Northumbria Research Link

Northumbria
University
NEWCASTLE

UniversityLibrary

Online learning in higher education in the UK: Exploring the experiences of sports students and staff

Nicola McCullogh, Georgia Allen, Emma Boocock, Daniel J. Peart, Rick Hayman [*]

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of higher education programs were delivered online and programs involving practical sessions were unable to deliver these activities on campus. This study explores the perspectives of students and staff from the sport department at a United Kingdom (UK) university. Undergraduate students (N = 21) and members of staff (N = 10) who taught on the same programs took part in online focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews respectively. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the qualitative data. These themes are discussed in the context of pedagogical research and future practical recommendations.

1. Introduction

The impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic has significantly changed the ways in which higher education (HE) institutions now deliver their education provision. In line with national lockdown restrictions, students and educators from across all study disciplines and levels had to make an immediate transition to online methods of teaching, learning and assessment (Lockee, 2021). This sudden halt with face-to-face learning caused significant challenge, disruption, and upheaval to work-life balance and wellbeing, with many students and staff feeling especially isolated and detached from peers and colleagues who they worked and socialized with daily pre-pandemic (Gülbahar & Adnan, 2020; Lockee, 2021).

University sports students are normally expected to study a broad number of practically based disciplines including anatomy, physiology, biomechanics, motor control, sport psychology, nutrition and coaching in small class sized, face-to-face campus settings (e. g., interactive lectures, laboratories, workshops, & tutorials) (United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2019). However, the combined effect of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, campus closures and rapid switching to online learning prevented higher education students and staff from experiencing social interaction and experiences that can be best achieved through in-person teaching, factors considered to be essential aspects of the overall university education experience (Kelly & Mulrooney, 2019).

University sport students typically arrive at university having been taught in schools and further education settings which were classroom-based and where group sizes were small enough for everybody to interact and get to know one another (Hayman et al., 2017). They are fully expectant for this personalized way of learning to continue through their entire university education, rather than having to engage with their studies remotely, expecting constant access to academic staff who are experts in their teaching discipline, are able to provide summative assessment support, guidance and feedback that is high quality and immediate (Balloo, 2018; Surgenor, 2013) and help them to handle their academic workload and the abrupt shift towards independent learning (Farhat et al., 2017;

Hayman, 2017, 2018; Hockings et al., 2018). There is evidence that university sports students engage more positively and confidently with constructivist over traditional directive teaching formats, where heavy emphasis is placed on solving problems, sharing ideas and reflecting upon personal experiences both individually and in small groups (Groves et al., 2010; Hayman, 2017).

Online learning has been described as a method of education undertaken using digital tools that provide instructions to other individuals using the internet (Clark & Mayer, 2016). The positive experiences of learning online upon engagement, motivation, enjoyment, and satisfaction are well documented and extend to all groups of students including those defined as mature, commuter, disabled and those who have mobility issues, medical conditions, and caring responsibilities (Abu et al., 2021). It is known that students prefer tutors who teach them online to be caring, empathetic, approachable, positive, comfortable with technology and to provide regular opportunities to interact, collaborate and build relationships with themselves and fellow classmates, reinforcing that staff still have a key role to play to facilitate student learning online (Bolumole, 2020; Khan, 2021).

A recent study exploring students' experiences of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic found they preferred and engaged more effectively with synchronous over asynchronous course elements (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Some studies report online learning effectiveness to be equivalent with face-to-face delivery (Allen et al., 2002; Swan, 2003), how it can support small group collaboration and online learning community cohesion (Bolumole, 2020; Komninou, 2017) and can be an excellent revision tool (Abu et al., 2021). Staff should however sufficiently educate their students before they start online learning about its concept, how it differs from traditional campus-based face-to-face teaching and the added responsibility, independence, and workload it can create (Lockee, 2021).

Further studies have reported how the switch to online learning can prove challenging to students for several reasons, including diminished social interaction, insufficient home-based learning conditions and reduced motivation and effort to learn, but that they enjoyed working remotely in small groups with peers who they knew (Almendingen et al., 2021). Abu et al. (2021) found students valued not having to commute onto campus and the resulting time and monetary savings, viewed the academic independence as an employability benefit, but missed the day-to-day interactions and casual conversations with fellow students and staff. Other study findings show effective online teaching outcomes are more likely to occur through well-planned pre-recorded and synchronous content which students can access at any time and at their own pace (Serrano et al., 2019) and when regular peer-to-peer interaction and engagement with problem-based and experiential activities are provided (Almendingen et al., 2021; Bolumole, 2020; Khan, 2021).

Nguyen et al., 2021 found students preferred and felt better engaged and satisfied with synchronous over asynchronous online classes, particularly when active learning approaches were used, but that they missed the social aspects of on-campus learning. Sports science students felt online learning teaching materials had to be interactive, engaging and practically applied if they were to be effective, and that lack of student independence and unstable internet access and services were disadvantages of the approach (Keogh et al., 2017).

