



*University of*  
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**The Impact of Covid-19 on the Learning Experience of  
International Students studying Public Health**

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## **Chapter One- Abstract**

### **Background**

Covid-19 has had a profound effect on higher education globally, whilst literature has shown online distance education as a suitable and efficient substitute for traditional higher education, there are still many factors that need to be incorporated in distance education, in order to promote motivation and engagement. Literature has shown that motivation is an intrinsic factor associated with successful learning, however, the Covid-19 pandemic has had detrimental effects on student attainment and whilst this is illustrated within literature, the impact on international students is significantly under-researched.

### **Aim/s**

The aim of this study was to identify the impact of Covid 19 on the learning experience of international students. Specifically, the study's objectives were to explore the impact of learning modes and their influence on academic success; examine the effects of Covid- 19 on student motivation and explore enhancement strategies to promote successful learning and engagement.

### **Method**

A case study approach, using semi-structured interviews of five students, completed using Microsoft Teams. Data collected was analysed using template analysis.,

### **Findings**

The study revealed five key themes that influenced the international student's experience during the Covid-19 pandemic: 1- Interaction (peers & tutors); 2- Mental health and well-being; 3- Internet connectivity and Technology; 4- Student Expectations and 5- Motivation. The study also found recommendations for future educators, to implement in practice for distance learning.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study concluded that Universities must implement live interaction to promote engagement whilst also giving students access to prompt feedback. Mental health was found to decline during the course of the pandemic, and it is recommended that the maintenance of international student's mental health and well-being is viewed as a priority. Guidance, support and accessibility to IT assistance, content materials and software should be easily made readily available with good communication strategies in place for students.

## Chapter Two- Introduction and background

Covid-19 has had a profound impact on higher educational institutes globally, (Brammer & Clark, 2020). The World Health Organisation explains that “*Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus*”, *The virus can spread from an infected person’s mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe*”, (p-4). In order to halt the spread of the disease, The World Health Organisation recommends; to stay at least 1 metre apart from others, wear a suitably fitted mask, wash your hands regularly and/or use alcohol sanitizer gel often. As a consequence of these new regulations, universities have seen closures all across the UK and had to switch to teaching and learning remotely with little to no preparation, with much uncertainty to what the future held for educational institutes and their student, Blankenberger & Williams (2020). Whilst this was a confusing and uncertain time for any student undergoing a degree, these feelings were amplified by international students. International students are often overlooked by universities, (Lai, 2021) however, generate £17.5 billion for the UK economy as opposed to £5.1 billion generated by EU students, (SITUK, 2020). According to UCAS (2021), an international student, is considered to be; an individual who migrates to another country, for education purposes. International students in the UK, totalled 556,625 for the year 2021 which means, over half a million students had travelled to the UK during a global pandemic. These students heavily relied on the university, for help and guidance, in assisting them in settling in. This support in transition, typically takes the form of universities, organising ‘freshers week’s’ or other similar social events in an attempt to engage student within the higher education community. Students are guided and provided information on their surroundings, this enables them to make friends, join societies and develop an understanding of the university, course and community. However, this could not be delivered due to Covid-19, whereby all “in person” events, lectures, seminars and social groups, along with information and guidance, materials, resources and services were all moved online. The impact of this upon international students was catastrophic, as many international students were left with the feelings of helplessness and isolation, (Ihm et al, 2021).

The initial aim of this research started pre-covid. I wanted to investigate the importance of motivation in higher education as this was something I had briefly researched during my undergraduate degree, as part of my dissertation. The available literature at the time, indicated that motivation in higher education is key to a successful academic experience. However, as this was pre-covid, I wanted to see the impact of the pandemic on learner motivation and develop possible strategies for future educators, to combat de-motivation and assist in planning and preparing for successful online learning. Whilst there is a plethora of literature, that investigates the impact of Covid-19 on students learning, motivation and

attainment, there is very little that focuses on international students and more specifically, in the UK. Pre-covid, online education was gaining popularity slowly over the years however, the global pandemic has now, thrust this new of learning into educational institutes and has now become the new norm in higher education, (Singh & Arya, 2020). Motivation and engagement have proven essential for academic success in higher education, (Lowe & El Hakim, 2020) and the overall aim of this research, is to identify specifics that influence students' engagement and motivation and try to implement these factors into a new online way of learning for future educators.

### **Chapter Three- Literature Review.**

The literature review is an important component of the research process as Robson and McCartan assert (2016) helps to identify the main gaps in knowledge, the general pattern to findings, and provides a basis for any discrepancies of the knowledge base of the topic being investigated. It is essential to be systematic in a review, so that all available literature on a topic can identify and a clear methodology presented (Aveyard, 2019). Therefore, to ensure that the completed review is comprehensive, reliable, and credible, this literature review was completed using the systematic approach as proposed by Aveyard (2019), which comprises of developing and implementation of a systematic search strategy.

Whilst the search strategy relied heavily on the university's recommended search engine, "SUMMON" using the advanced search option, specific data bases such as ERIC, Office for Students (OfS); Department for Education (DoE) and National Union for Students (NUS) was searched independently. For this, each objective was broken down using key words from each aim and then filtered by date, publication type and language.:

This review comprises nine articles, which reaffirms the paucity of literature in this subject. In light of the distinct dearth of literature in this subject, the recommendations of Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016) and Aveyard (2019) were followed and were included for this review. Articles were identified, screened for relevancy, and collated using the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)' guidelines proposed by Page et al., (2021) which was subsequently analysed using the PROMPT (Open University, 2021) evaluative framework.

An article summary matrix based on Aveyard, et al., (2016), was developed and completed, this enabled an adapted thematic analysis of the data collected which identified key a priori themes developed from the emerging objectives of the research generated by the search strategy. This adapted form of thematic analysis (Aveyard, et al., 2016) demonstrated the presence of three key themes:

### **Theme one: learning modes in academic success.**

In order to understand the perception and preference of online learning from students in differing university settings located in India, Muthuprasad et al (2021) conducted a study to further explore the preparedness, designing and effectiveness of eLearning, amidst the current global pandemic, known as Covid-19. The students chosen for this research were Agricultural graduates, as the writer explains that agriculture is *“is the most diverse subject that includes subjects ranging from life sciences to social sciences where students work from lab to land”*, (p-3). 307 Students participated in total, 136 Undergraduates, 84 Postgraduates and 87 students pursuing their PhD, (172 female and 135 male). The method and procedure used in order to obtain the information involved; structured/unstructured preliminary questionnaires, literature surveys and informal discussions with the students. The results were ranked according to their perceived value. The results presented suggests that overall, the students had a positive attitude towards online learning. Muthuprasad et al found that flexible learning and convenience were ranked highest, students expressed a preference for well-structured content with recorded videos and also indicated the importance of meaningful contact for example: illustrating a desire for interactive live sessions with quizzes and assignments. Whilst online learning evaluated positively, students did report some challenges such as; technological constraints, delayed feedback from tutors and the inability of the instructor to handle communication technologies.

Singh & Arya (2020) in contrast, acknowledge a reluctance from students towards online learning both pre and post-covid in developing economies. Much of this reluctance is due to poor internet connectivity, inferior technological know-how and poor communication between teacher and student. Using a class of over 200 students, the writers experimented and developed new formats and strategies to combat this hesitancy toward online education. The strategies consisted on four modes, mode 1- conventional audio-delivery with PowerPoint slides on live platforms. Mode 2- video and audio with animated graphics on live platforms. Mode 3- recorded videos with audio and video support. Mode 4- audio visual one-to-one discussion and problem solving with conceptual understanding. All four modes proved to be successful with student progression, providing a reliable internet connection was available. After observing feedback and comments from the students, the writers adopted a “hybrid” approach, using a blend of all four modes, to combat the technical difficulties and lack of internet connectivity.

Ananga (2020) reviewed literature on the concept of pedagogy, concept of eLearning, theories of learning and their implications of e-learning. The literature revealed varying definitions of e-learning from multiple authors alike and acknowledged that online learning

and the formalities of this phenomena must be researched further in order to better understand and improve online education. Without a clear consensus, the varying degrees of online or flexible learning creates confusion and lack of clarity in delivery. The literature recognises e-Learning is in fact, a suitable alternative for educational delivery, especially within the Covid era, as long as the delivery of such, is dealt with in a well and carefully planned manner. Ananga presented further recommendations for teachers, to further understand the pedagogy of teaching, learning and the theories of learning and styles of learning (cognitivism, behaviourism, constructivism and social presence). Distinctly suggesting that *“ teachers will have to go the extra mile to consciously provide warmth and a sense of belonging to learners. This could be achieved by providing immediate feedback as well as providing clear and concise instructions and directions as they deliver instruction”*. (p-318).

Gamage (2020) conducted a limited literature review analysing various steps taken by universities to deliver teaching laboratory practices remotely during Covid-19. The literature predominately focussed around the fields of engineering, science and technology. Whilst the focus centred around learning, the writers also wanted to investigate the potential impacts in the 'student learning experience'. In order to obtain the data, published literature was used including books, web-based provisions of selected universities and institutional and national policy documents. From the literature, it was apparent that most universities had excellent strategies in place to promote online learning however, the disruption of the student experience, learning activities and the general social interaction had not been considered, reaffirming that: *“Very little had been done to fulfil the myriad of opportunities from university such as; entertainment, leadership and community engagement”* (p-7). Gamage identified that mental health was discussed throughout the literature, with most, but not all universities surveyed providing extra online support for students suffering with feelings of stress, worry and isolation. Distinctly the needs of international students were not explored. Overall, suggests Gamage the literature provides an insightful overview of how online learning is an efficient substitute from face-to-face teaching, however they express the importance of having suitable access to the internet for all students, as this was seen to be a hindrance in many of the published studies.

### **Theme two: The effects Covid-19 has on student motivation.**

Ghazi-Saidi et al (2020) used a multiple comparative case study approach to examine both student and teachers' perceptions of moving from face-to-face learning to e-learning. The sample comprised of; five cases of undergraduate and graduate courses that transitioned from f2f learning to an online mode. The intention from the research was to analyse how the



course was managed during the transition, to what extent the instructors had previous experience in online teaching and their self-reflection and recommendations for a more successful scenario in the future. Online surveys were used in order to understand the students' perceptions of online learning and how effective they believed it to be as a substitute for f2f. Feedback from the teachers suggested that overall, online teaching appeared to be successful due to having previous experience in the delivery of education online. It was noted however, that having access to a reliable internet connection majorly impacted the student's motivation and from this, staying on task was difficult. Students preferred f2f interpersonal relationships between teacher and student although, acknowledging virtual interactions were still effective. The fact that students did not choose to learn remotely also appeared have a significant effect on their motivation, as they were forced into a new way of learning that was rather stressful due to the global pandemic. Students agreed lack of access to the internet amplified the resistance to learning online and this also effected their motivation to continue. Students also expressed they lacked the same interactive activities they did in class which alludes to being important in the delivery of education.

