

# **“The best year” / “I struggled with everything”: Widening participation experiences of pandemic online learning**

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## **CReDiT author statement:**

- WT: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing
- EN: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Project Management
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## **Abstract**

Improving retention and graduate outcomes for students from a widening participation (WP) background is key to achieving more equitable outcomes. However, evidence suggests WP students experienced different challenges to their peers during the Covid-19 pandemic. With a focus on the pivot to online learning, we explored how WP students experienced HE during this time to understand which practices supported students' access to education and which may have exacerbated existing inequalities. Data were collected across six focus groups from two Scottish universities (N = 23). While we found many similarities between WP students' experiences and the broader student population, our findings also suggest coming from a position of relative disadvantage magnifies both positive and negative elements of online learning. Based on these findings, recommendations are made for pedagogical practice to enhance the experience of WP students specifically but can also be applied to the student population more generally.

## Introduction

The SAR-COV-19 (Covid19) pandemic caused global societal and economic disruption due to its unprecedented scale and transmissibility, and caused Higher Education to rapidly change the day-to-day practice of teaching and learning to comply with protective measures. Changes to education mode were often the best bad outcome, reflecting the widespread lack of facilities to deliver entire programmes at distance and the challenging choices faced by educators (Marinoni et al., 2020). Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) such as virtual learning spaces, lecture recording, synchronous and asynchronous messaging, and virtual meeting rooms were variously utilised throughout the pandemic teaching (Nordmann et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Within Higher Education there also exist systemic inequalities which impact access to and progression through education systems (Gale & Parker, 2017; Younger et al., 2019). These barriers often have a greater impact on students from minority ethnic backgrounds (Allen & Storan, 2005), those who identify as LGBTQ (Grimwood, 2017), or are from less wealthy financial backgrounds such as carers and care-leavers (Kaye, 2020; Vignoles, 2014). The drive to include more students from under-represented groups in Higher Education is commonly called 'Widening Participation' (WP), particularly in the UK (Jones & Thomas, 2005) and Australia. It is generally recognised that WP students face greater barriers to education in spite of increased drives to support their participation (Boliver, 2017; Brown, 2018). Modes of TEL such as lecture recordings have been found to ease student perceptions of these barriers (MacKay, 2020), potentially through the provision of extra resources that means students do not have to spend social capital to 'check' with educators (MacKay et al., 2021).

In this study, we were interested in the intersection between the rapid introduction of various TEL modes during the pandemic and its impact specifically on WP students, with a view to establishing which modes of TEL may have supported WP students' access to education, and which may have exacerbated existing inequalities.

### **Did All Students Face the Same Pandemic?**

Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) were implemented society wide to protect public health during Covid19, but their impact was not equally felt across the population. This can be seen globally, where countries with lower Gross Domestic Product and higher shares of informal work generally found NPIs to be less effective, perhaps due to lower levels of compliance (Banholzer et al., 2022). More local scale research has found that people in disadvantaged socio-economic brackets had more challenges complying with NPIs, in part

due to the need to undertake work that could not be performed remotely (Krauss et al., 2022). Many roles and attributes that are characteristic of WP students were associated with more negative experiences of NPIs, e.g. caregivers experienced increased stress through concern for those they care for alongside isolation and caregiver burden stresses (Penteado et al., 2020), and social inequality was linked with pandemic outcome, i.e., the pandemic was more dangerous for those with less wealth (Mamelund & Dimka, 2021).

Student experiences were similarly variable. Students who were already separated from their families because they were studying away from home, experienced isolation and stress, particularly where there were few facilities available to support their social connections and lockdowns were stringent (Stewart & Lowenthal, 2022). In one survey of Arizona State University undergraduates, students with lower incomes were more than half as likely as higher income students to have delayed their graduation, and loss of income was prevalent across the whole student community (Aucejo et al., 2020). Additionally, lower-income and first generation students often found they had less access to facilities and study environments (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Worryingly, they also often compared their progress to other students with greater income and therefore greater access to facilities and learning environments (Kiebler & Stewart, 2022). Disparity in access to facilities and study environments may well exacerbate differences in other aspects of learning. For example, metacognitive skills i.e., the ability to plan, monitor and evaluate one's own learning, have been identified as key to successful learning, but findings indicate socio-economic circumstances play a role in the level of metacognitive skills which can influence student outcomes (Medina et al., 2017; Yerdelen-Damar & Peşman, 2013). It is evident from the evaluations of the online pivot that WP students faced greater challenges, both personal, but also in their learning experience.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Widening Participation**

Approaches to WP in education commonly form around theories of class. Bourdieu's theories of social class and capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are often utilised (indeed by these authors (MacKay et al., 2021)) to conceptualise the unequal labour that WP students must do to 'fit in' in Higher Education and workplace settings (Abrahams, 2017). The concept of 'fitting in' or 'belonging' in Higher Education is broadly defined as a feeling of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting, (Goodenow, 1993), and is a common theme for WP students who can feel alienated and unwelcome in their educational institution (Reay et al., 2010; Southgate & Bennett, 2016), .

