



LINCOLN HIGHER EDUCATION
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Access and Participation Plan Student Consultation Group:

The Impact of COVID-19 Phase II

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1. Executive Summary

This report focuses on the ongoing experiences of undergraduate students who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE) or who self-identify with characteristics of disadvantage at the University of Lincoln (UoL) during the academic year 2020/21 as the COVID-19 pandemic continued. 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 has the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic impacted on your experiences and learning at the University of Lincoln during the academic year?*

Eight students were interviewed individually from a small subset of students, some of whom had already taken part in previous APP related research and Phase I of this longitudinal study. The interviews were audio-recorded and detailed notes taken by the researchers. Qualitative analysis was completed manually.

Students' perceptions of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their continuing university experiences and their hopes and fears for the future are summarised as follows.

1.1 Impacts of COVID-19 on APP students' experience of the 2020/21 academic year

Evidence of a greater acceptance of online and blended delivery of teaching was found compared to phase I of this study, although opinions were divided on the preferred amount of face-to-face teaching. Some participants experienced difficulties engaging with online learning due to poor internet connectivity or a lack of suitable study space. Perceptions of university and programme level communications had improved, although the reduction in frequency of communications over the summer vacation did cause some anxiety.

Participants found it harder to connect with other students, and easier to become disconnected during periods of self-isolation - this was linked to mental and physical health challenges. Support from personal tutors, the Student Wellbeing team and existing social and family networks were highly valued, though a lack of access to these positioned students at greater risk of adverse experiences. Overall participants' perceptions of the university remained positive yet fragile. A sense of loss of control, lack of agency and feeling unheard could disrupt this relationship as the pandemic continues.

1.2 Hopes and fears for the future

Immediate hopes and fears expressed by participants focused on the possible impact of the changes to teaching and assessment on degree outcomes, although this was less marked than in Phase I. Concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the availability of graduate career and on student employability were expressed, as were worries about the short-term financial impact of loss of opportunities for part-time work which many students rely upon to support their studies. This loss exposed students from less affluent backgrounds to greater financial precarity.

By way of recommendations, we suggest the following:

1.3 Facilitate connections

Students found it harder to connect to others, and connections between course peers seemed to be particularly weakened by blended delivery. Changes to the student experience because of the pandemic made it easier for students to become disconnected and isolated. Risk factors indicated by this study included large cohort size, requirements to self-isolate, and lack of access to family or social support networks. UoL should try to identify at risk students early and encourage engagement with support services like Student Wellbeing and engagement with online one-to-one tutorials. Teaching strategies which maximise opportunities for peer interaction should be considered where appropriate, particularly for larger cohorts where peer to peer connections may be reduced.

1.4 Support students studying remotely

The importance of 'home' was identified as a theme. Some students were happier working within their family home and would prefer an option to remain there rather than having to live in Lincoln to attend very limited face-to-face teaching sessions which are often moved online anyway due to staff self-isolating. Where possible this option should be available to them. Other students enjoyed the option of face-to-face teaching and of living on campus, but may struggle with challenges, for example poor internet speed within private accommodation, lack of quiet space to work, antisocial behaviour from neighbours, and access to resources and hardware. The Students' Union could support students by improving knowledge of the extent and impact of poor environments and internet access for students living in private accommodation. UoL Student Support services could develop guidance for students living in private accommodation and for commuter students, supporting safe access to hardware, software, and study spaces where feasible. Continuing recognition of, and sensitive responses to, individual circumstances in the context of assignment submission deadlines and class participation are recommended.

1.5 Recognise and support access to significant spaces on campus

Understanding the geography of campus and the city was important to students' developing a sense of belonging at UoL. Certain places on campus have a special significance, particularly the Library and SU, but there remained confusion over if, and when, these spaces can be accessed. Particular attention to communicating this information should be paid. Policies regarding library loans of physical books, access to printers and quiet study spaces and the issuing of library fines should also be clearly communicated.

1.6 Keep students 'in the loop'

Overall participants appreciated the university's communications, and particularly liked personalised communications. Institution and programme level communications gave a sense of the institutional position in relation to the changing external environment and the latter gave practical, tailored information of relevance to the individual student. Timing communications following government announcements was positively received as they provided immediate clarification in an uncertain environment.

However, too many communications felt overwhelming, and a focus on student needs is important when identifying which communications to send out and when. Late communications regarding timetables caused anxiety and frustration for some participants, and the role of timetables in helping students to anticipate the coming semester and in providing a sense of purpose should not be underestimated. Individual staff have a role to play here, and the avoidance of "*glib*" impersonal communications is so important, particularly in response to student support service enquiries. Speedy responses at a time of high anxiety and uncertainty were also appreciated.

1.7 Consider the shifting relationship between students and the institution

There was evidence of a shift towards a more consumer-focussed discourse amongst participants, with typical concerns commonly reported in the mainstream media regarding COVID-19 and the student experience such as 'value for money', 'unfairness' and 'disadvantage', all reflected in participant responses. Concerns about changes to teaching and assessment practices (for example, variable quality of online teaching and move away from exams to coursework-based assessments) and their potential impact on grades were identified. UoL should continue to support teaching staff to deliver high-quality online provision, be clear about why changes to assessment practices are being made and ensure students less confident with new assessment formats are identified and directed to the appropriate support.

