



Transition into Higher Education: Pandemic Belonging in the
University

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Introduction & Context

The Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, has created widespread and rapid reform and change to the higher education sector. It has challenged the readiness of academic institutions to deal with a unique crisis. Such abrupt reform raises a plethora of questions around first year students' transitions into university. Although there lay a foundation of research on students' transition into higher education, little research has been conducted to explore first year students' expectations, perceptions, and subsequently student experiences of these newfound parameters induced by the pandemic.¹

The following research project is a starting point to explore students' renewed expectations, perceptions, and experiences of higher education as a result of the drastic changes due to COVID-19. Using the voice of first-year students, this research aims to understand the effects and the new social and pedagogical parameters of university for first year students' transitional experiences.

As Merrill² cites, little research has focussed on working class students' experiences of transition into higher education. Rubin & Wright³ suggest that a key feature in successful student transition is social interaction and integration with peers (both 'on-campus' and 'not on-campus').

Furthermore, more working-class students are now enrolling into university; low retention, satisfaction, and withdrawal rates from university are pertinent issues within this demographic.⁴ As access and participation data indicates, most Sheffield Hallam students come from Q1 and Q2 POLAR zones, the most deprived areas of higher education participation by local area, and this has gradually increased over time. Between 2018/19 and 2020/21 academic years, for example Sheffield Hallam has increased the percentages of students from Q1 and Q2 areas by 4 percent, resulting in nearly half of all students (48.4%) from the highest areas of deprivation from higher education.⁵ This data is significant when we begin to consider the multiple barriers these students face when transitioning from further into higher education.⁶ As Bowl⁷ research acknowledges, non-traditional students often struggle with a lack of family and peer support due to a geographically induced culture of zero to lack of participation in higher education.

Therefore, this research attempts to answer questions about first-year students as they transition into higher education in a time in which post-16 education was drastically different than in recent years. In the context of Sheffield Hallam University, this research also explores the importance of belonging, the role of support systems, and makes recommendations with an aim to lessen the

¹ Nyar. (2021). The "Double Transition" for First-Year Students: Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on South Africa's First-Year University Students. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 9(1), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v9i1.1429>.

² Merrill. (2015). Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies, and adult students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 40(10), 1859–1871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.914918>.

³ Rubin, & Wright, C. L. (2015). Age differences explain social class differences in students' friendship at university: Implications for transition and retention. *Higher Education*, 70(3), 427–439. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9844-8>.

⁴ Petrie, K. and Keohane, N., 2017. On course for success? Student retention at university. *The Social Market Foundation*. Accessed on 5th August 2022 via: <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/course-success-student-retention-university>.

⁵ Office for Students (2022). Access & Participation Data Dashboard. Accessed on 12 August 2022 via: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard>.

⁶ Bourdieu. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information*, 16(6), 645–668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847701600601>.

⁷ Bowles, A., Fisher, R., McPhail, R., Rosenstreich, D., & Dobson, A. (2014). Staying the distance: students' perceptions of enablers of transition to higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(2), 212–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.832157>.

impact of transitioning into and through higher education on students, and ultimately lead to fewer withdrawals for the institution.

Methodology

This research project was qualitative, utilising focus groups at three points in the academic year: at enrolment (October), mid-year (February), and end-of-year (May). The purpose, as defined by Bourne & Winstone⁸, was to “explore participants’ perceptions, feelings, attitudes, or ideas around a given issue or experience.” Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis; conversations were themed to find dominant narratives throughout each focus group. The first focus group was semi-structured and the remaining two thereafter utilised emergent design theory.⁹ Although each focus group had a general theme or focus, emergent design theory allows the researcher to take cues from the data to make necessary alterations and adjustments where they see fit. In total, 11 participants took part in the entire project. The research was submitted and received full ethical approval at Sheffield Hallam University (*Converis ID ER36585392*).

⁸ Bourne, & Winstone, N. (2021, pg 353). Empowering students’ voices: the use of activity-oriented focus groups in higher education research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 44(4), 352–365.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1777964>.