A sense of belonging can promote a positive sense of self identity and worth (Lingam et al., 2014) but student circumstances play a key role in the extent of interaction with, and

integration into, the academic community and this has been linked to student retention and attainment (Bland, 2018; Braxton, 2014; Ellis & Johnston, 2022; Hausman et al., 2009). This may be relevant in the consideration of the previous section where WP students were not only more likely to be conducting excess labour in caring for family members, etc., but also the invisible emotional labour in presenting an acceptable face to their educational institution (Ajjawi et al., 2023) . Throughout the online pivot there has been debate surrounding whether students should be required to use cameras for example to allow educators to monitor behaviour (Price & Lanclos, 2022). For the WP student, such a requirement may induce greater labour to disguise elements of their home environment.

Self-regulation and self-efficacy are also useful psychological lenses through which to interpret the experience of WP students during covid. Self-efficacy is a person's belief about their ability to complete a course of action and has been found to be a strong predictor of academic achievement (e.g., Elias & Loomis, 2002), in part because of its role in supporting the self-regulatory process of goal-planning, use of effective strategies, and behavioural modification following critical reflection (Zimmerman, 2002). Bandura (1997) suggested that the development of self-efficacy was supported by four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional state. Reilly et al. (2021) found that WP students were less confident about asking their instructors for help as compared to their peers, which aligns with MacKay et al.'s (2021) work on WP students using lecture capture to help navigate asking for help. In context of covid, self-efficacy may have suffered from having fewer opportunities to experience vicarious success due to reduced interaction with peers (whether real or imagined), as well as a more negative emotional state (Garner et al., 2022). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groups report lower self-efficacy (Satici & Can, 2016) and so taken together, there is evidence to support the idea that the WP experience of online learning during covid may have compounded the challenges these students face.

### **Study rationale and aims**

Given the heterogeneity of the student experience during the Covid19 pandemic, and particularly their experiences of how the online pivot affected their learning, we were interested specifically in the experiences of WP students in higher education during AY2020-2021. We aimed to investigate how WP students experienced online learning, discuss which practices increased inclusivity and which may have exacerbated existing inequalities, and to establish which practices should be retained to support widening participation.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were contacted through the Widening Participation teams in two Scottish universities via the respective teams' mailing lists. Students on the WP teams' mailing have typically entered university through a Widening Access program, are care experienced, or live in a postcode area within quintile 1 of the Scottish Government's Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD20). Scottish university programmes last for four years, although some, such as medicine, or integrated Masters, can run for five years or longer; eligible participants were those in their second to fifth year of study of their undergraduate degree (we excluded first-year students as they have not had previous experience of university prior to the pandemic). A total of 23 participants signed up for the study. While BERA do not recommend reimbursing participants for research, we felt that in the context of this research it was important to recognise that participants are likely to experience financial disadvantage, particularly if they have elected to participate where work or earnings are sacrificed. Hence, participants were compensated with a £10 Amazon voucher.

### **Data collection**

Focus groups were used for the data collection, as this methodology can support participants to explore a diverse range of viewpoints and issues which are relevant to the participants (Gibbs, 1997; Smithson, 2000). Six focus groups were run in two Scottish Universities (n=4, 4, 3, 5, and 3, 4, respectively), with data collection completed in June 2021. All data collection was conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams video meeting function. For consistency, WT conducted all focus groups, but JH was present for two of the focus groups to provide access to the relevant institutional Microsoft Teams. The focus groups were semi-structured, each consisting of the same six pre-determined questions (see Appendix A) but in places follow-up questions were asked to facilitate more in-depth answers from participants. Each of the focus groups lasted approximately 1 hour.

### **Ethics**

Prior to starting the study, the proposal was discussed with the Widening Participation Team of the University of Glasgow to ensure that the participating group of students is not overburdened by the study. The study had approval from University of

Glasgow College of Science and Engineering Ethical Review Committee, Reference 300200217 and the University of Aberdeen School of Psychology Ethical Review Committee, Reference PEC/4709/2021/4. We followed BERA's guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011). All data were managed according to the GDPR.

Participants were sent information and consent forms, which were returned electronically prior to participating in the focus group. Consent was confirmed verbally before starting the recording. To build rapport, the moderator reminded the participants about confidentiality and reassured the participants that the data collection is not an assessment, and that all their experiences and opinions are of interest to the research team. A short ice-breaker about which TV series or books the participants have watched/read during the lockdown was conducted to ensure the participants feel comfortable speaking. At the end of the focus group, the moderator reminded the participants how to contact the research team, should they have questions or concerns.

