



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

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## Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a qualitative review of undergraduate students' experiences whilst at the University of Lincoln (UoL) during the COVID-19 pandemic period of closures and restrictions undertaken in May and June 2021. 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). This report forms the third and final phase, Phase III, of a longitudinal consultation with APP students.

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 eight students were interviewed individually from a small subset of students who had already taken part in previous APP related research. The Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Qualitative analysis was completed using NVivo v.12 software.

A thematic analysis of participants' perceptions of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their university experiences and their hopes and fears for the future are summarised in five themes as follows.

### *Theme 1: Teaching and Learning*

Over the course of the pandemic, participants' views of the pivot to online learning and resultant phases of blended learning were mainly positive. There was an appreciation that staff had had to adjust their delivery mechanisms rapidly, and many had embraced the digital tools available to them to create interesting content. There was some support for aspects of this new way of learning to continue as it was convenient and improved the accessibility of HE for students who were not able to attend the sessions. However, online seminars were not perceived in the same positive light, and it was here that in-person interaction was mourned the most. Other benefits from the pivot to online learning included the digital skills participants had developed which were perceived as being useful in future employment.

### *Theme 2: Wellbeing and Support*

Participants' poor mental wellbeing had been exacerbated by the pandemic attributed to lack of social contact, isolation, and loneliness. As with the previous phases of this study, UoL Student Wellbeing services were highly valued, although some participants felt that the university could have done even more to proactively support student mental health and promote the availability of services. Perceptions of academic staff were good overall. Several participants praised their personal tutor or module leader for their willingness to help and listen to their concerns. However, accommodating behaviour from staff was not universally demonstrated. For most of the participants, family support during the pandemic was fundamental in terms of supporting their wellbeing or helping them financially. This was important since several of the participants

reported struggling financially. More widely, there was a sense of injustice about the costs of study and the pandemic expressed by many.

### *Theme 3: Spaces and Places*

A new geography of the UoL campus had emerged during Phase II and Phase III which highlighted that access to spaces such as the university library is incredibly important to many students especially those who are permanently based on the campus or in Lincoln all year. The university library was the key location mentioned by participants during the interviews. Communication about access to the library was vital and some sometimes struggled when it was not clear that they could visit it in person or use the library's facilities. Returning home during lockdown periods was the better option for students who were able to do so particularly if they were struggling with their mental health or the isolation of the lockdown periods. Although the reality of studying at home in busy households with siblings also confined to learning from home, could be frustrating if internet connections were unreliable.

### *Theme 4: Agency, Engagement, and Participation*

Some participants expressed a pragmatism and acceptance towards the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on their situation, perceiving that it was outside of their own and the institution's control. For others there was a sense of anger, through feeling let down or short changed. A loss of agency, also noted in Phase II, was evident amongst several participants who felt frustrated with the traditional systems of student representation and who felt ignored. In contrast, other participants saw institutional leadership and local responses more positively and where needs had been anticipated this was recognised and appreciated. Much of the positive or negative sentiments were linked, directly or indirectly, to university communications, which has been a significant theme in all three phases of this longitudinal study.

### *Theme 5: The Future*

The loss of work experience and other extracurricular activities was perceived as reducing employability in an already challenging jobs market. Concerns about employability and the jobs market were also evident in Phases I and II. Proactive work by the Careers and Employability service was noted and appreciated, including the funding available for job interview expenses. Thinking about the post-pandemic university, participants felt that there were some key aspects of blended and online delivery that should be taken forward to ensure a more equitable student experience such as the accessibility of online content, lecture recordings, online lectures, and meetings with staff where applicable.

The following recommendations are presented in relation to supporting student success and progression.

1. *Retain flexibility regarding the delivery of online teaching, learning and student support*

The availability of online library resources like e-books was appreciated throughout all three phases of the study, ensuring resources were accessible during lockdown periods. Recorded

lectures were also regarded as a positive step, enabling greater flexibility of access for students who were ill, self-isolating or needed to work or care for children, for example. However, some face-to-face delivery (where possible) was considered essential by most participants in this study. In-person sessions for seminars and workshops were perceived to be more engaging than online sessions. Some participants had developed a sense of the 'wastefulness' of the wait between lectures and the time required to travel to campus which were perceived to be an inefficient use of their time. The delivery of student support online, for example, Student Wellbeing and academic library support services, were positively regarded by participants and retaining some online options for these is likely to increase accessibility for those students who have limited ability to attend campus or who feel stigmatised for using them.

2. *Continue to develop ways of embedding student voices into decision making processes at all levels*

Recent media narratives often represent students as consumers of HE, emphasising the transactional nature of the relationship between undergraduates and their institution. In all three phases of this study, participants had to some extent identified with these narratives, speaking of "value for money" and referencing consumer rights. However, there was also clear evidence of a more complex relationship than "student as consumer", with participants showing care and concern for university staff and an understanding of the wider challenges facing the institution during the pandemic. Participants' educational experience held a personal, emotional significance which went beyond the purchasing of a service, and they expected decisions about their programmes of study to be made in dialogue with themselves and thus expressing distress, sadness, and disappointment when this did not happen. It is also clear that pre-pandemic mechanisms for capturing student voice (such as module evaluations and student representatives) were tested by the pandemic, and new ways of creating opportunities for participation and embedding a feedback loop between senior decision makers and students are vital to reduce the risks of disengagement and loss of agency documented by the participants in this study.