⁹ Saldana (2011). *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.

Analysis of Student Experience: Students in Post-16 Education

“It didn’t feel the same as being in school [pre-16] Discussions were difficult, and it wasn’t conducive to collaboration.” - Participant 4, Focus Group 2

Throughout the 2021–2022 academic year, UK universities welcomed a cohort of undergraduate students who faced unprecedented disruption to their studies. According to the Office for National Statistics, 2020 students lost approximately 6 months of education, a lack of ‘preuniversity’ support, mass cancellations of exams. Schools were closed in January 2021, and A-level and other vocational examinations were cancelled. This meant grades from assessments were teacher assessed. There was also a large variety in schooling experiences reflected in this piece of research. It is evident to see the range of different barriers post-16¹⁰ students had to face.¹¹ This new cohort of undergraduates will, therefore, require extra support in their transition to university.

Academic preparedness

Participants were asked questions surrounding: their experience regarding online learning during lockdown; how this compares to face-to-face learning; and the overall impact it had on their education during post-16.

Throughout the research participants spoke at length about their perceived lack of preparedness regarding what is academically and socially expected of them in their first year at university. Participants regularly commented on confusion surrounding the often uneven and incoherent applications of various online platforms. In their post-16 experiences, some year groups or classes were using Google Classroom, whilst others utilised Microsoft Teams. In some instances, teachers were sending students home with antiquated workbooks which bared no resemblance to the curriculum or previous learning. Pownall et. al.¹² suggests that students entering university often have deficit understandings of their own capabilities worsened by the ambiguity of a new form of education. This has been, however, exacerbated by the disruption COVID-19 caused for post-16 students. Within the focus groups, students spoke about their ‘fear of failure’ due to the disruption and sudden emergence of online learning. The swift transition from face-to-face learning caused concern and anxiety for students who had never experienced online learning (to this extent) before. One student expressed their worries succinctly:

“Yes, it was [stressful]. I was nervous all the time, I thought that I would fail. I convinced myself that because I hadn’t been learning properly, I would fail.” - Participant 1, Focus Group 1

This research enabled us to explore academic preparedness in more detail. Students are not only socially and academically reacclimatizing to higher education, the swift transition to online learning has meant students are also trying to develop digital competency and literacy in brand new surroundings. The newfound objectives of higher education’s teaching delivery have created a further barrier to a smooth transition for students entering HE. We can evidently see aspects of the

¹⁰ NB: Post-16 education and further education includes all post-16 learning, including vocational training and work-based learning.

¹¹ Eyles, A., Gibbons, S., & Montebruno, P. (2020). COVID-19 School Shutdowns: What Will They Do to Our Children’s Education? A CEP COVID-19 Analysis. Paper No. 001. In *Centre for Economic Performance*. Centre for Economic Performance.

¹² Pownall, Harris, R., & Blundell-Birtill, P. (2022). Supporting students during the transition to university in COVID-19: Five key considerations and recommendations for educators. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 21(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14757257211032486>.

“double transition” Nyar¹³ uncovered when exploring first-year students’ transitions during the pandemic. Nyar attests that pre-pandemic students encountered barriers surrounding academic competencies. However, Nyar also suggests that post-pandemic students face a further academic barrier based on digital skills and competencies. Through this research, it is clear to see that double transition in practice, reflected through participant’s deep concerns about what is required academically and what is required digitally.

Social Preparedness

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students felt their social support networks were becoming smaller, because they were not experiencing the same network of people, they might normally in typical life circumstances. Some participants were concerned that this might affect their social skills entering university. As one participant stated when asked what it was like being out of school during COVID-19 lockdowns:

“Lonely. You couldn’t see or talk to your friends and talking online is not the same. I was really stressed at the idea of being thrust into a new environment where I would be expected to socialise, and I feel like...out of practice” – Participant 2, Focus group 3

Furthermore, participants explained that they had to make a conscious and concerted effort to stay in touch with friends and remain social throughout lockdown. It is important to note, however, that friendships had sometimes changed due to normal changes in development and interests at this age.

