students and the challenges they face
- Look at the technological infrastructure in general and Library resources in particular to ensure availability of resources
- Record live lectures to ensure that students who are key workers or have caring responsibilities are able to access them.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This section discusses the findings of the student interviews detailed in the previous section in conjunction with a rapid review of literature relating to students' experiences of COVID-19. Whilst there may well be issues that are specific to students at the University of Lincoln, sectoral knowledge in relation to groups of students experiencing disadvantage across the HE sector may be insightful.

There are several limitations to this small-scale study. Only 11 students were interviewed, and the participants were self-selecting from a small subset of students who had already taken part in APP related research. None of the students interviewed were carers or had caring responsibilities nor did we ask about the sexuality of the participants. Disappointingly, only one participant was from a BAME background. The fact that we failed to engage students who are carers merits the university's attention. This suggests it is harder to engage this group and thus student support, online teaching and other provision for these students should be considered carefully and closely in future.

We would like to suggest based on our analysis, that some APP students have been disproportionately impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. APP students are not a homogenous group and, for example, the experiences of estranged students, students with a disability and first in family students in just this small group contrast with some of their peers who benefitted from a family network and as a result appeared to be less anxious, particularly about their financial situation. Two of the students in this study, experiencing estrangement, remained in Lincoln, highlighting that returning home is not an option or is a potentially dangerous option if the estrangement was a result of abuse.

Students experiencing ongoing mental health concerns felt well supported during this period but the pandemic had heightened many of their anxieties such as S5 who lived with a nursing student and was worried about contracting COVID-19 or S6 who found that she was living alone in her private accommodation from March because her other flat mate returned home. In the absence of their usual support networks of friends whether they remained in Lincoln or went home, most of the participants needed extra support from their peers and some of them looked to their programme staff and course mates for this and were disappointed when the interaction with them was minimal.

While the pivot to online provision was a necessary reaction to the situation, some students struggled with this mode of learning; both students who disliked online study had a SpLD (S10 and S11). Accessibility for students with SpLDs must take priority and is a global equity issue as a recent questionnaire of UNESCO Chairs revealed: *"Students with disabilities are amongst the most affected as they require specific support and teaching tools that are not always available in distance learning"* (UNESCO, 2020, np).

Recent survey research of more than 2000 UK students found that 63% of respondents were most worried about their grades (Save the Student, 2020) and this was certainly evident in our interview narratives. Moreover, this may be a particular concern of BAME students who *“are consistently given lower marks and less favourable feedback than their white counterparts”* (Singh, 2020a, np). The loss of the Library as an alternative study space to a bedroom in student accommodation was felt keenly by students and lack of space to study in the family home whilst not an issue amongst our group of interviewees, may be greater for students from lower income backgrounds (Langella, 2020).

Assumptions are made about what students may or may not want or need based upon a stereotype of a 'typical' student (for example, white and middle class in Burke, 2011; Webb et al., 2017) and there is a danger that some students will fall through the cracks of the support structures we have in place. There is a reluctance to engage with the thorny issue of finance in HE since we are in a fully marketised system where students pay for their education (Benson-Eggleton, 2019) but that obfuscates the issues of those students, particularly APP students, who work to support themselves often in the absence of any familial financial fallback. While some of the participants were able to make use of the discretionary institutional financial support on offer, this was reliant on staff referrals and prior experience of the system, suggesting that seeking out help relies on students *“having an awareness of eligibility”* and *“active application”* (Pollard et al., 2019, p.54). Indeed, BAME students may be particularly vulnerable financially during the current crisis because the systems we have rely on students coming forward to pursue support when some groups of students may be reluctant to tell anyone about their situation or seek help (Singh, 2020b). A recent survey by Save the Student found that one-third of students surveyed (n=2185) had lost income from part time work (Save the Student, 2020) and the main ways in which they were making money were by applying for or extending their overdrafts (32%) or asking parents for help (31%). Over half of their respondents said that they would not use the university hardship fund (53%) suggesting that there may still be stigma around accessing these sources of help. Similarly, research by YouthSight for the Sutton Trust exploring current UK undergraduate students' perception of COVID-19 (n=895) found that around a third of those surveyed had seen a reduction in work hours, had not been paid for the work they had done or had lost their jobs and around a fifth said that their families were less financially able to support them because of the impact of the pandemic (Montacute and Holt-White, 2020).

Our interviews reveal that APP students were positive about many aspects of their recent student experience and there was consensus around the swift transition to online provision and the helpfulness and flexibility of staff offering support across the range of professional support services but communication, in particular, was one aspect of the response to the crisis where students' opinions greatly digressed. Students had received a lot of communications from the

university, the Students' Union, Student Support and Student Wellbeing and their Schools or programmes but these were sometimes inconsistent and there were disparities in students' perceptions of the success of the university's communication strategy. For the most part the communications were welcomed but they were perceived as fairly standardised, suggesting a need for more "*emotionally intelligent communication, that responds to the needs and circumstances of all*" which, can of course, be very difficult when it is not face-to-face (Sharples, 2020, np).

5. Recommendations

In light of the findings discussed above, we suggest the following in relation to student success and progression:

Recommendation 1: Communication and interaction

Transparent and concise communication incorporating a greater *awareness* of student diversity and increased teaching and learning opportunities for staff-student and student-student interaction:

- A communications plan which is shared with students indicating when they can expect to receive messaging to help address uncertainty which includes next year's graduation ceremonies, the summer vacation, and in case there is a second wave of the virus ensuring messaging from the Senior Leadership Team, Colleges, Schools and programmes are aligned and clearly setting out what students can expect from a blended learning approach
- At programme level, lecturers make regular contact with their students to communicate the plan or the 'structure' for the week and the institution considers a revised, standardised time frame for staff responses which takes account of their additional responsibilities but helps manage students' expectations of when to expect a response in this environment which is shared with students
- An ongoing commitment to involve, consult and communicate with APP students from programme level upwards through existing engagement structures or setting up new ones
- Respond to students' concerns about their future during and beyond Covid-19 by targeted promotion of the Careers and Employability support available and offering online extra-curricular activities to enhance CVs.

Recommendation 2: Support and accessibility

Flexible to respond to student diversity and acknowledge that some APP students face additional constraints during their time at university and as they prepare to graduate:

- Financial support availability and eligibility actively promoted to APP students in targeted communications that takes into account the delay to the start of the first semester and the immediate availability of some non-discretionary financial support such as shopping vouchers or food packages. Explore financial support packages for students as they transition out of university especially for those without fallback support
- Ensure all students, including those who are disengaged and struggling, can access peer support via their programmes or via signposting from Student Support or the Students'

Union. Continue the ongoing support for APP students with mental health issues and reassure all students that mental health is a university-wide priority

- Some students find online delivery very hard whatever additional enhancements are made to content and will need additional support from staff to navigate their learning. Ensure online lectures, learning activities and resources are accessible to **all** students (including those with SpLDs) - staff should familiarise themselves with students' Learning Support Plans and record all live lectures to ensure that students who are key workers or have caring responsibilities are able to access them outside of the traditional working day
- Find out which students are also key workers and provide tailored information detailing the ways in which the university can best support them, their housemates, friends and family if applicable
- Further consider the impact on international students and the unique challenges they face through a similar, qualitative or quantitative review.

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