3. *Maintain awareness of and sensitivity towards diverse student needs*

This study focusses on the needs of students who are included within the remit of the APP, and these groups are more likely to have complex support needs. Across the phases of this study, it was apparent from participants' experiences that where the university had displayed awareness and sensitivity, for example, through the safety net policy, this was appreciated and had benefitted the participants. There were also times where this had not happened, for example, communications early in the pandemic advising students to "return home" were distressing for those estranged from their families who did not have a family home to return to and the accessibility issues described by students with disabilities and specific learning differences which negatively impacted their ability to get the most from digital learning resources and online lectures or seminars. Participants imagined the post-pandemic university as a welcome return to some of the experiences that had been lost, including face-to-face teaching, opportunities for

recreation, personal development, and social connections with peers. But they also identified a need to change, perceiving future universities as more inclusive, accessible, flexible, and in some cases fitting around their lives, rather than the students fitting their life around study. This presents both an apparent contradiction and a challenge to senior leaders and consideration should be given to how this could be achieved in practice.

#### *4. Further develop careers and employability services targeted at APP students*

As the pandemic progressed, concerns about graduate prospects and employability became increasingly evident in participant narratives. There was clear appreciation for the support available from the Careers and Employability service at UoL, but there was also a need identified for more specialised support for disabled students and for ongoing, post-graduation support. As the demand for these services is likely to increase, it is important to ensure that the service has capacity to meet that demand and ensure students who may already experience disadvantage in relation to obtaining graduate employment are enabled to reach their potential.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the students who took part in this Phase III consultation, and in Phases I and II, for their time and contribution.

# 1 Background

A 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 undertaken at the request of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Prof. Liz Mossop in May 2020 (Phase I (Spacey et al., 2020)). This was repeated in late 2020 (November/December) (Phase II (Spacey and Sanderson, 2020)). This report presents the findings of the third round of interviews undertaken in May and June 2021 (Phase III). 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). These groups include undergraduate, Home/EU students who identify with any of the following criteria:

- Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students
- Mature students
- Students with disabilities including mental health conditions
- Students who are care leavers
- Students who are estranged from their family
- Students who are first in family to attend university
- Students with a lower socio-economic status (and therefore entitled to receive institutional financial support in the form of the University of Lincoln Scholarship)
- Students from areas of lower participation in higher education such as Greater Lincolnshire or Coastal Lincolnshire, and students from areas classified as Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles 1 and 2.



## 2 Method

APP Evaluation Team staff (Dr. Rachel Spacey and Rebecca Sanderson) submitted an amendment (Ref: 2020-0579) to an existing project which had a favourable ethical outcome (Ref: 2019-0579) 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 the Lincoln Equality of Attainment Project (Ref: 2019-0867) and UROS projects – LEAP (Lincoln Equality of Attainment Project) related (Ref: 2020-0867). In addition, a recruitment email was shared by Students' Union Officers. 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 mostly self-selecting primarily from a small cohort of current and former APP funded and related projects. The over-arching research question raised and investigated here was: *How has COVID-19 impacted on students' experiences and learning at the University of Lincoln?*

Eight students were interviewed individually using MS Teams or via mobile telephone in May and June 2021. With their permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken by the interviewers. The interviews were also transcribed verbatim and qualitative data analysis was completed using NVivo v.12 software. The APP Evaluation Team analysed the interviews together.

The questions explored participants' views of their experiences of university from March 2020 in relation to their programme of study. They also investigated their perceptions of the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and their hopes and fear for the future.

The findings from the analysis are presented below and include participants' perceptions of the COVID-19 global pandemic from March 2020 onwards - the impact of lockdowns on their student experiences including their views of teaching, learning and support, and their hopes and fears for the future. The Recommendations section includes suggestions to help improve provision for students who experience or self-identify with characteristics of disadvantage.

## 3 Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 *The Participants*

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

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

They primarily consisted of third year students from the Colleges of Science and Social Science. Seven of the participants had taken part in the earlier consultations - Lincoln 2, Lincoln 3, Lincoln 4, Lincoln 5, and Lincoln 8 were interviewed for Phases I and II.

The features of the participants were as follows:

- Lincoln 1 (L1): Female, disability, Masters' student\*, College of Science (CoS) \*Lincoln 1 completed her undergraduate degree, also in the CoS in the summer of 2020
- Lincoln 2 (L2): Male, disability, first in family, lower socio-economic status, year 3, College of Social Science (CoSS) (also Phase I and II)
- Lincoln 3 (L3): Female, disability, year 3, CoSS (also Phase I and II)
- Lincoln 4 (L4): Female, first in family, lower socio-economic status, year 3, CoSS (also Phase I and II)
- Lincoln 5 (L5): Female, first in family, lower socio-economic status, year 3, CoSS (also Phase I and II)
- Lincoln 6 (L6): Male, first in family, lower socio-economic status, year 2, CoS (also Phase II)
- Lincoln 7 (L7): Female, BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic), lower socio-economic status, mature student, year 0, College of Science (CoS) (also Phase II)
- Lincoln 8 (L8): Male, disability, mature, year 3, Lincoln International Business School (LIBS) (also Phase I and II).

A thematic analysis was undertaken of the eight interviews and the themes identified are presented and discussed in the following sections:

- Teaching and Learning
- Wellbeing and Support
- Spaces and Places

- Agency, Engagement and Participation
- The Future.

### 3.2 Teaching and Learning

This section explores participants' experiences of teaching and learning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, including the pivot to online and then blended delivery of teaching, changes in assessment practices, issues around the accessibility and availability of learning materials and requirements for additional academic support.