Marchini et al.¹⁴ compared and measured groups of 18 to 25 year-old student’s feelings of loneliness and resilience during the pandemic and found that, comparing young people who had accessed mental health support prior to the pandemic, those who had not accessed support exhibited lower levels of resiliency and greater levels of loneliness. These findings coincided with the discussions in the first focus group where participants in this study felt ill equipped for extended periods of social isolation. It was evident, throughout the research, that COVID-19’s impact on students’ social life was pertinent, leaving students expecting more from the university and the students’ union to provide opportunities to meet new people.

Value for Money

“Not being able to actually attend uni physically. I don’t really feel like I am there. I don’t feel like I am getting value for money from my course. There is no way to communicate with people to seek help and online lessons are a challenge.” – Participant 5, Focus Group 2

In addition, participants spoke about the duality between disruptive COVID-19 lockdowns and the students-as-consumers mindset. Throughout the focus group discussions students frequently exhibited service user attitudes.¹⁵ Participants expressed concern when comparing their tuition fee

¹³ Nyar. (2021). The “Double Transition” for First-Year Students: Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on South Africa’s First-Year University Students. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 9(1), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v9i1.1429>

¹⁴ Marchini, S., Zaurino, E., Bouziotis, J., Brondino, N., Delvenne, V., & Delhaye, M. (2021). Study of resilience and loneliness in youth (18–25 years old) during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(2), 468–480. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22473>.

¹⁵ Tomlinson. (2017, pg 459). Student perceptions of themselves as “consumers” of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(4), 450–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1113856>.

to their university experience, especially when it came to teaching and learning. As classroom-based learning was limited and unevenly spread, students questioned whether their virtual learning experiences were worth the money. Participants felt strongly that they were consumers of their education, and also displayed feelings of being uninvolved in the university culture. The swift transition from on-campus teaching to virtual learning combined with a growing acceptance of the pandemic as a long-term, rather than short-term issue, has highlighted the impact of a marketized higher education system.

Blankenberger & Williams¹⁶ label higher education as a *'trust market'*. Student outcomes during university are measured entirely by their respective institution. This, compiled with the increasing cost of university, means students are *"vulnerable to fraud and must rely on the honesty of the seller in the exchange"*. Relating this to the current climate of virtual learning, students are often left wondering whether they are getting value for money, expressing disappointment at the loss of face-to-face teaching and the lack of social opportunities. There were, however, participants who enjoyed virtual learning, but equally felt that virtual pedagogy was not worth the money. Future research could further explore the relationship between COVID-19 and the cost of entering higher education with all its permutations.

Students' perceptions of teaching and learning

At the start of the 2021/22 academic year, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) proposed the *'Common language for the student teaching and learning offer'*, signifying a move away from language such as *hybrid* and *blended* learning. As Sheffield Hallam states, the university has been offering hybrid and blended learning pre-pandemic. Thus, Sheffield Hallam proposed *The Hallam Model*. This was proposed by SHU to realign pedagogy throughout the university to meet the new demands of students learning in and beyond the pandemic.

"Learning at Hallam will involve learning with, from and alongside others. The university embeds collaboration by ensuring that all courses provide opportunities for students to work in teams.... Elective cross-disciplinary 'Hallam Model' modules will become available in all courses, providing genuine inter-disciplinary working. An annual cross-disciplinary 'Hallam Challenge' offers an opportunity to explore a large-scale challenge in depth."

When asked about aspects of The Hallam Model, participants indicated that they felt as though they were not receiving a true representation of it in practice. Participants shared that they did not know about the model, nor were they involved in team working, as the above quote states. In addition, participants spoke about what, in their view, The Hallam Model should encompass. Participants stated that teaching, learning, and assessment should encompass traditional face-to-face teaching approaches, whilst embracing newer electronic learning activities and resources with a focus on student-tutor collaboration and blended learning. Blended learning, as defined by Garrison & Kanuka¹⁷ is *"the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences."* This definition aligns closely with the definition that participants felt would be applicable for The Hallam Model.

