

Creating a Student Community in an Online Space: The Romance and the Reality

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Abstract

This study aimed to explain the romance and the reality of creating an online community for Master's students in the COVID-19 context, and investigate the barriers and enablers to engaging in community online. In the urban university where this study was conducted, there are large postgraduate taught programmes with students who differ in their ability to thrive and flourish in the online learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students appeared to have been missing the 'hidden' academic and social opportunities that are normally available on campus which allow them to become part of an academic community. Therefore, an internally funded project was developed to enhance students' social and educational experience. The project included an ongoing series of online events across the spring and summer Terms in the academic year 2021/22, that revolved around peer support, support for academic work, and support for career development and beyond. A focus group was conducted at the end of the project with five students, discussing their perspectives on the events they attended, and their possible explanations for the low uptake despite students' initial enthusiasm. The findings showed that students valued the social dimension of the online events and the informal space they created, which helped alleviate stress regarding academic work. Students explained the low uptake by discussing the substantial 'virtual fatigue' they experienced, the lack of daily connection with peers, the impact of time constraints and the language barriers for international students.

Keywords: Online Community, COVID-19, Postgraduate Student

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Introduction

Background: a project of creating online community

In the urban university where this study was conducted, there are large postgraduate taught programmes with full-time, part-time, and flexible students, who differ in their ability to thrive and flourish in an online learning environment (Besser *et al.*, 2020). During the academic year of 20/21, a survey and module evaluations completed by students in one Master's programme, identified issues arising from online learning and suggested potential support that could be provided. Students who had planned on studying in person, given the current COVID-19 context, had to study online only.

In response to these circumstances, an internally funded project, *Learning Together: Creating Online Peer Support Community*, was developed by two Postgraduate Teaching Assistants (PGTAs) and two tutors in one department in the university, to enhance students' social and educational experience. The purpose of the funding was to provide support to students and staff who wished to work together to enhance the learning experiences of students, by seeking students' voices, and responding to them in partnership with the students. Thus, the project leaders began by seeking Master's students' perspectives through an online survey on their learning and social experience at the end of Term 1, and found that many students expressed their need to have informal spaces to meet with colleagues and tutors. This need appeared particularly relevant to students in the COVID-19 context because learning was conducted entirely online, and they appeared to have been missing the 'hidden' academic and social opportunities that are normally available on campus which allow them to become part of an academic community.

Thus, the project team aspired to support Master's students in the department during Terms 2 and 3, with the goals of creating an online peer support and learning community. The project included an ongoing series of events, including (1) bi-weekly drop-in sessions, where students had the opportunity to join live Zoom sessions with the PGTAs and have unstructured conversations with their peers about their coursework and daily experiences; (2) five writing workshops, where students attended Zoom sessions, stated their writing goals and wrote during structured writing blocks; and (3) three alumni talks, where alumni from the department spoke about their experiences following the completion of their Master's programme, and revolved around support for career development and beyond.

While students initially expressed enthusiasm regarding the implementation of this project, and while events in Term 2 saw an increased number of attendees as time went on, this enthusiasm did not last long. The number of attendees began to fall at the end of the second term, and very few students attended the events in the third term. Additionally, the project team initially set up an online communication platform for the students with the purpose of providing a space for the students to communicate with one another without the presence of tutors; however, most students did not join the platform and it was therefore not in use. Therefore, the study reported in this paper aims to explain the romance and the reality of creating an online community for Master's students in the COVID-19 context, and investigate the barriers and enablers to engaging in community online. The researchers thus conducted a focus group with five students who attended some of the project events, and sought to understand their experiences from the project and perspectives on the events.

Literature Review

Exploring effective online learning pedagogy

Online learning as a concept and as a keyword has consistently been a focus of educational research for over two decades. The essential elements of online learning were found to be the use of technology, time element (synchronous or asynchronous), synonymous terms and overlapping concepts (e.g., e-learning), interactivity, physical distance, and educational context (Singh & Thurman, 2019; Burke *et al.*, 2021; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). Online learning on its own has advantages as part of a blended learning approach in addition to face-to-face learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Bessser *et al.*, 2020).

