

'I Feel Like I Identify as a University Student, I Just Don't Identify with My University' – how First-Year Students Developed their Identities during the COVID-19 Pandemic



RESEARCH PAPER

KIERAN HODGKIN

RHIANNON PACKER

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

This study explored, in detail, the development of student identity as students transition to university, during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The study explored the journeys of four first year students from two United Kingdom (UK), Higher Education (HE) institutions and compared their expectations of the transition to HE to their experiences during their first six months of study. The study was underpinned by the principles of case study research with four 'cases' across two institutions. This study adopted a narrative approach, utilising paired interviews to explore student identity in relation to social integration and academic belonging. The data analysis was conducted using principles from Lincoln et al.'s (1994) audit trail. Three key themes emerged from the paired interviews: 'academic belonging', 'informal learning conversations' and 'intrinsic motivation to study.' In conclusion, this small-scale, qualitative study has identified that first-year students can develop a sense of 'academic belonging' via an online learning environment. Nevertheless, the participants did report experiences of low motivation and isolation, which hindered the development of a student identity. While the longer-term impact on students is uncertain, this study may also serve as a documentation of the experiences of students during the pandemic.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Kieran Hodgkin

Cardiff Metropolitan University,
UK

khodgkin@cardiffmet.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

The transition to Higher Education (HE) can be a time of challenge, trepidation as well as the first opportunity to be independent (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Tinto, 1975). It is a time of social and academic upheaval, and those early experiences tend to shape students' time at university, particularly in the first semester (Bowles et al., 2014). Transitions are more than a move or transfer from one institutional setting to another, they involve a change of status and an adoption of a new culture (Kyndt et al., 2017). Packer et al. (2021, p. 3) identify that transitions include "learning about identity and self, what a person can become and where that person is located socially and spatially". Recent research has highlighted interpersonal problems, a lack of peer support and incorrect programme choice can all lead to student attrition (Bowles et al., 2014) and that the transition can incur both positive and negative emotions in the individual (Larsen & McGraw, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges for many, if not all post-16 learners (those young people in education or training until their 18th birthday), as formal examinations were cancelled over two summer series and learning opportunities and experiences including projects, practical work and fieldwork were curtailed or abandoned. These learners have experienced particular 'pressures and uncertainty, and their confidence has been affected,' with disruptions to learning and social interactions also affecting some learners' physical and mental health and well-being (Welsh Government, 2021, p.6). What is known about student preparedness for university will have to be re-evaluated considering the significant changes to teaching and learning experienced during the pandemic. Moreover, some of the changes that were made during the pandemic should now be considered post-pandemic.

This paper explores the extent to which Education students at two UK institutions developed their university identity considering the changes imposed on them by the COVID-19 pandemic. As students progress into HE, a positive student identity can influence their engagement and result in them completing their studies (Briggs et al., 2012). This paper reflects on lessons learnt during the pandemic and provides recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and students in developing student identity as they progress into HE. For this paper 'Education students' are defined as those students studying an undergraduate focused on the study of Education in its broadest sense. The literature suggests there are three significant areas of concern for students as they manage the transition to university. These are developing student identity, social integration, and academic integration. It is worth noting at this point that the literature predominately focuses on in-person experiences of transition rather than transition experiences within a hybrid or purely online context. This paper explores whether the significance of these areas of concern for students remained the same during the pandemic and whether there are wider considerations in a post-COVID era.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The transition into HE has always been an area of concern (Tinto, 1987). Seminal transitional research has highlighted two distinctive issues for students: academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987). However, in recent times, literature has highlighted academic integration, social integration, and developing student identity as prominent concerns for students during this time (Scanlon et al., 2007; Shaver et al., 1985). Students are required to recognise, translate, and acquire skills, practices and knowledges that may be distinctively different from their previous educational experience (Aldous et al., 2014). In addition, students need to rapidly develop their identity and sense of being, belonging and becoming on joining university (Meehan et al., 2019). While the issues are inter-related, occur concurrently, and affect individuals differently, there is value in exploring the issues separately to allow for a clear understanding of how each issue impacts upon the student experience of transition. This can facilitate a more sensitive approach to induction planning for students and enable proactive measures to maintain retention to provide a more supportive and responsive experience for students.