Durak & Cankaya (2020) examined university students views around distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study collected data from four different universities based in Turkey. It was a qualitatively designed study with 32 students, the students were presented with an online questionnaire with open-ended questions. Once received, the data was then analysed using content analysis methods, themes were then created. The data showed that two out of the four universities used Microsoft Teams as their online platform, while the others used Moodle and ALMs. Students who were found to use Microsoft Teams (which has a more interactive system) were found to be more satisfied and preferred the live interaction with their students, teachers and academia. When the announcement that all learning would now become online, there was much apprehension among the students, these concerns were completely removed when using the more interactive platforms.

Jieun & Yongseok (2020) used the ADDIE model in order to design a study that would effectively analyse the practicality of online classes with PE university students. The ADDIE model is a generic process comprised of five phases: Analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation, (Yeh & Tseng, 2019). 75 Participants were used in total ranging from 15 universities based throughout Korea. The participants included both educators and students and were selected at random. The methods used were in the form of both formative and summative evaluations after every online lecture and then followed up with in the next lecture. Following the data collection, the writers offered the results in the form of recommendations. They highlighted that timely and quality feedback should always

be given to the students to aid a successful online learning environment. Secondly, the writers express the importance of providing students sufficient time and technical support with their studies. Thirdly, the importance of having web-based training prior to online teaching is also of great significance and lastly, educators have to devise ways to encourage the involvement of students in learning and fair ways to evaluate.

Baber (2020) investigated the challenges in students perceived learning outcomes and their influence on student satisfaction. 100 undergraduate students were used as participants from different universities and courses across South Korea and India. The students were asked to complete an online survey and along with a literature review, the writer discussed the findings. Interaction- is extremely important for student engagement and motivation particularly student-teacher interaction. Interaction also has a large influence on student motivation, motivation- student satisfaction- engagement. Course structure, in terms of the, *“development, organisation, design, curriculum, pedagogies, methodologies, timeline, and overall planning”* (p-287), are essential and help increase learning outcomes and heighten student satisfaction. Instructor knowledge and facilitation is also a prominent factor into smoothing online education, whilst secure and steadfast technological equipment. Lastly, student perceived learning outcome is a viable predictor of student satisfaction in online learning.

### **Theme three: Strategies to combat lack of motivation and promote student engagement.**

The importance of student engagement and motivation for academic success was explored by Rocher (2020) and discusses how active learning strategies, goals, values and self-efficacy impact engagement. Plagiarism is also discussed as the writer expresses how *“plagiarism reflects a shallow level of student engagement”* (p-1). The study conducted, aims to elucidate the relationship between the above factors. Participants were 140 students from the Psychology department at Goldsmiths University of London. The students completed a 35-item student motivation towards learning and the results showed that a greater overall study motivation, predicts a more negative attitude towards plagiarism. Similarly, study motivation measures alone, could be used as a predictive tool in academic dishonesty. Self-efficacy and the use of active learning strategies were also shown as responsible for the relationship between overall study motivation and total attentional control. The writers expressed implementing an intervention aimed at increasing mindfulness for the students in order to deter from academic dishonesty.

Whilst the available literature is insightful and has unearthed notable recommendations for future educators, it has only briefly touched upon the importance of motivation in higher

education and to what extent, covid has had on student engagement. The literature above also indicates a lack of focus from the UK as it is primarily, internationally orientated prompting, further investigation not only from universities in the UK, also an international student perspective. Whilst analysing and examining the literature, four themes were identified as seen below:

- Interaction
- Stable internet connectivity
- Feedback
- Mental health

### **Aims and objectives**

Whilst undergoing my dissertation in the final year of my undergraduate degree, provided the initial impetuses for this study, it was apparent from the literature reviewed, that motivation was essential for academic success and that the Covid-19 pandemic affected students' motivation to learn. This resulted in a change in emphasis of the proposed study. The overall developed aim is as follows:

- To explore the importance of student motivation within Higher Education and to what extent, the current pandemic (Covid-19) has had on students' willingness and ability to learn remotely.

Aveyard (2019) explains that conducting a literature review, provides the researcher with a generous amount of knowledge, to then re develop aims and objectives for the study. After conducting the literature review, three objectives were derived from the aim: 1- Explore the impact of learning modes in the Covid 19 era and their influence on academic success: 2- examine the effects of Covid- 19 has on student motivation: 3- explore strategies to combat lack of motivation and promote student engagement. Questions were then developed that relate and aim to answer my aims.

## **Chapter Four- Methodology.**

### Introduction

Included in this chapter, is a discussion of different research methodologies and an explanation to why qualitative methods were the most appropriate for this particular research project. The rationale for choosing case study design over other research methods is also discussed, along with an overview of alternative methods, (grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography).

This chapter offers the justification of the case study approach adopted and also examine and discuss different types of case studies and furthermore, explain how validity and reliability are presented in this type of research design, and measures to ensure quality were enveloped into the research design. An illustration of the philosophical perspectives that helped guide the choice of qualitative methodology will also be illustrated.

### Epistemology and Ontology

King & Brooks, (2017) highlight that both Epistemological and Ontological perspectives help drive the philosophical basis for any research topic in social sciences. Epistemology refers to the philosophy of knowledge. Blaikie, (2000, p-8) explains; “the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known”. The understanding of epistemology helps guides researchers to suitable methodologies that justify the resources and means for obtaining new knowledge. Alternatively, King & Brooks, (2017) suggest that ontological perspectives help define the nature of reality within social science research. To understand and define phenomena in relation to constituting a social process as reality, Kings & Brooks, (2017) suggest, that social science researchers could use empirical, positivistic and interpretive or constructive methods.

For the purpose of this study, I selected an interpretive approach, as this recognises social reality as a phenomenon based on individual intuitive construction, perception and experience (Merriam, 1988: Robson and McCartan, 2016) of the study participants, reflecting the context of their reality. This study explores the perceptions and experiences of learning and how the participants individual motivation had been impacted as a consequence of changes in learning modes.

Robson and McCartan, (2016) and King & Brooks (2016) assert that interpretive and constructivist philosophical approaches underpin qualitative frameworks and furthermore that the validity and reliability in interpretive approaches, are shaped by the methodology's authenticity in data collection, analysis and adherence to that methodology (Ulin et al, 2005

and King & Brooks, 2016). In a qualitative research, participants are not considered as an object of study unlike in quantitative research, Cohen et al, (2000), suggests that participants are empowered to explore their own intuitive constructs, in order to define their perceived reality, (King & Brooks, 2017). Hence, owing to the inductive nature of interpretive studies, qualitative and phenomenological studies are more appropriate to unfold the meaning-based subjective context (Neuman, 2003: Ulin et al, 2005) that is reflected in this case study.

As the focus of this research was to perform an open enquiry into Public Health Postgraduate student's perceptions of motivation in higher education during Covid19, qualitative research methodology was chosen as the most appropriate approach for this research, enabling the researcher to understand the subjective constructs and ways of apprehending knowledge of the real world. (Kazdin, 1992, 2003, cited in Marczyk, DeMatteo and Festinger, 2005). Therefore, enquiring about the importance of motivation in higher education during the Covid-19 era, a qualitative methodology was chosen over quantitative methodologies (Robson & McCartan, 2016; King & Brooks, 2017) to provide a complete understanding of the Phenomon in this context.

My philosophical position is underpinned by my belief, (as a result of my undergraduate studies in counselling), is that the lived experience develops an understanding and knowledge of phenomenon and experience, and that individuals hold different interpretations of the phenomena and experience of interest. This supports the view that this study is based on the interpretivist qualitative philosophy, as the study involves the exploration student perceptions of their learning experience. After reflecting with my supervisors upon the basic purpose of the study, the nature of the research question, philosophical framework and sampling strategies, a case study design approach was chosen as the most appropriate method, (Robson & McCartan, 2016). There are varying qualitative methodologies such as ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and case study designs. These methodologies are all established approaches that are rooted in sociology, psychology and anthropology disciplines that are congruent with the objectives and perspectives of this research (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Below there is a brief description of these qualitative approaches.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Approach**

This phenomenological approach focuses on the participants lived experiences and enables the researcher to examine the underlying structures of such experiences. Phenomenology is described by Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Lopez and Willis, 2004; Dowling, 2007, as both a research philosophy and a method, and according to Kvale (1996), is rooted in a humanistic paradigm. Kvale (1996, p-53.) states, "*Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that*

*which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects' perspectives of their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects' consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings".*

According to Smith, (2004), IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Approach) is originally rooted in the hermeneutic tradition and deals with in-depth exploration of meaning-making discourse. Finlay & Ballinger (2006) explain, IPA is often used in different disciplines such as; social sciences and health psychology in order to explore the underlying conscious involvement and motives behind human behaviour and specific situations, rather than merely focusing on objective details (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and as Morrison (1992) suggests IPA helps the researcher to gain an enhanced and deeper insight about human nature. However, whilst IPA could have been a potential approach if the main aims were to understand how a student's personal beliefs and values shaped learning. However, the focus of this research was not primarily concerned with this and that type of research would be beyond the scope of this study. For this reason, it was not considered further.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography involves studying any given phenomenon by the researcher immersing themselves in the community of context under investigation. This particular method has origins within different disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, where groups of individuals are observed within their natural setting, (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011; Brewer, 2000). Ethnography is often used to explore and examine health care or educational systems and data is usually collected through the immersion and participation of the researcher in the real-world context, typical by observation techniques (Pereira De Melo et al, 2014).

Ethnography may have been a useful approach if this research study aimed to explore the complexities relating to teaching and learning through typical class room teaching, seminar discussions and during clinical assessments, with the researcher acting as the observer. However, Ethnography would not have been a suitable approach to use in this particular study as the focus was not primarily to contextualise and interpret the dynamics of the teaching and learning process and therefore, this methodology was subsequently not chosen. Also, time limitations and structure of the MRes programme would inhibit my immersion as a researcher within the context as an observer and due to my role of mentor would have produced a conflict of interest, (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

## **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach which saw its development from a sociological perspective that overall, considers the research participants' experiences, (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). This approach allows the researcher to observe social phenomenon by developing a deeper insight into the underlying psychosocial processes based on the participants experiences without preconceptions, (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory adopts practice observations and individual or group interviews, in order to generate meaning directly grounded in the context and means the analysis and development of the theory happens after the data has been collected.

In this context, a study such as grounded theory, would have proven useful if the purpose of this research was to develop a theory to address conceptual challenges based on 'students' or 'educators' experiences. This is why this research method was also discarded for this reason.