## **Reflexivity**

Authors JM, EN, JH and WT each identify with aspects of the WP identity to varying extents. All authors are white, cis-gendered female researchers with experience working in the Scottish HE sector and share similar views on widening participation and inclusion in HE. Authors JM, EN and JH have previously worked on research surrounding Technology Enhanced Learning and hold strong views on lecture capture and inclusivity. The authors also share views on the importance of online provision as an aid but not a replacement for face-to-face-interaction, approaching the debate from the point of view of student self-regulation and belonging. We recognise that these pre-conceptions partially shaped the themes "Authentic connection" and "Resource agency". WT has previously facilitated WP programmes, and this made her more attuned to the aspects of data which are reflected in the theme "Sense of belonging". AB works in widening participation and student retention and success.

## **Data analysis approach**

The auto-generated verbatim transcripts for the focus group recordings were downloaded from Microsoft Teams through Microsoft Stream. Two members of the research team watched the original recordings, included timestamps, fixed any errors in the auto-generated focus groups and anonymised the transcripts by retraction. The stance of the authors is predominantly realist and within that stance we adopted a reflexive, inductive

thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) to generate semantic themes from the data. The analysis was conducted in six stages using Microsoft Word and pen and paper. In the first stage, two members of the research team (WT and EN) familiarised themselves with the data. They noted down and discussed initial thoughts, some of which were also used in stage two as codes. In stage two, WT coded all data using semantic coding. The codes were then reviewed and provisionally organised into themes in stage 3, reviewed in relation to the full dataset in stage 4, and defined and named in stage 5 by WT and EN resulting in four themes that answered our research questions: how do WP students experience online learning? What practices support and cause detriment to existing inequalities? And what practices should be retained in future?

## **Analysis and discussion**

Four themes were constructed, and all were interconnected with each research question, reflecting the complexity of factors affecting the WP experience. The first theme was 'authentic connection', where students discussed the trade-off between the benefits of online anonymity for help-seeking and question-asking versus online interactions feeling too "business-like" and formal. This spoke to their experiences of online learning, but highlighted how learning practices could both minimise and heighten existing inequalities, with experiences of this theme often reflecting a complex interplay of benefits and drawbacks for student learning. The second theme was 'sense of belonging', a common theme within WP research, which in this case spoke strongly to the research question surrounding existing inequalities, as the online learning environment both assuaged and exacerbated feelings of alienation. Third, students talked about 'resource agency', where the greater perceived control of online settings was highly valued, with key takeaways emerging for future practice. Finally, student 'mental health and wellbeing' cut across all research questions and highlighted challenges that cannot always be assumed to be because of the student's WP status, or the specific learning environment.

### **Authentic Connection**

Participants discussed how anonymity made it easier to ask questions of staff, while feeling isolated by the removal from the physical university. They discussed how talking to staff was easier and more convenient online, as they were able to reach them via multiple means without having to travel into university. Some felt they were able to develop more



personal connections with staff due to the online environment, or how it felt more informal and approachable,

*"The thing I enjoyed the most was actually getting to know the lecturers a lot better. Just cause they would say like 'oh good morning' like to everybody, that said, good morning to them by name sometimes and that was actually really nice"* (P4, FG1)

P12 (FG4) discussed how certain anonymity features of online platforms allowed them to engage in class in their own terms, which they were not routinely doing in large in-person lectures:

*"I love the chat feature where you could if the lecturer said something you could just type in a question, they would answer, because you would feel a bit nervous asking a question live in a lecture hall. It was just, I really loved that, I thought that helped a lot."*

The feeling of a connection with lecturers appears to facilitate engagement and create a more inclusive classroom environment, which is important because findings have shown that interactions with staff are related to student learning and retention (Bland, 2018; Hausman, 2009). Power relations are argued to be omnipresent in the classroom (Bowl, 2005; Brookfield (2017) with the balance of power in the teacher's favour, and this can manifest in students' reluctance to speak up for fear of "getting it wrong". There is a suggestion here that the power gap between lecturer and student may be reduced by the online setting. Despite the positive aspects of increased anonymity and more informal contact with staff, participants also discussed how online interactions can feel artificial and more business-like than interactions on campus: *"There's no casualness whatsoever, and there's no low-key."* (P17, FG5) . This highlights the contrast between online and face-to-face-interactions; while online was useful to gain information from staff conveniently and rapidly, and in some cases lowered the threshold for talking to staff, online meetings were always set up with a purpose, making them feel result-driven and less authentic, as opposed to incidental social contact on campus. Incidental social contact and access to physical university spaces (the library in particular) were highlighted as important aspects of not only peer relationships, but also in terms of staying on track academically and managing the workload through building an understanding of how other students on the course were doing. The physical campus space was considered by students to act as a facilitator of positive social comparison; having seemingly purposeless chit-chats and running into classmates gave students an opportunity to commiserate and create a mutual understanding that they were not alone struggling with the course materials. This could also provoke feelings of isolation where students felt they were unable to work in proximity with peers.