It is important to point out how online learning is not always held in high regard and considered favorably (Bolumole, 2020). Kundu and Bej (2021) revealed how university students felt underprepared and under-supported for the overnight pivot to enforced online learning, with many experiencing anxiousness and uncertainty. Recent studies also demonstrate how students feel that online education had caused them to fall behind with their learning (Tan, 2021) and lose motivation to study (Khan, 2021). Li et al. (2013) found university students displayed low levels of engagement and persistence towards learning remotely, finding it to be disempowering and a negative impact on their learning effectiveness. Bashir et al. (2021) surveyed bioscience students at a UK university on their experiences of online home studying during the pandemic, and the impact of lockdown on mental wellbeing and quality of life. A majority reported their positive experiences of online open-book assessments and having experienced only limited technical or connectivity problems, but only half felt comfortable using their video camera to interact during sessions. Others discussed having insufficient workspaces to learn and lacking key equipment, including office furniture and suitable lighting. Other notable findings were mainly negative, including decreased concentration, sleeping difficulties and a decline in mental wellbeing.

Even though UK universities continue to recruit large and diverse cohorts onto HE sports programs each academic year, research exploring the teaching and learning experiences of sports students and staff remains limited, despite a call for growth some years ago (Lane and Whyte, 2006). Whilst recent non-sport-specific online learning studies provide important conceptual and practical additions to the wider literature, including implications for learning content and delivery, accessibility, community development, employability and assessment, most were quantitative in design, from across a narrow range of subject disciplines and failed to capture both staff and student experiences, so the transfer to sport cannot be assumed. Perceptions of the potential for online learning methods in sport were mixed pre-pandemic (Lane and Whyte, 2006; Willett et al., 2019). Knudson (2020) collected data that captured the abrupt emergency move to online teaching mid-course, and Finlay et al. (2022) conducted a prospective study aiming to gather student perception of online learning in the 2020/21 academic year, which corresponds to the first full year of restrictions. However, whilst insightful and well conducted, there are limitations such as Knudson's (2020) data being collected under very specific conditions that make it difficult to transfer to future post-pandemic planning, and neither study reports on the concomitant staff perspective. Within the sport literature the staff perspective of the move to online learning is limited to narrative recommendations (Rayner & Webb, 2021) and an international paper where the staff and students were from various institutions, making the findings difficult to compare (Moustakas & Robrade, 2022).

Understanding areas of congruence and incongruence between staff and student perspectives will be important to support post-pandemic planning and delivery. It will facilitate the identification of methods to enhance teaching and learning born out of the enforced emergency online delivery, and areas where a move back to traditional methods may be more effective for the development ok knowledge, skills and experience. The aim was to identify key themes from their experiences of online learning and teaching, allowing insights which may guide future delivery such as blended learning.

2. Method

2.1. Research context

In accordance with the initial UK Covid-19 lockdown, the university changed its teaching and learning provision from a fully face-to-face format to a fully online format in March 2020. A blended learning approach was taken in late September 2020, with some teaching sessions taking place on campus and others online. However, due to continued Covid-19 disruptions and further lockdowns, all teaching and learning activities returned to an online format between October 2020 and the time of the data collection in March 2021. Data collection in the current study was part of a larger project evaluating the impact and experience of online learning for sports students during the pandemic, for instance via anonymous surveys which were anticipated to generate interest in this subsequent qualitative research.

2.2. Participants

Student participants were recruited by advertising the study during taught sessions and through announcements made via the online learning portal and by email. This was done for students from Level 3 (foundation year students) to Level 6 (final year undergraduate students) across all sport programs, including: Applied Sport and Exercise Science; Sport Coaching; Sport Development; Sport, Exercise and Nutrition; and Sport Management. Expressions of interest in participating in the study were received from 30 students. Of those, 21 participated: 7 (of 7) Level 4 students, 3 (of 4) Level 5 students, and 11 (of 19) Level 6 students from a range of demographic backgrounds. Though specific demographic data were not collected in order to remove the disclosure of potentially sensitive information as a barrier to participation, students were felt to be representative of their cohorts. Unfortunately, no expressions of interest were received from students studying at Level 3.

Staff participants were recruited by advertising the study via email to all members of staff in the department who were responsible

Table 1
Focus group guide for student participants.

1 Opening questions
2 In general, how have you been finding university life, during COVID? (both socially and academically)
3 What support have you accessed during this time (i.e. student services/library online/IT support)
4 What further support do you need from Northumbria and your module tutors to be successful in your studies whilst online?
Blended learning
1 What were your initial expectations of online/blended learning prior to starting your programme of study?
2 Have your experiences of online learning matched those expectations? Can you explain this further?
3 Can you identify any challenges or barriers you faced with online/blended learning over the past few months? Why?
4 What support have you sought out to overcome those barriers/challenges? If none, why? (If students identifying that they didn't feel they could reach out for support, then we need to expand this further)
5 What type of online learning activities do you find most engaging? Why? How does it make you feel? What is involved?
6 Have you found a difference in your engagement levels between large group online sessions and small group online sessions? Why do you think that is?
7 Discuss your online experiences of the following: personal tutoring, induction, assessment preparation, project supervision
8 What are your thoughts on a permanent blended learning approach? In your opinion what modules may be better suited to online delivery? Why?
9 Can you share a 'stand-out' online learning experience that has happened in either S1 or S2? What aspects of this were enjoyable?
Community – sense of belonging
1 In general, discuss your current relationship with academic staff? How has online learning impacted on this? If so, how? Why? Elaborate?
2 How regularly did you feel academic staff were in contact about module updates etc – were these useful? What impact did this have on your sense of belonging to the programme/module.
3 Discuss your relationship with fellow peers/friends? How has online learning impacted on this? Have things changed? Why? Elaborate?
4 Do you feel you have been able to interact well with your peer group during/outside of sessions?
5 Whilst engaging in online sessions how connected did you feel to the group? What helped with this/What could have been done differently to help with this?
Well-being
1 When we talk about 'wellbeing' this covers all sorts of things including physical health, mood, relationships with other people, self-confidence, independence, life satisfaction and things like concentration and memory. And if there's anything else you personally consider to be important when talking about wellbeing, that's great, too! Bearing all that in mind, do you think there have been any changes (positive and/or negative) in your wellbeing during the period over which we've been doing blended learning? If you're comfortable talking about it, please could you explain what the changes have been and what you think they are due to?
2 Do you think the changes you have experienced in your wellbeing have affected your learning, and if so in what way?
Closing question
1 Finally, are there any elements of online learning that you would like to see happen after Covid?