Conversely, there was also evidence of students retaining faith in the institution, recognising the efforts staff were making to address the challenges caused by the pandemic. While a sense of dissatisfaction was evident it was not necessarily being directed at the institution, although a failure to address student concerns may lead to a loss of confidence in the university.

1.8 Help students to feel seen and heard to enable a sense of agency

Students spoke about having a sense of loss of agency, having to “*do as you are told*” and feeling that their wishes were not always being heard and acted upon. An example provided by one participant described the university turning down a request endorsed by most students on a programme to move teaching online. This refusal was attributed to university policy and illustrates the risk of students losing faith in systems and processes designed to support student engagement and capture student voice, for example, student representatives. Communications responding to student requests need to be clear about the rationale for the response. It would be useful to consider the current mechanisms for student engagement and if these are fit for purpose in the pandemic and post-pandemic university.

Anxiety was a feature of participants lives, both a generalised anxiety associated with the pandemic and specific worries relating to personal circumstances. Acknowledging student anxieties during the pandemic can be powerful (Byrom et al., 2020), and it can be useful to raise awareness of this amongst tutors and professional support staff. Some of the concerns identified such as fears about employment prospects should be proactively addressed by supporting students to develop strategies to navigate the COVID and post-COVID jobs market.

Continuing to recognise the diversity of the student body by acknowledging the needs of different student groups can support students to feel part of their institution. While much work has been undertaken by the university and the SU in relation to this, one participant who was a mature student did not feel that social events were inclusive for people like him whilst Lincoln 6 was very critical of the institution for not giving students like herself with disabilities the option to go fully online this academic year which she perceived other universities had done.

2. Background

A small-scale qualitative snapshot examination of the experiences of undergraduate students at Lincoln who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE) or who self-identify with characteristics of disadvantage was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic period of closures and restrictions (March 2020 onwards) by staff in the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) (Phase I). This process was repeated in November 2020 to continue to explore undergraduates' experiences during the new academic year, 2020/21, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued (Phase II).

3. Method

To adhere to ethical standards, APP funded staff (Dr. Rachel Spacey and Rebecca Sanderson) submitted an amendment (Ref: 2020-0579) to an existing student consultation which had a favourable ethical outcome (Ref: 2019-0579) to draw on existing student contacts already recruited to the Access and Participation Plan (APP) Student Consultation Group and other prior projects with under-represented students including:

- *Lincoln Equality of Attainment Project* (Ref: 2019-0867)
- *UROS projects – LEAP related* (Ref: 2020-0867).

In addition, colleagues in the Students' Union (SU) promoted the call to participants via social media and recruitment emails were sent to the Student Wellbeing Student Advisory Board. As this study was an iteration of the Access and Participation Plan Student Consultation Group, participants received a £10 e-voucher in recognition of their contribution.

The over-arching research question raised and investigated here was: *How has the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic impacted on your experiences and learning at the University of Lincoln during the academic year?*

A total of eight students were interviewed individually using Microsoft Teams in November and December 2020. With their permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken by the interviewer. With time constraints in mind, the interviews were not transcribed verbatim, but relevant quotes included from the recordings were included in the analysis. Qualitative data analysis was completed manually. Key questions explored participants' views of the communications they received from the UoL prior to their return and at the start of this academic year, their expectations of student life and the reality, the support they have received and require to stay the course, and their hopes and fears concerning their future.

The findings from the analysis are presented below and include students' perceptions of their university experience during the COVID-19 global pandemic with a focus on their views of teaching, learning and support since studies recommenced in October 2020.

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

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the participants

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

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

For purposes of anonymity, the participants were named Lincoln 1, Lincoln 2 etc. They primarily consisted of returning students (five third year students and two second year students) and just one new entrant (one Science Foundation Year (SFY) student). Four of the participants took part in the first part of this study completed in June 2020 (Lincoln 1, Lincoln 2, Lincoln 3, and Lincoln 4). The other four students were all new to the APP consultation. The features of the participants were as follows:

- Lincoln 1: Female, first in family, lower socio-economic status, year 3, College of Social Science (CoSS)
- Lincoln 2: Male, disability, mature student, year 3, Lincoln International Business School (LIBS)
- Lincoln 3: Female, disability, year 3, CoSS
- Lincoln 4: Male, disability, first in family, year 3, CoSS
- Lincoln 5: Female, BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic), first in family, lower socio-economic status, mature student, year 0, College of Science (CoS)
- Lincoln 6: Male, disability, year 3, College of Arts (CoA)
- Lincoln 7: Male, first in family, lower socio-economic status, year 2, CoS
- Lincoln 8: Male, disability, lower socio-economic status, year 2, CoA.

4.2 Impacts of COVID-19 from September 2020 onwards

Feelings about returning/starting in 2020/21

Overwhelmingly, the students had felt anxious (“*very reluctant and nervous*” (Lincoln 6); “*apprehensive*” (Lincoln 7)) about returning to university and the commencement of this academic year. This reluctance was tinged with a certain inevitability, that their student experience would not be like anything they had expected before they began university or that they themselves might catch the virus:

“I knew it wasn’t going to be perfect” (Lincoln 2).