DEVELOPING AN IDENTITY: THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING

The process of developing an identity at university is a complex one (Kyne & Thompson, 2020). In the context of the transition to HE, the literature recognises two specific identity formations that are crucial to a successful transition (Scanlon et al., 2007). These are: the emergence of

student identity through social interaction and the emergence of student identity through an attachment to the context (in this case their university). When students make the transition to university, they exchange the stable learning environment of their school with a new unfamiliar context, in which they feel anonymous, introducing a feeling of uncertainty (Scanlon et al., 2007). Prior to the pandemic, literature suggested that students struggled with the contemporary structure of modern universities (Bridges, 2000; Evans, 2020). In support of this, research by Scanlon et al. (2007) suggests that students found it difficult to study on smaller, subsidiary campuses rather than on the main campus. In this case, their study's location significantly impacted the development of their identity as university students.

In March 2020, the onset of COVID-19 meant campuses closed and teaching and learning was moved from the classroom to online, leading to a distorted view of students' new learning context with HE. This was an uncharted experience of transition for students. Scanlon et al. (2007, p.223) suggest that issues related to identity development of first-year students can be associated with a 'naïve "knowledge about", rather than contextualized "knowledge of", the new learning context'. However, student identity formation was significantly more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the reduction of time spent on campus and less interaction with peers (Kyne & Thompson, 2020). Resch et al. (2022: 1) comment that although the online environment allowed more flexibility in terms of space and time, there were significant detrimental effects, namely 'limited forms of communication concerning academic content, limited relational aspects of communication, and fewer possibilities of expressing emotions due to the obstruction of para-verbal and non-verbal communication'. Importantly, Baik et al. (2019) in a study reporting on a survey of 2,776 students, found that university staff (in this case lecturers and administrators) played a key role in supporting students to develop knowledge of the university and its systems and identify as a student. The role of staff would be especially pertinent considering the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, however opportunities to interact with staff on a more ad-hoc basis were significantly limited.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION: CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

Social integration into HE has long been an area of concern for students making the move to university and is a crucial aspect of student identity within HE (Jensen et al., 2015; Tinto, 1975). Socially, the transition to HE can be challenging for many. The idea that social integration can impact students' commitment at university has been widely accepted within the relevant literature (Beil et al., 1999; Buote et al., 2007). It is a time of significant social upheaval for many students as they manage the move away from home, develop new friendships and attempt to maintain pre-existing friendships (Hultberg et al., 2008). Literature suggests that students may struggle to develop a sense of 'connectedness' with others during their first semester at university (Christie et al., 2008). Moreover, that many students have reported that this negative early experience can have an adverse impact on the rest of their time at university (Ahn et al., 2020), emphasising the importance of a smooth transition to HE. There are many examples to illustrate how HE institutions aim to support first-year students, realising the challenges they face and adjustments they need to make, such as Induction activities, peer mentoring programmes or personal tutor meetings. However, the COVID-19 pandemic severely hampered opportunities for social integration in moving to online spaces, thus limiting face-to-face interactions.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the adjustment to online teaching impacted students transition to university and significantly their wellbeing (McKay et al., 2021). Developing new friendships is reported to have a significant impact on students' social adjustment to university (Buote et al., 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that the necessary isolation from others significantly impacted students' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic (McKay et al., 2021).

ACADEMIC INTEGRATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Academic integration into HE has also been recognised as a prominent concern for students entering university for the first time. Tinto's (1975) seminal work argues that those students that quickly develop or have the necessary academic skills to perform, settle quickly into university life. National policies to widen participation in HE have diversified the nature and needs of new undergraduates and it is recognised that universities with pre-university outreach programmes and those with student-focused staff, lower staff to student ratios and institution-wide academic skills development programmes are best placed to support a diverse student

body (Yorke et al., 2003). It is widely understood that undergraduates develop their student identity within the university learning environment and culture and there is a growing body of research, that recognises that improving the student experience for all, also benefits new students (Meehan et al., 2018).