for teaching Level 3–6 students on the above listed programs. Expressions of interest were received from 10 people, of whom all 10 participated: six males and four females, ranging from Lecturer to Associate Professor. All staff participants had taught at the institution for at least 1 full academic year prior to Covid-19 restrictions. Online synchronous teaching and learning sessions had not taken place at the institution before the first lockdown so the online teaching and learning experience of staff members was largely restricted to lecture capture and the upload of learning materials to the learning management system, Blackboard, for students to access asynchronously.

2.3. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained for the study from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the university. After being provided with a participant information sheet, participants provided written consent for their participation. A total of five student focus groups were conducted, two with Level 4 students and three with a mixture of Level 5 and 6 students. Level 4 students were invited to separate focus groups to those at other levels as they were new rather than continuing students and may therefore have had different experiences/perspectives to those whose university studies had originally taken place in person. There were two and five participants in each of the Level 4 focus groups and four to six participants in each of the Level 5/6 focus groups.

Participants were asked questions pertaining to a range of issues related to online learning (Table 1), including their overall university experiences (e.g., 'In general, how have you been finding university life during Covid, both socially and academically?'), their experiences of online learning specifically (e.g., 'What type of online learning activities do you find most engaging?'), and their wellbeing and connections with others (e.g., 'How has online learning impacted on [your relationships with academic staff/peers]?'). Prompts such as requests for examples and elaboration on responses were used where appropriate, and at the end of the discussion

Table 2
Interview guide for staff participants.

 1 Opening questions
 2 Can you please describe your experiences of synchronous teaching? How does it compare with face-to-face teaching?
 3 Would you recommend the type of learning you have experienced this year for a whole degree programme? Why, or why not?
 4 Can you please describe your experiences of asynchronous teaching?
Students' responses
 5 How do you feel your students have responded to synchronous and asynchronous teaching?
 6 Do you think online learning has been beneficial for student outcomes? Do you have evidence relating to this?
 7 Would you recommend the type of teaching you have experienced this year for a whole degree programme? Why, or why not?
Wellbeing
 8 Do you feel there has been any impact of online teaching on your wellbeing? If so, can you please explain in what way?
 9 Do you feel there has been any impact of online teaching on your work-life balance? If so, can you please explain in what way?
10 Discuss how online teaching has impacted on your day to day workload, physical and psychological well-being, professional development etc
11 Discuss how online teaching has impacted on your day to day workload, physical and psychological well-being, professional development etc
Digital fluency
12 Do you feel more confident now about delivering online than you did before the pandemic?
13 What sort of Continued Processional development, if any, have you taken part in to help you with online teaching?
14 Are there any elements of the teaching that you might retain when a return to face-to-face teaching is possible?
15 Have your experiences of online teaching thus far matched your expectations? Explain?
16 Discuss your experiences of online teaching post COVID? Have you fully engaged/enjoyed? Why? If not, why?
17 Have you found any differences in student engagement/buy in etc between levels?
18 How would you rate your overall post COVID teaching experience so far?
19 Discuss any challenges/barriers you may have faced with online teaching over the past few months? Why? (e.g., greater preparation time needed, lack of student attendance/engagement)
20 What challenges/barriers were the most difficult to deal with/overcome? Why? How did you solve them?
21 What type of online activities have your students engaged with the most? Why?? What is involved? Does this differ between levels/ programmes?
22 What have been the most helpful activities/individuals etc in helping you to transition to online teaching?
23 Discuss your professional relationships with academic colleagues? How has online teaching/meetings impacted on this? Have things changed? If so, how? Why? Elaborate?
24 Discuss your online experiences of personal tutoring and dissertation supervision
25 What are your thoughts on a permanent blended learning approach (combination of face to face and online)? What types of modules do you think would be better suited to online delivery?
26 What is the biggest piece of advice you would provide to academic staff when developing online teaching materials/sessions? Why
27 What do you think is the ideal length of an online session and what type of teaching approaches should be used (e.g. flipped learning, break out rooms and group work, regular formative assessment)?
28 What has been the highlight of your online learning experience thus far? Why? Who was involved?
29 In terms of online delivery and provision, what do you need to learn more about? How would you like to do it?
30 Discuss how online teaching has impacted upon your academic development
31 Discuss how online teaching has impacted upon your professional development
Closing question
   Provide a few final words that sum up your online teaching experience so far?

participants were offered the opportunity to contribute any further thoughts on the topic of online learning. Questions were of an open nature to avoid leading the participants and were based on factors identified in the literature to be of importance in education during the pandemic, for instance participation in learning activities, wellbeing and the role of others (Burns et al., 2020).

