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Losses and gains: An investigation of Graphic Design students' perspectives on remote learning throughout Covid-19.

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ABSTRACT

In March 2020, the rapid spread of Covid-19 forced educational facilities to predominantly move to remote delivery. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that visualises the struggles of teaching and learning Graphic Design from a digital perspective. This study aimed to investigate the benefits and limitations of remote operation at a Further Education (FE) College throughout the pandemic, considering the subject's reliance on a practical classroom setting.

The mixed method case study collected qualitative and quantitative data from 35 learners that were encouraged to disclose their lived experiences through an anonymous online questionnaire and focus group. Participants were given the opportunity to uncover their mental and physical emotions and experiences of the remote learning environment in comparison to that in a classroom.

Thematic analysis revealed that online delivery severely devalued, demotivated and isolated students who were able to disclose their desire for personal interaction and physical instruction. This study has discovered that students now require more resources, time and support in order to thrive in the classroom environment as face-to-face learning resumes. Findings have highlighted that recorded delivery and digital resources proved to be advantageous and enrich student learning in innovative ways. Further research could explore what strategies and implementations are required after the months of Covid-19, to enhance students' subject knowledge, advance their understanding and progress underdeveloped skills.

Introduction

Since the rapid rise of Covid-19 in the early months of 2020, education has seen many drastic changes and alterations take place to manage the implications of a global lockdown. Many educational facilities were immediately forced to close, resulting in schools, colleges and universities having to operate digitally, with little or no time to prepare and adjust accordingly. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) argued that the consequences of moving learning online would cause interruptions on an unprecedented scale. They highlighted that the transition was untested and unexperienced which would result in the real impact of various issues and struggles not being measured accurately enough or catered for, until now. This research was conducted with a selection of students studying

Graphic Design at a South Yorkshire College of Further and Higher Education. The outcome provides an understanding of their personal impacts and experiences.

As highlighted by Voulgaris (2021), Graphic Design is a subject that required a variety of specialist software and digital devices to enable the development of technical skills and creative thinking. The subject curriculum is most effectively taught by delivering practical workshops, where students are able to access a variety of resources and equipment to produce designed concepts. Covid-19 caused the abandonment of these essential areas, therefore causing subsequent impacts to teacher delivery and student learning. This study allowed a logical investigation that would explore how a digital curriculum may have potentially enhanced, yet impacted the student experience.

Literature review

The Open University was created in 1969 and was labelled as revolutionary because it enabled students to access education using distance methods and digital aspects. Students could access learning beyond the traditional lecture halls and science labs (Mandelson, 2018). Since the early 2000s, technology has innovated massively which has seen remote and blended education options become increasingly popular (Güzer and Caner, 2014). The global pandemic caused massive chaos for mainstream education facilities. Nevertheless, Grace (2021), the head of content and licensing at The Open University, revealed in an interview that their institution was not as severely impacted during Covid-19 as learning is mainly taught online anyway. Literature has confirmed that online learning is mainly beneficial in higher levels of education as students can take ownership of their learning independently (Bashir et al., 2021; Namyssova et al., 2019). Literature appears to maintain the success of remote learning historically, although further research argues against the method in wider contexts.

Pandemic influences

The term 'new normal' has frequently appeared in literature as Covid-19 has created a new platform for learning. Callaghan (2020) has indicated that these models are being considered as permanent actions as 'this challenging period has given us plenty of insight into the flexibility of teaching and what education could look like in the future'. Hu (2021) revealed that colleges and universities are now considering adapting their pedagogical approaches to diversify learning, expand access to resources and make education more adaptable despite the harmful impacts. It was implied that facilities should innovate to become future-proof and embrace technology. In a recent interview about education's new normal, Fleming (2021) argued that Covid-19 paved the way for blended models to be used. He stated that 'remote and digital platforms support in-person classroom teaching and contribute to minimising teacher workload'. Although, Sinhal (2017) argued that education must continue from within the classroom as online education lacked the basic and essential fundamentals needed for successful learning. Bacchus (2020) highlighted that companies like Microsoft were already prepared for the effects of Covid-19 with communication platforms like Teams that have provided useful tools to support the digital transformation of education.

As illustrated by the Local Government Association (2021), it is clear that Covid-19 has exposed various hidden inequalities and that the government still needs to tackle existing vulnerabilities and learning gaps, but a 'catch-up' programme is simply not enough. They have stated that the pandemic 'has led leaders across education and children's services to gain a more sophisticated and shared understanding of vulnerability and hardship'. As illustrated by Sibieta (2021) the government has responded to this by pledging around £1.5 billion for extra resources that will allow students extra access and more intense sessions, to make up for lost time. Davis (2021) has since argued in a recent news article for the *Evening Standard* that children have already suffered enough throughout the pandemic and the government 'must not just focus on academic catch-

up, but should offer sport and extra-curricular activities so children regain a sense of normality'. Accordingly, an inspection of literature relating to the government's most recent efforts and attempts to combat and lessen the existing impacts Covid-19 can be read below.