The pandemic has affected where students learn. With less teaching on campus, undergraduates have had a vastly distinct experience to those who came before (McKay et al., 2021). Starting university is challenging (Baik et al., 2015), having less direct engagement with academic culture, campus life and other learners the pandemic has impacted on students' learning experience and engagement (Xunquian et al., 2022; McKay et al., 2021). It is well documented that enrolment does not automatically guarantee academic success (Arkoudis et al., 2019). Serventy et al. (2022), in research with learners in Australia, suggest that the pandemic has also impacted on students staying the course. While emergency remote education cannot be viewed as a viable alternative to face-to-face lectures and seminars, it is worth exploring the experiences of learners during this time to ascertain if there are any positive features of transition in relation to academic and social integration that can be transferred to the post-pandemic era.

AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This in-depth, qualitative, exploratory study explored the extent first-year Education students at two UK institutions felt that they have developed student identity considering changes to teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The confines of the pandemic served to accentuate aspects of the transition process which had previously not been considered, and as such have not been explored from this perspective by the literature. While technology in the form of Virtual Learning Environments was a daily feature of student life, the COVID-19 pandemic made online learning a necessity in HE (Resch et al., 2022). As a result, there is a gap in our understanding of how a sudden change in pedagogical approaches and the emergence of an online, remote way of working has impacted upon the experiences of new students into the HE environment. For this research, student identity is defined as the emergence of identity through social interaction and the attachment to context, in this case their university (Scanlon et al., 2007). More specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions: What were first-year Education students' experiences of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? And, to what extent do students feel that they have developed an 'identity' during their first year of study?

METHODS

The research was conducted in July 2021 and underpinned by the principles of case study research with four 'cases' across two universities, identified here as participants 1-4 and university A and B. University A, located in Northern England, is a Russell Group University offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including initial teacher education. Delivery of the education programme was online during the pandemic with no offer of in-person teaching. University B, located in South Wales, has a thriving Education department offering a range of courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, including initial teacher education programmes. During the pandemic, this institution offered reduced face-to-face sessions when restrictions allowed. The two institutions were chosen due to the different approaches to face-to-face teaching adopted during the pandemic.

Prior to data collection ethical approval was granted (Date – 31/03/2021). We contacted all first-year undergraduate Education students at university A and B (approximately 60 students) and received four responses. The research was an in-depth, qualitative, exploratory study. The study was also underpinned by the principles of narrative inquiry asking the participants to tell their stories of their expectations of university prior to attending, the lived reality of university during the pandemic and their hopes and aspirations for their future experiences of university once teaching had returned to some form of 'normality' – which they hoped would characterise their second year at university. As is often typical in both case study research and narrative inquiry, the research method used in the study was that of the research interview (King et al., 2019). The interviews were 45 minutes in duration and semi-structured in nature.

Typically, a research interview is envisaged as a one-to-one process (Mann, 2016). The paired interview (also described as a 'paired depth interview' by Wilson et al., 2016 and 'joint

interviewing' by [Houssart et al., 2011](#)) has received scant attention in the qualitative interviews research methods literature (notable exceptions are [Wilson et al., 2016](#) and [Mann, 2016: 176](#)). The paired interview can be defined as when an interviewer interviews two research participants together about a common experience. The advantage of the paired interview is that the research participants comparing a shared experience is a rich source for data analysis. There are two key disadvantages levelled at the paired interview. The first critique is the complexity of organising a mutually convenient date and time for the interview. In this study, there was an element of collaboration via email about availability. The interviewers did not perceive this to be any more difficult than organising a one-to-one meeting with a student.