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

Staff interviews took place via Microsoft Teams at the same point in the semester as the student focus groups and were also audio recorded. Interviews were conducted in a one-to-one manner between the participant and one of two researchers (one male, one female), both of whom were colleagues of the participants. Interviews rather than focus groups were felt to be appropriate for staff because whilst focus groups were well suited to generating discussions amongst students, the different levels of teaching experience amongst staff meant that there was a potential for those newer to the profession to agree with more established members of the department, especially those in leadership and mentoring roles. Equally, digital fluency varied amongst staff and was a possible source of embarrassment to discuss in a group context. As well as asking about some staff-specific issues such as relationships with colleagues, the open questions of the semi-structured interviews (Table 2) centered around participants' experiences of online teaching and learning and students' responses to this (e.g., 'Can you please describe your experiences of [synchronous/asynchronous] teaching?', 'What type of online activities have your students engaged with the most?'). Interviews lasted between 33 minutes and 16 seconds and 68 minutes and 2 seconds.

2.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The first phase of analysis (data familiarization and writing familiarization notes) involved the researchers reading and making notes on the transcripts from the focus groups and interviews. During the second phase (systematic data coding), the researchers coded the transcripts via inductive analysis, assigning codes (e.g., 'distractions from work') to any aspects of the transcripts which were relevant to the research question. Phases three to five (generating initial themes from coded and collated data; developing and reviewing themes; and refining, defining and naming themes) constituted an iterative process of organizing codes into themes and revisiting these themes to check for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2015). For example, the early themes of 'asking questions' and 'interactions with staff' were brought together into the theme of 'communication'. Finally, during phase six (writing the report) participants' perspectives were represented in the report using direct quotes.

3. Findings and discussion

Five key themes reflecting student (SD) and staff (SF) experiences of online learning were identified from the data: online inter-activity; modality suitability; communication; keeping focus; and the university experience. Each of these is described below.

3.1. Online interactivity

Online sessions were more interactive than students had anticipated, with short tasks being used to break up long sessions. Online lectures were even felt to be more interactive than face-to-face lectures because students were more likely to contribute to the sessions, either via these short tasks or because they were less reluctant to use the chat function than to speak in a lecture theatre: *'I really liked when within the call when they would have a poll or quickly answer a question; I thought they were a lot better and they were engaging'* (SD1, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science).

> the synchronous sessions were good, I felt they [were] more interactive than a normal lecture would be because you'd be getting asked questions in the chat and you'd be given answers and it gave you a chance to ask questions throughout the session (SD12, Level 5, Applied Sport Science with Coaching)

Greater engagement in sessions appeared to have led to better relationships with staff: *'I think definitely engagement with staff has improved … I think that has improved for a lot of people and obviously doing tutorials, you might not have normally done them'* (SD3, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science).

The results however demonstrated a disconnect between student and staff perceptions of student engagement. Students reported good levels of interactivity and engagement whereas staff reported feeling like radio broadcasters:

> it's a very different emotional experience than standing up in front of students, and learners, and seeing faces and judging what they're doing … what it feels like is doing a radio broadcast … that's been an interesting challenge is pushing the technology to see how you can actually do things that are better than you could do in a face-to-face environment, because that's quite static (SF1)

Kundu and Bej (2021) acknowledged that many students felt underprepared for the overnight pivot to online learning, but our staff also acknowledged their concerns about translating their teaching style to an online environment and how to develop online

interactivity:

> I knew it was going to be a struggle to begin with, because I think anyone who's seen me in the classroom knows that I tend to jump around a lot; I tend to, like, use things - it's just my personality. That doesn't translate very well into sitting behind the computer. I actually didn't use my camera very much, because a lot of students were struggling [with] bandwidth … If I have to choose between them being able to see what slide I'm on … and hear me, that's way more important than them being able to see me … It was probably easier for me than for the students because the students didn't know anyone … given the type of module it is, you want students … interacting with each other … forming those bonds, that sense of community, and that was … well it was what it was. It was incredibly difficult (SF8)

The vast majority of students (if any at all) did not put on their webcams during taught sessions and this caused issues for staff (a common findings across the higher education sector (Bashir et al., 2021) One lecturer explained:

> There's no camera … there's no mic and they won't put anything in the chat so there's a barrier there that you can't break down when you have those engagement things … You don't know if they're actually there in the room, you can see a name on the register but actually are they engaging, are they listening? At the same time if they're engaging and are listening, how much have they actually understood? So, that's the biggest challenge (SF7)

3.2. Modality suitability

Despite the interaction supported by the online format, students felt that some teaching was better delivered face-to-face, for instance statistics work, as there was a sense that certain content would be more understandable in person: *'if you were in, you'd have the lecturer's* support *of showing you how to do it, they'd see what you're doing, where it's a blind thing. The lecturer doesn't know what you're doing at the time'* (SD12, Level 5, Applied Sport Science with Coaching). Staff also discussed the importance of being able to 'read the room' to determine student understanding of a topic:

> In the real-life lecture the previous year I was, like, past them [in understanding], so I tried again … And it was just like … you guys aren't getting this! They were like, 'no'. Okay, well, we'll move on. I will put something on Blackboard over the next few days so you can look at it … and so I did. I cannot do [that] at all in an online environment … you don't know whether people understand or not (SF8)