By exploring effective online learning pedagogy, the focus of research tended to shift from how technology was used for automated grading or feedback, to student engagement, student-centered pedagogy (Burke *et al.*, 2021) and interactivity as key elements of online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019; Burke & Larmar, 2021). The ongoing development of online learning pedagogy might also cultivate an idea of identifying student engagement as a key predictor of online learning outcomes (Brown *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, while early definitions of online learning emphasised the role of instructors who developed their material into suitable online teaching recourses (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005), later definitions delved into the discussion about creating a learning environment and started concerning ‘lack of community’ as an issue in online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019, 301). A recent study revealed the *unmeasurable* elements found to contribute to online engagement quality that university-level students highly valued, which included reflective student-centered pedagogy, establishing personalised and human connections online, distinguishing online teaching from on campus teaching, and intentionally combined pedagogical approaches (Burke *et al.*, 2021).

While online learning enabled access to study for many students who formerly might not have been able to access it due to various reasons, there were also considerable concerns over the effectiveness of online learning (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). Particularly, online students have often been found to experience a sense of isolation and disconnection (Dixson, 2015). Greenland and Moore (2014) raised concerns over online students having a 20% higher attrition rate than on-campus students. Because online students tended to represent ‘adult learners who face competing demands, including family and work responsibilities’ (Redmond *et al.*, 2018, p.185); these competing demands, time constraints (Farrell & Brunton, 2020) and financial responsibilities (Busher & James, 2020), were reported to impact the online learning experience and student retention. These contextual issues further promoted a demand for studying flexibility in online learning, as well as for marketing the concept of online learning (Stone & O’Shea, 2019); however, studies revealed that this flexibility in practice ‘may be compromised by the application of inflexible university rules and regulations’ (Stone *et al.*, 2019, p.27), thus the online learners’ expectations remained unmet.

Students’ needs emerging in the Covid-19 context

Despite the ongoing research on effective online learning pedagogy, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in an abrupt, unplanned transition to various forms of remote and online learning for universities around the globe in the first half of 2020, presenting a range of novel challenges to university staff and students (Burns *et al.*, 2020). In light of these events, exploring the capacity of the higher education sector to adapt to sudden states of uncertainty, overcome the

challenges that they present for the students and provide suitable support for students has become imperative (Burns *et al.*, 2020; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021).

Like many other universities, the university where this study was conducted also faced the abrupt nature of the shift to online learning, and the literature shows that this has resulted in many challenges experienced by university students. One main challenge has been higher levels of stress, isolation, anxiety and loneliness among students, owing to a reduced sense of belongingness and limited opportunities to engage with peers (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Bessser *et al.*, 2020; Burns *et al.*, 2020; Zhai and Du, 2020). Additional challenges reported by students include concerns over their future professional careers and their ability to concentrate on their studies (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020; Bessser *et al.*, 2020); daily routines that significantly changed due to learning online; feelings of anxiety, boredom and frustration (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020); and challenges relating to the use of technology (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Neupane, 2021).

The project reported in this study was created specifically for postgraduate Master's students, whose needs and challenges prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic have been reported to be unique and different from those of other students. First and foremost, it has been widely reported in the literature that many of these students, particularly international students, face challenges and concerns in their adjustment to the academic expectations and conventions that are required from them at postgraduate study level, particularly critical and academic writing skills and the more active learning styles (Becker *et al.*, 2019; Bird, 2017; Coneyworth *et al.*, 2020; Kingston & Forland, 2008). Additionally, studies reported that postgraduate students in the UK often feel that they receive insufficient support for future employability (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Bird, 2017), and that often their needs for belonging and socialisation are overlooked (Coneyworth *et al.*, 2020). Specific to international students has been the challenge to adjust to the culture in the UK, which is often very distinct from their own (Bird, 2017; McDonald, 2014; Wu, 2015).