“I got it in my head that if I go [back to university] I will probably get it [coronavirus]”(Lincoln 4).

All but one had considered withdrawing from university but had felt that the upheaval of leaving and the uncertainty around the availability of employment and the course of the pandemic was likely to create more problems than staying. Students in their third year rationalised that they did not have long left until they completed their course, so it was better to stay:

“It crossed my mind... but I don’t think I could drop out” (Lincoln 1).

“Withdrawing was a thought in the back of my mind, but I shut it down” (Lincoln 2).

One third year student with a disability had wondered if she might be able to stay at home rather than return to Lincoln and just commute from Norfolk to Lincoln two days a week but found that the timetable for her programme was not released in time for her to make that decision as she had to agree to a tenancy agreement. This had proved rather irritating since she was only attending physical teaching sessions two days a week. In contrast, Lincoln 7 had worried that he might not be able to return to Lincoln which was a concern since studying in his home environment was just “*not an option*”.

The perceptions and feelings of the SFY student (Lincoln 5) were in marked contrast since she expressed excitement at starting university despite the restrictions. This student was looking forward to being independent and living away from her family in Leicester. Although she wondered how the teaching would work in practice and expressed fear that having asthma made her more vulnerable to the virus, she was not particularly concerned about the impact COVID-19 restrictions might have on her student experience.

Communication and Information

The communication prior to the start of this academic year was viewed positively by most of the interviewees. It was considered timely, responsive to government announcements and reassuring for the most part:

"If there was an update in government policy, we were told either straight away or we were emailed to say this will be formulated in the next few days" (Lincoln 2).

The sense of optimism despite the complexity the pandemic wrought on HE on the part of the institution was detected and appreciated:

"They didn't lose hope" (Lincoln 8).

However, some university-level communications were criticised for being overly long, vague, and insufficient in number prior to the return to campus in October:

"Like they started off informing us every day...but I think there was a lot of uncertainty and I don't think we were that well informed" (Lincoln 3).

"I just felt like they were regurgitating the same thing over and over. It was long blocks of text. I did read it" (Lincoln 6).

"The emails could have been cut down a bit for people with learning difficulties" (Lincoln 7).

One student felt that the communications were often duplicated. Lincoln 7 observed that the general email from the University was followed by one from the Students' Union, then the College, then the School, then their tutor and at times, they could be contradictory which he found confusing.

A third-year student felt that university emails seemed to be aimed at appeasing the fears of those about to start their studies in Lincoln rather than reassuring existing, returning students.

Three students agreed that it was not always clear to them which buildings they were able to go in once they returned to campus. One student suggested a virtual tour or images of the changes on campus within email communications would have been helpful. Confusion about the accessibility of key buildings such as the Library and the Students' Union was a particular source of frustration.

4.3 Expectations versus Reality

Student Experience

The students were asked to reflect on what their expectations of university life had been over the summer vacation and prior to their return to Lincoln in October. In relation to the social aspects of their student experience, they had all come to expect very little by the time they returned. All but one of the interviewees was a returning student so they were not concerned about making new friends. For some, the initial few weeks at university and the ease in restrictions meant that they were able to see many of their university friends even if the usual student nights were not running in pubs and clubs. The interviewees who lived in accommodation with friends discovered that the 'rule of 6' meant they were spending a lot more time together and this was generally working well. Lincoln 3 described playing card games and online gaming with flat mates whilst feeling "*distant*" from her other friends.

"We've made the most of the flat"(Lincoln 4).

But even the students who had solid, pre-existing friendship groups were experiencing a sense of disconnectedness as the pandemic continued into its eighth month despite meeting friends online for Zoom parties:

"Like I don't feel like talking to anyone" (Lincoln 1).

"Social media can't replace what we should have had"(Lincoln 7).

Those living in studio type, sole occupancy apartments were obviously finding socialising a lot more difficult. Lincoln 6 described her "*non-existent*" social life exacerbated by her health conditions, noting:

"It's a nightmare [to see friends] if you don't live with them" (Lincoln 6).

The SFY student had hoped for the full, stereotypical student experience, "*fun*" and "*going out*" but realised by the time she came to university that "*none of it was possible*" (Lincoln 5). She was living by herself on campus so did not really know anyone in her building but had fortunately connected with some course mates before the second lockdown period commenced in November.

Academic Experience

In terms of their programme and its delivery, most of the students had found that their expectations were not realised either because they had anticipated more face-to-face teaching and learning than they received or because they would have preferred it all to be online. It was in this regard that the opinions of the students diverged the most.

Lincoln 3, in her third year, had hoped there would be more online content whilst Lincoln 6 who has underlying health conditions would have preferred it all online as would Lincoln 1 who had two hours of in-person teaching per week.

Lincoln 2 was severely disappointed with the reduction in contact hours this academic year and did not feel that the quality of the online teaching was consistent, with some lecturers struggling to cope with the technology:

"My expectations were good in terms of the online lectures, since then it has gone quite drastically downhill" (Lincoln 2).