## **Case study**

Case study approaches and designs are frequently used within educational research to explore the standards of practices and identify any existing needs and challenges within provision (Casey & Houghton, 2010) and to conduct a detailed study of a specific subject in its real-world context (Yin 2014). The initial aim of this study was to inquire of the importance of motivation within higher education and to what extent the Covid19 pandemic has affected motivation on international students studying at university. Discussing this with my supervisors, one of which they had a good knowledge and understanding of this distinct group within the university, I learned that the vast majority of international students studied public health. This group comprised of 25 students from varying cultures although were predominantly from south east Asia. As this inquiry was to be drawn from the School in which I was enrolled, we agreed that this formed an ideal focus for the adoption of a case study approach. Furthermore, in view of the evolving nature of Covid and its resultant uncertainties a Case study approach is especially useful when the boundaries between context and phenomena are not clearly understood (Yin 2014).

Stake (2005) suggests that the choice of a case study is the preferred approach when the individual studies a phenomenon because of a distinct interest, which develops from a desire to learn about the phenomena. This supports my desire to investigate the impact of covid on learning this phenomenon emanated from my participation as a mentor for students but also my own experiences of the impact of covid in the final year of my undergraduate degree. Furthermore, discussing this with my supervisors motivate me further to explore the learning experiences of this group of students. Drawing upon the assertions of Yin (2018) and

Bassey (1995) this approach also provided the opportunity to develop and refine my pre-existing knowledge and experience whilst mentoring a number of the public health students.

Case study research approach is a single and, in depth investigation of an individual, a group, organisation or a society, for my study this is a group of eight post graduate international students studying Public Health. This approach is vital as it provides a description of a 'real' situation and thereby encompasses the contemporary phenomenon, providing an up to date account of the group being studied (Bassey, 1995). This is an especially valuable asset as it provides focus to this group of students under investigation and provides the possibility of generalisations, although these may have some degree of uncertainty. This case study will illustrate the social reality of learning in the context of covid-19 that provides a narrative and comprehensible reality from which judgements can be made.

Therefore, a case study design was deemed to be the most appropriate method of research.

Yin (2009), (2014) & Robson & McCartan (2016) both identify that case study design is exceptionally useful in evaluating and exploring the nature of underlying issues with reference to any identified phenomenon and has particular appropriateness to educational research. The case study approach was appropriate in this case as it provided an approach that enabled the exploration of the underlying factors perceived by students' learning in this particular area in real time and allows the researcher to explore relationships of underlying determinants with real-life interventions, (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It also enables further exploration of varying environmental factors that influence professional engagement for both students and educators. Furthermore, case study design allows the researcher to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the subject within the context studied. Yin (2014) highlights the complexity of case study design by explaining that this particular research design can be used to enable some generalisation of the studied phenomena, rather than relating the situation to a given and specific space, time and group.

Case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In this study, the context was not clearly defined, due to the evolutionary nature of the pandemic and each participant was individual.

This particular research, aimed to gather evidence from postgraduate students to explore the impact of learning modes, examine the impact that Covid19 has had on student motivation and explore possible strategies that combat both lack of motivation and student



engagement. Yin's definition fitted within my research question, as it allowed me to investigate all of these three areas in depth and to explore any hidden underlying factors and reflects my own personal interest.

Stakes (2006), Yin (2014), Robson & McCartan (2016) all acknowledge that several approaches to conducting a case study can be found in the social and health sciences. The following section explains my choice of an embedded multiple case study design proposed by Yin (2009, 2014), as opposed to, other possible case study methods.

### **Types of Case Studies.**

To help break down the complexity of case study design, Yin (2009, 2014) provides a structured and comprehensive approach to using case study design. An approach that was carefully followed to provide the logical structure of the study. According to Yin (2009, 2014), there are four types of case study designs. These include single case (holistic) design, single case (embedded) designs, multiple case (holistic) designs and multiple case (embedded) designs. A single case study (holistic) is conducted where a specific or critical case has to be examined as a representative case. It is holistic when the phenomenon of study is approached as a whole. If for any reason there are sub units selected to be studies within a single case study, this is what is referred to as an 'embedded case study design'. If the study investigates more than one single case, it is defined as a 'multiple' case study.

In contrast to single case studies, multiple case studies can also be holistic or embedded in nature, where the study focusses on the whole unit or differing sub-units within the case. In multiple case studies, cases can be selected for either literal replication based on similarity or theoretical replications that provide a contrast. To develop a replication strategy, a theoretical framework is required. Yin (2009, p-54) suggests that a theoretical framework is necessary as a "theoretical framework should state the conditions under which a particular phenomenon is likely to be found (literal replication) as well as the conditions when it is not likely to be found (a theoretical replication)". Furthermore, Yin suggest that once the theoretical framework is constructed, then the individual cases should be acknowledged and identified, in order to follow the constructed research design and data collection process. In multiple case studies, each case study finding guides the conclusion and addresses the nature and scope of any pre-set propositions. Stakes (2006) also explains that case studies can be classified as instrumental, intrinsic or collective.

In order to be an intrinsic case study, the case would have to be related to the interest of the researcher. Unlike intrinsic case studies, an instrumental case study enables the researcher to identify and examine the case provided and overall, a more sufficient understanding of the studies situation. The researcher must find purposive cases for an instrumental case study

design, that can explore the research question fully. Unlike intrinsic and instrumental, collective case studies are used in order to examine a number of cases, in order to compare the results and findings, (Creswell, 1998). This study could be described as both collective and instrumental, using a multiple case study design was judged to be most appropriate to explore student's motivation and perceptions of motivation pre and post-covid-19

Multiple case studies provide the opportunity to garner robust evidence enable more compelling and robust evidence to be gathered, that reflects Yin's (2009, 2014), case study design features of literal replication and internal and external validity.

#### Case study design

Yin emphasises the importance of the design process, as it provides the "logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of the study", Yin, (2014, p-26).

An embedded multiple case study design was chosen to investigate the relationships among and the underlying determinants within this underexplored study area (Yin, 2009, 2014). The embedded nature of the study stems from the fact that multiple units' "cases" are being collated. The case study design is as Yin, (2009, p.26) describes a "logical model of proof that allows the researcher to draw inferences concerning casual relations among the variables under investigation." The embedded multiple case study design enables the researcher to establish a causal relation among the factors that influence the level and extent of learning in higher education during the pandemic; rather just describing or explaining the issues as necessary information (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Thus, to investigate how motivation and engagement is attained in public health students post graduate learning, a multiple case study design was judged to be the most appropriate research methodology to adopt in order to provide logical reasoning of the phoneomen under investigation

Yin (2014, p. 29) explains, for a case study design to be of quality value, it requires:

1. A study question
2. Related proposition
3. Unit of analysis
4. A Logic of linking data to the proposition
5. Specified criteria for data interpretation.

#### **A study question.**

The following is the main research question for the present study:

To what extent, has Covid-19 influenced international students' motivation to learn and what are the implications of this influence?

The rationale for generating this research question, along with the aims and objectives of the study, have been discussed at length in chapter one.

### **Propositions.**

Propositions are an important feature of the case study approach as they maintain focus and direct the nature and scope of inquiry in order to inquire about the research project questions set (Yin, 2018). Based on the identified gaps and issues identified in the literature review, affecting students' motivation and engagement of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, the following propositions were identified for this case study:

1. Interaction with tutors and peers within an online learning environment is essential.
2. The accessibility of stable internet connections, and reliable technology systems, is necessary for successful study.
3. Having access to timely and informative feedback maintains engagement.

### **The case (unit of analysis)**

Yin (2009, p-30) defines units of analysis as, "the same as the definition of the case". Units of analysis are primarily centred around key objectives set as research questions (Casey and Houghton, 2010). Units of analysis separate the identified group or persons within each case, to establish the focus on the research question (Yin, 2009). For this study, as the main objectives were to inquire about the importance of student motivation and to what extent Covid19 has impacted this, each case/course was designated as a unit of analysis.

The identified propositions were linked with the literature review (chapter two). The rationale for this is briefly developed below. Data based on the research findings in each case will be further linked in the discussion, to help establish the validity of the research.

Proposition 1- Interaction with tutors and peers within an online learning environment is essential.

The literature provides evidence of the importance of tutor and peer interaction in distance learning. Interaction was discussed and identified as being the main detriment of online learning and the majority of the students, expressed a desire for interactive live sessions,

adaptive learning activities and general social interaction, to be incorporate into the curriculum. (Muthuprasad et al, 2021: Singh & Arya, 2020 & Gamage, 2020).

Proposition 2- The accessibility of stable internet connections, and reliable technology systems, is necessary for successful study.

It is evident that from the literature (Muthuprasad et al, 2021: Singh & Arya, 2020: Ghazi-Saidi et al, 2020: Jieun & Yongseok, 2020 & Baber, 2020), having access to a stable internet connection and reliable technological equipment is paramount, for student attainment. The data collected from the above articles, shows that without access to these amenities, students become disengaged with their academia and ultimately lose motivation. The writers suggest that online education cannot meet the needs of students if the connections are disrupted or the technology and online platforms are unreliable or difficult to navigate.

Proposition 3- Having access to timely and informative feedback maintains engagement.

Muthuprasad et al, 2021: Ananga, 2020 & Jieun & Yongseok, 2020, all discuss the importance of feedback. Specifically, having access to timely and quality feedback in a communicative manner. Students were found to have higher levels of engagement after receiving feedback from tutors on assignments and furthermore, advised educators to provide students with clear and concise instructions and direction, as you would if feedback was given face-to-face.

### **Specified criteria for data interpretation.**

Robson and McCartan (2016) highlight that validity and reliability are defined by the authenticity of selected methodology for data collection and analysis. There is however, certain criticisms raised when considering a case study design as a research method, the main one being, reliability. Case study methods can over-simplify and exaggerate findings due to selective/limited interpretation of the data which can be influenced by the researcher's pre-conceptions, Robson & McCartan (2016). Case study research has also been described as 'unscientific' and 'opportunity-based', only providing a fractional view and would therefore be incapable of supporting conclusions that can be applied more generally, (Blaxter et al., 2006).

Both Yin, (2014) & Robson & McCartan, (2016) highlight that terms of reliability and validity are especially relevant in establishing the quality and vigorous findings in qualitative research, particularly in case study design. However, reliability and validity were both established throughout the data collection and analysis phase by following the recommendations of Yin, (2009). In order to establish validity, Yin proposed four tests that

can establish credibility of case studies as a recognised method of qualitative enquiry in social sciences (2009, p. 41; 2014, p. 45). These measures are as follows:

### **Construct validity**

Yin (2009) explains, that in order to construct validity in a case study, data planning, collecting and analysis must be rigorous. Yin proposed, that in order to establish construct validity, cautious planning to collect various sources of evidence within each case is necessary. Such planning and multiple approaches to data collection, allow data triangulation, which supports the authenticity and construct-validity of case study findings. Creswell, (1998) explains that triangulation helps the researcher to develop data convergence, based on a variety of information. In this study triangulation was achieved by the multiple sources of evidence provided by each of the individual units of analysis

### **Internal validity**

Internal validity is known as, “the strength of a cause - effect link made by a case study” (Yin 2014, p-239). Internal validity defines the nature of underlying causes and their relationship to the findings, in order to justify the individuality of each case. The case study strategies used in this study to enhance internal validity included: pattern matching, explanation building for each case, addressing rival explanations and logical models to explain the findings.