Students missed practical, laboratory-based sessions as these were a chance to put learning into practice and provided variety; chiefly, they reported that they understood taught content more when they took part in practical sessions: *'when it came to be that this year would be all online, there wasn't really anything I could do besides learn the theory, and obviously, it's very important, but I sort of learn on the job'* (SD7, Level 5, Applied Sport Science with Coaching). The importance of practical work to facilitate scientific knowledge in sport science is clear (Lane & Whyte, 2006). Our students were conscious of the missed opportunities as were the students in Finlay et al.'s (2022) study. Staff also discussed the difficulties in providing practical learning:

> I was scheduled to deliver 9 hours' worth of practical badminton. Trying to then structure that online where you have to try and teach badminton in your own living room … it's quite difficult. Therefore … I had to record specific skills that we would obviously try to teach on campus. But then the … software wasn't up to scratch for those videos to go live, therefore, I have to share my screen to deliver my presentation, but then as a result of having to share your screen, you can't access comments that students are asking you … Therefore, I was having to operate on two laptops (SF2)

Comparisons were drawn between group tasks in face-to-face seminar sessions and breakout groups in online sessions, and overwhelmingly breakout groups were felt to be ineffective because some students did not engage whereas they would have to do so in a face-to-face session: *'we all hate breakout rooms because no one speaks in them. Whereas in a seminar … at least sort of people can't just ignore you when you speak to them … just, like, look away [laughs]'* (SD7, Level 5, Applied Sport Science with Coaching). Again, this is akin to the findings of Finlay et al. (2022). Whilst breakout rooms can create higher engagement and sense of community, breakout rooms are not a silver bullet (Saltz & Heckman, 2020; Khun, 2015). As the success of breakout groups was highly dependent on the group members' willingness to remain in the session and to interact, some students preferred to be with friends. Some did however note that through breakout groups they had discussions with people they did not know:

> With breakout rooms … a lot of people just leave the sessions and then they'll re-join later. I've never done that personally [laughs] but I've seen it when people pop in and out, you just see the notifications, but when you're actually in the breakout room you've got to have that one person that will get things going otherwise it will just be complete silence until a lecturer jumps in. I've had both good and okay experiences with it, there have been ones where there's another student in that [is] really interactive and we'll discuss certain points and then other times no one says anything because you don't want to be the first person to say something (SD16, Level 4, Sport Coaching)

Breakout rooms were also a concern for staff. One member of staff discussed the technical difficulties associated with online learning platforms and breakout rooms, whilst another highlighted engagement issues with breakout rooms:

We did the first learning activity … and I've split them into breakout groups and then we did the second part of the learning activity and because I'm a bit of a dinosaur I didn't know how to put them in the same breakout groups, so it was just … random, and they ended up in different ones and I don't think they liked it (SF9)

There was one of the sessions … all three groups turned their microphones on, and we heard from someone in the group. I almost had a party; it was wonderful, I was trying to encourage that. I don't think I once had a student turn on their camera even though I was quite willing for that to happen (SF8)

Having a concrete task to complete in the breakout group was suggested by students to promote greater engagement than simply discussing a topic. Whilst Saltz and Heckman (2020) suggest a clear purpose and/or tasks that are suited to a breakout format.

Finally, one staff member highlighted the need for on-campus teaching going forward:

Practicals are a must, in terms of being back on campus, being face-to-face, giving students an opportunity to practice things for themselves where they have the technical skill, practice … I think if you do that online again, I think you would lose our target audience (SF2)

Our findings show that a full online offering is not possible for practical and/or vocational courses due to the need for students to develop physical and technical competencies. However, there were aspects of online delivery that staff, and students found beneficial. Therefore, further research is needed to determine what type of blended (online and face-to-face teaching) delivery would work best going forward.

Communication

Students were complimentary about course communication, valuing the regular announcements made by departmental staff to let them know what would be happening week by week on each module:

The communication was really good … in terms of what was happening each week, you'd get an email at the start of the week saying this week it will be a pre-recorded thing, this is everything you need to do (SD1, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science)

Regular communication from staff appeared to support student learning on a weekly basis (Students had also set up their own communication channels via social media applications in which they could reassure one another if there were uncertainties, e.g., due to timetabling changes during the move from blended learning to a fully online format in October 2020 and develop an online learning community (Bolumole, 2020). In terms of asking questions about their learning, in addition to feeling comfortable doing so via the chat function during online sessions, greater use had been made of the online learning portal's discussion boards between taught sessions, which had been helpful:

Even the discussion boards are used a lot more now, and I think … people aren't afraid … Even if they think it's a silly question. I think people have become more confident with doing stuff like that' (SD3, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science)

Experiences related to one-to-one sessions with staff (e.g., personal tutorial sessions, dissertation supervision meetings) differed across students. Some had made greater use of one-to-one sessions during the pandemic due to feeling more comfortable booking in for a meeting via Microsoft Teams and the benefits of not having to commute on campus or moving from place to place (Abu et al., 2021):

I think it's much easier. At times, I've asked my lecturer if they're happy for me to record it, especially with dissertation. I feel really weird just whipping out my phone and being like, "Oh, can I record this?" in person and just have the phone sat there, but I think online, I don't know, it seems like there's less of a time constraint as well. Last year and first year, it would feel almost like you would get in and then you're rushed out the door because, not saying there is less to do now, but I think it would be, "Oh, I need to rush off to the next thing and be in this place," whereas now, because you're all working from the computer, it's not like, "Oh, I then have to move to this place or go to this building on campus." So, I think it works pretty well, having meetings online. (SD13, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science)