However, now he has returned home, he would be happy to have all teaching online: *"If I was able to learn remotely that would suit all my worries"*.

Similarly, Lincoln 7 was looking forward to the blended approach but was shocked to find little face-to-face teaching on receiving his timetable. He felt that the university had broken its promise to students and with so little face-to-face contact, it would have been better to be fully online.

Lincoln 4, a third year in the College of Social Science, had thought most of the delivery would be online and was pleasantly surprised he had some face-to-face teaching sessions. Lincoln 8, a second year, was happy with his programme in the College of Arts and felt that it was very similar to his experiences of the first lockdown period.

Lincoln 5 was enjoying the combination of online and face-to-face programme delivery, especially the option to learn at your own pace but did sometimes feel that the face-to-face teaching repeated what she had watched online.

Two of the students expressed frustration that their requests for full online delivery had gone unheard. Lincoln 2 (in his third year) and Lincoln 7 (in his second year) both relayed that their requests to move online were refused:

"A lot of the students were asking about it... This is the way it has to be done... but I don't feel like student voices were being listened to" (Lincoln 2).

In terms of access to study resources including books, eBooks, and journal articles, most of the interviewees' experiences were positive. Lincoln 2 and Lincoln 4 observed there were a lot more eBooks available this academic year than last and more resources were being put on or signposted to on BlackBoard by lecturers. Unfortunately, Lincoln 7 had found that when he loaned physical copies of university library books and returned them on the due date, the time the items spent in quarantine meant that they were overdue once processed and he had accumulated fines:

"So a week is actually 3 days... That in itself is really annoying" (Lincoln 7).

4.4 Feelings now

All but one of the students were in Lincoln at the time of the interviews in either private rented or campus accommodation. Lincoln 2 had returned home early as he was struggling to cope with anti-social behaviour by other residents in his accommodation. Two of the students lived by themselves. Overall, they appeared to be coping as well as could be expected with the impact the COVID-19 pandemic was having on their university experience. There were some concerns about feeling demotivated (this was during the second lockdown in November/December 2020) and having difficulties focusing on academic studies at times. As the interviews progressed and details of the 'travel window' emerged, the students were generally pleased to know about the arrangements for returning home. One student had already returned home (Lincoln 2) and the other seven all intended to make use of the window period including testing. Lincoln 5 was disappointed about going home early as she was enjoying her independence at university while Lincoln 7 expressed his concern about travelling home on public transport noting that the university had urged students to travel home by private transport if possible, he pointed out that "*I only have my Mum and Dad and neither of them drive*".

Opportunities for interaction

The interviewees seemed to feel more connected to their housemates (if applicable) than their course mates, apart from the SFY student (Lincoln 5) and Lincoln 8. Six of the eight interviewees described feeling disconnected from their course mates. There was a sense of bewilderment, wondering what had happened to some course mates since March which was not restricted to those on programmes with large cohorts, as Lincoln 3, a third year studying Education and Psychology described:

"Half of us are online, half are in person...So I don't really know what's happened to them... So it's a bit weird... I just don't know whereabouts in the country they are" (Lincoln 3).

"I feel a lot less connected [to course mates] than I did last year. It depends on the group you are in" (Lincoln 6).

Lincoln 2, a third year LIBS student, noted that there was no group work underway at the time of the interview, which meant he was not having to communicate with other students on this course, with the result that:

"I do feel quite disconnected from other students" (Lincoln 2).

All the students experienced some form of isolation since they had resumed/started their studies whether physical isolation through living by themselves or because they had to self-isolate. Lincoln 1, for example, returned to lectures and was then required to self-isolate almost immediately and while she found it frustrating at

times, was able to continue with her programme remotely. She lived in a house of six and apart from not being able to go out and go to the shops, she coped well. Lincoln 8 had had to self-isolate three times including the time he himself had COVID-19. Although he did not experience any of the coronavirus symptoms, he did find the periods of self-isolation very challenging in terms of motivating himself to study. Lincoln 8 has mental health issues and found it very difficult to function without a routine which involved being on campus:

"Six weeks of staring at a wall... It's harder to get yourself out of bed because I can't even leave the house... You just feel really unmotivated... I've struggled... without a routine that involves going out of the house" (Lincoln 8).

University support services, friends, and family

Despite the sense of isolation and disconnectedness most of the students conveyed in the interviews, support from university support services such as Student Wellbeing (SW), from personal tutors or from families and friends was being accessed and used to sustain the students. Four of the five students with a disability experienced mental health issues, for example, and three of the four were in communication with staff in the SW on an ongoing basis and were overwhelmingly positive about the support they received. One student, Lincoln 2, however, did not feel comfortable engaging with SW as he had felt his issues had not been acknowledged. He preferred to rely on his family and friends for support with his mental health issues. Lincoln 3, now in her third year, had not used any of the university support services until recently. She had been worried about whether to return home before the recent lockdown and her tutor suggested she speak to SW. She found this signposting very helpful. Similarly, online, individual sessions with tutors were also valued.