*"None of us got in touch with each other cause we all just thought well they're too busy with this. That never would have happened on campus because we would have seen each other. We would have known how busy each other is, and we had like general chit-chat of walking here, there, everywhere, sitting in the library", P20, FG6*

*"This year I feel like I was really on my own doing this all because I wasn't having any social interaction with any classmates to see like I'm finding this quite hard and if anyone else would say back 'oh me too'", P15, FG4*

Social interactions in an extra-curricular setting were also felt to be lacking. A combination of online fatigue and a Sense of Belonging (see below) meant that students often felt unable to access university resources, even less tangible resources such as community.

*"Just the fact that it was all online, 'cause I'm just sitting in my room like I had no idea if people were already like friends, and it just felt weird like trying to intrude on that cause I have no idea how well people know each other beyond that one group chat.", P2, FG1*

That said, some participants were able to find university community online (and some found it easier to engage with) and they were positively surprised by peer interactions, reflecting the complex nature of an individual's experience with virtual platforms.

*"I like had this idea in my head that it would be quite, umh, like a bitchy space or not that helpful. So our course has a messenger group, Facebook Messenger and like come in the first week of teaching, I was like Oh my God I'm on an island here. So then they added me into it and I'm so glad I did it because I had it completely wrong. Everyone is so nice, so helpful." (P3, FG1)*

The presence (or absence) of authentic connections directly impacted our participants' experience of online learning. These connections appeared to influence how students engaged with staff and peers as well as supporting self-regulatory processes in their learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Previously, distance learning modes have been subject to a 'campus imaginary' concept (Ross & Sheail, 2017) where students perceive the distance to deprive them of opportunities relative to on-campus students who are perceived to have

more community. Even in very large cohorts, distance learning models can promote a sense of community, both within the student bodies and between students and educators (MacKay et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2017) and we see this in our data. The positive social relationships that have been fostered, while not a universal experience among participants, do highlight how WP students can achieve the ‘soft’ benefits of the university experience even when learning at distance.

### **Sense of Belonging**

This theme describes how participants felt like they did not belong in a traditional classroom, and how increased anonymity of online formats helped this feeling of unease. Participants discussed not fitting in with the typical student crowd, wanting to just get on with their work and how they felt like they did not want to bother staff, either due to awareness of the staff workload or because of the risk of being perceived as stupid. The latter aligns with the idea of students having to “spend” social capital which is often perceived to be lacking in WP students (MacKay et al., 2021).

The online format seemed to have a dichotomous effect on WP students’ help-seeking and how comfortable they felt speaking to staff. On one hand, online formats such as anonymous question boards and being able to post questions on a live chat during lectures were easier ways to engage than asking in front of the whole classroom in a lecture theatre. However, some aspects of online delivery seemed to perpetuate the idea of feeling like a burden and feelings of impostor syndrome: “...so you get very difficult questions that I am convinced that if I don’t get them right, I will be an idiot because it’s online. I should be able to find the answer for it.” (P17, FG5)

Overall there was a strong sense of not wanting to bother their teaching staff or to be a burden. Additionally, the lack of opportunities for informal help-seeking also contributed to this feeling of being a burden:

*“But I feel like if it been face to face, I would have had those little chats with them and picked up some stuff that might not on the online setting because you tend to just keep to yourself and get on with the work.” (P18, FG5).*

This echoes the sentiment of not wanting to bother others or to draw attention to you, and how in-person classrooms offer the opportunity to pick up on information without explicitly asking; these vicarious learning experiences may have been more difficult to come by in an online environment. Many students appreciated the anonymity of online delivery, because they felt like they stuck out less in an online classroom as opposed to a standard lecture hall and that the opportunity to anonymise oneself could help with the social anxiety

of a busy classroom and gave them control over the situation. P18 also discussed their sense of otherness in face-to-face classrooms and how this was helped by being online:

*“Again gonna just keep banging on about being really old but being in a class for lots of nineteen, twenty, twenty-one year olds. Some, you feel alienated a lot of times we spend a lot of time feeling really awkward, but when it’s just online, you’re not in that situation where you’re stuck in that two or three hour class left feeling like you can stick out like a sore thumb, you know. So it’s like that was a positive. Anonymity, so I quite like keeping my head down so then it is sometimes a bonus” P18, FG5*

While some aspects of online delivery helped to increase anonymity and counteract feelings of not belonging, the idea that everything was recorded enhanced the sense of being on display to other students, as discussed by P21 (FG6): *“I’m more of kind of person that will go in person ‘cause I always think my questions are you know, a bit dumb and you don’t really wanna say that online, especially when things are being recorded as well”*.