The second concern levelled at the paired interview is a power dynamic between the pair creating a situation where one interviewee is dominant in the conversation. Our decision to conduct paired interviews had arisen from a more 'traditional' power dynamic concern – that related to the power dynamic between the academic-interviewer and student-interviewee. We ensured that we did not interview participants from our 'home' institution therefore avoiding a power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee. The paired interviews were organised so that the participants in each interview were from the same institution and therefore knew each other prior to the interview. In addition, on reflection we found our paired interview approach did allow for a sense of a reduction in our concerns about this more 'traditional' power dynamic. However, mindful of the research literature identifying this concern about a power dynamic between the pair, we subsequently analysed the interview transcripts for any evidence of dominance or feeling unable to share contradictory experiences. The interview comments suggest that a power imbalance between the pair was not a cause for concern: "um yeah, I would say a similar thing" (Participant 3, University B) and "And I think a lot of people my age, the expectation is to party and things but I'm not that type of person so that's not what I kind of expected anyway, maybe the odd sort of social thing but I think the same as [name of student's friend] we haven't had that opportunity to meet everyone on our course so" (Participant 4, University B). The examples cited suggest a nuance in the participants' responses in which they are comfortable to acknowledge the ways in which they agree with the other interviewee, but also that they are comfortable to reflect on differences or ways in which their identity may not align with the other interviewee or the student population more broadly. We believed that this paired approach enabled an elevated level of validity in the participants' responses due to this opportunity to 'compare and contrast' experiences.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed by the interviewers and the data analysis was conducted using principles from Lincoln et al.'s (1994) audit trail with each researcher analysing the interview transcripts separately and independently before meeting together to discuss the findings. The researchers agreed on four clearly identified themes that arose from the findings. The theme of academic belonging, conversations around informal learning, online group work assignments and the intrinsic motivation to study were discussed, and it was agreed that these would form the structure of the research findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In analysing the data four key themes emerged from the paired interviews: that of academic belonging, conversations around informal learning, online group work assignments and the intrinsic motivation to study. These resonate with earlier literature which identify factors pertaining to identification with the new setting, such as the ability to develop secure friendships and clear ideas around career goals are key in supporting a smooth transition to university ([Bowles et al., 2014](#); [Parmentier et al., 2021](#); [Tinto, 1975](#)). While the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the individual HEI's ability to offer both formal and informal opportunities for first year students to meet with each other, it is interesting to note that despite a lack of face-to-face contact, that identification with the institution or course, and a feeling of belonging are integral to the way in which students feel supported as part of the transition process into HE. Despite this, some of the challenges identified by the data is the limited ability to engage with peers on the programme particularly from a social perspective.

ACADEMIC BELONGING, BUT NOT SOCIAL BELONGING

During the paired interviews, all participants said that they felt as though they were ‘university students’, demonstrated by their commitment to study, engagement in online learning and submitting work on time, however not all felt a sense of belonging to their university. Participant 1, University A commented:

Yeah, I think I do. I definitely think academically that I do. I'm not sure I feel like a university student at my university if you get what I mean. Like I haven't been on the campus, I haven't been in a lecture theatre or the buildings. I feel like I identify as a university student, I just don't identify with my university.

Missing out on the typical university experiences such as physically attending lectures and seminars, feeling part of a cohort of students, and seeing other students at the campus influenced how the participants viewed themselves in relation to their universities. As Scanlon et al., (2007) assert, social interaction and integration within the new student community is critical in fostering a sense of belonging to the institution, in addition to becoming familiar with the environment. As Participant 3, University B further explains:

I still feel very meant to be a university student because I've given 100% all of my work, and so, and all of you know all of the assignments etc so yeah, I do definitely feel like a university student I just feel like I've missed out on some of those experiences.

Parmentier et al., (2021) comment on the value of anticipatory emotions among adolescents in the transition to HE, particularly in the way in which young people imagine what will happen and visualise how they will behave. While the participants in the study were able to partially envisage how their time at university might look and feel positive about this, there was a significant level of uncertainty, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the realisation of not being able to have the typical experience of being at university.