Over the course of the pandemic, participants' views of the pivot to online learning and resultant phases of blended learning were mainly positive. There was an appreciation that staff had had to adjust their delivery mechanisms rapidly, and many had embraced the digital tools available to them to create interesting content, which was just as good, if not better at times, than offline learning. There was some support for aspects of this new way of learning to continue as it was understood it improved the accessibility of HE for students who were not able to attend the sessions and provide a reference copy for students to refer to if they were struggling to understand content:

*I think, just the sort of flexibility of online learning, and I think there are bits of that, that can and should be carried forward. You know, little things like sessions being recorded, having meetings online sometimes is more convenient, making sure that all resources are available digitally, you know more library books, for example, is a big one (L2).*

*Even if you can just, even if you go to the lecture, you can go back when you're revising or doing the essay, like you can go back to the actual lecture, rather than just having a PowerPoint. Because lots of lecturers have PowerPoints where they don't have much on the screen, but they talk a lot. Which is good, because it's more engaging than reading off a slide, but if you miss it or you don't understand something, you can go back and listen to them explain it properly. And I just think it works much better (L5).*

*So, in some respects, I do like the online delivery, and as I said earlier, the lectures, whilst I would love to sit there in person for... There's activities you can do online with no issue... Go through the PowerPoint, make my notes, go through the lecture, add to those notes. So, it's not... That's not too bad (L6).*

Most of the students interviewed in Phase III felt that online delivery of lectures was good. However, online seminars were not perceived in the same positive light, and it was here that in-person interaction was mourned the most:

*Yeah, that has probably been the biggest change. I think because we were quite a small course and we were a very close-knit course, you know, we know each other incredibly well, and the lecturers, and just with the nature of our degree really, we take a lot from discussion, debate, engagement. That is really where the best learning for us comes from in our degree, and as soon as we moved online that really stopped you know, the communication is really low, people don't want to engage, people don't want cameras or microphones on, and then obviously sort of that snowballs, so the less people talk and engage, the less they want to (L2).*

*The seminars are awful. It's not the lecturer's fault in any stretch of the imagination. Not being sat physically as a group in all the collaborative discussions is very difficult, and then people obviously don't turn up, people don't... People now are more reluctant to do the reading (L6).*

*On the seminar side of things, it's a little more awkward. In a seminar you're expected to get involved, and I felt some members of the team, some people in my seminars, they just refused to get involved, or they were simply having their lecture open to get their attendance record up (L8).*

Other benefits from the pivot to online learning included the digital skills students had developed which were perceived as being useful in future employment. Some students felt that the "convenience" (Cronin et al., 2021, p.10) of online learning enabled them to be more efficient at organising their time:

*Having these online lectures, it made my life much easier. I didn't have the short travel time of walking to the university, or if I had an hour's break waiting around. I could get a lot more done because I had these online lectures, and that to me was a much more effective way of working. I could divide up my days and think, I've got a lot of lectures on this day, so I'll get loads on small tasks done in between. This day I have nothing, so I'll do a lot of big assignment work. It made it a lot easier to divide up my time because I had one place of work effectively, a desk and a computer (L8).*

*Like you develop more time-management skills because you haven't got the strictness of you have to go do something, you have to go somewhere. You've got to get up, get sorted yourself. You've got to manage what you do at home, because you've not got that change of environment say (L1).*

*As I alluded to earlier, the online delivery, in some respects, is rather efficient, and I think being back in the good old days which feel many moons ago when everything was face-to-face, and everything was... The social norm back then. The*

*time to and from traveling to university, the time traveling between buildings, it's the... If I had an hour between sessions, there was no point in me walking back to my own (L6).*

However, even during Phase III, some participants were still experiencing accessibility issues. L1, a CoS student who lives at home in Lincolnshire with her parents because of her disabilities including being partially sighted, struggled to view lecture and seminar content online at times and often found she had to explain to the staff or other students how they could help her:

*It's been tougher for me to do some aspects of it... Well, for me, I've made an absolute fool of myself on the Teams in the live chat because do you know when the lecturers share their screens to try and do something on a programme?... I still cannot see what they're pointing at with their mouse... Because I cannot see their mouse... They're trying to talk away, so I'm trying to put my hand up, just like speak out, like say, "I cannot see what you're doing." Which as you can imagine, in front of... I know we're all scattered about, but sitting in front of 30-odd people, saying you cannot see something blatantly on the screen can be a bit of a... Because it makes you look like you're being... either ignorant or being lazy and not paying attention. Whereas I am paying attention and I am trying to do it... And then I'm trying to see, and I'm trying to say, "Can you try to do this?" But it felt like they're not wanting to listen to what I'm suggesting (L1).*

Although she had tried to get help from ICT Services, it had not really helped resolve the accessibility issues she was experiencing, and she felt staff chastised her for having the wrong equipment. She felt that her School would benefit from a member of staff who could act as an advocate for students with disabilities (including students who are officially diagnosed with a disability or learning difference and those who are not but still require some support). She also thought that more online guides for students about how to use Microsoft Teams and Blackboard Collaborate would have helped.

L3 had found it difficult to access the learning materials she needed from the library during periods of restricted opening since her course involved using publications that were not available in an online format. She felt that this had adversely affected her grades:

*A lot of the books that we use, are photo books or stuff, which are very, very fragile, very expensive, and are not online. I feel like, because of all this, it's actually affected my grades (L3).*

L4 had had internet connectivity issues back home at her parents in Norfolk where she and her siblings were all learning from home:

*I am the oldest of six children, so while they were all at home too, we had issues with internet because we couldn't all connect. We live really rurally in Norfolk, and*

*you know it was a disaster really, so we couldn't all be in our online lessons at the same time (L4).*

Almost all the participants were concerned about their final degree classification as many of them were about to complete their degrees. Reflecting on the last 14 months, L2 and L6, realised they preferred face-to-face learning and felt that the disruption to their degree programmes had impacted their final grades negatively: *"So, for me, I'm a more social person, and learn a lot better in person... where the majority of semester A probably didn't go as well as what it could've gone, because it was such a huge adjustment"* (L6). Concerns were expressed by participants about the impact of the pandemic on their academic work during 2020/21:

*But I can see within my own work that I just don't feel at least that I am performing as well as I should have been, I don't feel as engaged (L2).*

*I feel like I'm going to get a 2:2 instead of a 2:1, because of this whole COVID situation... And I was fuming when they didn't do the safety net for this year like they did last year (L3).*

The participants' feelings about their student experience at this point in the pandemic were more negative than they had been in Phases I and II of the consultation. They expressed sadness and a sense of resignation and in some cases, anger, by those about to complete their studies. L3 was incredibly upset and angry about the impact the pandemic had had on her student experience and felt that she should receive a refund:

*Say if it's like you pay for a holiday, and you go, and you were expecting a four or five star, and you get a two star, and it was shite? You'd automatically want a refund, and you'd feel dissatisfied. That's how I feel it is... It's been sub-par. It's been very, very sub-par. Say if I paid for a course, and I was expecting a nine out of ten, I'd give... a three (L3).*

While this sentiment was not shared by all the participants, there was a determination to just get to the end of the degree. L2 and L5 both described their resolve to get final assignments completed and the degree finished in a very pragmatic way:

*It is a weird time for me, because I am sort of coming to the end of my teaching and now my big focus is on assessments. But this last few weeks has been a very weird situation. I think for me and a few others it has very much been our mindset, our focus now is on just getting those good last grades, and we are maybe pushing aside bits of teaching and bits of other elements of uni, and I think our real focus and worry really is just focusing on those last few assignments (L2).*

*So, I'm just... I'm very much done with it now, but I'm just trying to, like, focus and hopefully it will be alright. Yeah, I'm just nervous, basically! (L5).*

### 3.3 Wellbeing and Support

This theme covers all aspects of student wellbeing including their financial, social, physical, and psychological welfare and the support participants utilised to sustain them through the pandemic.

Student finances have been raised by participants throughout all three Phases of this study, as well as their perceptions of the value for money of their study programmes and any additional financial support they have sought and received. A more detailed evaluation of student finance during the pandemic has been carried out and is documented elsewhere (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021a). Several of the participants reported struggling financially. L6 reported that without receipt of the Disabled Students' Allowance they would not have been able to continue their third-year studies. L4 had not considered applying for institutional support, instead they had chosen to work full time alongside their studies to continue:

*So, I have had to get a job, and it is actually a full-time job, and while they are letting me do my online lectures at work, it is still hard to manage time, because obviously I am working 8am to 4pm, by the time you get in you are quite tired, and obviously there are still loads of deadlines that need doing. It is just trying to find the time and energy and motivation, which isn't as much as before I had a job and before I was going to uni. So, that has all been quite difficult to balance. But I have just got to hope that I manage to find it before now and the end of the year (L4).*

In contrast, L5 felt that the reduction in social activities during the pandemic had saved them money. For other participants there was a sense of injustice about the costs of study and the pandemic. L1, L3, L7 and L8 all alluded to tuition fees, positioning themselves as paying customers who were being short-changed, with the university unable to provide the experience they expected. L3 and L4 expressed dissatisfaction in relation to accommodation fees. L4 said:

*Across the board I feel like a lot of students feel like they have been deceived maybe a little bit, because a lot of students that I have spoken to on my course had kind of contacted the uni at the start of the year and said, "Look, will I be needing tenancy? Is it likely that we will be at uni, or will it all be online?" Obviously the uni didn't know at that point, so I am not saying it is their fault that they said, "Yeah, get tenancy," because they were being optimistic that we were going to turn up in person, but obviously it has resulted in us barely needing somewhere to stay in Lincoln at all. So, I do feel like that a lot of the things we have been paying for, we just haven't seen (L4).*

L4 highlighted that while partial refunds had been made for students in university accommodation, students of private landlords were less likely to have received any refunds,

illustrating the student dissatisfaction which arises from situations outside of the university's remit but nonetheless impacts on overall student satisfaction and experience.

Participants' poor mental wellbeing had been exacerbated by the pandemic. L3 felt her existing anxiety disorder was made worse by pandemic-related stress. L4 noted that stress levels had been higher this year, perhaps inevitably due to final degree assessments but certainly made worse by the inability to access peer support: *"it would be nice to be able to see everyone else and all have a bit of a chat and a moan about it together. It is a little isolating in that sense..."* while L6 said *"[the stress of assessments is] exacerbated a bit more with online study and working from home"*. L7 experienced a decline in motivation which they attributed to a lack of structure and routine when learning online:

*And then I think that's hard, to find motivation to work sometimes when you're in your room and there's already structures around because if you were in campus, you would go to your campus, have... a seminar, and then you would run to the library to get your work done. But it doesn't happen like that. You have a seminar and then you wake up just 10 or half an hour before the seminar and get ready, and then you have the seminar online. And it's just like you're home from the beginning to the end, and just staring into a screen and working from there (L7).*

Lack of social contact, isolation and loneliness were also considered to contribute to poor mental health:

*Just the lack of connection that I felt back there with anyone really. I had flatmates that I was living with, but I didn't really get on with them. Moving home I just noticed such a change because I had people around me who cared for me... Definitely my mental health dropped massively at the start of the academic year (L8).*

As with the previous phases of the study, UoL Student Wellbeing services were highly valued and praised by students. Participants who had accessed the service spoke highly of the quality and utility of the support offered, and the service's proactive solicitation of feedback from service users and their responsiveness to that feedback although some (L4, L7) felt that the university could have done more to proactively support student mental health and promote the availability and nature of services. As per Phase I and II there was evidence of awareness of the pressure teaching staff were under, and this may have motivated some students to look elsewhere for support: *"makes me reluctant to say any issues I'm having"* (L3).