### **External Validity**

Yin (2014, p-238) states that; “The extent to which the findings from a case study can be analytically generalised to other situations that were not part of the original study is known as External validity”. In this present study, external validity was achieved using both multiple case studies and replication logic.

### **Reliability**

Yin (2014) explains that a consistent and repeatable approach of the research procedures, determines the reliability of a case study. It was suggested by Yin, that the use of a case study protocol to develop case study data ultimately, enhanced and improved the reliability of the research findings.

The study protocol should include the following suggests Yin (2009, p.81):

1. An overview of the case study project: (including project aims, objectives and relevant reading around the topic to be investigated).

For establishing reliability of this study, detailed discussion on the research aim, objectives and rationale and scope of the study has been presented in Chapter One.

2. Field procedures: (A presentation of credentials, access to case study sites as sources of data are important in maintaining reliability of a case study).

For this research, ethical approval was sought from the host university. Accessing and recruiting participants involved email correspondence between the programme leaders and students, informing them about the project. Also, a small power point presentation was delivered to the participants illustrating the aims and scope of the research project. The details about field procedures covering, ethical approval, recruiting and modes of data collection are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

3. Case study questions:

Yin's reliability framework emphasises the value of questioning the case at different levels. Since the aim of this study was to inquire the importance of student motivation in higher education, different questions were used to investigate the issues portrayed by the suppositions. The detailed discussion on conducting interviews is presented in Chapter Four.

4. A guide for the case study report: (Outline for the data, use and presentation of other documents).

Records were kept separated, in order to keep progress records for each case. Including; keeping a log of any correspondence, emails and the time frame used during the ethics clearance both in accessing and recruiting participants. Recorded interviews were used as a form of data collection were kept confidential and anonymous in line with the university and legal data protection guidelines. These measures helped by keeping an audit trail and avoiding any bias in performing data analysis (Yin, 2009, 2014). Chapter Four discusses all steps taken for data collection in detail.

### **Research process.**

The research process involved multiple stages as shown below:

Ethical approval

The research proposal had to receive ethical approval from The University's school of Research Ethics and Integrity Committee, in order to minimise any harm to the participants well-being. The SREIC Committee issued advisories such as:

- Title change - to become clearer and more concise with the aims

- Consent form- adding logo and title
- Interview schedule- incorporating covid into more open-ended questions
- Information sheet- to include the benefits of taking part and researcher/supervisor details with logo

Subsequently, the amendments were made, and the research has received full ethical approval, from the university for data collection and analysis.

### Sampling

For case study research Yin (2009) suggests that the logic of selecting case sampling is not based on identifying any prevalence of phenomenon but on the logic of identifying the case and the subsequent unit of analysis based on finding similar or contrasting underlying aspects of the situation studied. In this case, international students studying public health at a well-established University in England. Consequently, the findings generate comparisons to be made and the extent and type of replication found, will enable conclusions to be drawn about common and unique characteristics across the case (Yin, 2009, 2014).

Purposive sampling is a method useful in studies that are influenced by the researcher's knowledge of the potential sample. In this case I had acted as a peer mentor to many of the students and were well known to the group and the course team. For this study, purposive sampling will be used to select a minimum of eight students from the current cohort of Public Health Students who are classified as international. The selections were made on the basis of who responded first, showing interest and availability within the limited time set for recruitment (Robinson, 2014) who meet the following additional criteria: currently registered students as internationals, registered on the Public Health programme, during the period Sept 20-September 21. The Public Health course was chosen to be the focus of the study – and hence the “case” as the course is the course with largest international intake within the School. Furthermore, the course team had offered their support in enabling recruitment and granting permission to recruit students, as the team desired information and guidance in developing support strategies for future cohorts.

The participants were interviewed via Microsoft Teams, due to Covid-19 halting in-person contact and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews.

### Data collection

To begin, the students were first contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. They were then sent an information sheet, detailing the aims and objectives of then study and other information to possibly answer any initial questions that may have arisen, with

contact details of the researcher: Holly Musson and the supervisory team: Dr Michael Snowden and Dr Jamie Halsall. Full ethical approval was granted as mentioned above however, if the student's well-being became at risk, the students were also offered support from the university Wellbeing and information from the Mind Charity. A consent form was also emailed to all of the potential participants, that required a signature as confirmation of their understanding and willingness to participate. The consent form also included: withdrawal information, transcription, and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with full explanations on each section. When consent forms were attained and a suitable time and date arranged, the interviews took place with eight participants. For anonymity purposes, each participant was given pseudonym's and completely randomised. Furthermore, any personal or identifiable information was removed when writing up the transcripts.

The interviews took place on Microsoft Teams and were semi-structured, then digitally recorded with all eight participants. The semi-structured interview approach, allowed flexibility within the interview and often prompted, further responses for the participant to disclose further information. Whilst there was pre-set questions, this approach could still allow a fluid process, with freedom for the researcher or participant to drive the interview process and discover, information not previously considered, whilst also ensuring the researcher can cover their objectives. This was done using open-ended questions, as this ensures the researcher can acquire as much detail as possible by each participant, (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

King & Brooks (2017) suggest that Microsoft Teams is an effective alternative, when compared to face-to-face interviewing, and research suggests (Durak & Cankaya, 2020) that Microsoft Teams is a more preferred way of communicating with students, as it more personable and interactive. Using Microsoft Teams as an alternative to face-to-face interviewing, enabled the students to be in a more convenient and comfortable environment. Some of the participants were not in the United Kingdom when the interviews took place, which would have proven difficult to arrange if the interviews were to be face-to-face and the ease of accessing the internet via Microsoft Teams, allowed the interviews to take place over three days.

#### Data analysis

The data from the interviews, was collected using the screen recorder and the transcripts tool on Microsoft Teams. They were then anonymised, and password protected through two-factor verification, needing an additional password to gain access into the computer to view the recordings. These precautions were necessary to ensure anonymity and secure all of the



data collected, (Robson & McCartan, 2016), whilst assuring the data could only be accessed by the authorised personnel. To analyse the findings, the King & Brooks (2017) template analysis was utilised, as this method helps to provide structure to the analysis process and maintains a flexible approach. This analysis approach allows the researcher, to find priori themes, identifying themes in advance, which is commonly used within template analysis. To focus on the individual accounts of those being interviewed, further analysis is then carried out to enable a greater depth of analysis before the integration of separate cases, (King, 2012).

### Development of the Template

To familiarise the participants experiences, transcripts were initially read following preliminary coding. The priori themes were developed in the initial stages of the template and were revisited at different stages of the progression of the research, as new themes emerged. The integrative and key themes were then discovered which also highlighted the main research themes. After analysing the transcripts thoroughly, five themes were uncovered, based upon the research question, framework, objectives, and interview guide. The two co-supervisors: Dr Michael Snowden and Dr Jamie Halsall, analysed a sample of the data, ensuring the reliability and credibility of King's (2012) template, and drew the same conclusions as I. This process suggests Robson and McCartan is useful strategy to enhance credibility of the analytical process. The themes are as below:

- Interaction (peers & tutors)
- Mental health and well-being
- Stable internet connectivity & technology
- Expectations
- Motivation

### Managing Data

The transcripts were manually checked, after the initial analysis using the transcription tool on Microsoft Teams, to make sure the tapes matched the transcripts, this was done several times. Any personal information, which could reveal the participants identity, was erased, and bracketed with "personal information". Line numbers were added to the word documents containing the transcripts, for ease of locating precise text. This method of transcribing enabled an intuitive and accurate analysis of the acquired data, (Robson & McCartan, 2016). To ensure credibility of the systematic process, Attride-Stirlings (2001) framework was implemented, along with providing structure of the process. Each transcript was saved separately as a single document, then highlighting the relevant text, later evolved into

themes and sub-themes. The highlighted text would then be separated onto a different document, and joined together to identify which would become themes and sub-themes and which would not. Transcripts and data were based on the participants own individual experience, in order to locate similarities in answering the research question.

## **Summary**

Varying qualitative approaches could have been used in order to conduct this study. However, the best methodology was chose to address the nature of the research. This chapter has considered and appraised the limited scope of other qualitative approaches in addressing the research question. Furthermore, this chapter has explained the different types of case studies and explained the scope of exploratory and embedded multiple case studies for this research. Finally, based on the recommendations of Yin (2009, 2014) the design and rationale of each step towards a successful case study has been explained and considered in context of the overall approach.

## **Chapter Five- Findings.**

As this was a qualitative study, eight international student participants were interviewed to gather the data. Students were briefed on the intentions of the study, along with the consent form and finally, students were offered an opportunity to ask any questions regarding the research. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, names have been changed and any identifiable information removed from the transcripts. As the students began their Master's degree in 2020, the country was still battling the global pandemic known as Covid-19. After analysing the transcripts, the following themes were identified, along with multiple sub-themes, when discussing the students transition to online learning.

The themes included:

- Interaction (peers & tutors)
- Mental health and well-being
- Stable internet connectivity & technology
- Expectations
- Motivation

### **Theme One: Interaction.**

The interaction in this case, included both peer-to-peer and tutor interaction. Previous research suggests that students have a higher regard for 'in person' interaction vs online learning, (Trantnik et al, 2019). When analysing the data, interaction became the most

prevalent theme throughout all the interviews and highlighted the importance and complexity, face-to-face interaction can have in higher education. Furthermore, three sub-themes were identified throughout the transcripts:

- Face-to-face
- Feedback
- Social experience/culture

Identification of this theme is illustrated by a number of excerpts for example:

*Caitlin.*

*“But then over time I think I was like, I would like to meet my classmates. You know how you can have like group discussions like? Just meeting people like discussing certain things like even, even like the lectures, like some of the lectures we had and there's more. I mean, it's more interactive when you know it's in person”, (p-1, line 11-15).*

Not only did this highlight the importance of social interaction, it also emphasised how students craved academic interaction with fellow students and tutors:

*Katrina.*

*“So the main challenge is the, erm, contact with the professors, because in my country, we, uh, mostly do face to face classes. We will be interacting with our professors. Uh, asking questions in their room and chatting with them”, (p-2, line 44-46).*

Whilst academic interaction was identified as imperative to the students learning, having access to timely feedback was also recognised as extremely important to the students. Students discussed some of the areas of feedback that they felt, lacked in terms of desirability and efficiency:

*Caitlin.*

*“Or you know, if uni was open, you would literally just walk into your lecturer's office and you know you can catch them. Maybe they have like that 10 minutes of conversation and they can easily just discuss it. But then now, you're trying to like set appointment trying to work around like each other's schedules, and it might just not necessarily work”*

This was reinforced by:

*Mable.*

*“Uhm, well to be honest, no, it would have been better than if I would have got a detailed explanation or maybe like a one-to-one session where they would tell me that OK, this is the area where you lacked”* (p-2, line 63-65).