Overall, participants expressed a strong sense of “sticking out” or being on display in standard classrooms, and as a result may have felt uncomfortable asking questions in lecture halls or otherwise drawing attention to themselves. Some aspects of online learning and the anonymity it provided helped with the feeling of otherness, but overall, the sense of not wanting to bother staff, just trying to get on with the work themselves, and only seeking help when strictly necessary were further perpetuated by online delivery. It is notable that some students were potentially undervaluing their own work, perceiving themselves to lack the “know-how” necessary to operate within the academic setting (Fernando & Kenny, 2021). Developing authentic connections, understanding how others navigate the environment and having the opportunity to see others ask those questions which appear “silly” but in fact turn out to be perfectly reasonable, appear to be important for developing students’ sense of belonging and in turn influence their perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Ajjawi et al. (2023) suggest belonging is intrinsically linked to notions of power, with the balance of power to define who belongs and what that looks like, lying with institutions. Students who do not feel as though they belong are then at risk of perceiving the “deficit” to lie solely with themselves rather than recognise structural inequalities may contribute to this sense of “otherness”.

## **Resource Agency**

Overwhelmingly, participants described the online learning environment as one in which they had more control over their time and that this was an advantage:

*“I prefer it. Online learning, the fact that everything is online, and I knew what was coming up that week and I had the chance to kind of layout my diary and organize myself. And I can make uni fit into life and not life into uni” (P9, FG3).*

Participants reported that part of this increase in flexibility was due to the nature of online learning, for example, the use of asynchronous lecture recordings that could be watched at a time that fit them best in addition to being able to pause the recordings to control the pace of learning:

*Personally, for me, having the opportunity to just listen to lectures in my own time at the speed I want to listen to was quite helpful. I do like the fact that some of them are recorded cause sometimes it's hard to keep up with the pace of learning, especially in my [clinical] subject. There's a lot of information being thrown at you left, right, and center. (P21, FG6)*

Access to lecture recordings was frequently highlighted as a positive of the pandemic experience aligning with recent findings about the value of lecture recordings particularly for WP students (MacKay et al., 2021). Several participants alluded to their experiences of being denied lecture recordings prior to the online pivot and a hope that the experience would encourage academic staff to retain their use as an inclusive technology:

*“For all the reasons that have been said, they're really, really good and I'm kind of hoping that it might show the department that some people that aren't, you know, this classic “normal” sort of student do benefit from them without it negatively affecting other things.” (P14, FG4)*

Although it was not a universally positive experience, many participants reported preferring online exams due to the agency they felt they had over the process. Part of this came from being able to control their environment:

*“It was a timed exam but I could do it anywhere in there so I could plan everything out. I could get myself settled like there wasn't that, like, you know, waiting outside the exam like everyone else around you panicking, which makes you panic” (P6, FG2)*

A recurring theme, and one of particular importance to the WP demographic given the increased likelihood of living at home rather than in student accommodation, was the transformative effect of removing the commute to university. The savings incurred of both time and money appeared to have a generalized effect of granting greater control over how they used their resources and enabled them to participate in university life more fully:

*“Travel costs are non-existent now and it used to be, you know that I would be getting up at 6am to go and get the train to be at uni for 9 and you’d come home, you’ll be home at like 6pm and you’d be so tired and you can’t really do anymore work after that whereas now you know, I think I’m just, more filled with energy and more able to, you know, get what I need to get done, done well, so being able to enjoy myself a bit more”. (P8, FG2)*

As well as the impact of commuting, participants also spoke about how the flexibility of online learning gave them the opportunity to manage their studies in the face of caring responsibilities, family commitments, and health problems:

*“I think if the pandemic has shown us anything, it’s that things can be made much more accessible for people that need it. So for people that do have mental illness or mobility problems or things like that. So if we could just keep some of that awareness to find a way to do online check-ins.” (P17, FG5)*

However, it was also recognized that greater control over their time created challenges regarding motivation and self-regulation, for example, in response to a comment about preferring flexibility, P21 (FG6) described the need for greater structure suggesting that there is a balance to be struck: *“I like having a timetable. I like having structure in my day. I like having routine and I struggled to make my own routine and stick to it at home.”*. Other challenges included prioritizing tasks, keeping themselves accountable when their attendance could not be physically monitored, and managing procrastination. Thompson (2019) suggests that WP students may be particularly vulnerable to a lack of structure and require a clear sense of direction when it comes to navigating the Higher Education landscape.