Financially, the interviewees seemed relatively confident that they would cope this academic year. Four were in receipt of the UoL scholarship¹. Lincoln 5 saw this as the university being supportive of her situation. Six of the eight interviewees worked part-time whilst they studied during vacations and/or during term-time. Despite the restrictions imposed to cope with the pandemic, most of them had still worked over the summer vacation. Lincoln 8, for example, worked as a COVID-19 tester in Leicester. One of the interviewees financially supported his parents and gave them the money he earned from a part-time online tutoring job. Two of the students mentioned that they found applying for Disabled Students' Allowance onerous such that Lincoln 7 (the student who helped support his parents financially) abandoned his attempts to secure the letters and statements required to prove eligibility whilst

¹ The UoL Scholarship is awarded to full-time, Home, undergraduate students whose household income is below the threshold currently set at £45,875 a year.

Lincoln 8 felt that the £200 contribution from students towards the DSA was too much.

Reflections on how the university has managed the COVID-19 pandemic

Despite the feelings of loss and sometimes, frustration, which shaped the interview narratives, the eight interviewees all felt that the university had done its best under the circumstances:

"They can't do any more, with the restrictions. They've done their absolute best and I commend them for it" (Lincoln 8).

"I have faith they have done everything they could" (Lincoln 7).

Admirable adjustments and support included the food packages and prescribed medication delivered to self-isolating students, permitted social engagement opportunities promoted by the Students' Union, visible safety arrangements on campus including clear signage, improved online course activity and increased availability of study resources.

However, there was dissatisfaction shared by some of the interviewees, that they had not been given the option to go fully online and that some requests via Student Representatives and course tutors had been refused. Lincoln 6, for example, who had underlying health conditions felt that students like her who were worried about contracting the virus had not been considered enough. She found face-to-face teaching very stressful and navigating the campus, notwithstanding the precautions to support social distancing measures, rather nerve-wracking and so would have preferred full online delivery.

At the same time, some of the students were saddened by the reduction in face-to-face teaching and contact hours and felt short-changed. Lincoln 2, in his final year in LIBS, seemed to have been the most affected by this reduction in terms of his feelings about his experience:

"But seeing my timetable and the hours cut down was a little diminishing really" (Lincoln 2).

4.5 Hopes and concerns for the future

While much of the focus of the interviews was on the students' current situation, they were asked to reflect on their immediate future as well as their plans post-graduation.

In relation to their degree programmes, there was a little apprehension expressed about how the changes in assessment type to counter the effects of the pandemic might impact negatively on outcomes. Lincoln 1 was concerned that with her

course's move to assignment-based assessment, she might not do as well as she perceived she would in examinations while Lincoln 7 felt that the pandemic would affect his overall grade outcome:

"I will be very surprised with how Semester A goes... it will undoubtedly have had a negative effect on the overall outcome of the degree" (Lincoln 7).

The interviewees were asked their thoughts about completing their programme and graduating. Of the five third years, one had a firm plan to undertake a career in teaching whilst the others were feeling less confident about what they would do particularly if the pandemic and its effects continued. Two were thinking about postgraduate study, one because he was concerned that the impacts of the pandemic on extra-curricular activities and work experience meant that his plans had gone awry and as a result, he felt he was presenting *"a weaker case in my CV and personal statement"* although he did acknowledge that *"everyone else is in the same boat"* (Lincoln 4). Two students planned to return home and live with their parents and get a job locally whilst they worked out what to do next. Having a plan, even if that meant working in a non-graduate role, was important and seemed to help with the anxiety and stress they were experiencing about the future:

"My parents have always said I can still live at home... I'll just go home and work in retail... until I decide" (Lincoln 1).

"Wait for the right job" (Lincoln 2).

Three of the interviewees had already accessed content from the Careers and Employability team at UoL including careers workshops, and one intended to do so later this year. The SFY student was impressed with what she had already discovered about C&E and had plans to complete the Lincoln Award to enhance her future career prospects:

"We've had a lovely lady from the Careers Services... she's been fantastic at maximising the opportunities around networking" (Lincoln 4).

There was also a sense that some of the students were trying not to think too far ahead, too worried about the impacts the pandemic might be having on the future jobs market:

"I'm trying not to think too far ahead because of circumstances at the minute" (Lincoln 6).

"Still early days" (Lincoln 2).

5. Discussion

As this report comprises Phase II of a longitudinal study of the experience of University of Lincoln undergraduate students during the coronavirus pandemic, this section focuses on a comparison between phase I of the study (which was carried out in May/June 2020) and the results from phase II (carried out in November/December 2020). This is contextualised with literature investigating student experiences during the pandemic within the wider Higher Education sector both in the UK and farther afield, since the completion of phase I (June 2020).

Considering the strength of the conclusions there are several limitations to this small-scale study. Only eight 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 care experienced, estranged from family or had caring responsibilities, for example. The researchers found that recruiting participants, especially new students, to phase II was much harder than it had been in May/June 2020 despite the financial incentive offered to encourage participation. This may be due to the rapid pace of change taking place since September 2020 and the numbers of students who were self-isolating and/or infected with COVID-19 at UoL at the time of recruitment.