¹⁶ Blankenberger, B., & Williams, A. M. (2020, pg 406). COVID and the impact on higher education: The essential role of integrity and accountability. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 42(3), 404–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2020.1771907>.

¹⁷ Garrison, & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>.

The many faces of online learning

*“it's like the difference between going to the cinema and watching a film at home” –
(Participant 4, Focus Group 2)*

In the second round of focus groups, participants were asked what they thought about the pedagogical approach used on their course. Responses were conflicting. Some participants spoke of the convenience and efficiency of online learning through, for example, being able to access lectures and resources from home. Many participants said the benefits of learning at home was due to rising commuting costs and being comfortable in a familiar setting. Participants also enjoyed lectures whereby students had agency over the playback features; pausing and rewinding non-live lectures were commonly spoken about as positive devices for their learning. As one participant compares face-to-face lectures to pre-recorded ones and concludes that:

“When you can pause lectures, you can really think about what's being said, whereas if you were in a lecture room and its live, it's going and then if you've missed one thing then, you know, you've basically missed it.” - Participant 6, Focus Group 2

Furthermore, the transition to virtual learning gave students more autonomy over their time management and general learning. Heidari et al.¹⁸ suggests that online learning environments can encourage and engage students to self-direct their own learning. Filgueira¹⁹ concurs to call this ‘*autonomous learning*’ in which students who are digitally literate have fewer scholastic barriers to overcome and ‘*unintentionally*’ become motivated to learn in a range of environments with more agency, as is displayed below with by a participant.

“...for me [the pandemic] opened up different ways of learning, as there was no physical presence there, i.e., teachers, you had to do it yourself. It opened more ways to actual research – broader ways to learn. It encouraged a better understanding of how I could learn myself, not simply from my teachers” – Participant 1, Focus Group 2

This participant was, however, studying an IT course whereby their digital competency was higher than the average student. This demonstrates the importance of digital literacy when learning in a pandemic.

Furthermore, a recent study by García-Peñalvo et al.²⁰ concludes that online assessments requires redesigning the subject assessment systems. Online assessments should not replicate traditional exams in a digital environment. This implies the need to have both pedagogical skills for lecturers and the technological skills for students to know the functionalities and limitations of IT tools; however, it also implies that technology is only a facilitator of the assessment and learning. By itself, virtual learning platforms will not provide answers to the objectives of the assessment process. The notion that effective, asynchronous teaching and learning is achieved by both tutor and students

¹⁸ Heidari, Salimi, G., & Mehrvarz, M. (2020). The influence of online social networks and online social capital on constructing a new graduate students' professional identity. *Interactive Learning Environments, ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1769682>

¹⁹Filgueira, Larionov, A., Lannes, N., & Yotovski, P. (2021). Anatomy Learning under COVID-19 Measures: A Real World Educational Experiment. *The FASEB Journal*, 35(S1). <https://doi.org/10.1096/fasebj.2021.35.S1.01510>

²⁰ García-Peñalvo, Fidalgo-Blanco, Á., & Sein-Echaluce, M. L. (2018). An adaptive hybrid MOOC model: Disrupting the MOOC concept in higher education. *Telematics and Informatics*, 35(4), 1018–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.09.012>.

having clear understandings of learning objectives, competence in using these platforms and tutors being aware that technology cannot simply replicate dialogical pedagogy. As a participant shared:

“I actually transferred courses because the online things were so bad that I couldn't stay on that course anymore. Basically, they pre-record almost everything, but it will be like mass lectures where you'd actually need to ask a question and they'll have just recorded it and it's like what the hell am I meant to do with this?” – Participant 1, Focus Group 2

For this participant, a pre-recorded lecture led to mass ambiguity over their learning. The slides were in place, but there was no space for asking questions surrounding the content. Being able to freely ask questions is a key component of critical thinking, a skill that is developed during a student's experience in HE.²¹ Simply put, this student left their course due to their negative experiences with asynchronous lectures.