Research often reported that the support that universities provide their postgraduate students is insufficient and does not meet their unique needs and challenges (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Macleod *et al.*, 2019; McDonald, 2014). For example, one case study conducted by Arambewela and Maringe (2012), that explored postgraduate students' perception in a Russell Group university in the UK, found that the support services that the university provided tended to target domestic and undergraduate students, and did not meet the expectations or suit the demographics of many postgraduate students. For example, postgraduate students expressed their need for more relevant services to suit their studies, like targeted training in academic and critical writing and English language skills, as well as services preparing them for future career opportunities.

While the literature on the challenges faced by students in light of the Covid-19 pandemic is not specific to postgraduate students, it is plausible that the specific challenges often reported by postgraduate students have been amplified by the transition to online learning. Therefore, as discussed in the Introduction, the project reported in this paper aimed to provide support for students' academic and social needs. A focus group was conducted later to better understand students' experiences and needs in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and its challenges.

Methodology

Methods and participants

At end of the academic year 20/21, the two PGAs who co-led the project, conducted a focus group with five Master's students in the department, who attended at least one of the events offered through the project (see Table 1 for details of the participants). Four of the students were full-time international students, and one student was a flexible 'home' student. The students were asked about their perspectives on the events they attended, their possible explanations for the low uptake despite students' initial enthusiasm, and their suggestions for the future of the project. The focus group conversation was audio recorded and transcribed. The researchers adopted a thematic coding analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016) strategy to analyse the findings and were guided by the research aims and questions. Initial codes were generated based on the participants' responses, and these were then gathered into themes which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Participant	Mode of study	UK or international student	Events attended
S1	Flexible	UK	Predominantly drop-ins Viewed recordings of alumni talks
S2	Full-time	International	First alumni talk (about future studies) One writing retreat session Several drop-in sessions
S3	Full-time	International	Two drop-in sessions One writing retreat session One alumni talk
S4	Full-time	International	Several drop-in sessions
S5	Full-time	International	Several drop-in sessions (Viewed recording of the alumni talks)

Table 1: Participants

Research questions

1. What were students' perspectives on the events they attended as part of the project?
2. Why was students' initial enthusiasm about the project not reflected in the participation?
3. What were students' suggestions for the future of the project?

Findings

The findings are structured to answer the research questions.

Q1. What were students' perspectives on the events they attended as part of the project?

Students valued the social dimension of the online events, and the informal spaces they created which provided them with opportunities to make social and professional connections with peers, that also helped alleviate stress regarding academic work and academic writing. The participants discussed the drop-in sessions more than other events, even though the alumni talks had the highest number of participants.

All participants attended at least two drop-in sessions. Four of the participants positively spoke about the drop-in sessions in their answers. The most recognised reason for the positive feedback on these sessions was the social dimension that was added to the Master's programme. The students perceived the drop-in sessions as an informal space to have conversations and make connections with peers, especially during the pandemic. Students who enrolled for face-to-face programmes could not have the in-person university experience due to the teaching and learning taking place entirely online. Students, therefore, did not have the opportunity to establish informal connections as they might have done face-to-face. For example, S2 mentioned that the social aspects were missing such as 'talking with other colleagues'. Likewise, S5 confirmed that it was the 'free talk' that she very much enjoyed. Furthermore, S5 mentioned the sessions to be informal as they had 'no set agenda or PPT slides', which S1 had also acknowledged,

It's been incredibly beneficial, especially during the pandemic, to have an informal space to have conversation, which isn't structured around necessarily the topics that we're studying, but just about how we're all feeling, ... just meeting people and understanding their backgrounds. (S1)

The students positively commented on the content included in the drop-in sessions. For instance, S3 revealed that she occasionally felt 'really anxious' as an international student who was unconfident in academic writing. Likewise, although S1 is a UK student, she shared the same 'mental stress' in academic writing,

So in some respects, the drop-in sessions that, [the project team] you guys held, was really helpful for that, because while you are just sitting at home creating this mental stress that, am I the only one trying to get these words done and can't do it? You know, how do I reference accurately? (S1)

S1 and S3 both found the drop-in sessions helpful as they could 'have a dialogue' (S1) with others about their anxieties. Moreover, S3 identified the challenge she was facing at that time regarding time management. She then referred to the positive aspect that she identified in one of the themed drop-in sessions in Term 3. That session was designed to focus on workload management, and thus, it helped her by 'discussing how to manage our time better' (S3). Therefore, it appears that the drop-in sessions helped students alleviate stress regarding academic work and academic writing for both UK and international students, particularly in an online learning context where students were isolated and lacked connection with peers.