On the whole, the flexibility afforded by online learning was generally viewed as a positive that increased student agency and autonomy. In contrast, the discussion regarding control over the working environment was largely negative and whilst some of the issues described will have been faced by all students, many will have been exacerbated for those from a WP background. Access to an appropriate study space and being able to separate their study space from their personal space was problematic with P20 (FG6) describing the impact on their motivation: *“I struggled to get motivated. I struggled to do very much. I struggled with everything. And I assume the reason for that is that I do not have an appropriate study space at home.”*

The need to share resources with other members of the family was also a challenge – space, internet bandwidth, and quiet time were often in competition. P1 (FG1) describes

having to share their working space with their siblings and the tension this caused between them, whilst also having a clear impact on their ability to engage in a live class:

*“She was doing schoolwork so it was kind of like, right, I need the desk now and here’s a laptop. You need to be quiet for like an hour, I’m on a live one and it was like kind of an argument between us, like right you need to shut up for now. We did still have to kind of share a space and you know, switch. It wasn’t great in case like my sister like coming in my room to get clothes, to get whatever stuff and it’s like keep muting myself and I put my camera off in you want in the background”.*

Overall, the online learning environment presented both opportunities and challenges regarding access to resources, however, on both sides, the impact on motivation and engagement stemmed from whether participants felt they had any control over the situation. We find many similarities with Raaper et al., (2022) in that students appreciated the flexibility and freedom of the online pivot, but were often ill-equipped for the distance learning environment in both physical and technological resources, but also in social and study skill spaces. The experience of our participants as specifically from a WP background is arguably not fundamentally different to the experience reported by students as a broad demographic in the literature, however, it was clear that their position of relative disadvantage magnified both the positive and negative impacts of the online pivot.

### **Mental health and wellbeing**

This theme describes how, while many participants had positive experiences of online learning and suggested it may help with social anxiety, their mental health was negatively affected by isolation and lack of social connections. Participants also discussed the feeling of overwhelm as a result of online learning taking longer and the lack of adjustments to workload to account for this.

Many participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with online learning relating to mental health and wellbeing; in particular, the ability to manage their own time and the flexibility of online learning. P1 (FG1), having started university multiple times, discusses how online learning has helped her find a way of studying that works for her, which increased her completion of the studies but also her confidence, and for the first time gave her a positive experience about university:

*“I just say it’s been the best year for me ever out of my whole five years of being there, that it’s the one I’ve been most productive. I’ve actually done all my exams, I’ve completed every semester so I feel like, I just wish everybody could have that kind of positive experience”*

However, participants also discussed how it was more difficult to be engaged in class due to the lack of social connection and people not turning their cameras or mics on: *“the seminar tutor tried their hardest but it didn’t really work out that well. So it just made me demotivated to go to seminars so I didn’t really bother with them once they got near the end.”* (P11, FG3). In addition to the lack of social connection, participants struggled to maintain work-life balance with online learning due to constraints on physical space that may be more likely to affect WP students:

*“I felt like having a study space like in your room was really difficult, like getting out of bed, taking a step, and that’s where you work and then it gets like harder to separate you working and you having fun. And like you know it’s always on your mind”* – participant (P5, FG2)

The emotional burden associated with exams appears to have been alleviated by the use of online exams *“It was a lovely luxury to just go away and take it and be able to do your best on it, not in a state of fear or panic”* (P18, FG5) together with the perception of improved performance *“I’m terrible with exams, I’m that person who’s like, sick in the toilet beforehand, so stuff like really actually helped me.”* (P3, FG1)

Participants discussed how online delivery helped with social anxiety regarding being in busy campus spaces. Whilst suffering from online fatigue, some participants appreciated the provision of online activities for socializing and extra-curriculars; *“I have anxiety being out at night so it was great to be in the comfort of my home. Format like joining stuff on Zoom and things”* (P11, FG3). The general sense of having a choice and control over how to engage with the campus space and student community seemed to alleviate anxiety related to physical university spaces.

However, while some participants found online learning as a whole very positive, many discussed their sense of loneliness, isolation, and struggles with motivation and mental health related to the pandemic and online learning: *“I would say online learning brought my work to a grinding halt for a long time. I struggled to get motivated. I struggled to do very much. I struggled with everything.”* (P20, FG6). The phrase “grinding halt” and the repeated use of “struggle” in P20’s comment underlines their complete sense of disruption by online learning as well as frustration and a sense of overwhelm. This notion of the workload feeling higher due to stress, and online learning taking longer to complete added to the feeling of being overwhelmed and stressed: *“my first lab took me 2.5 days to complete and it was meant to take three hours. That was really hard going”* (P6, FG2). Participants discussed how some lecturers added more materials with good intentions to try and compensate for the online delivery format, but that workload was not then adjusted to



account for the fact that there was extra materials and engaging often took take longer due to students and staff needing to learn a new delivery format.