It could be argued that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring restrictions on face-to-face teaching resulted in a focus on the quality of curricula delivery by HEIs, but the same consideration was not given to nurturing learner communities. It could also be argued that this was due to the unforeseen nature of the pandemic and the various challenges of online learning such as a lack of experience among teaching staff, information gaps and adverse home environments (Rahman et al., 2021).

LEARNING WITH COURSE FRIENDS: INFORMAL LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

While the concept of academic belonging is viewed as integral in developing a student identity (Jensen et al., 2015; Tinto, 1975), participants felt that the online learning experience was detrimental in nurturing valuable informal learning conversations essential to belonging to the university, particularly when didactic in nature. An intrinsic sense of belonging was able to be nurtured in discussions with peers on their course as well as with lecturers (Baik et al., 2019). In Pre-COVID times such conversations would have happened outside the formal parameters of the seminar or lecture and could be conceived as opportunistic dialogues. A lack of opportunity for social learning with new course friends was identified as missing from their experience of studying, as participants from both universities commented:

I had friends at the uni so I knew we were going to be online. But I did hope that some stuff would be in person as well, like at least once or twice a week. I did think the social aspect would be affected too. Like some people would find it harder to make friends and stuff (Participant 2, University A)

I have met loads of people from the course on Zoom but it's hard to count them as friends as I don't really know them (Participant 1, University A).

It should be noted that there was a variation in the opportunities for face-to-face learning at both institutions. University A did not provide any face-to-face learning during the pandemic. Conversely, university B offered some in-person contact time for students at the beginning of the new academic year. Students noted that it was a challenge to develop meaningful relationships with fellow students even with limited face-to-face contact:

And then we were only allowed to be in university, I think it was twice a week, we were on campus but it wasn't even for a full day so that was quite that was quite difficult (Participant 3, University B).

McInnis (2004) notes that the contribution by university to first-year transition is more than instruction and curriculum content and identifies several enablers which can assist students during this time, such as a strong campus culture and encouraging the development of peer and academic learning communities. Krishnakumar et al. (2022) further note that while online learning allows for increased opportunities for self-direction and autonomy, this is driven by the individual and that the global pandemic may have reduced perceived autonomy due to reduced interaction with peers.

In recognising this challenge, Participant 3, University B commented:

It's been a little bit isolated, and I feel like when we've been working on assignments. It would have been so helpful, I think that for a lot of us to have been sharing the same room and even if all working away on our own work to just be able to throw ideas or questions that each other, which has been unbelievably helpful [we're]... trying to get on with it on our own, without being able to bounce ideas off each other.

In recognising some of the social challenges associated with online learning, both institutions attempted to orchestrate opportunities to promote friendships on the programmes via group assignments.

ONLINE GROUP WORK ASSIGNMENTS

Both institutions required their first-year students to complete online group work assignments as part of the programme delivery and to provide opportunities for the students to get to know each other. However, there was variability in how successful this experience was both within and across the institutions:

I was quite lucky that my group engaged quite well, and I feel that Participant 2 had a different experience (Participant 1, University A)

Yeah, I did [have a different experience to Participant 1]. I don't think it was down to the online learning though. I think some people just aren't as motivated as me. I'm quite a perfectionist.... The assessments were alright for me, the lecturers were helpful apart from that one group, it was okay (Participant 2, University A).

Students commented on the variability in responses by their peers due to the online nature of the tasks set, further supporting the assertion by Krishnakumar et al. (2022) that individual learner behaviours play a role in their ability to thrive in online learning situations. A variance in learner behaviour had the potential to cause tension during group work, as Participant 3, University B commented:

There was [group] assignments, where people would say that they were going to go away to work, and then they would come back and had done no work, and it was time to have to pick up what they did...if we'd all been sat in a room, we could have all worked on it together and everybody would have been there, there would have been no excuses off or I can't miss it – all my batteries died on my iPad or sorry my wi-fi doesn't seem to be working. It was too easy for people to have excuses to not get the work done. (Participant 3, University B)

The participants acknowledged that some of the issues around commitment levels to group work were exacerbated by the online format. However, this was mainly related to the nature of the participants in the group and individual levels of self-efficacy and autonomy (Rahman et al., 2021). Discussions with the participants reflected the varying success of working online in groups, with some having a more positive experience of group work than others.