Others were however reluctant to make first contact with staff and appreciated personal tutors and supervisors checking in with them via email:

Personal emails off your tutor or for dissertation. Obviously, you go to them with your problems, but for instance, there was a bit of confusion over who my supervisor was initially, and I received no contact … So, I just think if we are ever in this situation again, little check-in messages, because if you are feeling demotivated sometimes it's quite overwhelming to make that contact in the first place, or I would imagine for a lot of people it would be (SD2, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science)

Staff also acknowledged the increase in email traffic and communication from students and highlighted some of the perceived reasons for the increase in student emails:

The volume of email traffic is double anything you would normally get. It's if they've got a question but can't ask their mate in the library or their flat mate, they ask you, and they won't post anything on chat rooms, and they won't post anything on any of the forum, which allows for the social problem solving to happen. It's all straight to the program leader or straight to the module leader and that volume, I haven't worked out how to stop that (SF1)

It appears the lack of student interaction on campus and in a face-to-face manner resulted in many students going straight to a member of staff instead of independent problem solving.

3.2.1. Keeping focus

There were mixed thoughts on whether students were more focused or distracted during their online teaching sessions and during their independent study time than they would have been on campus. Experiences seemed to vary from student to student and from occasion to occasion, e.g., focus could be greater than for face-to-face learning due to students having fewer distractions:

I would say I get more out of a lecture at home than what I would in uni [university] because I'm not with my friends and I'm just at home. There's no one else in the house with me … it's just everyone else is out working, so it's quite good in a sense (SD8, Level 6, Applied Sport Science with Coaching)

For other people/at other times the temptation to engage in other activities was greater as students felt less accountable: *'There's nobody looking at me to say, "What are you doing?"'* (SD3, Level 6, Applied Sport and Exercise Science), whilst another student explained:

This is down to me … having to sort this out. I find that a lot of the time, I'm great with turning up to the synchronous sessions and getting on with the tasks. But when it comes down to doing asynchronous, which is obviously do it yourself … and because of the sort of timeline that they [lecturers] have given, I find myself getting distracted a lot at home. I have been managing to do new things, not just looking at my phone, which is good. But I still struggle to sort of really manage my time with my asynchronous work (SD7, Level 5, Applied Sport Science with Coaching)

Staff members had also experienced situations where they perceived students to be more focused online: *'certainly for dissertation supervision it appears like there's a more focused conversation, there's not as many distractions, there's less nerves, you can have a chat with them about their projects, and what they're up to'* (SF1).

At a duration of 3 hours, however, online teaching sessions were too long for students to maintain their concentration, and the monotony of continuous online learning led to a *'lack of motivation sometimes because you're all day in front of the PC and I think it's really hard to get motivated sometimes'* (SD14, Level 6, Sport, Exercise and Nutrition). Staff also acknowledged the challenges with 3-h teaching blocks: *'I think, optimal length … I don't think you really want personally to be going beyond 90 min'* (SF4). Other staff thought about the 3-hours blocks as different kind of challenge: *'I like the discipline of having a time where I've got to deliver a session, and where I have to be at my best for that 2- or 3-h period'* (SF1).

Potentially going some way to address issues of focus/motivation, recordings of lectures - and other materials accessible on-demand such as summary videos and detailed PowerPoint slides - were valued by students if these were up-to-date and with audio of an adequate quality (Abu et al., 2021; Serrano et al., 2019): *'it's really good to watch a recorded lecture … we can watch them anytime we want, even at night or in the early morning'* (SD15, Level 4, Sport Coaching).

3.3. The university experience

Although it was not something students felt that teaching staff could be responsible for, they missed the experience of being on campus:

Obviously, there's less of a social side and the sports clubs shutting down as well … I've just been at home, so it doesn't really feel like I'm at uni. It's not as much of a full experience, I wouldn't say, even though the actual teaching has been decent (SD11, Level 5, Applied Sport and Exercise Science)

Seeing other students and encountering staff around the campus (rather than setting up meetings with a predetermined agenda) were good ways for students to reassure themselves they were up to date with course communication and were progressing at an appropriate rate and manner with assignments. Not having this was missed (Khan, 2021): *'I would say there's a lot more stress before an exam as in, like, are you completing the right stuff? Is the content that you've got in going to be correct?'* (SD8, Level 6, Applied Sport Science with Coaching).

Because no one's seeing each other, [staff] saying where you should be up to on an assignment might be quite useful. Particularly with the [final year project], it's a massive piece of work, and I'm spending loads of time on it, but I don't know if I'm behind or if I've done more than most people or what really (SD10, Level 6, Applied Sport Science with Coaching).

Attending lectures and accessing other facilities whilst on campus assisted in students' routines and motivation and would have supported new students in particular to meet people (Almendingen et al., 2021): *'Most of my friends are from societies and student accommodation but I don't know any of my classmates. Hopefully, next year* [laughs]' (SD15, Level 4, Sport Management). One of the international students additionally felt that not being on campus *'affected my [communication] skills because … I didn't have the opportunity or the chance to communicate with other people in a second language'* (SD14, Level 6, Sport, Exercise and Nutrition).