Timothy also noted that some of the sessions were pre-recorded, (it was not questioned whether Timothy had missed the live session and therefore, had to catch up on pre-recorded sessions).

*Timothy.*

*“Getting feedback when you are in on campus directly, when you are in class and speaking to professors. I think that really make us to understand about how we are learning in terms of, you know, learning certain aspects of the course and it's like obviously human interaction does help more than you know rather than uhm, learning the feedback from the email because at the end of the day, you're not seeing the person and you don't know what it means and you have a lot of question to ask to them like; where am I going wrong here”,* (p-4, line 114-119).

*“The other thing was because some of the classes were pre-recorded, so obviously in order to ask any question, you have to definitely ask for an appointment with the professors and they will get back to us. Obviously, you know, when you way the class and you ask questions, you learn a bit more than waiting for a while, and then they come back to us. And then if you have to question again, you have to email them and then it takes a lot of time”,* (p-2, line 44-48).

Whilst most students expressed a desire for more academic interaction with tutors, either through gaining feedback or classroom discussions, almost all of the students explained their longing for social interaction and experiencing new cultures compared to their own, this was a consistent finding encapsulated by:

*Caitlin.*

*(Discussing social experience). “That was a 0 that was a 0 / 100. Because like I said, I never met my classmates and I never for one day, like in person we never. I mean, I don't know. I don't know what they look like in person. I don't know”,* (p-47, line 167-169).

And by:

*Mable.*

*“So there was no social experience for me like it was completely 0 and only until I decided to become this member of Public health society. That's when I started meeting people, so it was during the end of my session, like I had completed my dissertation”, (p4, line 102-105).*

*“So being an international student, what are our expectations? We go to a new country, we we, we will try to learn their culture, we get to meet new people, interact with them, learn about their culture, you know. But this didn't happen. For me, I couldn't even go to university”, (p-11, line 344-347).*

Timothy distinctly alluded to failings in the experience by suggesting alternative:

*Timothy.*

*“I do think they could have done more, because obviously whenever they you know they recruit international students, they give a give a certain kind of like ‘guides’ in having some instruction about how to get adapted into a new city, how to get adapted into a new culture environment”, (p- 8, line 252-255).*

Interaction, whether in the form of the social experience, academic interaction with fellow classmates or tutors or face-to-face/live sessions appeared to be of extreme importance to the students. They placed great emphasis on being unable to recognise their fellow students or tutors and highlighted that whilst the university made every effort to keep them engaged with the academia, the interaction with one another lacked immensely.

### **Mental Health.**

Mental health was the second most prolific theme throughout the transcripts, with three sub-themes identified within this theme. These included:

- Impact
- Engagement
- Support

Many of the students appeared to view the global pandemic as a novelty, as this was something they had never experienced previously and at the time, there was still lockdowns put in place by the government to help tackle the virus. It appeared from the transcripts, that the students assumed that the lockdown restrictions were viewed as temporary however, most students discussed a decline in their mental health once the reality of the pandemic had set in. Caitlin, Mable, Michelle and Timothy were quite vociferous in their reflections of the impact:

*Caitlin.*

*“Yeah, mine wasn't the best. I would say that at the beginning during the first term, like just before the Christmas break I was, I mean it was OK. I was still like trying to adapt. It was interesting because it was new and I was, I guess I was like really curious about it then. But then after I had, you know, gotten into it, understood how it worked. I would say by the second time, so this was after Christmas break. I wasn't having the best time, Like I I struggled mentally. I was really, going through it like it was a lot for me 'cause not only to come in terms of like school work, like also general my general life into it, (p- 4-5, line 102-100).*

*Mable.*

*“It, it was really bad to be honest, so I had to, you know, I went into a depression kind of state in the middle of the sessions and so I had to take help so I didn't... You know”, (p-3, line 73-74), (p-3, line 82-86).*

*Michelle.*

*“Oh, how... It was... It was affected quite a bit. I was very anxious, you know, so when we were hit with the pandemic at this time, I was really afraid how the modules we're going to go. You know, we still had a few more modules and I was, you know, we were just starting our research project. So, Uh, so I, I personally was anxious how we're going to get it done and will we get enough support?”*

Timothy illustrated the transnational nature of the covid effect by alluding to the global nature of Covid and the separation from family

*Timothy.*

*Uhm, COVID has a lot of impact on the mental health, because at the end of the at the beginning of the I mean when this whole thing with unravelling, international students were in a very difficult, difficult indifferent situation because when these situations and this whole scenario was unfolding around us, obviously we don't have family behind us and obviously they're anxious whenever they learn about what's happening because all this was starting erupting in European countries”, (p-6, line 173-177).*

After discussing the decline in mental health, the conversation switched to the impact of declining mental health on the students' studies, either prompted by the student themselves or the researcher. The decline in mental health, appeared to affect the student's engagement in self-directed study, many of the students started to withdraw from learning and ask for extensions in order to pass:

*Caitlin.*

*“Yes, it did (affect mental health) because I know sometimes, I, I had to like close like shut down my schoolwork, not touch, not do schoolwork, and because I had to ask for extensions quite a few times because I was really struggling.”*, (p-4, line 134-136).

*Mable.*

*“Well, it did affect my studies because I couldn't concentrate and then I had to take extensions for a few modules because I wasn't able to catch up on time. So yeah, that was a really big issue. Plus, you're not meeting anyone. Everything is online. So, if I would have met someone, I think I mean my depression would have been a bit, you know, less, that's what I assume”*, (p-3, line 91-95).

*Timothy.*

*“because there was a time when I felt very low. I really don't want to do anything. I would just be lying on my bed frankly and thinking about what I will do. I was panicking, so obviously I thought about quitting”*, (p-11, line 366-368).

Although the students highlighted that mental health did create a barrier into self-directed study, it had no lasting impact on their overall grade. The students explained that the university offered plenty support for student's health and well-being:

*Caitlin*

*Yeah yeah, just student support and occasionally like email. Uh, emailed me, I remember a, you know, letting me know or if you're ever feeling like overwhelmed and you know you need to join any sessions. They always had like mental health and well-being support. And for their college support forums. Yeah, they did have that. So yeah, I would say the unique they did the best they could, well”*, (p-3, line 90-93)

*Hanna*

*Well, university, well they were pretty much supportive and they used to, you know, keep keep on checking it on us there where like really focused on the mental health as well. Uh, so yeah university were very supportive. I mean everyone, even the lecturers. They were like pretty, you know. Not they were not making a stressed or... They were constantly checking up on us. So that was a good thing about this university”*, (p-1, line 29-33).

Only one student followed up with the support offered however, the student in question, sought support elsewhere due to technical difficulties:

*Mable.*

*“Well, I actually went, just there was this website called (Personal information) and I went there but then I don't know what happened. Maybe it was an IT thing. I really don't remember what exactly happened, but I don't think it was much responsive. So then I went to this (Personal information) site”*, (p-53, line 82-85).

### **Stable connection/technology.**

Reliable internet connectivity and technology was discussed at length during the interviews and three sub-themes were identified from the transcripts. These included:

- Adjustment
- Accessibility
- Convenience

Most of the student's interviewed, had access to a reliable internet connection within their accommodation with few issues:

*Caitlin.*

*“Well for me Internet wise, I would say mine was pretty good. I I didn't really have issues with connection here even when I went to (Personal information) like I didn't have any issues at all”*, (p-7, line 239-240).

This was reinforced by comments from other student's such as:

*Katrina.*

*“Yeah, actually. I have been at (Personal information), so we bought a good Wi-Fi”*, (p-6, line 171).

*Michelle.*

*“Yes, the Wi-Fi was all very good in my accommodation. Yes, I didn't have any problems, yeah”*, (p-6, line 162-163).

*Timothy.*

*“Yeah. Uh, in terms of challenges while being on Internet while accessing resources, I don't think that we faced that much challenge”*, (p-9, line 295-296).

Only one student, had difficulty accessing the internet. The student had to resort to using mobile data, which in turn, became very costly:

*Mable.*



*“But when I came here, it took me some time to get a Wi-Fi. So I was just relying on mobile data which is very expensive. So then I had to, you know, figure out. I had to call all these Wi-Fi companies who would give me sooner connection, which is like fast enough and soon enough to get it fixed. So there was a trouble for me as well to find someone who's reliable enough to give me a great Internet connection for studying”, (p-6, line 164-168).*

After discussing their experience with internet connectivity, the student's all highlighted that there was an adjustment period when transitioning to online learning. Particularly, having to self-manage study time and knowing when to switch off or have a break:

*Hanna*

*“But then with this one is like you're in between because yeah, for one hour you try to do a little work and then you stop and then you have to psych yourself to get back in. So there isn't really like, Uh, and yeah, you're not really organised. You kind of just it was for me, it was just kind of all over the place, right? Yeah?” (p-5, line 158-161).*

*Katrina.*

*“so it's, it's a new type, actually new learning experience. Uh, so I haven't experienced this before because in my days mostly they were all face to face lectures etc. Uh, initially it was very difficult for me to cope with this because, ah, it's like it's not like face to face is so even sitting in home and attending all these classes, it's like very boring initially and difficult to cope”, (p-1, line 7-11).*

*Michelle.*

*“It was ok, it was difficult in terms of arranging it and time management etc. You know, like I mean getting used to it. But once we started it, it was, it was OK”, (p-1, line 12-13).*

Some of the students also discussed the transition and ease of using the new software and resources such as Summon, Brightspace and Microsoft teams:

*Caitlin.*

*I attended, they did like they had like a section, sorry, a session, ugh, it wasn't actually. Yeah, it was a Microsoft team call. The way they explained how to use it and also how to go about using SUMMON, how to use them, like, your uni mail etc. Yeah, they just explained the whole process, like how to use everything and there were links. They provided links and provided some, some PDFs”, (p-9, line 301-305).*

*Michelle.*

*“No, I was able to access everything you know through the summons and everything. You know, while doing my research projects, yeah”, (p- 7, line 186-187).*

Only one student had difficulty using and accessing the materials and resources:

*“Like for example MS teams. So, it was a very new, you know, new kind of software, you have to learn that particular, you know MS Teams how to operate etc. You know like, in a sense, like you, if you want to access some of the materials, you need to learn about.. You know where you can. I'm not take like an IT professional, so it was kind of challenging The other thing was, because the classes were pre-recorded, so obviously in order to ask any question, you have to definitely ask for an appointment with the professors and they will get back to us”, (p- 2, line 40-46).*

Whilst the students discussed the difficulties of adjusting to distance learning and accessing all of the new software, resources and materials, three of the students expressed their preference for the convenience aspect of moving from on campus teaching, to online education:

*Caitlin.*

*“It was a bit different at the beginning. It was very convenient because you know you just roll out of bed. And then you can easily join your classmates. You don't have to like try to get ready to go to uni and all of that. So yeah, it was very convenient”, (p-1, line 8-11).*

And by Michelle:

*Michelle.*

*“Uh, like for now, after experiencing that online learning, I think online learning is ok because its more convenient, you know? My, my perspective kind of changed like to be to be more positive with it, you know, towards online learning”, (p-8, line 236-238).*

The students expressed that the convenience of online learning, being able to study whilst being at home and reducing travel time would theoretically, assist their learning in a way that is more proactive. Whilst there was an adjustment period, having accessibility to all of the resources and learning materials, there was also procedures put in place for technical support. The students were able to raise a ticket with IT for any additional support however one of the students stressed, that at times it was easier to source help elsewhere:

*Thomas:*

*“You have to raise a ticket. You have to wait, so this waiting time was creating a lot of chaos. So what some people did including myself, they sometimes reached out to other students*

*that may have done this previously. You know that know, how to do that. So if anyone of us able to do that then it would solve the problem, or else then we will find other ways like going on YouTube you know, or going to the different sites where they talk about where you can find the journalist relation to this, uh, or academic discipline. So that is what we were doing”, (p-10, line 318-323).*

All of the students acknowledge the challenges faced with distance learning, whilst there is a convenience factor (less travel time etc), it appears that the detriments outweigh the benefits. Whilst most students had reliable internet access, most students found the adjustment period very challenging, whilst also trying to collaboratively work with their tutors or tech support, in order to resolve any queries in a timely manner. Almost all of the students (6) summarised their experience by explaining an alternative pathway if they were to undertake another course of study.