Apart from the content about alleviating stress, students claimed that the drop-in sessions had a positive impact on their learning and professional development. S1 commented that the drop-in sessions helped her form professional connections with peers, as she could 'hear what's going on in the wider [professional] field'. S5 discussed the positive peer pressure that she felt during the sessions, which contributed to her motivation in learning,

Because I procrastinate, just keep postpone the time to finish a task, ... So when I join the session, and when I hear the things [students] have done, I feel stressed {laughs} and I push myself to learn more ... or some students ask questions and I can learn from others, I think that's the most important thing that I learned from the drop-in sessions. (S5)

Other benefits that participants acknowledged from attending the drop-in sessions include, 1) The students spoke positively of the fact that their timing was convenient since they alternated between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. every fortnight. S1, as a part-time student who worked during the weekdays, acknowledged the convenience of having 5 p.m. sessions because she could join the sessions ‘after work hours’. The 10 a.m. sessions may have been more convenient for international students in different time zones. 2) For international students, the drop-in sessions in general appear to act as a platform to encourage conversations, which, as S3 commented, could ‘push them [international students] to jump out of their comfort zone, push them to talk and to share their views’.

In comparison to the drop-in sessions, the writing workshops and the alumni talks were not as popular. Two of five participants attended the writing workshops. S2 attended one session and reported that she found it beneficial for exchanging her work with other students. She reported that she did not attend other sessions due to time constraints. S3 also attended one session and reported that she faced challenges which stemmed from the design of the session: due to her struggles with academic writing, S3 found the schedule of the session was ‘a bit too quick’ for her, and that she chose not to attend others,

I can’t plan for my writing in [the first] 20 minutes or 30 minutes, so, it’s a little bit hard for me to follow the whole writing retreat, so I think it was better to just follow my own plan, so this is why I just attended once. (S3)

Two of the five participants attended one alumni talk and another participant watched their recordings. S2 reported the first alumni talk that she attended, which focused on future academic studies, to be ‘quite beneficial, considering I’m doing the postgraduate, it sort of guided me for the next steps.’ No one else spoke about the alumni talks, even though these events had the highest numbers of participants.

Q2. Why was students’ initial enthusiasm about the project not reflected in the participation?

While students initially expressed enthusiasm regarding the implementation of this project through the online survey, and while events in Term 2 saw an increased number of attendees as time went on, this enthusiasm did not last long. The number of attendees began to fall at the end of Term 2, and very few students attended the events in Term 3. This was recognised by S1 who said that ‘it’s just nice to have a little bit of dialogue and again it seemed to lessen as time went on’.

Participants identified some issues that might have resulted in the decrease in enthusiasm and participation. Firstly, the online remote learning was inevitably affected by time constraints and time differences. Like other international students, S2 felt ‘excited’ for many events but then ‘the time was not very suitable’. She further noted that, especially in the academic year of 20/21, when students had the choice of learning remotely from their home countries, ‘people were living in different areas, so it might not be convenient for everyone, due to time difference and so on’ (S2). A similar comment was made by S4. Moreover, S1, as a UK student, discussed the time differences in reference to people’s various commitments while working remotely, ‘everyone’s in different time zones, logistically ... for myself, I was working as well’.

