

Socially Distanced Higher Education: Student and Staff Experiences of Teaching and Learning During the Covid-19 Lockdown.

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Abstract.

The social distancing measures developed as an attempt to control the Covid-19 outbreak have had a major, long lasting effect on every aspect of society. Higher Education was dramatically affected by these social distancing measures, leading to the closure of campuses around the globe and the move to continue facilitating student learning online. In order to develop a Higher Education system in a future where the results of Covid-19 will be long lasting in our society, we require insight into the priorities of the Higher Education Institution as a whole. Here, we present a small sample of staff and student experiences of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 lockdown. Through their experiences, we see that the Higher Education Institution continued to ensure functional progress of students and staff during the lockdown; however, other equally important forms of progress were not prioritised. We argue that as we move into the future of Higher Education, it is vital that any changes made to the system take into account the ability for students to make functional, social and emotional progress through their studies.

Keywords: Student Experience, Staff Experience, Covid-19, Forms of Progress.

1. The Pressures of a Pandemic.

A pandemic illuminates the cracks in the structures of our society. Prior to Covid-19, many social structures were believed to be immutable. Their historic buildings seemed to be symbolic of their deep roots and strong foundations within society. However, we are now beginning to see that while these systems may have been built on solid foundations, they are now crumbling with time and change, further eroded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the world was facing what was described as a “*massive, long term disruption cycle*” (Hansen, 2018) - one which Higher Education as it previously stood would not have been able

to cope with. As Hansen (2018) wrote of the pre-pandemic Higher Education system: “*most education systems were built for the needs of the 20th century. Take higher education: it has not been designed to deliver the skills needed for the disruption ahead*”. As Joel Mokyr (2001, p.7) explained, the modern education system was designed to create factory workers who were “*docile and malleable*.” Indeed, commentators on the state of Higher Education, such as Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi (2013) knew that the system as it stood was precarious and any form of social disruption could potentially cause it to collapse. It was not predicted that the disruption to Higher Education would take the form of a global public health pandemic.

At the outset of the Covid-19 lockdown Maynooth University Innovation Lab conducted a Design-Thinking based research study with staff and students at Maynooth University¹. Through a combination of PhotoVoice research, journaling, Design Thinking workshops and semi structured interviews, we were able to capture the experiences of the academic and administrative staff, and undergraduate and postgraduate students as they continued to engage in Higher Education during this unique and challenging period. To frame our reporting of the experiences of these students and staff, it is necessary to pause and consider ‘What is the role of the Higher Education Institution?’ We suggest that at its core, Higher Education’s function is to help people make progress. We see this progress being made up of three elements: social, emotional and functional. To facilitate students to make this progress, the Higher Education Institution needs to: “*enhance people’s creativity, their connectedness, and their responsiveness to the environment*” (Rankin, 2020). We argue that during the Covid-19 lockdown, the Higher Education Institution focused on maintaining the functional aspects of the system, meaning that students’ social and emotional progress became stifled. By understanding the experiences of students and staff during this heightened situation, we have the opportunity to design a system for the upcoming semester, and further into the future which ensures progress in all of these areas.

1.1 Ensuring functional progress during the pandemic.

Higher Education was forced to respond to the new social distancing and public safety guidelines which accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic. The two metres of social distance required between individuals meant that the physical Higher Education Institution was forced to

¹Research received ethical approval from Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub Committee - Approval Number 2379901.

completely shut its doors. In addition to the campuses being closed, the staple of the Higher Education experience, the face-to-face lecture, was cancelled. Across the globe, pretty much unanimously, lectures were facilitated to continue online. Lecturers made rapid changes to module outcomes in order to facilitate remote teaching and remote assessment.

While transitioning online was relatively easy for lecturers, there were mixed feelings towards the value of online classes. The care and concern lecturers had for their students at this challenging time became evident. Ailish,² a well-established lecturer, explained that the move of content online was something she was not fond of:

“I feel sad for my students, and wish I could teach them in person. I feel that online teaching is not ideal for us or them. I truly believe in classes being in person, and do not think the teaching or learning experience is as beneficial or rewarding for students or teachers when occurring online.”

In addition to this frustration with moving lectures online, some lecturers expressed fear and concern for the upcoming semester. As Matthew, a relatively new lecturer explained, he was concerned that online learning might be viewed as a positive alternative to teaching in the classroom setting:

“If they [the Higher Education decision-makers] see that this online teaching is working now, I’m afraid that they will say, ‘Oh, well you can just do this [teach online] from now on. But that can’t happen.”

When we think of how face-to-face learning has transitioned online in response to the requirement for social distancing, the online option has filled the functional gap of delivering content and assessment to students.

In addition to the functional move of lectures online, other Higher Education Institution staff noticed the focus the Institution was placing on very practical elements of running the organisation. When asked to reflect on what they were ‘hearing’ through communication with their Institution, one Higher Education staff member documented the following key messages being communicated by the Institution to staff members:

²All research participants mentioned in this paper have been attributed a pseudonym to protect their identity.