### **Expectations.**

The students' expectations of undertaking their degree online, appeared to differ from the reality of the situation as soon as the academic year began. Whilst discussing their expectations of a distance learning degree, two other sub-themes were found within the transcripts:

- 'Blended education'
- Reduction in course fees
- Regret

Almost all of the students (8) explained that before the academic year began, they were told that the year would be a hybrid of both online and face-to-face sessions, phrased as 'blended education' by the university. This explanation is backed up by Rahman & Ilic (2018, p-338) who define blended education as; *“Blended Learning combines the conventional face-to-face course delivery with an online component”*. The students define their understanding of a blended education below:

*Katrina.*

*“Yeah, actually, yeah, when we joined for this course, uh, we had some meetings with the university people. So, what they told us, it will be like a blending of face to face and and online classes. But we still had full online classes only. It's like, uh, online learning. Uhm, the only learning of public health. So what I think is, even though it it, it doesn't affect my studies or learning or anything like that”, (p-8, line 248-252).*

Mable's feeling reflected this:

*"So for me personally it was quite difficult because when we came up, when we registered for the university, they were told that, I mean we were told that it would be a blended education and then all of a sudden it was all online", (p-1, line 6-8).*

*"I wasn't prepared for an online education, even though they told me it would be blended, I was still considering the fact that we could at least once go to the university", (p-11, line 342-344).*

And by Timothy:

*"So, kind of different, but we all adjusted into it, so I would say it's a very mixed kind of reaction. I would say for me, because it was all, it was not even a blended one, but it was like an online transition, so we all missed face to face interactions. We in all missed the experience of being in a class. So yeah, that was my experience", (p-1, line 27-30).*

After discussing their experience during their degree, the students reflected on the financial aspect of the course. Most of the students expressed that because they were promised a hybrid/blended type of education and only received a distance learning experience, that there should have been some sort of reduction in their course fees as this is not what they had paid for:

*Katrina.*

*"But I still feel I have paid more for this course. This is mainly due to because the, online degree's and classes is is half of this amount. Actually when we compare this with face to face and online study, I could done a distance degree for half the price", (p-8, line 252-253).*

*Michelle*

*"So when it is online. I think that we we saw, you know, we felt well... I also felt that it should have, you know, online learning should be on a reduced price compared to in person. You know in terms of the resources in terms of. You know, of course, when we go in person. You know we are going to the classroom. There are certain utilities that are used and all that. So that was all in the cost fees. But now when we're online, we are actually not using those resources like you know", (p-10, line 277-282).*

*"Yes. I felt they should have given, you know, like kind of giving us a little bit, you know. Some money back, you know, and I think we did ask for that actually", (p-9, line 262-263).*

*Timothy*

*“because, international students have paid more, ugh, we haven’t received any discount for this course which I think we we should have as it wasn’t what we have been promised”, (p-8, line 260-262).*

Finally, after discussing their expectations of the course, how it differed to the blended/hybrid education that was promised by the university before the academic year started, the students all expressed their regret for doing a Master’s degree during a pandemic, encapsulated by the three following excerpts:

*Caitlin.*

*“After my experience I would say online learning personally is not for me. I don't, I would. I would not do it again. Yeah, if there was another pandemic, I I wouldn't go to school, I'd wait”, (p- 11, line 346-348).*

*Mable.*

*“There were times when I thought it would have been better. If they would have told me that it's all going to be online then I wouldn't have come to the UK”, (p-5, line 143-144).*

*Timothy.*

*“We were all very low point to think about that, we took the wrong decision to come and study because of the situation going on and we were feeling helpless and no one there to reach out”, (p-6, line 185-187).*

Mable also expressed that, this new way of learning, can be done without enrolling at a university:

*“Well, one thing that I've understood from digital learning is that you can learn from anywhere you can. You know knowledge is everywhere. You can just learn from you know, any resources that you get. You do not have to enrol in a university to get an education. And one more thing is that it's very expensive to get an education online when you can get the same things for free when there are certain resources online, where you can learn the same things for free”, (p-9, line 264-269).*

### **Motivation.**

Not only did the students express their regret at undertaking a degree during a global pandemic, the student’s also expressed how it affected their motivation to learn. Motivation

appeared to be a key theme when discussing online learning and four sub-themes were extracted from the transcripts:

- Feedback
- Engagement
- Impact

Four students referred to online and distance learning as having a negative impact on their motivation to study:

*Caitin*

*“yeah, with online learning, there's a huge lack of motivation, because it's just like, uh, I got like, like you can't be arsed to do it but, it's just, there's, you know, there's a difference between going in on campus, going to uni, knowing your student, and just you being at home, alone”, (p-2, line 42-46)*

*Timothy.*

*“you have to adjust to a new way, it was a bit different and obviously did affect our motivation to study. We all feel that we were lacking something at the, you know at the end of the day, we all were like, anxious because of the fact the whole thing was unfolding around us, when I was doing the Masters in public health. So yeah, so it was a bit different and a mixed kind of, of, you know feeling, and it did, in fact, have a negative impact on our motivation to study”, (p-4, line 125-130).*

Some student's appeared to relate motivation with feedback. The student's explained that the type of feedback (either positive or negative), made the students more motivated to engage with the academia, possibly by having some sort of interaction with their tutors:

*Caitlin.*

*Yeah, well, yes, uh feedback was related to how much motivation we had, whether it was good or bad, like yeah it definitely did, (p-2, line 42-43).*

*Michelle.*

*I mean how, how motivated I get from their feedback, yeah, I do get very motivated because they give, you know, good feedback where I could improve etc and what was good about it, you know, and and what I can improve. So it was quite, you know, it, it's quite motivating you know, yeah, (p-2, line 50-53).*

*Timothy.*

*Yes obviously (feedback) it does have an impact on my motivation. If a person like me, because I prefer human interactions and sometimes during it's not obvious feasible to have, you know like. Is, uh, sometimes it will be through the email feedback", (p-5, line 145-148).*

The students acknowledged that being motivated was a key component in self-directed study. They emphasise, that's whilst covid, motivation, feedback and engagement did not have an overall impact on their final grade, it did influence certain modules and assignments:

*Katrina.*

*I don't think so (when asked if covid affected overall grade), because, uh, initially it was difficult for me for the first two-three subjects. After that, I got on very well because I I learn how to do all these things and so and I got great support from, from the professor", (p-47, line 191-193).*

*Caitlin.*

*"I mean, generally I did well, I got a (Personal information), so I mean, I'm happy about that, but I'm in terms of, I had a presentation where I was presenting and (Personal information). Right, if I was in like in on campus I wouldn't be. I wouldn't like face that and I I was so... I notice that particular presentation, I got a (Personal information) which I was going to, I was actually going to like what what's the word not appeal? Well maybe appeal? or something because I was like, well, it wasn't entirely my fault", (p-10, line 316-326).*

The results from the study provide, by through the identification of summary themes provide an illustrative account of the challenges faced by international students. The following chapter will now focus on analysing and examining these quotes and furthermore, proposing recommendations for future educators in adopting a distance learning approach to higher education.

## **Chapter Six - Discussion**

Analysing the transcripts revealed a large portion of data congruent with the presupposition generated by the literature review. However, it also highlighted anomalies not predicted

during the study's initial proposal. This chapter provides a discussion and contextualisation of the findings generated by the data. What is clear and will be illustrated as the chapter progresses is the interdependence of the themes in what is the complex and multi-faceted world of learning in the context of Covid19. What was surprising, was that students were not, or expressed their lack of awareness the support strategies in place to support them during the pandemic by the university. These included for example; extra financial support for internet costs, the loan of lap tops and extra well-being support. It was clear that the programme team had provided extra support and adopted a much more flexible approach to teaching and learning, however participants did not view this as support specifically related to Covid. The chapter will illustrate recommendations and highlight the potential impact of the research for future practice.

### **Interaction.**

Interaction within higher education became the most prevalent theme within the transcripts, whether the context was either social or academic interaction with tutors or fellow peers. Trolan et al (2020) identified interaction as the key component in university students' well-being, suggesting that interaction with students and faculty members should be the prioritised above all other modes of academic progression. Vlachopoulos & Makri (2019) emphasise the importance and complexity that interaction has between tutor and student, is essential in a successful online education programme and underline that future planning for online learning, needs to have elements of live interaction in order to keep students engaged with academia. In addition to this, Arvaja & Hämäläinen (2021) & Damina et al (2022) underline the importance of interactional activities such as live quizzes, peer to peer reflection, one-to-one mentor collaborations, have on student engagement and achievement in higher education. The transcripts showed that all of the students held an extremely high regard for interaction with their fellow peers and tutors. During the interviews, some of the students expressed that's whilst they were aware of the current pandemic halting any social interaction, they still expected to have a degree of 'normality' in terms of academic interaction. Contact with the tutors pre-covid consisted of a phone call or dropping by their office however, because of covid, any interaction had to be done via email which took some time. When the students did receive a reply from the tutors, it was not always easy to interpret the information, so often the students either did not respond or declined further communication. Whilst the findings indicate that some of the lectures and seminars were pre-recorded and therefore lacked any form of interaction of any kind, students expressed their desire for classroom discussions, with both peers and tutors. However, applying this phenomenon to online distance learning, is not always possible due to technical delays or time constraints as illustrated by Hrastinski, (2021:2022).