Student impacts

Not surprisingly, research conducted by Kemp and Grieve (2014) discovered little evidence of students' responses to the unfamiliar and non-traditional teaching methods. They argued that there is 'a substantial gap in the educational literature, as there are potentially important implications for student engagement, performance, and attrition' (p. 9). Online learning came with various difficulties not just for students but educators too. Many issues and educational needs were harder to identify digitally, therefore resulting in missed safeguarding concerns and less support for vulnerable students (OECD, 2020). The experience was an unfamiliar and challenging concept, made difficult by students not turning on their cameras and engaging with online sessions (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). However, Gillett-Swan (2017) indicated that many students had personal factors affecting their access and contribution. The pandemic made learning painful by impacting their wellbeing, attitudes and motivation (Jackson, 2021).

The absence of academic environments was to blame for the changed behaviours and emotions of students (Mirahmadizadeh et al., 2020). Times Higher Education (2020) argued that students missed out on the physical learning elements of personal teacher interaction. Vitally, students missed out on the important development of communication and soft skills that are transferable to employment.

Government input

A study by the Department for Education (2021a) highlighted that most research was conducted at the very beginning of the pandemic. Therefore, many of the recent policy changes should consider the wider issues that have occurred since. As illustrated by the Local Government Association (2021), Covid-19 exposed various hidden inequalities, vulnerabilities and learning gaps. Various articles and reports indicated that the government has put 'catch-up' programmes in place; however, more is needed. Strategies like this have been designed to increase learning time by providing disadvantaged pupils with the option of additional sessions throughout the summer months (Davis, 2021; Hallahan, 2021; Sibieta, 2021; Weale, 2021). Although, the Department for Education (2021b) has proposed a scheme which would work better for colleges and universities. Students would get the 'opportunity to repeat up to one further year of study if they have been particularly badly affected by the pandemic' (p. 9). Whiteman (2021) criticised this, stating that educational facilities have adapted quicker than guidance or policies. He stressed that facilities should 'employ their own expertise to determine what pupils need and be given funding directly from government to achieve this'. The government needs to provide help and support specially catered to the different types of education.

Local implications

Northern Health Science Alliance (2021) studied students throughout the pandemic and discovered that students in the North of England received less online delivery due to a lack of digital resources. They indicated that students who had attended facilities within those boroughs had been directly disadvantaged compared to other regions in the UK. Plenty of research focused on the impacts of Covid-19 in South Yorkshire, with various studies focusing on the area of Sheffield. Although little seems to be documented about Barnsley specifically. GOV.UK (2022) presented their 2019/20 academic year school and college performance data, which showed some positive findings despite Barnsley being an area with a high number of disadvantaged students. The report reviewed college students' destinations after the ages of 16–18, and it highlighted that out of 2,412 students, 78% progressed into either employment or onto higher levels of education. It is hard to determine if Covid-19 has impacted these figures since. Fortunately, Barnsley is now part of the government nationwide scheme known as the

'levelling-up agenda' and the local authority 'are digging into their own pockets to fund the needs of pupils who have fallen behind' (Robert, 2021). Data from the surrounding boroughs document that Rotherham Borough Council has experienced that the 'pandemic has "directly impacted" the attendance rate' (Andrews, 2021). Literature from more local sources appears to be focused on schools, which are unrelated but have provided a useful insight.

Creative & practical

Literature relating to creative subjects throughout the pandemic is sparce. Research focused in 'Higher Education' settings appeared to be more relevant to this study, as the perceptions of mature students allowed for better comparisons. A recent interview with students at the Royal College of Art London found that the concept of online learning was not a 'normal' experience. It was argued that students could not create work without access to studios, facilities and resources (Elephant, 2020). Results indicated that students studying subjects of this nature lost what they had signed up to because of Covid-19. It appeared that learning was no longer enjoyable or worthwhile but instead caused changed attitudes, irritation and anxiety. Finch (2022) has recently identified in a study about practical skills undertaken for the awarding body AQA that subjects that require 'hands-on learning appeared to have a greater number of obstacles to overcome, whether online or in a socially distanced classroom setting'. Not all subjects are deliverable online, so when sessions moved online, practical elements were lost. Bates (2021), who currently teaches Music in the east of England, gave some advice in a *Tes Magazine* article about delivering practical subjects online. He suggested that students should be given freedom and autonomy so they can choose how and what they learn. This developed confidence as choice was offered based on equipment, access and interest.

Graphic Design

There is very little literature relating to Graphic Design. Although, the Office for National Statistics (2021) recently published an article about remote learning. Data was collected from secondary school teachers and students using an application called 'Teacher Tapp'. Results identified that throughout the pandemic the subject of 'design and technology has been particularly affected [...] pupils that were remote learning in these subjects appear to have been able to cover significantly less material than their in-class peers' (p. 5). This research was conducted at a lower level, but information highlighted that there were concerning issues, and subjects with less need for physical materials and workshop access have clearly been less affected during Covid-19. A Graphic Design lecturer in the Department of Design at Alexander College in Cyprus argued that traditional teaching approaches are essential as it is not possible to teach students to grasp comprehensive technical skills in a remote environment (Voulgaris, 2021). Results provided an interesting insight from a practical perspective, the challenges of enhancing student creativity and problem-solving abilities through a computer screen were highlighted. Development and progression of these skills rely heavily on human interaction. Although, Olson (2020) interviewed an American professor, Penny McElroy, who taught typography at the University of Redlands, who said, 'Graphic Design courses are easier to translate to a digital learning environment than some other studio art disciplines.' She described how technical aspects and demonstrations were recorded for students to watch and play back. Students would essentially learn the same concepts through a video instead of seeing them physically in the classroom. Continuing this would build a useful bank of resources that were transferrable, enabling more time and focus to be delegated to student understanding and interpretation.