The students interviewed had relied on several diverse sources of support during the Covid-19 pandemic as they negotiated lockdowns and a new way of learning. Some of the participants had preferred the times when they could meet with friends in person but having contact with them via text messaging and social media had been incredibly important especially for checking in with them to make sure they were coping with the restrictions:



*I've got some very good friends who were very supportive. I think I would have gone mad without them (L3).*

*Yeah, so the Messenger group for my course, it is good, and my course mates have tried to like arrange kind of video calls together, kind of outside of uni, not scheduled by lecturers or anything. So, we kind of started trying to create our own support groups (L4).*

The experiences of L7 were particularly interesting in relation to friendships made at university. She was a Science Foundation Year student and had spent hardly any time in person with her new course mates or university friends. However, this proved enough to support her through the year, and she felt that these friendships, albeit forged in a unique context, had been particularly important in terms of sustaining her and she had made a point of making sure the students she knew were coping:

*I think that's one positive thing about lockdown, is always checking on people. Even if you haven't really made friends... And then the group chat there and asking how they're doing. That helps (L7).*

Perceptions of the Students' Union at this stage were positive, particularly in terms of their support over the university's prevarication over the graduation ceremony plans. However, there was some criticism of ICT Services and the support they provided. L1 and L3 had both had negative experiences in relation to accessing learning content on mobile phones and logging in to websites. L1 who is partially sighted was particularly upset with the way her requests for assistance were handled:

*I did that, because that's what you do, switch it on and off and say, "I've done this and that and it hasn't worked." And then they told me off for having an iPhone (L1).*

*I just got fobbed off and told, "We don't deal with that. Bye-bye," when it's logging into something (L3).*

Perceptions of academic staff were good overall. Several participants praised their personal tutor or module leader for their willingness to help and listen to their concerns:

*So, it has been really helpful for staff just to say, "There are times when I am available, please drop me an email". For example, even over the Easter break they were really good at making sure they were still available for that time period (L2).*

*My tutors' accommodating. They were very, very accommodating for me, and I appreciate that (L3).*

*I know my personal tutor is always about to chat to, like if we have any concerns about that kind of thing (L4).*

*My personal tutor has been quite helpful in that sense, so moving back home I've had to take care of my family. My dad was going into hospital, and it was just quite a good understanding to know that the university, through my personal tutor, helped out (L8).*

What was observed, however, was that this accommodating, supportive behaviour from staff was not universally displayed and one participant suggested that some staff were not sympathetic to the diversity of students' realities during the pandemic:

*Some lecturers are understanding, and as I alluded to earlier, somebody might be really run down, and so much as a "That's okay, you take a day," whatever. Some lecturers, it's, "Why are you run down? You've only got two lectures." But as a student, you could have mental health issues and not display them, but they are hidden. You could be stressed, you might need three part-time jobs to survive, for whatever reason (L6).*

For most of the participants, family support during the pandemic was fundamental in terms of supporting their wellbeing or helping them financially:

*My mother came up and visited just before I moved back home and she mentioned that I didn't seem right and that I might be feeling a bit stressed, so why didn't I consider moving home? (L8).*

There was also an appreciation that having the option to return home during the pandemic was not available to all students: *"I'm privileged. I could go back to home" (L7).*

### 3.4 Spaces and Places

Participants highlighted the importance of access to significant spaces on and off campus during the pandemic and the implications of and satisfaction with their changes in living arrangements.

The university library was the key location mentioned by participants during the interviews as they expressed their sadness and frustration when it was closed and their happiness when it opened again because it signified normality and a space to study and see other students away from where they lived. They could be more productive in the library or see their friends which helped minimise the sense of isolation experienced during lockdown periods:

*So, most days I am at the library now, just that different learning. It almost feels more academic compared to the flat, and that is really beneficial because that again feels almost like I came back to uni, and I am sort of making myself do work (L2).*

*Still having access to the library was an amazing bonus, so I'm happy we can still use the library. There were some universities that weren't allowing that at all (L6).*

L4 had remained at home in Norfolk and really missed not being able to use the university library:

*Like, the resources there as well, being able to go to the library, it's a place where you can really focus hard and with no distractions. So, I've obviously not had that (L4).*

At the time of the interviews, three of the eight participants were living at home with their parents. L1 lived with her parents ordinarily as she has disabilities which mean she is safer living with them. L4 and L8, both in their final years at university, had paid for private student accommodation but had returned home. L4, for example, had been at home since Christmas. She had a large family and found that studying at home was often difficult:

*It's the noise as well. Like, they are nice kids, but still everyone being cooped up together, it was carnage (L4).*

L8 had moved back home earlier in the year after struggling with his mental health. He had found living in private accommodation with other students had been challenging in terms of trying to study whilst some students were engaging in anti-social behaviour. He had returned home at the suggestion of his Mum and found that his mental health improved:

*It was a suggestion, and then the real solidifier of me deciding to stay the rest of the year at home was the fact that it was a better environment for me (L8).*

L2 had spent much of the pandemic back home in Wales but had grown increasingly disengaged and demotivated over the year. Once they were able to return to Lincoln, they did so, but did not find it made much difference to their perception of the student experience:

*It was weird. I was quite motivated to come back because sort of being at home I didn't feel that engaged with university, it didn't feel you know real, like the proper experience. But I suppose coming back, it really doesn't feel much different (L2).*

### 3.5 Agency, Engagement, and Participation

This theme includes aspects of student experience related to the culture of the institution, participants' perceptions of their power and influence on policy and practice within their relationship with the institution, sense of belonging, trust, and participation.