5.1 Impact of COVID-19 on the student experience

Online teaching and assessment

In Phase I, there was some resistance to online delivery of teaching with issues around the availability of lectures such as the inconsistent use of recording of live lectures, and reduced opportunities for interaction with course peers in sessions. There was certainly evidence of a greater acceptance of online and/or blended learning amongst the interviewees in Phase II and students perceived there was increased organisation within Schools and across programmes in relation to planning and delivery.

Increased acceptance of online delivery was also noted in a recent survey of more than 1000 undergraduate students undertaken by the Higher Education Policy Institute and YouthSight in November 2020. They found that satisfaction levels with online learning had grown since March: "*More than half of full-time undergraduate students (59%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the online learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching, up from 42% in June 2020 and 49% in March 2020*" (Hewitt, 2020).

This reaction may be due to the efforts the university made to manage expectations prior to students' return to university (see *Communication and interaction*), increased capacity building internally through staff training on digital accessibility,

perhaps combined with a growing acceptance of the pandemic by students as a medium-term rather than just a short-term phenomenon.

Many of the students in Phase I had felt that their module marks and degree outcomes would be negatively affected by the adjustments made to assessment brought in during the pandemic but in Phase II this did not seem to be as much of an issue for the students. There had been little criticism of the quality of online provision in Phase I but in Phase II, some complaints emerged about lectures being pre-recorded when the timetable said they would be 'live' and staff uploading resources hours, rather than days, before taught sessions. In Phase I students had felt that staff had done their best in the time available to them whilst in Phase II, some students were subjecting their online lectures to greater scrutiny, perhaps because (as Jackson writing about the Pearson/WonkHE (2020) student expectations survey suggested) in the absence of social opportunities, what else is there for students to do?

"Covid-19 has thrown teaching quality into sharp relief, in the absence of all the other activities that would otherwise be filling up students' days"
(Jackson, 2020, np).

Access to adequate broadband and suitable study spaces had not been a significant issue in Phase I but did emerge in the analysis for Phase II. Two of the interviewees expressed their frustration at the poor internet connections they had to manage with in private student accommodation which was affecting their ability to access lectures. Accessibility issues are therefore still an issue for some, as highlighted in the Pearson/WonkHE survey of more than 3000 students which found that students "referred to hardware and connectivity challenges" (2020, p.9). Confusion over which university buildings students were permitted to enter also highlighted the significance of the Library and the value of being able to physically access its resources as well as the opportunity to study in a different environment, away from student accommodation.

Communication and interaction

In Phase I, a key recommendation was to enhance communications to students with transparent and concise messaging. There was certainly clear evidence of more positive perceptions of institutional messaging and its timely arrival in the wake of government announcements in the interviews in Phase II:

"If there was an update in government policy, we were told either straight away or we were emailed to say this will be formulated in the next few days"
(Lincoln 2).

As Byrom et al. (2020) found in relation to postgraduate research students during the pandemic, communications which are personal, timely, clear, honest, and regular appear to be the most effective. Certainly, the regularity of communication was important since some students felt worried when the university did not really keep in touch over the summer vacation (Lincoln 3), suggesting that the regular flow of information through university email is critical (Sahu, 2020):

"I think it would have been reassuring [over the summer] because a lot of people were feeling very uncertain... but it definitely created a lot of uncertainty" (Lincoln 3).

Support and accessibility

Digital accessibility problems did not occur amongst the eight students interviewed and yet accessibility, particularly for students with a Specific Learning Difference, was evident in Phase I. There were, however, some connectivity issues in Phase II (see section above). In terms of institutional support, services such as Student Wellbeing (SW) and the support of personal tutors were highly praised in Phase II and all but one of the students with mental health issues was in ongoing dialogue with SW. The interviewees were happy with the interactions they had with their tutors including, for those who had worried about returning for the new academic year, over the summer vacation. This contrasts with Phase I which found that students' experiences of interactions with their tutors had been inconsistent during the period March to June 2020.

Financial concerns remain an issue but appeared less urgent in Phase II compared with Phase I. This may be because Phase II was undertaken during the first semester of 2020/21 when students had recently been in receipt of their maintenance loan whilst students in Phase I were at the end of their academic and financial year. However, six of the eight interviewees worked part-time whilst they studied either in the vacations or during term-time and it was clear from the interviews that reliance on part-time jobs was considered risky as many of them had not worked recently. For six of the eight interviewees, family were there to support them if they struggled financially in terms of helping with out with their costs, highlighting that family is an important buffer for students in times of trouble. Family members were there to support students financially, practically, and emotionally, which highlights that students without that cushion can struggle as illustrated in the precarity experienced by estranged students in Phase I. Two of the students in Phase II were unable to rely on their family for financial support not because they were estranged but because of their low incomes. Lincoln 7 was helping to support his family financially whilst Lincoln 4 was worried that if something happened to his parents' ability to earn money during the current situation, he might struggle:

"There's always been a reliance on parents but there's an extra stress on everyone now... there's so much more pressure financially at home" (Lincoln 4).

Both these students were first in family and their concerns about finances resonated with Bono et al.'s US COVID-19 study which found that students whose parents had not entered Higher Education "experienced worse academic and financial impacts due to the pandemic compared to their higher-parent education peers" (p.52).