Secondly, students reported to lack peer connection when learning remotely, and that resulted in students not having a sense of 'going together' to the events which might have lessened the participation in the project. Participants noted that most of the students had not met their peers in person or built relationships with them. S1 then described a scenario of obtaining peer support for participating in the events,

Most of us haven't really met our peers personally and built those relationships, and often when you do that, you can have a group saying, 'oh, look, are you going to turn up to this?' and 'this will be really interesting', and you can kind of drum up a little bit more of the number work. (S1)

Thirdly, all participants confirmed the general decrease in enthusiasm over the year, as well as a virtual and general fatigue, which might have also impacted their participation in the project. S5 described the 'huge differences in the atmosphere' that she had felt from Term 1 to Term 3:

In Term 1, I feel very enthusiastic and very joyful to participate in each tutorial, drop-in session, any activity organised by the [university] or by [the project team] (S5)

In comparison, she found that she did not enjoy participating as much in live tutorials in Terms 2 and 3.

For a person who wants to keep joining events, ... you have to keep joining, and they need to have passion, they're passionate and enthusiastic, but when it comes to Term 2 it kind of shut down, you know, my feeling about learning kind of calmed down, and so, that's why when I joined a drop-in session every time, ... the feeling of participation is not very high. (S5)

Similarly, S3 and S4 noted that students' decreased interest in various activities had become more substantial as the year went on; 'maybe some of them just not interested and only wanted to study or something' (S4). In addition to the general fatigue over the year, S1 highlighted the 'digital fatigue' during this year of online learning, which she described as an 'unfortunate circumstance with regards to the current era that we're living through',

Predominantly, I think it probably is just due to the fact that there's a virtual fatigue during the pandemic period. ... so I think there is a bit of a digital fatigue that has set in, when you're back on your computer again, back to, kind of, listening to something. (S1)

It appears that this 'digital fatigue' might have therefore affected the efficiency of methods for reaching students and notifying them about the events. The project team had advertised the events by posting on the online teaching and learning platform used across the university, where students could access all the learning materials and activities. Students registered on the programme received an email every time a post was made. As S4 mentioned,

Every time we receive emails that notice us to participate, I find that every day there are so many emails that sometimes I ignore them. (S4)

Therefore, the students might have received too many emails from the same platform and therefore chosen to not engage with them. Thus, this method of reaching students might have

not been efficient. As mentioned before, although the project team initially set up an alternative online space for students only, the space was not picked up by the students. The project team had therefore stopped using that online space.

The final reason for the initial enthusiasm not being reflected in participation was suggested to be language barriers for international students. Again, because international students in the academic year of 20/21 had the choice of learning remotely from their home countries, those who made this choice might not have had many opportunities to practise their English-speaking skills as they would have if they had been in the UK. This may have resulted in a general lack of confidence in speaking English. International students, as non-native English speakers, had accounted for the majority of the cohort. S3, as one of them, said that students from her country can often be shy and struggle to talk with others in English. For example, S3 mentioned that she used to invite her friend to join her in attending activities but was rejected,

I always try to ask one of my friends, 'hey, come with me, let's go together' but she's there, like, 'no, I don't want to talk', she's not get used to talk in English, so I think, maybe this is also one of the biggest problems, we lack the language environment, some people, they lack the courage, they don't want to jump out of their comfort zone to talk with others in English. (S3)

Q3. What were students' suggestions for the future of the project?

The participants all agreed that it may be beneficial to implement this pilot project as a regular social project in the department in the future. They acknowledged the value of online activities and experiences, and suggested that the future of the project can balance online and offline activities. They further proposed that the project might benefit from creating a wider community, for instance, involving more students from other Master's programmes to both attend the activities and be involved in the project team. Interestingly, engaging a large number of Master's students, as part of the idea of a wider community, was one of the aspirations of the project at its outset.

All five participants suggested a combination of online and offline activities for the future of the project, while one of them suggested that the balance should shift more towards online activities, since they can allow more flexibility for the participants. Four participants suggested that a balance of online and offline would be helpful for students with diverse needs. For example, S1 acknowledged that due to students from different formats,

I think moving forward it'd be nice to have a balance of both, obviously, understandably for a Master's programme, there are so many different students coming in from different formats – part-time, flexi, online and so on. So I think, definitely a balance of both would be quite helpful. For example, the drop-in one would be nice to have some face-to-face, and it's understandable if the other ones need to be virtual as well, so I guess it's just gathering up your numbers to see who can attend what. (S1)

Those suggestions were in line with the aim of the project, which was to work together to enhance the learning experiences of students, by seeking students' voices, and responding to them in partnership with the students.