Participant 3, University B's comment below is an effective summary of the general feelings expressed by participants of their experiences of online learning during the pandemic. While it can be argued that the participants for this study were atypical in terms of their high engagement, level of satisfaction with online learning processes and were proactive in

developing their academic identity, a common feature was the importance of interaction with staff and fellow students. They were keen for increased face-to-face teaching and in-person social opportunities:

They definitely need to focus on having as much in person teaching as possible whilst also being safe. I think societies as well, having them in person as opposed to Zoom is really important. I think they have like student union days but because of the pandemic it isn't easy to access. As much on campus stuff as possible (Participant 3, University B)

Engaging in online learning and completing assignments to a high standard encouraged the participants to develop a sense of academic belonging with identity strongly aligned with being 'university students.' This was despite the social challenges which hampered a sense 'connectedness' between students:

I didn't expect a typical university kind of experience, just because I am a mature student, and so I wasn't going in going into halls or looking for the party side of it...not the going out drinking but having the social interactions have been in university for the day and actually being able to meet the people that you work with (Participant 3, University B).

However, the comments accentuate the importance of the social aspects of university and awareness of participants that they were unable to have the full student experience due to the restrictions brought on by the pandemic (McKay et al., 2021). The type and extent of social belonging to university varied amongst the participants and this was perhaps related to their living situation and their expectations about university (Participant 1 and 2 both living at home, Participant 1 living with their parents and Participant 2 living in their own home) and (Participant 3 and 4 – both living in student accommodation away from home). However, all participants valued social belonging in terms of spending time learning with course peers:

Yeah, I would completely agree with [name of student's friend] like myself I'm not a mature student I have come straight from sixth form (defined as the final two years of school for students between the ages of 16 and 18), so I think my expectations... And I think a lot of people my age, the expectation is to party and things but I'm not that type of person so that's not what I kind of expected anyway, maybe the odd sort of social thing, but I think the same as [name of student friend] we haven't had that opportunity to meet everyone on our course so (Participant 4, University B).

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, two of the participants proactively engaged in as many volunteering activities as possible to feel more like a university student. They felt that this was an enriching part of their first-year experience at university:

Oh, I think 100% I identify as a university student, and this is the one thing I think has been positive from the pandemic. If it wasn't for the pandemic, I don't think I would have had the opportunities I have had. I'm the school and group rep for my university. Like I said, if it wasn't for this pandemic, I may not have had the opportunity. It had a positive impact on my confidence. I can oversee and communicate with staff which has really helped me. I feel like a university student. (Participant 2, University A)

Yeah, it seems to me, really, I do in the I try to volunteer for every opportunity that is given to us, so I try to be as much as involved as I can to feel as though I'm part of an institution and things, whereas I think if I wasn't taking those opportunities I'd maybe feel like I wasn't because, obviously, we have a long time off now from my last assignment till September, but obviously when I volunteered for things such as this ... I feel like I still am in the loop with university, so I think that's allowed me to feel like more part to feel like more of a student yes (Participant 4, University B)

This proactivity in engaging in the wider aspects of university life was significant for developing a sense of belonging, and a way to overcome enforced social isolation due to the pandemic, but this did not appear to fully mitigate for the loss of learning opportunities with course peers.