Social and psychological wellbeing

Despite the university's commitment to blended learning, in practice due to requirements for self-isolation affecting both teaching staff and students, participants described temporary cessations in face-to-face teaching throughout the first term. Their accounts suggest these periods of online delivery, particularly when combined with self-isolation, increased the risk of experiencing feelings of disconnection and of becoming disengaged from their learning and from peers. As in Phase I, some participants directly linked this isolation to a lack of motivation, although the extent to which isolation was identified as an issue by participants was more marked in phase II. In contrast, for one student with existing health conditions, attending face-to-face teaching was stressful due to an increased risk of becoming seriously ill if they contracted COVID-19.

Several studies have linked the pandemic to increasing the incidence and severity of issues with mental and physical health. Majumdar et al. (2020) in their study of students and office workers found links between changes to working practices resulting from social distancing and lockdowns with increased feelings of isolation, physical and mental health difficulties, and sleep disorders; similarly, Jackson's (2020) summary of the Pearson/WonkHE survey of 3500 UK HE students also identified negative impacts on the pandemic on mental health. Savage et al. (2020) in their study of UK HE students found behavioural changes, in particular a reduction in physical activity due to requirements to self-isolate, which was associated with an increase in perceived stress. In one study of doctoral student mental health and the impact of the pandemic, risk factors for increased levels of mental distress included being female and having a disability (Byrom, 2020).

Several researchers have emphasised the importance of student support services, particularly mental health services, in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic upon student wellbeing (Morgan, 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Zhai and Du, 2020). Indeed, most of the participants in this study had found engagement with Student Wellbeing helpful in supporting their mental health, therefore continuing promotion of the service, particularly signposting from personal tutors, is indicated.

Relationship between students and institution

There is some evidence of a shift in the relationship between students and UoL within participant responses in this phase II study. Although arguably students had their expectations managed ahead of semester A (in contrast with the first lockdown which was unexpected) and had made a choice to come or return to the University, there was a divergence of views regarding the most appropriate delivery (blended or fully online) and the consistency of quality teaching. Media coverage over the summer and autumn of 2020 often presented a negative picture of UK universities and their treatment of students (Dickinson, 2020), and elements of this discourse were apparent in participant comments for example regarding "*value for money*" of their courses or being "*disadvantaged*" by university policies. Some participants felt that their needs and views were ignored by the institution and the students communicated a sense of resignation and loss of control.

Although most participants did not hold UoL responsible for their disappointment at the current time, emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic is testing the relationships between students and their institutions. A recent survey of 3500 UK students reported significant dissatisfaction with the university experience, with only ten per cent of respondents indicating they did not hold their university responsible for dealing with the impairment of their student experience and 47 per cent of respondents indicating they wanted a fee reduction or refund as compensation (Jackson, 2020). Given this emerging evidence and the ongoing media headlines describing a consumer-orientated relationship between HE students and institutions, the importance of nurturing positive relations between the university and its students cannot be overstated.

5.2 Hopes and fears for the future

Much of the discussion in the interviews focused on students' plans once they had finished their course/post-graduation, which was probably influenced by the number of third years who participated. Immediate hopes and fears focused on the potential impacts the changes to teaching and assessment practices might have on degree outcomes, but this was not as marked as it was in Phase I. However, there was more concern expressed in Phase II in relation to employability and an awareness of a potentially challenging future jobs market whilst in Phase I, much of the worry focused on the availability of part-time employment in the local jobs market in Lincoln. Indeed, a recent report from Universities UK (2020) would seem to confirm the worries of students about future employment as they highlight "*all the indicators appear to suggest that the UK is going to face a severe and deep recession*

accompanied by sharp rise in unemployment" (2020, p.2) with the higher likelihood of graduates struggling to find employment.

6. Conclusion

This small-scale rapid qualitative review explored the question 'how did the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic impact on students' experiences and learning at the University of Lincoln during the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year'? Comprising phase II of a longitudinal study beginning in May 2020, a comparison of student views then and now can provide useful learning for the university senior leadership team. Key issues identified include:

6.1 Online teaching and assessment

This study found evidence of a greater level of acceptance of blended delivery compared to phase I. However, there was greater scrutiny by students of the quality of provision, and issues of accessibility (for example, access to reliable broadband or suitable study spaces) were more apparent than in phase I.

6.2 Communication and interaction

Participants were more satisfied with university and programme level communications than in phase I, but cessation of communications over the summer vacation had caused some anxiety.

6.3 Support and accessibility

The importance of the Student Wellbeing service and support from tutors was highlighted by participants. The results of phase II suggest a greater level of consistency of support from academic tutors compared to phase I. Finances remain a key issue for students, and a lack of financial support from parents places some students in a particularly precarious position.

6.4 Social and psychological wellbeing

Periods of isolation were experienced by participants, and these were linked with reduced motivation and mental health challenges. As in phase I, support from the Student Wellbeing team was highly valued.

6.5 Relationship between students and the institution

There was evidence of greater concern with the nature of the relationship between individual students and the institution than in Phase I, with concerns over value for money, acknowledgment of student voice and fair treatment perhaps reflecting

negative press over the summer and autumn. A sense of loss of agency and voice was a concern which may have implications for the future relationship between UoL and its students.