In summary, while participants had positive experiences of online learning and some managed to address long-standing difficulties with university studies, it was also apparent that the students' mental health was negatively affected, leading to isolation, lack of motivation, non-engagement in class. Participants also felt overwhelmed by the workload and the difficulties of separating work and personal life in confined physical spaces. Paton et al. (2023) suggest a mixed picture in terms of the impact of Covid on students' wellbeing, but report those from traditionally under-represented groups are associated with less positive outcomes, potentially related to the disproportionate impact of social and economic factors. Clearly there is no one experience or solution regarding the impact of online learning on student wellbeing however, there are lessons that can be learned in terms of what may exacerbate existing inequalities which we discuss further in our reflections.

## **Reflections and Recommendations**

The purpose of the current study was to explore how WP students experienced online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, trying to understand what practices helped ameliorate existing inequalities and consider what practices should be retained in future. Taken as a whole, the four themes identified share much in common with self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2017). As it relates to education, SDT suggests that for students to be intrinsically motivated and persist in the face of challenges, they must experience autonomy (the sense of being in control, as reflected in discussion on agency over their time, learning, and environment), competence (feeling effective and capable in one's actions, as reflected in discussions regarding online exams and the learning curve with switching to online learning), and relatedness (the feeling of being connected to others, as reflected in discussions regarding the need for authentic connections and the various consequences to both academic and social skills as well as mental health that a lack of connection resulted in).

As previously observed (MacKay et al., 2021), the WP student experience is not a monolith with a standard set of characteristics that can be applied throughout the entire population. The authors recognise that study is limited in its scale, taking place across two ancient Scottish universities with WP agendas which will shape the experience of the WP students attending. In particular, our sample was comprised of predominantly White participants and conducted by White researchers. Given the intersection between ethnicity, class, and the experience of prejudice and social disadvantage, a limitation of our research is that the voices and experiences of people of colour are underexplored. This research is

therefore not intended to provide one common experience of WP students that can be 'solved', but instead to provide a greater depth of understanding of the of their experience: there is no one 'correct' way for a WP student, or indeed any student, to experience the shift to distance learning. In exploring what elements of the online pivot fostered inclusivity and which exacerbated inequalities, there may be practices which fit both categories, and we consider how they can be retained to better support student learning by making recommendations for future practice.

### **Recommendation 1 – Where possible, give students' agency over their time and environment.**

Whilst the pivot to online presented varied serious challenges, a consistent theme running through all focus groups was the positive impact of having more control over one's time and environment. Specific to the WP experience, the reduction in commuting time and cost and the ability to better organise university life with caring responsibilities or employment was transformative. The provision of lecture recordings as an inclusive technology is not a new recommendation, even by these authors (e.g., Mackay et al., 2021, Horlin et al., 2023) but it is a very strong one. Importantly, this recommendation is not to replace attendance at live lectures, particularly in light of Recommendation 2, but rather to acknowledge that flexibility is most important for those with the most complex lives and that this interacts with socio-economic factors.

Whilst it may appear antithetical to the recommendation to provide flexibility, it is also crucial to recognise the importance of physical campus spaces and to ensure that students who do not have a suitable working environment at home are able to fully engage with university life. For many of our participants, the absence of a set structure, routine, and a physical space in which to study gave them less control over their environment as they could not separate the demands and limitations of their home-life from university. When deciding whether to flip a classroom or keep an exam online for example, aside from pedagogical considerations it is also important to consider where and when students will be able to engage if their timetabled presence in a quiet lecture theatre or exam hall is not built into the course.

One approach to providing equitable education and provoking changes is to provide 'accommodations' for students, typically with recognised disabilities or learning adjustments. One notable approach to accommodations is that of 'universal design' which aims to put in place procedures to access accommodations without the need of further adaptation or design (Ketterlin-Geller & Johnstone, 2006). There are connections with critical disability

theory, which posits that disability is often defined by a person's ability to interact with their environment, rather than being an inherent characteristic of the individual. Furthermore, this theory advocates that the concept of disability should not be removed from a student's identity, emphasising the importance of inclusivity and acceptance (Hamraie, 2016). Horlin et al. (2023) report on the criticality of lecture recordings for disabled and neurodivergent students arguing that the provision of recordings should be universal rather than by accommodation given the diverse range of experiences and issues they can support. Providing flexibility that allows agency over time and study environment can be viewed through a similar lens for WP students. Rather than having to out themselves and their circumstances, embedding a level of flexibility through universal design for learning can help empower WP students to take control of and manage their learning in a way that suits them best.