Within the interactional theme, face-to-face delivery and communication appeared to be of extreme significance to the students. The students in question were all undertaking a Master's degree in Public Health, meaning the students had attended university previously. They all had an idea of what a typical university experience consisted of and had expressed a preference for the face-to-face aspect of academia. This notion is backed up by Gherheş et al (2021), who aimed to explore online vs face-to-face education. The results indicated that first-year students favoured distance learning as opposed to post-graduate students who preferred face-to-face education and wished for the return to typical academic delivery. Similarly, Hubner et al (2022): Costado et al (2021): Chisadza et al (2021), all expand on this notion, highlighting post-graduate students have a preference for face-to-face education and engage more, with the course content.

Whilst discussing the delivery of the course content and the interaction being online only, feedback became a notable sub-theme within the transcripts. As mentioned previously, in order to meet/speak with their tutors regarding assignments or course content, the students had to arrange a convenient time for both parties via email. The response time often hindered the student's engagement and when they did receive feedback, it was often left to interpretation when trying to understand the meaning. Winstone & Carless (2019) describe feedback as the most impactful element in academic progression and express that feedback cannot be generically handled but must be context specific. This appeared to synchronise with the public health students' perceptions, as two students discussed feedback given after giving a PowerPoint presentation. The students explained that because the presentations were done online, the feedback is difficult to comprehend as it was not given live and in person, they were not given the desired grade and because of the feedback process, did not appeal or discuss their grades further. This is a distinct finding as Wood (2021): Zhang & Hyland (2022): Cladera (2021-22), support this notion by alluding to, and placing emphasis upon timely feedback being crucial in motivating students to progress, especially in higher education.

Interaction in any form, whether its formal interaction or informal, appears to be of great significance to the student's typical university life. One type of interaction that is often overlooked is the social aspect of attending a university. When beginning the academic year, typically, universities hold events such as 'freshers' week', this is to help the students settle in, meet other classmates, show the societies available to join and provide general information and support to assist students in familiarising themselves. The students in questions are international students, who have come to study abroad for the purpose of attaining a qualification, (Arkoudis, 2018-19). International students are arguably the most vulnerable students in attendance at a university, (Forbes-Mewett, 2020). They have

travelled to a foreign country, often alone and solely rely on the events and organisations at the university in order to equip themselves for a new type of educational setting. The students all highlighted that the social aspect of the degree was at zero. They expressed that the pandemic placed great emphasis on upholding the educational aspect of the course, that the social interaction was completely overlooked. Alghamdi (2021) illustrates this, explaining that the social aspect of higher education has been impacted greatly due to Covid, more so, than the educational side. Experiencing a new culture also appears to be an important aspect of the traditional university experience for international students. Four of the students expressed the lack importance of events or information to aid the students in getting acquainted within a new culture and country. They were unable to go out, meet national students, socialise and experience a new way living.

The data retrieved, concludes that interaction, in any sense (formal, academic and social), is of extreme importance to an international students' university experience. Whilst the university has not experienced a global pandemic before, it has had to try and adapt to a new way of providing education whilst adhering to restrictions. Whilst the university has attempted to provide students with everything needed to learn remotely, the interactional aspect of university has been overlooked especially the social side.

Mental health.

In the beginning of the year 2020, the pandemic was viewed by most of the students as a novelty, as this was something never experienced before by the students or the university. Lockdowns and restrictions were put in place by the government to help tackle the spread of the virus and students were left with two options: leave to return home and study remotely or stay and study with the hope that the education system returns to normal. When analysing the transcripts, it was apparent the students viewed the restrictions as 'temporary' and therefore decided to stay however, four of the students emphasised a decline in their mental health, mainly due to the feelings of isolation, loneliness and anxiety, once the reality of the situation set in. There has been a plethora of research completed in the past three years to support this notion as being a worldwide issue, Wieczorek et al (2020) explain that Covid had a significant impact on student's mental health and well-being and presented recommendations: "*for early psychosocial interventions among students is strongly advised*" (p-2884). Likewise, Ihm et al (2021), highlight all of the above, whilst also emphasising the struggles outside of university such as: psychological trauma, bereavement and financial instability. The interviews highted that a decline in mental health and well-being, as one of the consequences of the pandemic. After discussing the student's mental health, the

conversation switched to the effects of declining mental health on their academia, either promoted by the students themselves or the researcher.

Three participants explained that they had to resort in requesting extensions for several assignments, mainly due to lack of engagement. It was apparent from the transcripts, that due to lack of interaction and a mental health decline, students started to withdraw from learning and often found it hard to complete assignments on time. Oliveira et al (2021) & Conrad et al (2022) explain that it is crucial to offer new guidance and training in dealing with unusual and stressful situations, in order to increase engagement, participation and possibly offer new strategies such as: peer collaboration in order to digitalize educational systems successfully, “ *institutions need to redesign students' learning experience systematically and re-evaluate traditional pedagogical approaches in the online context*”, (Conrad et al, 2022, p-534). Whilst analysing the interview transcripts, it appeared a few (4) of them mentioned a ‘buddy’ system, used as a port-of-call in case the tutors were not available or could not respond in a timely manner. Only one student discussed speaking with their ‘buddy’ however, it was very brief and did not appear to have spoken with them more than twice, suggesting tutor support was more favourable.

Throughout the interviews, support was discussed briefly with all of the participants. All of them clarified, that they had received offers of support throughout their academic year by the university. Jojoa et al (2020) explains that the perceptions of the pandemic, between tutor and student differed greatly, the students suffered anxiety and depression however the staff had a positive professional experience and had access to materials and services and therefore, their quality of life was maintained. Jojoa alludes to this being key into the reasoning why students are not receiving adequate support from universities. Whilst the Public health students in this case, all received offers of support for health and well-being, only one student accepted however, due to technical issues, sought support elsewhere outside of the university. However, this study suggests that support for health and well-being was not encouraged as much as the engagement in academia and whilst education is the most significant part of a degree, a decline in mental health can halt any chance of academic progression and therefore, mental health needs to be viewed as important as education.

Stable connections/technology.

Covid-19 forced universities to close their doors to students and forced most forms of education to move online. Suddenly, the students, who would usually go into university, work from the classrooms, watch/participate in lectures and rely on the delivery of information by their tutors, now had to adapt to a whole new way of learning. The public health students all explained they had access to reliable Wi-Fi or internet connection, only one had difficulty,

which led to them having to use mobile data, which in turn, became very costly. The students in question did not appear to receive any support from the university and because of the pandemic, was unable to use any of the resources at the library's such as the computers, printers or Wi-Fi. The student explained that the issue was eventually overcome however, they did express great difficulty in trying to do this alone. All the students were asked about their experience accessing resources and materials online. Most of the students' comments were collectively, very positive and emphasised that lectures and workshops were organised, in order to help with any difficulties, they may face. One student did express having technical difficulties with the platforms such as; MS Teams and explained that in order to seek assistance with any IT issues, you would be placed in an online queue, which at times, was very time consuming and did not always resolve the problem. Another student noted that because some of the sessions were pre-recorded, in order to ask any questions, you had to contact the tutor which again, was very time consuming. Gawronski (2021) alludes to the importance of live sessions when teaching online and suggests making sure sessions are also interactive to support online education.

Whilst the students did appear to receive guidance on accessing all of the course content and navigating the platforms such as MTeams, the students all expressed a difficulty in adjusting to this new way of learning. They all expressed difficulty in the beginning, they also noted that the tutors and support staff struggled adjusting to the new software. Oliveira (2021) explains that most of the difficulties faced with technology in online education, is due to lack of experience/knowledge from the tutors and expresses, making sure tutors and professors are fully equipped with the training needed in the new platforms and software. Similarly, Abdi (2021, p-319) appears to synthesise with this by stating that, "*the research identifies the need to develop an online learning model, teaching material, and multimedia in supporting geography-based online learning*", in order to overcome the challenges that hinder online learning.

Most of the students had a positive experience with internet access and accessibility to the platforms/software/materials, with only a few obstacles. Consequently, the students expressed the convenience of studying remotely. Travel and prep time were discussed, being able to wake up and go straight into an online lecture and seminars, without the need for travel time whilst also benefitting financially. Binmohsen & Abrahams (2020) argue that online learning is more effective than traditional face-to-face due to the convenience factor and being easier to deliver sessions presumably, without the need for trips to different locations within the establishment. Additionally, Bergeler & Read (2021): Sánchez-Cabrero et al (2021) & Stevanović et al (2021), all acknowledge that whilst students prefer a more

interactive and face-to-face approach to learning, online education has proven to be a more convenient way of teaching and educating.

Expectations.

After analysing the transcripts, it is apparent that any frustrations the students faced, was ultimately due to the university not meeting the students' expectations. The frustration can be seen and heard from the transcripts, when the students discuss what was pledged to them at the beginning of the academic year, vs what type of education they had received by the end.

Traditionally, blended education consists of *"face-to-face session at a given time but is extended to online spaces as well, happening anywhere at any time at students' preference"*, (Bouilheres, 2020, p-3049). Um et al (2021) implies that, previous research on student satisfaction with blended learning: (Brochado, 2009; Chiu et al. 2007; Okzan & Koseler, 2009; Yang & Peterson, 2004) does not incorporate the covid aspect into the literature. Blended education has been used for quite some time, to assist learners and tutors in different aspects of higher education however, pre-covid, it was not a necessity. Current research on the efficacy of blended learning in higher education, shows that whilst students prefer a traditional education, blended learning has ultimately, proven to be largely successful, (Sharma & Alvi, 2021; Bezliudna, 2021 & Amro, 2022). At the beginning of the interviews, students were questioned about their transition to online education, to which four students explained that, before the academic year began, they were assured they would be a blended education type of approach to their Master's degree however, the reality was very different. The students expressed how they were happy to undergo the degree if it would be a mix of face-to-face sessions and remote learning however, by the end of the academic year, the students highlighted they had still had zero face-to-face sessions. This appeared to frustrate the students greatly, it seemed that they almost felt cheated out of what they paid for in comparison to what they received.

This reality was discussed at length, by five of the participants students and not only when prompted to discuss it. After reflecting on their experience, five students all discussed the financial aspect of their degree. They inferred that they should have been given either a reduction in course fees, or a refund of some sort, due to the fact: they had not used the majority of resources available (eg. Library, computers), they hadn't had any in-class session, the social aspect of university (freshers' week, society gatherings etc) and had very limited access to help and guidance from their tutors or university support staff. The students also clarified, that because they are international students, they in fact, pay more than national students with higher course fees, travel and accommodation. Watermeyer et al

(2021, p-630), explains that international students are less inclined to *“pay a premium whether directly in tuition or indirectly in accommodation costs etc, for the prestige and reputation of an institution and be more aware of the importance of its information technology infrastructure and the quality of its virtual learning environment.* According to the Higher Education Policy Institute (2018), international students make up £23.3 billion in revenue for the United Kingdom each year however, these figures are pre-covid, it is doubtful these figures would still be the same if international students only received learning remotely, (Watermeyer et al, 2021). The Public Health students all express they would not have paid the usual costing for their degree if they had known it was all online and because they believe, they are entitled to a discount and refund of some sort. Certain universities in south-east Asia have offered generous discounts (up to 50%) and refunds to previous students who have been unable to attend university due to closures, (Times Higher Education, 2021) however, the director of Higher Education Policy has stated that did not think there were *“strong grounds for an across-the-board tuition refund’s because good online learning is expensive”*, (Times Higher Education, 2021). From this data, it does not appear the students will receive any sort of financial discount or reimbursement.