Similarly to the student above, most participants found The Hallam Model of teaching and learning a challenge. One aspect of the challenge was the lack of relatedness and unfamiliarity with new scholastic online mechanisms, as was shared earlier.²² Below, one participant compares their expectation and lived experience of virtual learning:

“I understand that it (study) had to be distance learning and I thought I would be equipped. But it became too distant...if that makes any sense. Not being able to ask questions in the usual way was disarming and difficult at times, but I got used to it. I think we all did. But it did feel quite disconnected, sending assignments online. I was very unsure about the levels of competence I was displaying” – Participant 6, Focus Group 3

This indicates that, for this participant, there was uneasy relationship between pedagogical belonging and what Mohamedhosein & Cruil²³ call ‘*competence*’. The relationship between the two are key indicators as to how well a student will attain and achieve.

Furthermore, the degree and willingness to which participants engaged with asynchronous content and synchronous material was shared by some participants. Giesbers et al.²⁴ speak critically about the relationship between online learning and “*self-determination*”. Self-determination refers to students' perception of the degrees to which learners self-direct their learning. Therefore, self-determination is strongly related to motivation as it is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors. An apt representation of this is one participant's experience of asynchronous learning:

²¹ Davies, M., & Barnett, R. (2015). *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education* (First edition.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

²² Polona Gradišek, & Alenka Polak. (2021). Insights into learning and examination experience of higher education students during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Sodobna Pedagogika*, 72, 286–307.; Watermeyer, Crick, T., & Knight, C. (2021). Digital disruption in the time of COVID-19: learning technologists' accounts of institutional barriers to online learning, teaching and assessment in UK universities. *The International Journal for Academic Development, ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1990064>.

²³ Mohammedhosein, & Cruil, M. R. . (2018). The relationship between first year students' interaction, basic psychological needs, and academic success. *American Journal of Educational Research (Print)*, 6(12), 1702–1709.

²⁴ Giesbers, B., Rienties, B., Tempelaar, D., & Gijselaers, W. (2014). A dynamic analysis of the interplay between asynchronous and synchronous communication in online learning: The impact of motivation. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 30(1), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12020>.

“I feel like because I’m at home and I’m either lying on my bed or I’m on my desk and not interacting with my classmates I’m not really engaging with the lessons and it’s harder to have a group discussion with them because, I don’t know” – Participant 1, Focus Group 2

This participant’s exogenous surroundings were a key factor in their ability to engage and effectively learn. Ryan & Deci²⁵ distinction between “*autonomy-orientated learners*” and “*control-orientated learners*” helps us further understand the impact of asynchronous learning and motivation. This student displays “*control-orientated learner*” characteristics as their extrinsic environment is a primary factor in their engagement and motivation with their course related activities. We can also see that the learning environment plays a fundamental role in positive student engagement, experience, and transition successful transitional phase from one level of study to another relies on authentic, dialogical exchanges between student, peers, and tutors. This is not to say virtual learning environments do not harness the potential to do this, however, the mostly swift change to virtual education that has been provided has left students feeling disconnected from their studies and subsequently having a negative impact on their transition.²⁶

Throughout the second round of focus groups (which took place in February), participants began to position themselves as introverted and extraverted, and how this impacts on their satisfaction with online learning.

Participant 3: *“I am an introvert; I like being at home but on my own terms. I like to choose how I want it to be. I don’t like the imposition of having to learn online because that is not my choice – it has been imposed on me.”*

Participant 4: *“I have loved online learning; I am an introvert too. I have a good friendship network already, so I don’t need to make any more friends. I enjoy lectures in bed or in my living room.”*

Participant 5: *“No, I think I’m the opposite, an extravert. I prefer to be in uni. Online learning doesn’t motivate me like it should.”*

Student definitions of extraversion and introversion were particularly interesting. Participants implied that being introverted meant acting more as a lone part, whereas students who said they were extraverted claimed they would prefer to be a part within a system. This aligns with Aparicio et al.²⁷ research which found that students who defined themselves as collectivist (extraverted) learners compared to individualistic learners (introverted) perform differently. Learners who positioned themselves as introverted implied that virtual learning was more suited to their learning needs. Conversely, those who stated that they were extraverted said virtual learning lacked the social interaction necessary for them to learn effectively.