Methodology

Covid-19 was an unfamiliar and unforeseen event that has impacted education in unimaginable ways (Callaghan, 2020). Conducting a case study would be the best approach for researching the impact of

this, as it would enable a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the different challenges and issues that students encountered while learning online (Crowe et al., 2011). Although, a case study focuses on observing a particular scenario, this study was designed with action intent. This methodology would conclude and present these findings along with potential solutions to the organisation where this research took place, enabling reflection of their practices and policies throughout Covid-19.

A case study appeared to be the most beneficial approach as it enabled 'a holistic view and to look in depth at the subtleties and intricacies of complex social phenomena' (Denscombe, 2017, p. 66). It was purposed to look at the bigger picture and investigate all relevant factors that may have caused issues or created challenges surrounding the scenario (Beyo, 2019). A case study traditionally allows the collection of multiple forms of data using mixed methods, which results in different sources providing more credibility in the results (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). A triangulated approach has enhanced the plausibility of these findings and provided a more concrete understanding of the scenario (Salkind, 2010).

Aims

This research aimed to answer the two carefully considered questions below:

1. What did students believe were the strengths and limitations of an online curriculum?

2. What physical and mental challenges impacted students while they were learning online?

Rationale

The intention of this study was 'to explore students' perceptions of both online and face-to-face learning experiences, rather than just one or the other' (Kemp and Grieve, 2014, p. 2). This allowed for a detailed, evidence-based comparison of the two differing curriculums, which would determine whether a mixture 'of online and offline teaching could be the new normal' (Pandit & Agrawal, 2021, p. 1). The findings of this study were able to highlight potential areas where resources were lacking and support was needed for learning throughout the pandemic. This determined areas where intervention was required as students were able to propose strategies that would prevent further loss of learning.

During the months of Covid-19, it became apparent that recorded lessons and digital resources proved to be flexible and efficient for enhancing learning in the home environment. Research was purposed to establish whether these changes and adaptions could be potentially utilised by educational facilities in the long term (Gillett-Swan, 2017). This also allowed the conclusion of the benefits and challenges of teaching and learning in an online and unfamiliar context (Danielson et al., 2014). It was additionally observed that students suffered due to various factors such as social isolation and reduced support from tutors and peers, which resulted in learners becoming lonely and depressed (Werner et al., 2021). Research examined these external factors that impacted students when away from the classroom, both physically and mentally. The objective of this study gave students the direct opportunity to express their opinions, attitudes and emotions they felt throughout the ordeal.

Positionality

Throughout the duration of Covid-19, my own role within this research was as an associate teacher delivering various Graphic Design workshops. My position was to deliver content, facilitate learning and conduct online tutorials to a variety of student groups studying different courses within the department. As a teacher, delivering the curriculum digitally, I witnessed the difficulties of teaching a heavily practical and creative subject without a classroom. Therefore, my motivation led to an investigation of my own students' perspectives of online learning and how their experience of learning at home differed and impacted them as individuals.

Data collection

Research was conducted using two different approaches: a questionnaire and a focus group. The mixture of approaches allowed for collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, which when combined helped to build more valid and reliable representations of the students' experiences (Zohrabi, 2013). Both methods were used independently to gather information, with the results of each method considered to have equal weight and validity to this study.

Chosen sample

Considered judgements were made about who would participate in this study, known as purposeful sampling. As indicated by Lavrakas (2008), the sample became the most logical option, as it allowed contemplation and selection of the best representatives which produced some very credible and useful results (Dudovskiy, 2022). Sharma (2017) did argue, however, that the approach would be 'highly prone to researcher bias' (p. 751). She indicated that it can be difficult to determine if the appropriate sources have been selected as the method has been known to cause conflictions as more generic participants would produce different results.

Participants

All students selected for involvement in this study were enrolled on Graphic Design related courses at the organisation where this research took place. The students chosen were current and or previously enrolled learners who had witnessed both classroom and remote learning. Overall, 35 students participated in this research; 25 in the questionnaire and ten in the focus group. There were 11 different student cohorts within the department, at study levels three to six. Nine of which were existing students and two were groups of learners who had progressed and/or graduated. This allowed the exploration of different students at different stages of their educational journey, each as important. Out of the 11, five of these groups were selected randomly to participate in the questionnaire, to avoid as much bias as possible. Within the five groups, in total 55 students were initially invited to participate in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered anonymously, so participants were more inclined to be truthful and comfortable knowing their responses would not be identified (Patten, 2017). Afterwards just one out of these five groups were then chosen to participate in the focus group. This selection was not made at random, but instead based on their level of study, which did, however, present more bias but provided more valid conclusions.

Online questionnaire

The questionnaire was the first data collection method to be distributed to all involved participants. The creation of it online was beneficial as all the information was stored securely on an easily accessible database. This enabled subsequent and automatic computerised analysis (Evans & Mathur, 2005). The questionnaire was created with a series of open-ended, scale selection and checkbox questions. As highlighted by Denscombe (2017), it was important to ensure participants understood the questions fully to be able to provide appropriate answers. Considering this, areas and topics interrogated in the questionnaire were devised based on themes discovered from existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of the method became an attractive ideology due to the flexibility and ease of accumulating information (Mathers et al., 2009). Although, for it to be purposeful, thought, effort and careful consideration were required in order to ensure the information was useful and reliable (Roopa & Rani, 2012).

The questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed to all participants through the virtual learning environment of the organisation. This gave the students the opportunity to disclose their perspectives quickly and easily. As previously stated, 55 students in total were invited to be involved in the questionnaire. Denscombe (2017), argued that this is an important factor for the method to be successful and give the results validity. Unfortunately, the response rate was relevantly moderate, as only 25 answered overall.

Surprisingly, however, these findings are very detailed, and most students gave genuine and honest answers, which made for some eye-opening conclusions. This was only possible because of the length and breadth of the questionnaire, which was designed to investigate many areas, from access to technologies to the opinions and thoughts of tutors and teaching methods.

Focus group

The second method dived deeper and uncovered more personal and detailed understandings. Discussion was focused on the initial themes that began to appear from the questionnaire results. It proved more beneficial in various ways as group interaction, related attitudes and shared views established some crucial findings that potentially may not have been discovered from the questionnaire (Denscombe, 2017). The focus group did allow students better opportunities to provide more accurate and realistic interpretations of their reactions and experiences due to the discussion being within a personal setting. However, it was difficult to control discussion and keep dialogue relevant to the topic (Leung & Savithiri, 2009).

To expand on the results of the questionnaire, a focus group was integrated into the multi-method designed study. It was designed to gather further evidence to ensure the authenticity of the results. Nevertheless, only one student cohort was selected to participate in the second method of data collection. The cohort in question was a small group of third year, level six, BA (Hons) degree students. As previously indicated, this cohort was selected due to the importance of their education during the time of Covid-19. Leung and Savithiri (2009), highlighted that individuals who are purposefully sampled can produce some heavily biased results. This group was among the participants in the questionnaire and some of these students did indicate they had already given answers. Having numerous students involved multiple times enabled the data to be richer, but it was arguably harder to analyse and generalise (Kennedy et al., 2001). Considering this, the students were willing to give more personal and in-depth views of their experiences through verbal interactions. The ten students then assigned themselves pseudonyms (Appendix B) to anonymise their identities and to portray a more realistic representation for the reader, when these findings were discussed (Lavery, 2017). It was decided to encourage engagement and increase value in the participants' involvement (Allen and Wiles, 2016). The small cohort of students were five months into the second year of their degree course when Covid-19 arose. The group became the ideal participants for this study having experienced a mixture of physical sessions as well as digital delivery. These students witnessed how their education had changed and been impacted since the pandemic, allowing them to compare and reflect on their past and present experiences.

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted following the educational guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (2018). In accordance with their regulations, before this research took place, students were provided with information about the study and an explanation of why their contribution was crucial (para. 8). To comply with the regulations, consent of all participants involved was gathered (para. 9), and students were informed of their right to withdraw from this study at any time (para. 31). As the guidelines state, parental permission was gained for students who were under the age of 18 (para. 24). As specified in the regulations, students who disclosed issues or concerns were given information with various help and support contacts (para. 18). Also, in line with the procedures, students were informed that any safeguarding matters would be passed onto the relevant sources (para. 34). To correctly follow the regulations, data has been securely stored (para. 50), and information has been kept confidential and anonymised throughout (para. 40). This study has also complied with regulations of the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and GDPR (2018). No information has been shared, distributed or compromised as specified by the guidelines (para. 49).

Thematic analysis

Keywords and reoccurring phrases were among the initial results of the questionnaire, therefore thematic analysis appeared to be the most logical process as it allowed the identification and interpretation of emerging patterns within the data (Michalos, 2014). Findings from the questionnaire were the easiest to examine as the results were organised and understood numerically which presented the data clearly as a series of factual statistics. Although, Barratt (2018) argued that the use of percentage results in a small sample can mislead the audience due to a lack of validity.

Data gathered for this study was from a mixture of methods, but overall thematic analysis has proved to be 'a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights' (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Braun & Clarke (2006) highlighted that thematic analysis is flexibly used in qualitative data analysis; however, in this study it became useful when analysing the information gathered from the focus group. The method was used to generate codes and organising data into small meaningful snippets (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis has proved to be the most effective and adaptable approach for this research; however, Braun & Clarke (2006) highlighted that prior to this research beginning, initial analytic interests or thoughts might have potentially been sparked upon exploration of contextual literature.

Findings

These findings have been grouped into five recurring themes that emerged after analysis of results. This publication focused solely on the most significant topics that aligned closely with the aims of this research.

Missing the classroom

The first area that appeared primarily substantial to participants was the importance of the classroom environment. Sinhal (2017) argued that 'teaching in a classroom gives students the opportunity to engage in live discussions in which they are forced to use their critical thinking skills to formulate opinions or arguments'. Covid-19 removed these essential components which normally ensure successful and worthwhile learning.

Voulgaris (2021) stated that traditional teaching spaces are valuable components for training students to grasp, comprehend and follow the creative process in Graphic Design. Without a solid understanding of knowledge and theory, students would not be able to use technical skills or creative thinking. In the questionnaire, 92% of learners confirmed that they were satisfied learning had returned to the classroom. One participant stated that they missed the 'access to the different creative facilities around college to try and learn different skills'. Amanda, Vanessa and Michelle documented their frustration with the difficulties of instant feedback during the focus group.