Staff also acknowledged elements of the 'on-campus experience' that were lost: *'I love catching up, and it's great walking down the corridor and having a quick chat, when you're in the office your door's knocking with students'* (SF3). Staff missed the ad hoc meetings with colleagues but also the face-to-face encounters with students. Another staff member highlighted:

When you see somebody in the corridor, and you go, 'Ah, yes, about this and that' … if you're working on a research project together or whatever. You say, 'I've had this idea' and you can just talk. I think there's definitely less, like, those little sparks if you like, to start these conversations or ideas … I can't just pass you in a corridor, I can't just knock on your door (SF7)

The impact of the *lost* on-campus experiences needs to be considered when (and if) practical based courses move to a blended approach.

4. Conclusion

As with many institutions across the world, staff and students from the sport department of the post-92 UK university explored in this study were thrust into online learning in an unprecedented and swift manner during the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent work by Finlay et al. (2022) found UK undergraduate sport and exercise science students preferred blended over remote-only learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this approach impacted more positively on student satisfaction and performance indicators. A key strength of our paper which expands upon the findings of Finlay et al. (2022) was gaining the views of both staff and students. Our focus group and interview findings align with previous studies that have indicated both the strengths (Bolumole, 2020; Finlay et al., 2022; Khan, 2021) and challenges (Bashir et al., 2021; Khan, 2021) encountered by remote education. Whilst some elements of online teaching and learning worked well (e.g., engaging sessions; session recordings), not all aspects worked as effectively (e.g., students disliked breakout rooms; there are difficulties with delivering a practical-based course in an online-only context).

How teaching is best delivered moving forward needs to be carefully examined now that we are emerging from the pandemic and into a more flexible approach of working and learning (Lockee, 2021). If blended learning approaches are to be adopted for sport courses, these should retain the effective and enjoyable elements of online teaching and learning identified by both parties involved in the learning process - i.e., students and staff - whilst also addressing the apparent desire by both parties to return to campus, particularly for the practical aspects of course content (Finlay et al., 2022). Whilst some institutions are better geared towards online learning, such as those offering distance/remote learning courses, many universities are still trying to understand the best approach for their students going forward (Abu et al., 2021; Bolumole, 2020). The current research adds to the knowledge base around this issue, specifically for UK sport programs.

5. Limitations and future recommendations

It is both a strength and a limitation of the study that the focus groups and interviews were conducted by researchers known to the participants as their lecturers/colleagues. Pre-existing rapport allowed participants to feel comfortable in expressing their views, yet there is still an inherent power dynamic between students and members of staff and between colleagues of different standings which may have led in some instances to the participants withholding negative information and/or expressing their views in a less critical manner. Furthermore, students who were willing to volunteer to take part in an online focus group were likely to be more confident and engaged with the online processes which were the subject of discussion, meaning that although the study did not aim to generalize it must still be noted that the views of other students may differ. It was, in addition, unfortunate that none of the Level 3 foundation year students expressed an interest to participate in the study as their perspectives may have differed to the undergraduate students, offering further insights into the existing and/or leading to the development of additional themes.

Future research should seek to explore the experiences of Level 3 students and of students and staff undertaking/delivering postgraduate programs with practical elements. Similarly, it would be valuable to follow up the Level 4 students involved in the current study once they have experienced face-to-face teaching to compare with their online-only experience at Level 4. There will of course always be differences between individuals in their experiences and preferences when it comes to learning and teaching. However, developing an understanding of students at different levels allows for a more targeted application of learning and teaching strategies to address the particular needs of the learners. Future work should also explore any differences in the perceptions of staff and students as the current study aimed only to gather the perspectives of both parties for a complete picture, yet unearthed discrepancies in terms of positive student perceptions of the interactivity of online learning sessions while the interactive experience of teaching was missing for some of the staff.

References

Abu, L., Chipfuwamiti, C., Costea, A., Kelly, A., Major, K., & Mulrooney, H. (2021). Staff and student perspectives of online teaching and learning; implications for belonging and engagement at university - a qualitative exploration. *Journal of Learning and Teaching, 14*, 1–13.

Allen, M., Bourhis, J., Burrell, N., & Mabry, E. (2002). Comparing student satisfaction with distance education to traditional classrooms in higher education: A meta-analysis. *American Journal of Distance Education, 16*, 83–97.

Almendingen, K., Morseth, M., Gjølstad, E., Brevik, A., & Tørris, C. (2021). Student's experiences with online teaching following COVID-19 lockdown: A mixed methods explorative study. *PLoS One, 16*, 1–16.

Assurance Agency, Q. (2007). Subject benchmark statement: Events, hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism. Available at: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-events-leisure-sport-tourism.pdf?sfvrsn=c339c881_11. (Accessed 9 May 2022) Accessed.

Balloo, K. (2018). In-depth profiles of the expectations of undergraduate students commencing university: a Q methodological analysis. *Studies in Higher Education, 43*, 2251–2262.

Bashir, A., Bashir, S., Rana, K., Lambert, P., & Vernallis, A. (2021). Post-COVID-19 adaptations: The shifts towards online learning, hybrid course delivery and the implications for biosciences courses in the higher education setting. *Frontiers in Education, 6*, 1–13.