²⁵ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1020>.

²⁶ Oliveira, Grenha Teixeira, J., Torres, A., & Morais, C. (2021). An exploratory study on the emergency remote education experience of higher education students and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 52(4), 1357–1376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13112>.

²⁷ Aparicio, M., Bacao, F., & Oliveira, T. (2016). Cultural impacts on e-learning systems’ success. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 31, 58–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.06.003>.

Belonging to the University

*“Belonging and the process to belong requires the complex interaction of three factors, which include the **environment**, **social**, and **cognitive** attributes which when combined support students feeling of connectedness or belonging.” - Meehan & Howells (2018, pg. 1378)*

When asked what belonging means to participants at the university, this led to discussions about how one comes to belong: what factors contribute to students’ feeling they belong and are an active member of their institution? In relation to COVID-19 and the barriers associated with this, responses were multifaceted; participants feelings of belonging and value to the university community were related to their interactions with peers (course mates and friends), connection to their course, and their sense of place and space. These three indicators of belonging are similar to what Meehan & Howells (2018) define as belonging. Interaction with peers aligns with the social, connection to their course is the cognitive and their sense of space and place environmental.

“Not being able to actually attend uni physically. I don’t really feel like I am there..... There is no way to communicate with people to seek help and online lessons are a challenge.” -Participant 5, Focus Group 2

As Participant 5 stated, they felt as though their presence was not validated and that they did not belong. Mohamedhosein & Crul²⁸ explain the conceptualisation of learning higher education through two concepts: psychological needs of the student and social / academic integration. Gradišek & Polak²⁹ argue that the sudden emergence to online education *“enormously challenged”* the psychological and social integration of students which is necessary for a smooth transition from secondary / college education to HE. For a student to become a *competent* learner, there must be a successful interaction between the autonomy and agency of the student and the relatedness to their new climate. The relatedness can be explained through familiarity with teaching and learning, and a range of social factors discussed below.

Belonging and the Social Sphere

“...my Welcome Week was all online, and it sucked really. In my first week I hadn’t met a soul.” – Participant 5, Focus Group 1

Bowles et al.³⁰ sets out a framework for *triggers* that enable smooth transition for first-year students. This framework includes *“administration”* and *“orientation”*, which in the context of Sheffield Hallam, would include Welcome Week. Welcome Week is the induction and introduction period at the start of a students’ journey at Sheffield Hallam. A student’s welcome week is an opportunity to get set up for ‘student life’ and includes administrative tasks such as locating and understanding your induction schedule, arranging your accommodation, course funding, and healthcare. The *“orientation”* part of the Welcome Week takes into consideration the meeting of staff, course-mates and an access-point to social events, societies, sports, and Students' Union

²⁸ Mohammedhosein, & Crul, M. R. . (2018). The relationship between first year students’ interaction, basic psychological needs, and academic success. *American Journal of Educational Research (Print)*, 6(12), 1702–1709.

²⁹ Polona Gradišek, & Alenka Polak. (2021). Insights into learning and examination experience of higher education students during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Sodobna Pedagogika*, 72, 286–307.

³⁰ Bowles, A., Fisher, R., McPhail, R., Rosenstreich, D., & Dobson, A. (2014). Staying the distance: students’ perceptions of enablers of transition to higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(2), 212–225.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.832157>.

activities. Bowles et al. express that these two aspects require careful thought in planning to ensure a student's first impressions of a new environment are positive. The pandemic necessitated large sections of 'Welcome Week' to be held online. As Participant 5 mentions above, it is clear that they wanted Welcome Week to be in person, suggesting that 'online' orientation and administration inhibited their ability meet new people and make new connections. Although well-planned, strategic Welcome Weeks can be deployed virtually, this research has highlighted the relationship between Welcome Week and a student's sense of belonging. Furthermore, the research has also shone a light on the need to develop web-based welcome resources even more as these are highly valued by students making the transition to higher education.