Some participants expressed a pragmatism and acceptance towards the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on their situation, perceiving that it was outside of their own and the institution's control:

*A lot of it, you can see why things have had to change, and a lot of it is understandable. Yes, of course we might want different things, but it's limited for the safety of everyone at the end of the day (L8).*

*You know, this isn't just me, this has affected everybody sort of at university and beyond (L2).*

For L6 this didn't lessen the negative perception, however:

*The overall student experience... I'd say negative overall. I think the lack of face-to-face sessions and face-to-face provisions, which are by far, in some respects, not controlled by the university, but I think the lack of them sessions has really lessened the experience (L6).*

For others there was a sense of anger, through feeling let down or short changed, "Honestly, my experience overall has been terrible. I'm really, really unhappy with how things have gone this year" (L3). L3 also referred to loss of access to library resources which she felt negatively affected her degree outcomes.

There was evidence of a sense of loss, loss of control and loss of engagement and going through the motions. L1 preferred to avoid using social media and this had led to a sense of isolation:

*The biggest impact is not having the social interaction and not having the routine of you've got to get up and go somewhere today. Because when you had lectures during the day, you'd get up, go get some work and go to the campus and you'd spend say the day on campus doing jobs or doing your lectures and you'd have that interaction with the people on a daily basis, the people that you're doing a course with which is a bit harder with that on Teams and stuff. Just having a friendly chat is hard to do, because not everyone has Teams loaded up and that (L1).*

L4 felt the loss of the social side acutely:

*Well, it's a shame really, because it kind of ruined it midway through second year, and that was when things were getting a bit fun. So, all like these friendships that probably would have been stronger, I think it has ruined it quite a lot really, because it feels like it is pretty much at an end now, and we have only spent a year and a half actually at uni. So, actually now the last few weeks I have started thinking, "Right, I am a bit gutted now," but before then I hadn't been too concerned. I think, yeah, the social aspect of it, I think it has had quite a large effect, yeah. I mean, it has academically too, but I think I have just been pondering over the social aspect more recently (L4).*

*Yeah, so I was in a few, like, sports teams, which we haven't been able... one team I've got two sessions for the whole of this year. And the other one just never*

*started, like ever. So that's been a bit gutting, especially because I'm leaving, I can't do that again (L5).*

L5 also said:

*I think not being in uni made it feel like I didn't have as much control over what I was doing. Which sounds really weird because it like, the online teaching was good, and I was still getting all the work done and I didn't have anything to distract me. But it felt very detached (L5).*

A loss of agency, also noted in Phase II, was evident amongst several participants. For L3 her experience was: *"We've all pretty much just been told what's happening. We've had very little say in it"* citing the loss of a timely face-to-face graduation and feeling pressured to return to campus for face-to-face teaching when she was shielding for health reasons and did not yet have access to the vaccine. She attributed this to decision-making by senior leaders: *"I think it's people higher up, who see very little of the university, and see very little of the students"*. In contrast, other participants saw institutional leadership and local responses more positively: *"I think on the whole the university and school have been very responsive and understanding"* (L2). L5 felt there had been improvements over time: *"And I think the further it's gone, obviously the better the uni have got at sorting it out"*, noting a new sensitivity to students' personal circumstances, for example, in the assignment extension policy.

L6 talked about their role as a student rep, receiving *"constant feedback"* from course peers but sensing that although things had *"improved a little bit"* in the preceding months, overall, the feedback provided by students had not been taken as seriously or acted upon as expected by academic leaders in the school. L8 also noted that they felt the institution was not paying sufficient attention to student's wishes, citing an ethical imperative to do so, and alluding also to the issues around a perception that the opportunity for a timely face-to-face graduation had been removed and the removal of module evaluations from their programme, both of which they reported were reinstated following interventions from the Students' Union. For L8 this was both an ethical issue and one of consumer rights: *"because they are the people that pay for their courses and pay for the university to keep running at the end of the day"*.

In contrast, where needs had been anticipated this was recognised and appreciated. L2 described lecturers ensuring students could access and use the digital technology required for online lectures while L7 was positive about the efforts taken to arrange the summer festival and for a rent rebate on their student accommodation.

Much of the positive or negative sentiments were linked, directly or indirectly, to university communications, which has been a significant theme in all three phases of this longitudinal study. L8 had found communications regarding the changes to and impact of government rules such as lockdowns reassuring: *"Definitely keeping us up to date on the interpretations of the government rules has been pretty good"*. L6 noted in their role as a student rep that peers were frustrated at the lack of communication and rationale provided for decisions, citing the decision

to not open the library 24 hours: "[some students] were quite annoyed, but because there was no clear communication from the university saying, "We've taken this decision because..." And albeit on an email or even on the website, there was nothing".

L2 also wanted to see more transparency and openness with students, although they did feel that university communications had improved as the pandemic progressed:

*I think, it has obviously been a great time obviously with people asking questions and not knowing, and I think that communication from sort of above was, I shouldn't say not brilliant. But it was a bit challenging, because you know we would message staff or the school and say, "What is happening with this, do you know?" and it was understandably a lot of, "We are not sure". So, I think that communication from the sort of higher up elements of the university, you know just to say, "We are discussing this. We are possibly planning this. We are thinking about adapting this," is really good, rather than just the sort of big announcements you know that things are changing. Having that nice stream of communication and knowing what the university is working on, knowing that they are planning for this, preparing for this, is really nice and really reassuring, and I think it would just help to quash a lot of those questions and those worries (L2).*

However, L3 felt that her ability to communicate with university staff had got progressively worse over time, linked perhaps to the transition to third year studies and critical assessments. She particularly cited lack of responsiveness to emails as a problem since she was no longer able to make inquiries of support staff in person. L5 valued regular School level communications, even when they did not offer clear outcomes: "[My school] were really good, even when they didn't know what was going to happen, they still said, "We don't know yet, but as soon as we know we'll tell you", rather than just waiting". L2, felt that they were just going through the motions: "I think it is a shame because lots of the enjoyable bits of university we have missed out on, and with that it sadly becomes a bit more of an obligation. You sort of feel like, 'Well, I've got to go to this lecture because I have to get this degree'. You know, it is a sort of a need rather than a want to be at university at the moment, I feel". This sentiment was echoed by L3 who stated she was "looking forward to leaving", and that the pandemic had spoiled the best part of two years of her university experience, reiterated by L8: "There's been quite a few times where I have thought about dropping out, but I've just thought, you know, let's get to the end of it".