Furthermore, after reflecting on their expectations and financial aspects of their degree, the students expressed their regret of undergoing a post-graduate degree remotely and in an alien nation, along with recommendations to any future students who may find themselves in a similar situation. The students explained that they could have paid for a distance learning course for much cheaper and recommended future students to do the same if a similar situation were to arise again. Signal (2021) suggests that traditional higher education courses are more expensive than distance learning courses and often, produce the same success rates. An example of this, can be seen with the Open University, whose course fees typically run around £3000 cheaper than a traditional university course fee. This only applies for national students, international students (according to the Public Health post-graduates) pay more than national students.

Finally, as mentioned above, students expressed their regret of undertaking this degree during a global pandemic and one of the students explained that learning can be done without paying for a degree. Much of the information and materials used in higher education, was available from other platforms and for free, such as YouTube. These sources and platforms were often used when the students struggled with their course content. When concluding the discussions about their expectations and the financial aspects of studying abroad, the students all recommended to future students, to defer the year and wait until the government removes restrictions and lockdowns and use that year as preparation, to familiarise yourself with the course and module content.

Motivation.

One of the main focuses of this study, was to analyse the importance of motivation in higher education and to what extent, the global pandemic impacted students' willingness to learn. Ballad (2022) argues that distance education demands a higher degree of motivation to learn, due to online education requiring higher levels of self-direction and organisation. Ferrer et al (2022) supports this notion suggesting, teachers and educators need to design online learning environments that support the learning experience itself and encourage engagement and motivation. Kember & Hong (2008) explains that, teaching abstract theory alone can be extremely de-motivating and establishing relevancy and applying it to the theory such as: *"showing how theory can be applied in practice, establishing relevance to local cases, relating material to everyday applications, or finding applications in current newsworthy issues"*, (p-249). Whilst the students did not discuss course content during the interviews, they did explain that the content itself was often 'boring' and because some of the sessions were pre-recorded, discussions of apply relevancy to theory would have proven difficult. The students also noted that the pandemic has caused them to lose motivation, due to worry, concerns and anxiety of the situation, education at times, did not appear to be the main concern. All of the students indicated that their motivation was decreased at some point during their degree and found it difficult at times, to self-motivate.

One element mentioned, as having a profound on their motivation was feedback. All of the students communicated the feedback was often hard to retrieve and when receive feedback, it was often left to interpretation, as it was often written. The students explained written feedback did not possess the same qualities as face-to-face feedback, nor was it as easy to comprehend. It appeared from the transcripts, that if feedback had to be given non-verbally, thorough and detailed comments were desired however, students had desire for face-to-face feedback or verbal.

The results of the research indicated that, engagement and motivation were very closely linked together, lack of engagement, reduced the learner's motivation to learn and vice-versa. The students explained that often, lack of feedback and/or communication with their tutors often resulted in a lack of engagement and because of this, were less motivated in self-directed study. Since the beginning of the pandemic, researchers have investigated the importance of engagement in higher education and attempted to find strategies to combat lack of engagement and motivation. To battle lack of engagement, Sitar-Taut (2021) expresses that universities should make 'mobile-learning' more interactive and enjoyable by creating social support groups within classes and inserting gameplay elements into the

learning system. Three of the students explained they had never met their classmates and would not recognise them in person, nor did they have any interaction socially during or outside of the online lectures. Two of the students even suggested that gameplay should be incorporated into the sessions and explained that this was never a consideration. Similarly, Rossi et al (2021), agrees that the interactional aspect should be incorporated into any online sessions and that engagement is a key component into high levels of motivation. Becker & Birdi (2018) discuss the 'flipping the classroom' technique used in higher education, "*An important element of classroom flipping is that elements of active learning (e.g. games, experiments and polling) are brought into the classroom setting and that content delivery is moved (at least partially) from the classroom to the virtual learning environment*", (p-1). Whilst this technique could not have been physically applied to the classroom during the beginning of the pandemic, these techniques could still be incorporated virtually. The research around this particular technique has shown to increase student retention, engagement and motivation, (Clark et al, 2022 & Desaulniers, 2021), prompting a need for this method to be applied to distance learning. Recently there have been few studies attempting to implement this technique into distance education, with favourable results. Nighojkar (2021) recommended the flipping technique as a suitable form of online education and agreed that it increased student engagement. Similarly, Smith & Boscak (2021) favours this technique in online learning and adds, that students preferred this technique after analysing a series of surveys.

Due to the pandemic, teachers and educators had to adapt to a whole new way of academia without any sort of preparation. The lack of experience and knowledge on distance education has had an impact on students' motivation and willingness to learn. The stress, uncertainty, anxiety and in-experience has had a profound impact on students' engagement and whilst it had no long-term impacts on the student's education and grades, it certainly influenced the health and well-being of the students. This is then amplified for international students, who have the added pressure, of living in a foreign country, feelings of isolation and loneliness and with no immediate support network like friends and family. As highlighted earlier in this discussion, whilst universities did offer extra support in many areas, (providing support for IT service, contributing to lap top purchase, health and support helplines), some international students were reticent to access this support. Consequently, this research suggest that further investigation should be considered exploring why international studies are reticent to access support.



These are the potential recommendations for future educators, that has arisen from the research.

- Educators need to make online sessions more interactive and have more fun and casual elements implemented into the curriculum, to attain student engagement.
- Students need to have access to timely feedback and be able to converse with their tutors regarding course content.
- Universities need to incorporate more social and group activities and encourage interaction and communication in and outside of the classes.
- Students' mental health & well-being should be prioritised over education and guidance and support should be readily accessible.
- Guidance and support should be easily accessible concerning IT assistance, course content, materials, software, and any platforms used in online education.
- Universities and educators need to be upfront of expectations for the academic year and keep students up to date with any uncertainties or changes that will be implemented.
- Lastly, teachers need to implement strategies in order to maintain motivation and promote positive engagement, without relying on traditional pedagogical methods of practice, to adapt to a 21<sup>st</sup> century way of learning.

### Strengths

Covid-19 has had a profound impact on universities worldwide however, international students have been one of the most negatively impacted groups, (Xu, 2021, Lai, 2021). This research shows the need for further investigation to be undertaken to see the effects of Covid on international students' motivation and has made a suitable contribution to the beginning of this investigation.

Whilst this researched focussed on international students, the premises of the research can be used to assist future researchers, in investigating the impacts of covid, not only on international students, but all students undergoing higher education.

Utilising a qualitative approach as opposed to an quantitative approach, allows for a richer scope of information not accessible using typical qualitative methods. Qualitative research as an approach, used to answer questions that can not be answerable using surveys, Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020). The phenomena of investigating individuals true experiences and the impact that traumatic events has had on their lives, requires a qualitative approach to research, (Mohajan, 2018)

Whilst universities are slowly returning to the normal functioning of the delivery of education, distance learning is still widely used throughout the United Kingdom, (Li & Wang, 2021). This research, whilst intended to investigate the detriments of Covid in higher education, can be adapted to for use post-Covid, to improve the quality of distance learning. Unsurprisingly, the recommendations asserted above do provide the basis for an enhanced learning and teaching experience in the adaptive covid era. Indeed, a report published in May 2022 by University UK (2022) asserts that almost two thirds of the UK student population would prefer a blend of face to face and on-line teaching and learning affirm these recommendations. Proposing that:

- there is sufficient and redirected funding to invest in digital infrastructure and spaces where it can be accessed.
- staff and students are confident in their digital literacy and continue to be upskilled as digital technology advances.
- Curriculum design, assessment methods, quality assurance, and portfolio reviews consider the potential in digital capabilities to enhance the offer to students.

(Universities UK 2022 p 11)

#### Limitations

Sample size for qualitative research should exceed 10 participants, (Braun and Clarke, 2016; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). The sample size for this particular research was eight and all individuals took part in an interview that lasted 35-45 minutes to discuss their experience. The sample size was below the recommended due to precise targeting of individuals within this particular group. Whilst 18 participants met the selection criteria on 9 replied and one later declined. None the less, this represents a response rate of almost 50% which Robson and McCartlin (2016) suggest is a very good rate.

The sample was restricted to one university and one discipline ( Public Health), this in turn, restricts the participant size and therefore, make the recruitment process more difficult. Utilising other universities in the United Kingdom and other disciplines, could have developed a more saturated analysis and provided a more in-depth insight into the student experience. None the less, the findings have been shared with the Programme Leader for the Public Health and have been warmly received. The recommendations are being considered for implementation for the next cohort that commences in September 2022.

Upon reflection, a 'mixed method' approach may have been more beneficial to allow a truly in-depth analysis and may have contributed to greater triangulation. However, this approach as advised by my supervisory team was beyond the scope of this study.

## **Chapter eight- Conclusion**

At the start of the year 2020, educational institutes were thrust into new way of educating, with little to no preparation time as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic . Universities were thrust into adapting to distance learning, whilst trying to maintain some degree of normality, for the well-being of the students and to continue to promote academic success. It is apparent from the literature, that whilst online education can be seen as a suitable and efficient way of teaching in higher education, it still requires further research and investigation, in order to mimic the traditional way of teaching in higher education.

This research has highlighted the importance of live interaction within teaching and suggests future distance learning educators, incorporate interactive live sessions into the online curriculum. Similarly, having access to timely feedback from tutors has proven to be just as vital, in promoting students' motivation to learn. Traditional education allows students to question and engage with tutors regularly regarding course content however, this needs to be implemented into online learning, if it to be as effective as face-to-face education.

The research has also shown the importance of the social aspect of traditional university life, students have not had, what they perceived to be, a traditional experience in higher education, due to Covid-19. If a similar circumstance were to arise again, universities and educators need incorporate the social aspect of university life, into online distance learning as much as the academic side. Many of the students interviewed, viewed the pandemic as a novelty in the beginning and assumed that restrictions and lockdown were temporary. When the reality of the situation became apparent, most of the student's mental health declined and they were left with feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and isolation. The students did note that the university and wellbeing centre were often in touch offering support however, this should be prioritised and made easily accessible. The students all discussed their expectations and how the university had promised them a blended learning approach, to their degree however, this was not carried out. Due to this, the students expressed their regret at undergoing a degree during a global pandemic and wished they had deferred until a more traditional approach to education could resume. It is important to form a realistic future for potential students especially if they are international, thus, to prevent, de-motivation, lack of engagement and a decline in a student's mental health and well-being.

The recent report published by Universities UK (2022) highlights the importance of change, it is clear that the needs of students in the pandemic are challenging to meet. However, as educators respond to these challenges they do so in a way that enhances the learning experience of students.

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