The opportunities to make new friends in a new environment was a dominant theme throughout this research project. Most of the participants shared that meeting new people was either the primary reason to go to university or recognised that it was integral to their learning and future job prospects. An example of this is shown below via a conversation between Participant 1 and Participant 2 during Focus Group 1.

Participant 1: *"... I think [being able to have someone to talk to] is very important. It's maybe the main reason I chose Sheffield, to meet new people. You need to talk issues through with someone."*

Participant 2: *"So, my best friend is at Hallam too which is kind of lucky. But I also wanted to make new friends here too, that's very important for me too."*

Researcher: *"Why is it important?"*

Participant 2: *"Well, they provide a support system, and you can have fun with them too."*

Participant 1: *"For me, if you only have yourself then it's just an echo chamber of your own opinions and thoughts. But if you can talk to others, it can shape and alter, even improve your own views and opinions which is better."*

Furthermore, Stanley et al.³¹ conducted research on student suicides and found a range of risk factors within the lived experiences of students in university who took their life. Whilst this is an extraordinary study, they found that one of the most prominent factors that contributed to severe psychological distress surrounds the lack of social support networks, primarily through friendships made, or not made. The research highlights that despite transition periods for students can be life affirming, there also lies a range of risk factors that ought to be addressed with delicacy.

Belonging and Social Class

Although social class was never overtly discussed within the focus group discussions, seven participants identified as first-generation university students. As mentioned in the introduction, this is noteworthy due to Sheffield Hallam's high rate of students that come from Q1 and Q2 (POLAR4) zones.

Reay, David & Ball³² demonstrated the discursive ways in which gender, class, and race shape students' perceptions of choice with regards to higher education. Within their research, working-class students used prompts about class to choose where they attend university asking themselves

³¹ Stanley, N., Mallon, S., Bell, J., & Manthorpe, J. (2009). Trapped in transition: findings from a UK study of student suicide. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 37(4), 419–433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880903161427>.

³² Reay, D., & Ball, S. J. (1997, pg. 91). Spoilt for Choice': the working classes and educational markets. *Oxford Review of Education*, 23(1), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498970230108>.

questions like "What's a person like me going to do at a place like that?" Furthermore, Bufton³³ revealed that in their younger years, participants that identified as working-class never considered going to university and wrote off the aspiration of university due to it being "not for the likes of us". This has consequential effects on working-class students' sense of belonging in HE, especially during and post COVID-19. Further research suggests that first-generation students are associated with lower retention rates than their non-first-generation peers. This has been exacerbated greatly due to the pandemic.³⁴ In addition, explanations behind marginalised students not envisaging Higher Education as a space for them lay in entrenched cultures of whiteness and elitism throughout the education paradigm.³⁵

³³ Bufton, S. (2003). The Lifeworld of the University Student: Habitus and Social Class. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 34(2), 207–234. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916203322847146>.

³⁴ Walsh, B. A., Woodliff, T. A., Lucero, J., Harvey, S., Burnham, M. M., Bowser, T. L., ... Zeh, D. W. (2021). Historically Underrepresented Graduate Students' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Family Relations*, 70(4), 955–972. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12574>.

³⁵ Madriaga, M. (2020). Antiracism In English higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(11), 1143–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1512660>.

Conclusion

This research project set out to explore first-year students' expectations, perceptions, and overall experience of belonging in the COVID-19 university landscape. Upon analysis, it was clear that the sheer scale of disruption precipitated by COVID-19 had exacerbated students' expectations of university. In the first round of focus groups, students spoke about their post-16 experiences with mostly bemusement at the lack of academic structure and social support networks available. This, compiled with examination cancelations and lack of transitional support (that would have otherwise been received on a more consistent basis), increased students' educational fragility when considering university. This equated to students having a loosely defined sense of belonging in an educational context.