Times Higher Education (2020) highlighted that educational facilities are reimagining how they deliver their content to students. As education is returning to campus, they have argued that some students may now prefer learning to be online. Facilities may have to offer digital opportunities to provide flexibility of offered courses. Although, when participants were asked what type of pedagogy they thought was the better option for Graphic Design, 72% opted for fully classroom-based learning, with 28% selecting the option for a blended curriculum. When questioned about the success of online learning, there is a very polarised perspective. Participants were asked how easy they found the experience, and 60% indicated it was difficult, with 80% strongly disagreeing that digital delivery was not practical. Students experienced issues such as occurrences of slow internet, technological issues and platform bugs sometimes disrupting sessions. Fortunately, all students who were involved in the questionnaire indicated that they did have access to all the appropriate equipment, and 92% of them specified they had access to the internet through Wi-Fi connectivity. Times Higher Education (2020) did, however, indicate that the 'speedy migration online,

highlighted widespread digital poverty, which meant not all students and staff had access to resources such as hardware, the internet or even a quiet place to study'.

Technological enhancements

Results did appear to confirm that there were many digital elements which enhanced the support and delivery of content for learning (Siemens et al., 2015). The questionnaire gave the participants the opportunity to discuss online elements as well as physical, where 87.7% of students strongly agreed that Microsoft Teams enabled them to successfully learn from home. Students indicated that the most useful features included:

- group chats which allowed students to contact classmates and teachers collectively;
- screensharing options so individuals could remotely see a specific computer window;
- recorded video meetings which allowed sessions to be captured and replayed by students.

During this study, participants were also questioned whether the platform hindered their learning at all. Feedback was mostly positive, with a select few stating they found the programme hard to navigate and that it would occasionally crash due to technical glitches. In comparison, Maria and Katie praised Microsoft Teams in comparison with Zoom, due to the available capabilities. As highlighted by Bacchus (2020) Microsoft Teams has become revolutionary and 'it has integrations with the Microsoft Office apps and other Microsoft services like OneNote. It's also why Microsoft reports that Teams for education is now used by 183,000 tenants in 175 countries'.

Various platforms appeared advantageous and technology has appeared to enhance delivery. The success of online learning was determined based on the cooperation of students themselves. There were many external elements impacting their learning, as 'home was not the best environment to facilitate their studying for many reasons' (Bashir et al., 2021, p. 7). Surprisingly, during the questionnaire 84% of students actively indicated they were engaged with digital content, which did appear to be the case. Castelli & Sarvary (2021) indicated that it was difficult for teachers to operate online and deliver interesting and creative lessons, because students would not turn on their microphones and cameras. Results showed that only 52% of students admitted to using their cameras and microphones, not willingly but when instructed to, and when asked how comfortable students were in front of the camera, 60% maintained they did not want to turn them on at all. Participants disclosed concerns of anxiety and low confidence, stating that they felt awkward due to their physical appearance and home environment (Castelli & Sarvary 2021).

Lacking motivation

Jackson (2021) highlighted that participants lacked motivation and interest which in turn also affected their online engagement. The questionnaire found that only 36% of participants indicated that they felt motivated to complete their coursework while at home. Some of the statistics emerged were very interesting: 88% of students stated that they worked in their bedroom, and 52% of learners admitted they were not prepared for lessons, causing demotivated mindsets and careless attitudes. The focus group gave students the opportunity to discuss the causes. Rachel admitted to losing her routine and staying up until the early hours, causing her to sleep in and miss morning lessons. Michelle indicated that lessons were not inspiring and fun with no practical elements, therefore she felt less motivated to join sessions and engage.

Gillett-Swan (2017) argued that students may not have fully participated in online lessons due to interruptions. Eighty-four per cent of students stated they were distracted by mobile phones, 68% admitted to going on social media and 48% declared that socialising with family occupied them. They were then asked if they did anything to remove distractions. In the focus group Denise indicated that she tried to set goals to do certain amounts of work then reward herself by watching television. Whereas Anthony stated that he had to move rooms

away from family members to keep focused. Coincidently, 48% of students disclosed that they had to share equipment and workspaces with other people at home, therefore their learning was disrupted.

Communications challenges

It is apparent that inappropriate circumstances and learning environments caused various issues that would not occur in a classroom setting. The changed attitudes and motives of students was down to the lack of access to workshops and resources, and online lessons took students away from the ideal environment where learning should thrive. Creative students require specific environments with accessible supplies in order to thrive and create concepts (Voulgaris, 2021). Six out of the ten students in the focus group admitted to having to change their work and create digital pieces, which was not their style or way of working. The impact was similar to the ideology argued by a student in the blog by Elephant (2020): 'how could we be expected to make work, to continue our education "as normal", with no access to our studios?' Students being removed from their normal workshops and settings caused various issues as they needed 'access to the required technology and materials to be able to fully participate in practical lessons' (Bates, 2021). Results from the questionnaire and focus group showed that students were unhappy with what teachers expected from them with limited capabilities.

Additionally, students in the questionnaire stated that they experienced difficulties communicating with tutors online. When further investigated in the focus group, Michelle, Amanda, Denise and Claire confirmed that they were not able to get in touch with tutors easily, and the simple task of asking questions took twice as long. As argued by Voulgaris (2021), 'one of the difficulties of distance education is that the instructor and the learners are no longer in the same space to address, common misunderstandings together' (p. 22). Specially, in the questionnaire, 96% of participants strongly agreed that student and tutor interaction was essential to effective learning. One learner indicated that 'the lack of human interaction in a creative subject was never going to be as successful as being in a classroom, you need actual interaction with the tutors and other students'. Although, 84% of learners admitted to regularly keeping in contact with peers preventing them from total separation.