An intrinsic motivation to study as a new student at university was hampered by enforced restrictions on face-to-face engagement with peers and course lecturers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the response to the constraints placed was to offer students online lectures and seminars, both asynchronous and synchronous, students were often passive recipients of materials delivered. While Xunquian et al. (2022) argue that online learning can strengthen classroom engagement when sessions use problem-based learning, due to the spontaneous and unexpected nature of the online delivery, many lecturers were not equipped in, or confident with, the necessary IT skills to develop high-quality problem-based learning as part of their curriculum. Lecturers within the present study had spent time over the summer becoming accustomed with the operational aspects of online learning but had no practical delivery experience. The approach taken by many universities was to offer lecture recordings (with timetables offered as a guide to structure students' work routines) and a greater amount of 'online' learning. Participants initially reported enjoying the online learning experience, however this waned over time:

I think I'm a bit odd in this perspective but I 100% enjoyed online learning. I felt more confident speaking in Zoom and smaller groups and giving answers. So, yeah, I really enjoyed. However, everyone else that I have spoken to me don't think anybody would say the same (Participant 1, University A).

I'm a bit half and half. At the start I kind of enjoyed it, I was contributing quite a lot. However, it got to January time, and it started to become difficult to go to lectures and I tried and stuff but like I said things become difficult. However, the lecturers were amazing, and they tried really hard to make things easier. The only thing I would say is that there was one lecturer who made their recordings very long and very hard to watch but other than that, it's been a bit of half and half, it's been hard! (Participant 2, University A).

The flexibility of working from home and not needing to travel was another benefit of the online learning. While participants reported that they felt they were able to work independently more effectively there was a recognition that learning remotely did not allow for time to discuss ideas and thoughts with lecturers on a one-to-one basis:

But not as much self-learning, I thought we would have obviously thought they would be more time on campus to sort of run through things with tutors and things like that... all of that said, though, I have quite enjoyed the online learning because it obviously does give you more time to focus on your assignments, and things because as soon as you meeting ends, you can just carry on with your assignment, whereas I would have to travel back home and things like that, so I think it has given me the opportunity to work on my assignments more and obviously it's given you that opportunity to be more independent with your work and not rely on maybe a tutor on each other as much. (Participant 4, University B)

There was an acknowledgement that perhaps their perspectives of enjoying the online experience were not common to all students:

Like online lectures and things like that you find as soon as the lecture mentions breakout rooms, a lot of people drop off the call (Participant 3, University B).

The level of enjoyment the participants identified in online learning was an unexpected finding, but with a recognition from the participants themselves that they were outside the 'norm' compared with the experiences of their fellow students, it was also apparent that the finding came with several caveats. Certainly, for some of the participants there was a sense of online learning fatigue that began to set in and a challenge to levels of motivation for all students on the programmes:

It was too easy for people to have excuses to not get the work done.... I didn't feel like that myself personally, because I knew that I gave 110% but I know that there were plenty of people from the course that that didn't give 100% and then perhaps going to be at a disadvantage because they had such flexibility (Participant 3, University B).

This may have been related to the novelty of the process wearing off, but also as of January 2021 the participants would have been experiencing the lockdown that both countries had been returned to, alongside assignment deadline pressures. Turning attention to completing assignments became instrumental in the development of academic belonging as it provided students with a clear purpose and a goal to reach, thus moving away from the frustrations of limited social interaction and engagement with the university campus environment.

While students faced significant challenges with the constraints of online learning and feelings of isolation, individual determination and personal insight were key features of ensuring that students were able to manage some of the challenges that they faced. In understanding the transitory and unprecedented nature of the move to online learning and the contextual pressures upon universities to deliver curricula and for students to engage, perhaps enabled students to see that some of the challenges faced were beyond their control and that circumstances would change for the better in due course.

LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two specific limitations can be identified within this paper. The first is the small sample size used within the study. The views of four undergraduate students were explored to understand student identity during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, on reflection we were not surprised to receive four responses (two from each institution) due to the challenges students faced at the time of data collection (at the height of the pandemic). Moreover, the opportunity to collect a large dataset was difficult due to university holidays coinciding with the data collection period. Finally, this research was designed to be an in-depth exploration of a small number of students as they managed the transition to university. The second limitation relates to the number of universities involved in the research. To generate a broader understanding of students' experiences during the pandemic, engaging with a wider range of universities would have been beneficial. However, as the research team are situated in education departments in HEIs, our insider's positionality (Hammersley, 1993) gives us prior knowledge of the group being researched and the reality of student transitions which adds to the validity of the research.

In conclusion, this small-scale, explorative qualitative study has identified that first-year students can develop a sense of 'academic belonging' via an online learning environment. Nevertheless, the participants did report experiences of low motivation and isolation, which hindered their development of a university student identity. This could be due to the constraints of online learning and social restrictions placed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, we argue that future designs of online learning environments *specifically* for first-year undergraduates should draw upon the research literature on 'transition' and 'belonging.' A greater focus on the 'first-year experience' could ensure pedagogical provision for authentic incidental learning opportunities with peers within the online learning context. In addition, a balance of two considerations is required for first-year students: the benefits of flexibility offered by asynchronous delivery versus an increased sense of structure and community through greater synchronous learning opportunities.

The findings raise some interesting considerations and recommendations (see Table 1) for those engaged in teaching university students in a post-pandemic context. First, the academic aspects of studying are central to the sense of self for undergraduates, which returns us to the need for careful consideration of early opportunities for this sense of academic belonging to be 'confirmed'. Furthermore, students recognise and appreciate opportunities for informal learning alongside the formal taught aspects of their programme and universities keen to retain some aspects of online learning should consider what 'spaces' enable this type of learning to take place. Finally, the well-intentioned flexible asynchronous approach to online learning draws heavily on willpower and motivation to learn for this demographic group and suggests further consideration of asynchronous delivery.

In a wider post-COVID context this study highlights the flexibility of both students and lecturers in responding to an unprecedented global event. It demonstrates practical reactions to immediate need, which in this context was ensuring that students were able to access the necessary academic resources to fulfil the measured requirements of their undergraduate programmes. While the needs of students remained broadly similar to the pre-COVID

environment, there was an understanding of the challenges and practical limitations faced by HEIs to deliver the ‘first year’ experience. The capacity to explore the more nuanced transitional experiences of first-year Education students in terms of academic belonging, social integration and developing a student identity was overshadowed by the immediate, emergency response by HEIs to the pandemic. While previous research on the transition experiences of students entering HEIs has focused on the in-person experience, this paper has highlighted a need to explore transition within a wider learning context, considering both the face-to-face experience and hybrid learning environments.

AUDIENCE	RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>For universities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide opportunities for students to engage with wider university initiatives to enable a stronger identity with their university (for example, activities organised by the student’s union).• Increasing face-to-face teaching to allow interaction between students.• A comprehensive training programme to equip staff with the required skills to deliver online (with a particular focus on problem-based learning).• A recognition of the difference between ‘online learning’ and ‘emergency online learning that was experienced during the pandemic (I.e., staff had to teach online for the first time)• Creating purpose-built spaces on campus to foster informal learning opportunities. For example, meeting areas on campus, more social spaces
<i>For Teaching Staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide opportunities for students to feel part of the ‘learner community’ (I.e., book clubs, field trips’).• A focus on developing connections between students as they progress through university (i.e., a robust re-induction programme).

Table 1 recommendations for student transition.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data is stored at the lead institution. Data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval was granted by the lead institution.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Kieran Hodgkin has no competing interests.

Rhiannon Packer is guest editor of this collection. However, she was removed from any decision making related to the abstract submission and acceptance as well as the review process to ensure independent review and editing.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS


Both authors have contributed equally to the following tasks in this research; conception and design of the research work, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, drafting the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the version to be published.


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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Kieran Hodgkin  orcid.org/0000-0001-7546-2187
Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK

Rhiannon Packer  orcid.org/0000-0002-1976-8410
Cardiff Metropolitan University – Cyncoed Campus, UK

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