6.6 Hopes and fears for the future

Some concern over the impact of online learning, assessment and grades was evident, but to a lesser degree than phase I. Concerns about the financial implications of lower availability of part-time work to support students' studies were expressed, as were fears about the impact of the pandemic on post-graduation employment prospects.

7. Recommendations

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

7.1 Facilitate connections

Students found it harder to connect to others, and connections between course peers seemed to be particularly weakened by blended delivery. Changes to the student experience because of the pandemic made it easier for students to become disconnected and isolated. Risk factors indicated by this study included large cohort size, requirements to self-isolate, and lack of access to family or social support networks. UoL should try to identify at risk students early and encourage engagement with support services like Student Wellbeing and engagement with online one-to-one tutorials. Teaching strategies which maximise opportunities for peer interaction should be considered where appropriate, particularly for larger cohorts where peer to peer connections may be reduced.

7.2 Support students studying remotely

The importance of 'home' was identified as a theme. Some students were happier working within their family home and would prefer an option to remain there rather than having to live in Lincoln to attend very limited face-to-face teaching sessions which are often moved online anyway due to staff self-isolating. Where possible this option should be available to them. Other students enjoyed the option of face-to-face teaching and of living on campus, but may struggle with challenges, for example poor internet speed within private accommodation, lack of quiet space to work, antisocial behaviour from neighbours, and access to resources and hardware. The Students' Union could support students by improving knowledge of the extent and impact of poor environments and internet access for students living in private accommodation. UoL Student Support services could develop guidance for

students living in private accommodation and for commuter students, supporting safe access to hardware, software, and study spaces where feasible. Continuing recognition of, and sensitive responses to, individual circumstances in the context of assignment submission deadlines and class participation are recommended.

7.3 Recognise and support access to significant spaces on campus

Understanding the geography of campus and the city was important to students' developing a sense of belonging at UoL. Certain places on campus have a special significance, particularly the Library and SU, but there remained confusion over if, and when, these spaces can be accessed. Particular attention to communicating this information should be paid. Policies regarding library loans of physical books, access to printers and quiet study spaces and the issuing of library fines should also be clearly communicated.

7.4 Keep students 'in the loop'

Overall participants appreciated the university's communications, and particularly liked personalised communications. Institution and programme level communications gave a sense of the institutional position in relation to the changing external environment and the latter gave practical, tailored information of relevance to the individual student. Timing communications following government announcements was positively received as they provided immediate clarification in an uncertain environment.

However, too many communications felt overwhelming, and a focus on student needs is important when identifying which communications to send out and when. Late communications regarding timetables caused anxiety and frustration for some participants, and the role of timetables in helping students to anticipate the coming semester and in providing a sense of purpose should not be underestimated. Individual staff have a role to play here, and the avoidance of "glib" impersonal communications is so important, particularly in response to student support service enquiries. Speedy responses at a time of high anxiety and uncertainty were also appreciated.

7.5 Consider the shifting relationship between students and the institution

There was evidence of a shift towards a more consumer-focussed discourse amongst participants, with typical concerns commonly reported in the mainstream media regarding COVID-19 and the student experience such as 'value for money', 'unfairness' and 'disadvantage', all reflected in participant responses. Concerns about changes to teaching and assessment practices (for example, variable quality of online teaching and move away from exams to coursework-based assessments) and their potential impact on grades were identified. UoL should continue to support

teaching staff to deliver high-quality online provision, be clear about why changes to assessment practices are being made and ensure students less confident with new assessment formats are identified and directed to the appropriate support.

Conversely, there was also evidence of students retaining faith in the institution, recognising the efforts staff were making to address the challenges caused by the pandemic. While a sense of dissatisfaction was evident it was not necessarily being directed at the institution, although a failure to address student concerns may lead to a loss of confidence in the university.

7.6 Help students to feel seen and heard to enable a sense of agency

Students spoke about having a sense of loss of agency, having to “*do as you are told*” and feeling that their wishes were not always being heard and acted upon. An example provided by one participant described the university turning down a request endorsed by most students on a programme to move teaching online. This refusal was attributed to university policy and illustrates the risk of students losing faith in systems and processes designed to support student engagement and capture student voice, for example, student representatives. Communications responding to student requests need to be clear about the rationale for the response. It would be useful to consider the current mechanisms for student engagement and if these are fit for purpose in the pandemic and post-pandemic university.

Anxiety was a feature of participants lives, both a generalised anxiety associated with the pandemic and specific worries relating to personal circumstances. Acknowledging student anxieties during the pandemic can be powerful (Byrom et al., 2020), and it can be useful to raise awareness of this amongst tutors and professional support staff. Some of the concerns identified such as fears about employment prospects should be proactively addressed by supporting students to develop strategies to navigate the COVID and post-COVID jobs market.

Continuing to recognise the diversity of the student body by acknowledging the needs of different student groups can support students to feel part of their institution. While much work has been undertaken by the university and the SU in relation to this, one participant who was a mature student did not feel that social events were inclusive for people like him whilst Lincoln 6 was very critical of the institution for not giving students like herself with disabilities the option to go fully online this academic year which she perceived other universities had done.

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