The perspective of online learning certainly confirmed there to be a lack of communication. As argued by Voulgaris (2021), 'the discipline of design and creativity is subjective, and as such, the teaching is subjected to communication that has been facilitated between the educator and the students' (p. 22). Within Graphic Design, communication is one of the key elements between educator and learner, as it can encourage creativity and evoke deeper learning through the process and discussion of ideas and artwork. It is not surprising that students preferred a more traditional face-to-face learning approach, as social connections were completely diminished.

Social isolation

As highlighted earlier, data collected has identified further issues surrounding the mental health and emotional worries of students. In the questionnaire, students could list feelings experienced while away from college, and some included: stress, anxiety, loneliness, boredom, doubt, anger, frustration, depression, worry and sadness. Most feelings disclosed were negative; only two students declared emotions of happiness and joy (Mirahmadizadeh et al., 2020). Concerningly, four students who took part in the form disclosed they experienced feeling depressed. As highlighted by Grace (2021), communication online made it more difficult for students to show emotions and even tougher for teachers to identify these hidden issues. It does appear that socialising and being around other people is an essential part of the student learning experience.

Surprisingly, students did indicate that they enjoyed some elements of online learning. During the focus group, Claire and Benjamin stated they

were happier to work from home than to spend money, time and effort commuting. Rachel disclosed that online learning allowed her to 'develop independence in controlling your own schedule, learning without pressure and in a way that works for you at home'. However, when questioned if they would opt to learn digitally again, 76% of students strongly disagreed. Anthony made an excellent point when he suggested that people need a great deal of self-discipline to work from home and the willpower to remove as many distractions as you can. It appears that responses were divided. In the focus group some students indicated online delivery was managed well. Although, most students did agree that the transition came as a shock, so no one could have really prepared for it (Schleicher, 2020).

Conclusion

This study has proven to be very successful; it is evident that Covid-19 has impacted every one of the involved participants in distinct ways. Data gathered has been thoroughly detailed and varied which made analysis and overall conclusions easy to determine. The use of different data collection methods has allowed this study more buoyancy, as a range of sources have created solid evidence for an argument against online delivery (Health Security Agency, 2020). Participants have put forward their personal experiences which have produced some very honest and detailed perspectives with surprising but obvious themes becoming evident.

Generally, the results of this study have established that the students' learning experience has severely deteriorated throughout the pandemic. Perspectives from participants have determined that digital delivery has been difficult, and it appeared that Graphic Design is more effectively taught within the classroom, despite the heavy reliance on technology (Sinhal, 2017). Voulgaris (2021) stated that the heavily practical and creative elements of the subject need personal instruction for learning to be successful. Findings have clarified that the implementation of a fully digital curriculum does not appear to be the way forward for any subject, let alone one that is practical and creative. The need and benefits of physical teaching massively outweigh the motives for virtual delivery. It is important to remember that 'remote learning has not been able to replicate the interactions that take place naturally on campus' (Times Higher Education, 2020).

The findings of this study have indicated that the students have addressed a strong desire for classroom learning. However, the future of education will potentially see subjects adapt to new ways of delivery as witnessed throughout Covid-19 (Hu, 2021). Evidently, teaching and learning could be more accommodating and offer mixed curriculums where the main elements of delivery are done in person with components of digital content offered away from the classroom; however, this would oppose the findings of this study (Siemens et al., 2015). Students would be given the flexibility to take control of their own learning, which could potentially be beneficial for both staff and students (Bates, 2021). Autonomous learning has been debated in literature as to the successes and challenges. Although it has been proven to develop confidence, motivation and more preference for students (Montin & Koivisto, 2014).

Potential solutions

Whiteman (2021) discussed a scheme called 'top-up funding' which would mean pupils in low-income areas are given more focused funding. This would result in previously identified disadvantaged pupils from the local area relevant to this study gaining access to more opportunities (GOV.UK, 2022). However useful or concerning the findings of this study are, it appears that without government intervention some facilities have little or no support and resources to make up for lost learning. Without the appropriate guidance and help, lost learning will be forgotten about and the mental and physical issues of students will continue to deteriorate.

Prioritising the wellbeing of students and teaching should be one of the areas most focused on. As argued by Weale (2021), wellbeing 'is high-priority for headteachers and their leadership teams [...] wellbeing of their children and teachers has to come first'. As previously stated by Sibieta (2021), there

is an apparent need for the government to provide additional funding and create policies that will focus on further educational opportunities. Students would benefit from support groups and schemes set up by colleges and universities. Voulgaris (2021) suggested the concept of 'touchpoints' between teacher and student. Establishing regular communications through learning via emails, videos calls and phone conversations. This would ensure that students are receiving feedback and support at critical points, and allow teachers to address concerns and provide continuous investment to fill in any gaps in their educational experiences. This would allow learners to return to education with ease. Help and understanding can be given to students, even counselling offered to discuss and overcome the anxieties and emotions faced during the pandemic. These could be offered on a weekly or monthly basis to allow students to reconnect with peers, teachers, staff and most importantly the classroom.