“What I’m hearing From the University:

- *Wash your hands*
- *The University is losing money*
- *Everyone is doing their best*
- *We will take health advice on deciding how 2020-21 will look, so no decisions yet”.*

The closure of the physical campus had a pronounced effect on students’ motivations and desire to keep going. Previously highly motivated students were finding it difficult to find the energy to keep going. As Alex, a third year undergraduate student explained:

“Motivation is a big issue with me. I feel like ever since I started [studying at home during the Covid-19 lockdown], my energy level and my motivation have just dropped. I know I have all this stuff to do. I have more to do now because exams have been cancelled. But it’s like, the more the work piles up, the more I’m just like, ‘No. Just leave me alone for ten minutes, please.”

What became evident through the students’ experiences of trying to complete work at home during lockdown was how much they relied on being on the physical campus to structure their day and their learning. One student, William, reflected on how he had previously structured his day around being on campus and relied on the ‘gaps’ between lectures to get work done:

“I think I’m more of a structured person. If I have two hours between lectures I know I’m in [on campus] for a couple of hours. I get my work done in those couple of hours. Whereas here [at home during lockdown], if I sit down for two hours I don’t have the motivation to continue with the work.”

While Higher Education Institutions covered their most basic functions during the pandemic, what became evident through students’ experiences was that they were struggling to motivate themselves due to the breakdown of their routines and structures. While the content being delivered was relatively similar, extra assessments and the lack of the physical learning space challenged students, causing stress, anxiety and overwhelm. With the core focus being on ensuring functional progress, we should ask how did the HEI try to maintain progress in the social and emotional realms during this challenging period?

2. Social and Emotional Progress.

Students tried desperately to continue making social progress under the unusual circumstances which the Covid-19 restrictions created. Some students, such as Bonnie turned to writing letters to her friends and family in an attempt to maintain her social connections and rebuild old connections that had previously dissolved (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Second Year Student Bonnie attempting to maintain social connections through letter writing during the pandemic (photograph has been reproduced with consent).



Interestingly, organisations and individuals within the Higher Education Institution took on the role of making individual connections with students, helping to ensure that they maintained some sort of emotional equilibrium. For example Helena, a third year undergraduate student who was also the president of an extra-curricular society on campus, explained how the Students' Union Clubs and Societies Coordinator made the effort to connect with her and other members of the campus societies to ensure they were well:

"I'm the President of one of the societies on campus. I got invited to this phone call that they [Students' Union Clubs and Societies coordinator] had. It was literally just checking in. They were asking, 'Oh how are you getting on? How's your family?' Because usually it would be 'How is your society doing?' It was more like 'How are you doing?' than 'How is your society doing?' I found that really

good.”

Individual lecturers also took it upon themselves to facilitate wellbeing discussions with students across their department. As Scott, a first year undergraduate student explained, one lecturer went out of their way to facilitate a meeting group where students could discuss anything they wanted, including assessments and how they were coping:

“There are some people like [Name of Lecturer] who have gone above and beyond for students. He’s holding a Zoom session for people to just catch up. We don’t even have him this semester. I genuinely feel it’s like he is making such a difference in my life. I definitely feel like there’s at least some level of normality.”

Some students have seen the loss of social and emotional progress that the physical University structure represents as detrimental, especially to their ability to make functional progress. One striking example of how social and emotional progress was stifled came to us through a piece of PhotoVoice research. On being asked to take a photograph of ‘The Most Difficult Change they Face During Lockdown’, Nora, a third year undergraduate student offered the photograph of her front door (Figure 2), from the inside and the rationale behind her photograph:

“The most difficult change is not being able to be on campus. Since starting in [University Name] I have called it ‘My Happy Place’ and that is no overstatement. My marriage broke down some years ago and I have faced mental health problems. Returning to education was an enormous step for me. I discovered a new life which I love. The sudden loss of that, and the return to being isolated in the house has been crippling in many ways. I still share the house with my ex-husband as we co-parent, so the restrictions place extra stress on that situation despite the fact that it is generally quite amicable. My greatest challenges are associated with the restriction on movement rather than the distance learning. This house which holds memories of me at my very lowest ebb is not the ideal place for productivity.”

Figure 2: A photograph of Nora’s front door from the inside, representing the challenges placed on the individual by distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.



For Nora, and so many other students we spoke to, the physical campus allowed them to replace memories and make progress in a direction, not necessarily related to a better career, but to a better life. The prioritisation of the functional delivery of course content and assessment has meant that students are feeling like their social and emotional progress has been blocked, with many of them asking *“What’s the bloody point in all of this now?”*

3. Concluding Remarks.

As we mentioned at the front of this review, this pandemic has allowed us to see the cracks within our everyday social structures. What we have highlighted through the experiences of staff and students in this time of pandemic is the priority placed upon the functional delivery of lectures and imparting knowledge. This is not meant as a criticism of the system. Rather, the HEI’s responses during the Covid-19 lockdown tells us much more about the priorities of the Higher Education Institution as a whole. The functional issues which affect the everyday running of Higher Education as a system are at its core, as student and staff experiences during the lockdown have highlighted. What we suggest is that for Higher Education to remain relevant and to provide graduates with the skills they need to tackle the challenges they will face as a result of Covid-19, we must readjust the system so there is equal emphasis placed on making

social, emotional and functional progress.

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