Bolumole, M. (2020). Student life in the age of COVID-19. *Higher Education Research and Development, 39*, 1357–1361.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Burns, D., Dagnall, N., & Holt, M. (2020). Assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student wellbeing at universities in the United Kingdom: A conceptual analysis. *Frontiers in Education, 5*, Article 582882. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.582882 Carrillo, C., & Assunção-

Clark, R., & Mayer, R. (2016). *E-Learning and the science of instruction: Proven guidelines for consumers and designers of multimedia learning* (4th ed.). London: Wiley.

Farhat, G., Bingham, J., Caulfield, J., & Grieve, S. (2017). The academic's project: Widening access and smoothing transitions for secondary school pupils to university, college, and employment. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, 5*, 23–30.

Finlay, M. J., Tinnion, D. J., & Simpson, T. (2022). A virtual versus blended learning approach to higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic: The experiences of a sport and exercise science student cohort. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism Education, 30*, Article 100363.

Gillis, A., & Krull, L. (2020). COVID-19 remote learning transition in spring 2020: Class structures, student perceptions and inequality in college courses. *Teaching Sociology, 48*, 283–299.

Groves, M., Bowd, B., & Smith, J. (2010). Facilitating experiential learning of study skills in sports students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 34*, 11–22.

Gülbahar, Y., & Adnan, M. (2020). Faculty professional development in creating significant teaching and learning experiences online. In L. Kyei-Blankson, E. Ntuli, & J. Blankson (Eds.), *Handbook of research on creating meaningful experiences in online courses* (pp. 37–58). IGI Global.

Hayman, R. (2017). Using flipped classroom to place sport students learning at centre stage: Insights and food for thought. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change, 3*, 23–34.

Hayman, R. (2018). A flipped learning maiden voyage: Insights and experiences of undergraduate sport coaching students. *Innovative Practice in Higher Education, 3*, 81–102.

Hayman, R., Allin, L., & Coyles, A. (2017). Exploring social integration of sport students during the transition to university. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, 5*, 31–36.

Hockings, C., Thomas, L., Ottaway, J., & Jones, R. (2018). Independent learning: What we do when you are not there. *Teaching in Higher Education, 23*, 145–161.

Kelly, A., & Mulrooney, H. (2019). Student perceptions of belonging at university: A qualitative perspective. *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences, 14*, 1–11.

Keogh, J., Gowthorp, L., & McLean, M. (2017). Perceptions of sport science students on the potential applications and limitations of blended learning in their education: A qualitative study. *Sports Biomechanics, 16*, 297–312.

Khan, M. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on UK higher education students: Experiences, observations, and suggestions for the way forward. *Corporate Governance, 21*, 1172–1193.

Knudson, D. (2020). A tale of two instructional experiences: Student engagement in active learning and emergency remote learning of biomechanics. *Sports Biomechanics*, 1–11.

Komninou, I. (2017). A case study of the implementation of social models of teaching in e-learning: The social networks in education - online course of the inter-orthodox centre of the church of Greece. *TechTrends, 62*, 146–151.

Kundu, A., & Bej, T. (2021). COVID-19 response: Students' readiness for shifting classes online. *Corporate Governance, 21*, 1250–1270.

Lane, A. M., & Whyte, G. P. (2006). From education to application: Sport and exercise sciences courses in the preparation of applied sport scientists. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism Education, 5*(2), 89–93.

Li, Y., Wu, S., Yao, Q., & Zhu, Y. (2013). Research on college students' online learning behaviour. *E-Education Research, 34*, 59–65.

Lockee, B. (2021). Online education in the post-COVID era. *Nature Electronics, 4*, 5–6.

Moustakas, L., & Robrade, D. (2022). The challenges and realities of E-learning during COVID-19: The case of university sport and physical education. *Challenges, 13*(1), 9.

Nguyen, T., Netto, C., Wilkins, J., Bröker, P., Vargas, E., Sealfon, C., Puthipiroj, P., Li, K., Bowler, J., Hinson, H., Pujar, M., & Stein, G. (2021). Insights into students' experiences and perceptions of remote learning methods: From the covid-19 pandemic to best practice for the future. *Frontiers in Education, 6*, Article 647986.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.

Rayner, M., & Webb, T. (2021). Implications and opportunities for sport management education in the COVID-19 era. *Sport Management Education Journal, 15*(1), 49–53.

Saltz, J., & Heckman, R. (2020). Using structured pair activities in a distributed online breakout room. *Online Learning, 24*(1), 227–244.

Serrano, D., Dea-Ayuela, M., Gonzalez-Burgos, E., Serrano-Gil, A., & Lalatsa, A. (2019). Technology-enhanced learning in higher education: How to enhance student engagement through blended learning. *European Journal of Education, 54*, 273–286.

Surgenor, P. (2013). Measuring up: Comparing first year students and tutors' expectations of assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 38*, 288–302.

Swan, K. (2003). Learning effectiveness online: What the research tells us. In J. Bourne, & J. C. Moore (Eds.), *Elements of quality online education, practice, and direction* (pp. 13–47). Needham, MA: Sloan Centre for Online Education.

Tan, C. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on student learning performance from the perspectives of community of inquiry. *Corporate Governance, 21*, 1215–1228.

Willett, J., Brown, C., & Danzy-Bussell, L. A. (2019). An exploratory study: Faculty perceptions of online learning in undergraduate sport management programs. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism Education, 25*, Article 100206.