For this to happen, deeper investigation is required in specific regions to provide information about impacts of Covid-19 locally rather than nationally. Listening to the voices of staff and students directly in specific areas would be more beneficial than generic policies and strategies (Elephant, 2020). The government should gather information from local authorities and examine individual organisations to identify where support and action is needed. It is important that when the government examine these strategies, they consider not just the students but the teachers, parents, stakeholders, companies and communities that have been affected by Covid-19. Collaboration between all these different parties is essential to finding effective solutions moving forward that create change and provide lasting results.

It also appears that individual investigation is needed per subject as well per region. Within the Further Education sector, some curriculum areas were easily transferrable online whereas others were simply not. Therefore, research is needed to identify what resources and support are required per subject. Otherwise, policies for funding and schemes will be generalised. They will not cater to specific subjects' specialisms that have struggled due to the complexities of their different teaching and learning elements. Research should be done to determine how curriculum areas coped during Covid-19. There is a need to discover how they had to adapt and what they now require in order to ensure students are progressing and developing fully. This research would be beneficial when published, as different colleges and universities would be able to share and inform their own subject and others of good practice.

Amid the other challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, lost learning is still one of the biggest issues facing students. Considering the aforementioned suggestions, new implementations need to be put in place sooner rather than later. Most of the students who have participated in this study will soon progress onto Further Education pathways and it will be too late. Voulgaris (2021) recommended that colleges and universities could create a 'virtual base camp' for learning using a management system. Past students would be able to revisit and continue to study using this format. Utilising virtual learning environments, creating websites or using online file drives. These would contain learning materials, class conversations and creative resources that would appeal to students who require additional sources. It appeared that the pandemic was a collaborative opportunity as it 'has opened up the ground for different initiatives to be undertaken' (Voulgaris, 2021, p. 22). The concept of linking learning to industry as part of the continued education process. Students could work closely with companies and employers to allow them to gain new practical skills. Students would be given the opportunity to work collaboratively with different sectors. Their skills, creativity and imagination would be used in return for the experiences and challenges that they missed during Covid-19.

Further considerations

The produced findings appear to emphasise that online learning has been mostly negative for learners, but positive perspectives have emerged. If

content is delivered within a classroom, it does appear that the subject could involve some digital elements in certain circumstances. The usefulness of recording online sessions so that students could replay the lesson to enhance learning seemed to be an attractive ideology (Siemens et al., 2015). However, if elements of courses can be conducted and delivered online, the need for a teacher becomes irrelevant. Although, the concept is like the technique undertaken by Penny McElroy, who stated that 'recorded demonstrations of certain techniques and tools to help students understand technical aspects of graphic design. Having a catalogue of these recordings she says, has been a long time coming and something students have asked for in the past' (Olson, 2020).

Nevertheless, if education does become more digital as technology is slowly embraced by facilities, it needs to be successful. Adequate infrastructures, more support and technical training for staff and students along with new guidance and framework from governing bodies is needed (Hu, 2021). As argued by Siemens et al. (2015), there are significant disadvantages to adopting these emerging learning approaches. Instructors would need to redesign courses to ensure they are facilitating and suitable. Due to the short-term impacts of Covid-19, it is purely not sustainable at this current moment in time. Though, education has resumed back on campus, it has been argued that some students may now prefer learning to be completely online. Organisations would have to offer digital opportunities to provide flexibility of offered courses. They will need to compete with other providers as students have become familiar with the idea of an adaptable learning option (Busby, 2021).

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Appendix A. Online questionnaire

Disclaimer*

- Please tick this box to confirm you have read and understood the information form.
- Please tick this box to confirm your participation within this study and your consent for your information to be used.

Educational & personal information

Please enter your answers below

Please specify your gender. *

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say

Please specify your age. *

- 16–18 (Further Education)
- 19+ (Higher Education)

Please specify the course you are currently studying. *

Please specify the level of current study. *

- Level 1 – Entry
- Level 2 – GCSE equivalent
- Level 3 – Diploma/A-Levels
- Level 4 – Certificate (HNC)
- Level 5 – Foundation degree (HND)
- Level 6 – Bachelor's degree

Please specify the year of your current study. *

- Year 1
- Year 2
- Year 3

Please specify the model of your current study. *

- Part-time
- Full-time

Resources & equipment

Please enter your answers below

What devices did you have access to at home? *

Please select all options that apply

- Desktop
- Mac
- Laptop
- MacBook
- Tablet
- iPad
- Printer
- Scanner
- Webcam
- Microphone
- Headset
- None of the above

Did you have access to the internet? *

Please select all options that apply

- I had access through WI-FI connectivity at home
- I had access through a dongle device
- I had access from data on a mobile or tablet device
- I did not have any access to the internet

If you answered no to the previous questions, what did your educational facility do to ensure you had access to the appropriate resources and equipment? *

Did a lack of any of these resources and equipment hinder your learning? *

Use of technologies

Please enter your answers below

Did you find Microsoft Teams useful and did it enable you to learn effectively from home? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

What features of Microsoft Teams did you find most useful while learning online? *

Please select all options that apply

- Individual message chats
- Course group chats
- Message reactions
- Channel announcements & messages
- Video meetings
- Video transcriptions

- Video recordings
- Screen sharing
- Polly/forms
- Class notebook
- File sharing & storage
- Online assignments & submissions

Is there any part of Microsoft Teams that you found challenging to use while learning online? *