Within the second and third rounds of focus groups, we discussed how their university experience to date had coincided with their expectations of higher education. What emerged from participants' experiences was similar to that of their post-16 experiences. Teaching, learning, and assessment was described as inconsistent across courses with only some students receiving holistic approaches to hybrid teaching or The Hallam Model of teaching. Virtual learning was often described as uninspiring due to a lack of collaboration between course mates and often stale and non-interactive lectures. In turn, students felt like they were not receiving the full experience, lessening their feelings of belonging and community, whilst also expressing concerns over value for money. There was a clear separation of participants who enjoyed working solo, compared to those who appreciated collaboration and dialogue with peers; online learning should cater to both learning preferences. The second round of focus groups (in February 2022) took place after a COVID-19 induced lockdown, which occurred during December 2021. Therefore, participants spoke about the hardship and loneliness of this lockdown and how it affected their motivation and engagement towards their course and general university life. Despite this, the timing of focus groups meant that the research team could gather true experiences of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As is stated previously, this had a substantial impact on their sense of belonging, as well as their experiences with teaching and learning in virtual (or hybrid learning) environments. One's first year at university, for most, is a new and complicated life chapter. Traditionally, students are often leaving their established social support systems and are quickly presented with new academic, communal, and personal challenges. Considering the diversity of these cohorts in terms of gender, linguistic, cultural background, age, socioeconomic and socioeducational status, there is no linear approach for helping students during this period of their lives. Kift et al.³⁶ argues, however, that any successful '*transition pedagogy*' must incorporate the curriculum and that constructing meaningful relationships with peers and staff is crucial to a successful transition. This research makes the case that universities should highlight endeavours to construct community and foster a sense of belonging among students amidst the transition to virtual learning.

³⁶ Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: a third-generation approach to FYE: a case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 102–111. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intifyhe.v1i1.13>.

Recommendations

Based on this research project, the following recommendations take into consideration the Sheffield Hallam environment to ensure that students transition into and through higher education is facilitated well, considering the nuance of individual needs.

1. The University should facilitate increased collaborative group working.

On the most part, participants felt as though a combination of lockdowns and stagnant online learning sessions limited space for student-to-student collaboration, consolidating feelings of isolation and helplessness. In turn, students felt less motivated and able to self-direct their own learning. In placing a strong emphasis on the *collaborative* rather than the *individual*, teaching and learning in future academic years should encourage critical discussion and in turn, self-directed learning. As part of this, Sheffield Hallam University could consider training and updating teachers' knowledge in digital technologies so that they will be able to develop digital skills and competencies in their students.

2. The University and the Students' Union consider, and remain sensitive to, the long-lasting mental health effects of COVID-19, whilst embedding inclusive practices.

All participants shared the impact that COVID-19 has had on their sense of belonging in the educational context – both during post-16 and higher education spaces. Participants shared that the onus is on them to ensure that they belong to their university through various forms of student extracurricular work or by establishing connections with course mates themselves. Whilst Welcome Week is a time in which students, particularly first years, can embed themselves into their new environment, the haphazard nature meant that students struggled to 'find their feet' from the start. As participants shared, more could be done particularly at the course level to encourage students to feel indoctrinated into the Hallam community early.

3. The University to continue to track the impact that COVID-19 has on students' transitional journey.

It is important to understand that transitioning into HE does not end in the final semester of the students' first year. Meehan & Howells³⁷ envisage transition as a pathway through each level of study. Using Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy³⁸ data on student retention, students who withdraw in their second, third, and fourth years of undergraduate study are largely down to external factors relating to the University. These factors range from workload, administrative support, and teaching, learning, and assessment practices. As this piece of research highlighted, participants often struggled to acclimatise to the newly established forms of online learning. Continuing to trace the transitions of students who were affected by the pandemic during their post-16 education and beyond would garner further learning regarding transitional pedagogy and where, and how, the university can help.

³⁷ Meehan, & Howells, K. (2019). In search of the feeling of "belonging" in higher education: undergraduate students transition into higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), 1376–1390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1490702>.

³⁸ Willcoxson, L., J. Cotter, and S. Joy. 2011. "Beyond the First-Year Experience: The Impact on Attrition of Student Experiences Throughout Undergraduate Degree Studies in Six Diverse Universities." *Studies in Higher Education* 36.