### 3.6 The Future

This theme includes participants' perceptions of their immediate future, including expectations for graduation, the next academic year, future work or study plans, and the support offered by the university for these. It also includes participants' views on the future of the 'post-pandemic' university.

Concerns about employability and the jobs market have been evident in Phases I and II. The loss of work experience and other extracurricular activities was perceived as reducing employability in

an already challenging jobs market. L2 wanted to train to be a teacher but was worried the pandemic had reduced the chance of being successful:

*You know, just getting experience in schools was a big one, and that was a big worry for me thinking when it comes to my time now for applying for teaching opportunities, not having that experience that they say is required, not having those extra opportunities that really benefit your sort of CV, and you know my experience of missing out on those is a big worry for me because I thought obviously in the future now my application won't be as strong (L2).*

Proactive work by the Careers and Employability service was noted and appreciated by L4: *"I know we have had a couple of sessions with the Careers Centre, so they have already probably done everything they can really to support in that sense"*. L5 noted the post-graduation support from Careers: *"that definitely reassures me"* and expressed appreciation for the funding available for job interview expenses. L8 noted:

*"A few of the interviews or a few job applications I've put forward, they've always mentioned that the LinkedIn Learning has been a reason that they've wanted me on board, because I've utilised that system. The Careers and Employability team, and to some extent my School, have pushed these LinkedIn Learning courses, but I think doing that even more, sort of that focus on constant development and constant development of employability skills, for me is second to none. A lot of employers have commented on it"*.

L1 is disabled and was very concerned about her post-graduation prospects, and wanted disability specific advice regarding employability, but was frustrated that talks in lectures, despite repeated attempts to obtain this, had not provided the information she sought: *"And then a careers' person walks in and goes, 'We're taking over your lecture.' I'm like, 'Oh.' Because they don't talk about how disability in the workplace or how getting a job with a disability works as well"*.

Participants were asked to think about what the intra- or post-pandemic university might be like, what had been learned from the pandemic and if there were any good practices which should be retained. L4 reflected on teaching practices, feeling that change was inevitable, for example, large group lectures may need to be abandoned. L1 expected that more study and work would be done online. L2 saw the future of teaching and learning as blended: *"And I think integrating bits of that, you know I think everyone is rightly keen to get back to face to face learning, but I think that can be really sort of aided quite well with bits of the digital learning that we have had to use over the pandemic. That sort of flexibility, and choice, and accessibility are really good things and really helpful things, and I think some should be carried forward even when we go back to the normal face to face teaching"*, something which L6 and L7 agreed with but they also hoped for a return to face-to-face seminars and workshops, although L7 felt that lectures would actually be better online as going to an in-person lecture to listen was: *"just wasting your one hour"*. L5 also

picked up on the theme of inclusivity and accessibility: *"I think, like keeping up with all the recordings and stuff, and being a bit more understanding and inclusive of stuff that is going on in people's lives"*. Business student, L8, was emphatic that the *"digital side of things is the way forward"*, as *"having these online lectures, it made my life much easier. I didn't have the short travel time of walking to the university, or if I had an hour's break waiting around. I could get a lot more done because I had these online lectures, and that to me was a much more effective way of working"*.

The notions of flexibility, choice, and fitting study more efficiently around life was important to some participants. L6 said *"That sort of flexibility, and choice, and accessibility are really good things and really helpful things, and I think some should be carried forward even when we go back to the normal face to face teaching"*. L5 had appreciated the additional flexibility which had enabled them to work to finance their studies:

*Like, I completely get that you go to uni, and your first priority should be uni, but it's not, that's not realistic for everybody. Like, some people, their loan doesn't cover their rent and they have to work, and their jobs aren't very accommodating for uni, and that kind of, like, being more understanding about that sort of stuff. Like, it can't be everyone's priority all of the time. Which I think they've done quite well this year, but they didn't before, because it was very much like, "You're here to learn, and that da-da-da-da". So, hopefully they will be a bit more like that (L5).*



## 4 Conclusion

Much of the findings of Phase III, as with Phases I and II, in terms of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, were applicable to most undergraduate students but all three Phases have highlighted that under-represented groups of students particularly those without access to support, whether financial, emotional, or practical, are especially vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic on their student experience.

Over a year after the pandemic had started, the students interviewed here felt that online learning or a combination of face-to-face and online (blended) learning went some way to making HE more accessible, inclusive, and convenient for all students. There was an appreciation that lecture recordings were important for students with caring or other responsibilities and for students who needed to work to fund their student experience and that they also provided an opportunity for some students to revisit content if they struggled to process it the first time around. Moreover, because of the lockdown periods, more of the library's materials had been available digitally and this was welcomed in terms of accessibility.

Financial struggles can affect any student, but those from lower socio-economic groups are particularly vulnerable to financial precarity. This longitudinal study has highlighted that some participants do not consider themselves in sufficient need to access financial support, even when they are entitled to. This issue has been previously noted by the UoL Student Finance team, who recognise that students from working families may not be eligible for the additional financial support available through the Student Loans Company and yet their families may not be able to offer the assumed level of additional income (Cadogan, 2021).