Furthermore, while the participants suggested a combination of online and offline activities, they recognised the benefits of online activities. Firstly, they proposed that online activities would be convenient for those who were not on campus, who would either have no access to campus if the circumstances continued, or might have in-person experience already and ‘sometimes they just want to attend a session wherever they are’ (S2). Secondly, S4 and S1 found it beneficial to have the option of watching a recording of an online event, either as a solution to time constraints, or for those who wanted to watch the event more than once. S3 highlighted the flexibility of online participation, and therefore thought online communication may be better.

Participants further suggested the building of a wider community in the future, which can involve students from other programmes in the department. S1 said that the project should ‘definitely evolve’ if moving forward, and then proposed reaching to students from different modules and programmes,

... get more people involved, like potentially people from different modules and so on, it’d be nice to have different experiences. [The project team] can as well delegate the whole process a little bit, and have a bit of wider community, so like perhaps a ‘project group’ can come together and suggest more different ideas and you can have more students on there to suggest and people from different countries, so you can have flexi, online, part-time, you can actually cater for the masses, so that will be quite helpful. (S1)

According to S1, after involving more students, the project team can delegate the process by, for instance, establishing a group of students who can co-lead the project and propose various ideas. This group can then represent students from different countries and modes of attendance. This suggestion again reflected on the aim of the project, seeking to understand students’ needs, and responding to them in partnership with the students.

Conclusions

This study concludes that despite the initial enthusiasm (the ‘romance’) for the project from both the project team and students, different factors seem to have resulted in the low uptake throughout the project, including: time difference and time constraints; lacking a sense of peer connection; general and digital fatigue from online learning; and language barriers for international students. Students appeared to value the social dimension that the project added to their general Master’s experience; however, it did not seem to contribute to the peer connections that students lacked while learning online.

Lessons learnt from our project, as well as additional studies and reviews conducted in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrate the importance of diversifying online activities and services in higher education institutions, in order to cater for the needs of a greater number of students (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Burns *et al.*, 2020). We have found that, in order to increase student engagement and satisfaction in our online project, awareness of the diversity in student demographics, interests and needs was paramount. Thus, online programmes and projects can be designed in ways that reflect on the flexibility of online learning (Stone *et al.*, 2019). For example, various methods should be used to reach students, and a variety of activities should be held on different platforms and at different times of the day, to ensure different students’ ability to access. Moreover, forming partnerships with student representatives can help encourage students’ engagement and seek students’ feedback

on the programmes. Additionally, we have also found that sometimes, less is more. The most successful events – the drop-in sessions - were less structured and did not have a clear focus or agenda; rather, they provided informal spaces for students to form friendships with their colleagues and have casual conversations while learning remotely. This reflects on one of the essential elements of online community: building personal connections (Singh & Thurman, 2019; Burke *et al.*, 2021).

The limitations of this study might be rooted in the roles of the two PGTAs in the Master's programmes, who also acted as the project leaders. The duality of these roles may have benefitted the project since the students from the Master's programmes had more opportunities to familiarise themselves with the project team and establish connections them, and vice versa. However, these dual roles raised concerns over the ethical issues that students may not have been entirely honest because: a) the project teams are staff members, b) the students might not want to give feedback that might offend the project team who also conducted the interviews. Additionally, the project team worked with only two Master's programme in the department, and that might become a barrier that stopped students in other programmes from participating in the events.

This study offers valuable insights into the perceptions of Master's students' learning experiences, and their needs and expectations during online learning within the COVID-19 context. This study can be significant for academic staff who wish to understand students' needs in an online context, and support them through the implementation of a peer support framework.

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