Can you suggest any other online platforms or programmes that would have enabled or enhanced your learning at home? *

Did you regularly turn on your camera and microphone during online lessons? *
Please select all options that apply

- I turned my camera and microphone on in every lesson
- I turned my camera and microphone on in some lessons
- I did not turn my camera and microphone on in any lessons
- I only turned my camera and microphone on when I was instructed to

How comfortable were you with your camera and microphone turned on during online lessons? *

- 0 – Not comfortable at all
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very comfortable

If you did not turn your camera and microphone on regularly in online lessons, why was this? *

Do you think anything could have been done differently to enable and enhance learning online? *

<u>Home learning environment</u>
Please enter your answers below

At home during online lessons, where did you usually work? *
Please select all options that apply

- I worked from a home office
- I worked in my bedroom at a desk or on the bed
- I worked in my living room on the sofa
- I worked in the dining room or kitchen at the table
- I worked in an outbuilding or garage
- I worked elsewhere

How did you prepare for online lessons? *
Please select all options that apply

- I set an early alarm, got up and logged into the lesson in plenty of time
- I set a reasonable alarm, got up and logged into the lesson on time
- I set an alarm a few minutes before the lesson and logged into the lesson quickly
- I did not set an alarm and attended lessons whenever I woke up

What do you think you could have done to better prepare for lessons? *

Did you have to share the room you were working in with others during online lessons? *
Please select all options that apply

- I sometimes had to share the room with other family members
- I always had to share the room with other family members

- I never had to share the room with other family members

Did you have to share resources and equipment with others during online lessons? *
Please select all options that apply

- I sometimes had to share resources and equipment with other family members
- I always had to share resources and equipment with other family members
- I never had to share resources and equipment with other family members

Did having to share the room, resources and equipment at home ever hinder your learning? *

Were there other family members around while you were learning at home? *
Please select all options that apply

- There were always other family members at home
- There were sometimes other family members at home
- There were never other family members at home

Did you keep in contact with classmates online during Covid-19? *
Please select all options that apply

- I always kept in contact with my classmates
- I sometimes kept in contact with my classmates
- I never kept in contact with my classmates

How isolated would you say you felt throughout Covid-19 at home in general? *

- 0 – Not isolated
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very isolated

College tutors
Please enter your answers below

How satisfied were you with the support you received from your tutors and educational facility throughout Covid-19? *

- 0 – Not satisfied at all
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Hugely satisfied

Do you believe student and tutor interaction is essential to effective learning? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

Do you feel that Covid-19 hindered your personal interaction with your tutors? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

How easy did you find it to get feedback from your tutors? *

- 0 – Very difficult
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very easy

Do you think there is anything that could have been done or provided by your educational facility to support your learning more while working from home? *

Do you think your tutors were well equipped and trained to educate and support you online appropriately? *

<u>Emotions & experiences</u>
Please enter your answers below

How easy did you find the online learning experience? *

- 0 – Very difficult
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very easy

Do you think learning online is practical and effective? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

How successful do you feel learning a creative subject is online? *

- 0 – Not successful at all
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very successful

Do you feel online learning had any benefits? *

What do you feel has been the most useful elements of online learning? *

What elements did you find challenging or hindered your learning while online? *

What has been your most negative experience while learning online? *

What has been your most memorable experience while learning online? *

What emotions did you experience while learning online? *

Did learning online affect your mental health at all? *

How would you rate your mental health while learning online? *

- 0 – Very poor
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Excellent

Do you have any other comments that you would like to share about your online learning experience? *

Behaviours & attitudes

Please enter your answers below

Did you engage with your teachers and digital content? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

What factors would you say stopped you engaging and contributing fully with online lessons? *

Were you as willing to learn online as you usually are in the classroom? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

How would you describe your attitude towards learning online in general? *

Were you motivated to complete coursework at home? *

- 0 – Strongly disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Strongly agree

What do you think could have been done to enable you to be more productive at home? *

Did you face any distractions at home while learning online? *

Please select all options that apply

- Mobile phone
- Social media
- Socialising with friends & family
- Housework
- Exercise
- Games console
- Television
- Family pets

Did you do anything to remove distractions from yourself while learning online? *

Returning to the classroom

Please enter your answers below

How satisfied are you to be back learning in the physical classroom? *

- 0 – Not satisfied at all
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Hugely satisfied

What physical elements of your subject did you miss most while learning online? *

Did a lack of access to facilities and workshops hinder your learning while online? *

How did you problem solve to complete work without access to facilities and workshops? *

What type of learning do you think works best for your subject? *

Please select all options that apply

- Remote learning (fully digital)
- Blended learning (a mixture of digital and physical lessons)
- Hybrid learning (some students online and some in the classroom simultaneously)
- Classroom learning (physical lessons)

Do you think operating digitally could possibly work in the future? *

How likely do you think you will be to learn digitally again in the future? *

- 0 – Not likely at all
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10 – Very likely

Is there anything else you would like to share about the two differing experiences? *

Submit Form

Appendix B. Table 1: Focus group pseudonyms

Student one	Vanessa (F)
Student two	Maria (F)
Student three	Anthony (M)
Student four	Amanda (F)
Student five	Michelle (F)
Student six	Claire (F)
Student seven	Katie (F)
Student eight	Denise (F)
Student nine	Benjamin (M)
Student ten	Rachel (F)