Participants benefitted from support from family members and their university peers, but it was clear that making new social connections was much harder while studying remotely. Some students may benefit from online activities and participation in social media communities, but others prefer not to engage with social media or are unable to access this content, and most participants throughout the three phases of the study considered online a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction, although they were sometimes a welcome supplementary activity, particularly for those having to self-isolate, shield, or for students who experience practical difficulties in participation in activities on campus or off, such as commuter students and those with disabilities.

A new geography of the UoL campus had emerged during Phase II and Phase III which highlighted that access to spaces such as the university library is incredibly important to many participants especially those who are permanently based on the campus or in Lincoln all year (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021b). During the pandemic, the desire to study in the library was amplified by the reality, that at some points during the crisis, this option was unavailable to participants, and they were confined to their accommodation. Communication about access to the library was vital and participants sometimes struggled when it was not clear that they could visit it in person or use the library's facilities. Conversely, returning home during lockdown

periods as was advised by the government and the university was the better option for participants who were able to do so particularly if they were struggling with their mental health or the isolation of the lockdown periods. Although, as discovered by some of the participants in Phases II and III, the reality of studying at home in busy households with siblings also confined to learning from home, could be frustrating if internet connections were unreliable.

Participants' sense of agency emerged as a theme in Phase II and was reiterated in Phase III particularly from those participants who felt that their wishes or concerns were being ignored by the university. Views about the university's handling of the crisis diverged greatly amongst the students interviewed with those who felt positive about the way the university had handled the pandemic situation and who perceived that the university had listened and responded to their concerns and those who felt frustrated with the traditional systems of student representation and who felt ignored. The lack of control experienced by participants during the pandemic was thus exacerbated when they felt the university was not responding to or addressing their concerns.

While thoughts of a return to a 'normal' student experience were exciting for those yet to complete their studies, feeling pressured to return to campus for face-to-face teaching for students with underlying health issues created anxiety before the vaccine roll out to students. As participants pondered a post-pandemic university, they shared their concerns about the graduate and local job markets and worries that they would struggle to find a job when so many opportunities to gain employment and extra-curricular activities have been curtailed. Whilst some of the participants had used the UoL Careers and Employability service or were at least familiar with it, there appeared to be a market for more tailored content for students with disabilities and how they would manage their careers post-pandemic. Positively, participants felt that there were some key aspects of blended and online delivery that should be taken forward to ensure a more equitable student experience such as the accessibility of online content, lecture recordings, online lectures, and meetings with staff, where applicable.

## 5 Recommendations

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

### *1. Retain flexibility regarding the delivery of online teaching, learning and student support*

The availability of online library resources like e-books was appreciated throughout all three phases of the study, ensuring resources were accessible during lockdown periods. Recorded lectures were also regarded as a positive step, enabling greater flexibility of access for students who were ill, self-isolating or needed to work or care for children, for example. However, some face-to-face delivery (where possible) was considered essential by most participants in this study. In-person sessions for seminars and workshops were perceived to be more engaging than online sessions. Some participants had developed a sense of the 'wastefulness' of the wait between lectures and the time required to travel to campus which were perceived to be an inefficient use of their time. The delivery of student support online, for example, Student Wellbeing and academic library support services, were positively regarded by participants and retaining some online options for these is likely to increase accessibility for those students who have limited ability to attend campus or who feel stigmatised for using them.

### *2. Continue to develop ways of embedding student voices into decision making processes at all levels*

Recent media narratives often represent students as consumers of HE, emphasising the transactional nature of the relationship between undergraduates and their institution. In all three phases of this study, participants had to some extent identified with these narratives, speaking of "value for money" and referencing consumer rights. However, there was also clear evidence of a more complex relationship than "student as consumer", with participants showing care and concern for university staff and an understanding of the wider challenges facing the institution during the pandemic. Participants' educational experience held a personal, emotional significance which went beyond the purchasing of a service, and they expected decisions about their programmes of study to be made in dialogue with themselves and thus expressing distress, sadness, and disappointment when this did not happen. It is also clear that pre-pandemic mechanisms for capturing student voice (such as module evaluations and student representatives) were tested by the pandemic, and new ways of creating opportunities for participation and embedding a feedback loop between senior decision makers and students are vital to reduce the risks of disengagement and loss of agency documented by the participants in this study.

### *3. Maintain awareness of and sensitivity towards diverse student needs*

This study focusses on the needs of students who are included within the remit of the APP, and these groups are more likely to have complex support needs. Across the phases of this study, it was apparent from participants' experiences that where the university had displayed awareness and sensitivity, for example, through the safety net policy, this was appreciated and had

benefitted the participants. There were also times where this had not happened, for example, communications early in the pandemic advising students to “*return home*” were distressing for those estranged from their families who did not have a family home to return to and the accessibility issues described by participants with disabilities and specific learning differences which negatively impacted their ability to get the most from digital learning resources and online lectures or seminars. Participants imagined the post-pandemic university as a welcome return to some of the experiences that had been lost, including face-to-face teaching, opportunities for recreation, personal development, and social connections with peers. But they also identified a need to change, perceiving future universities as more inclusive, accessible, flexible, and in some cases fitting around their lives, rather than the students fitting their life around study. This presents both an apparent contradiction and a challenge to senior leaders and consideration should be given to how this could be achieved in practice.

#### *4. Further develop careers and employability services targeted at APP students*

As the pandemic progressed, concerns about graduate prospects and employability became increasingly evident in participant narratives. There was clear appreciation for the support available from the Careers and Employability service at UoL, but there was also a need identified for more specialised support for disabled students and for ongoing, post-graduation support. As the demand for these services is likely to increase, it is important to ensure that the service has capacity to meet that demand and ensure students who may already experience disadvantage in relation to obtaining graduate employment are enabled to reach their potential.

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