## **Recommendation 2 – Create and promote opportunities to develop a sense of belonging.**

Both academic and peer support have been identified as key components to developing a sense of belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2012) but the latter may be particularly challenging for WP students e.g., being first generation students, lack of access to social support networks, less access to financial support. Whilst flexible and accessible access to course materials is important, the experience of the pandemic highlights the need to balance flexibility with structure and the opportunity to create meaningful connections. Therefore, a recommendation is to ensure peer and academic support are explicitly embedded within a course. Collaborative learning tasks such as group projects and focused class discussions can facilitate peer support networks, although such tasks should be inclusive and small stake, to facilitate positive relationships. Academic support should begin with clear and unambiguous communication thus reducing anxiety around the complexity of institutional systems and processes, something that is often a barrier for WP students. Ensuring a range of pathways to engage with staff and course content can also help promote inclusive practices and foster a sense of belonging.

It is also the case that existing structures and traditional formats can be used to support belonging. For example, Nordmann et al. (2021) argue that traditional lectures can provide opportunities for students to come together and engage in informal peer support. Creating opportunities to increase social connections does not have to require flipping the classroom and reimagining one's pedagogical approach, even simple adjustments like introducing short breaks in lectures and encouraging students to talk to each other may help increase relatedness for those who need it the most.

### **Recommendation 3 – Recognise the skills, knowledge, and strategies that are influenced by social capital as part of learning design**

Much has been written about the need to make explicit the “hidden curriculum” (e.g., Birtall et al., 2022; Pownall et al., 2021). Our analysis further supports the idea that ensuring all students have equal access to the skills, knowledge, and strategies that will help them succeed is a critical responsibility of higher education. Educators cannot assume that students will arrive at university knowing how to study, or when and how to ask for help as doing so will advantage those who arrive with greater social capital.

The experience of the online pivot by WP students reported here provides several examples of practice to encourage or avoid. Be explicit about how students can seek help and in messaging, be mindful of reinforcing the fears of those who will “keep their head down” so as not to be a burden. The use of tools that grant anonymity may be helpful however, there is also a balance to be struck with anonymity in that it can sever the social connection between students and staff and being able to ask questions is an important skill students must learn. Without the opportunity to develop the confidence to do so, we risk further widening skills gaps that exist along lines of social class.

Whilst the students in our study appreciated the greater flexibility online learning provided, the ability to self-regulate this greater independence effectively posed a clear challenge. Embedding opportunities across the course to engage with SRL tasks can provide students with the scaffolding required to support development of SRL and metacognitive skills. English and Kitsantas (2013) provide some examples of how this might be embedded within course content e.g., self-reflection activities which could be task-based (e.g., how could I improve the task outcome?), or more holistic self-reflection (e.g., what are the aspects of this task I find most challenging?), inclusive problem-based learning tasks that include a range of scaffolding. Formative assessments are also a route to promote self-regulated learning allowing students to identify gaps in their learning and develop strategies to address these gaps.

### **Conclusion**

The experience of our participants as specifically from a WP background is arguably not fundamentally different to the experience reported by students as a broad demographic in the literature, however, it was clear that their position of relative disadvantage magnified both the positive and negative impacts of the online pivot. For example, the need to share space and resources is directly influenced by social class and income; the compound effect of anonymity and not wanting to bother staff interacts with a lack of social capital, and the impact of reducing the opportunity for informal peer support and the development of study

skills through observing others is exacerbated for those that arrive at university needing more support in developing self-regulation learning strategies. Incorporating some of the recommended pedagogical practices suggested here can help contribute to a more equitable experience for WP students within HE.

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## **Appendix A: Focus Group Schedule**

### **Set up stage (Approx 5 minutes)**

Participants welcomed, introduced to moderator. Confirm all participants have had sight of the project information form, have had opportunity to ask further questions regarding the process, and are happy to proceed with signed consent forms.

### **The following information is conveyed by the moderator:**

Focus Group Purpose: We're running this focus group to find out more about how you guys feel about your experience of online learning in the past year.

You have been invited to participate because you came into the university through a widening access route, after taking part in a widening participation pre-entry programme at school/college/ Summer School. When people talk about 'widening participation', they often use words like 'inclusion', 'accessibility', 'equity' and 'diversity' interchangeably. The European Universities Association provides the following definitions:

Diversity refers to the make-up of a group, such as the sex, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural associations, religious affiliation, physical or mental conditions, health conditions, and socio-economic background.

Inclusivity refers to the actions taken to ensure these diverse backgrounds are all being valued within the group and implies the institution is aware of the differences and privileges within the diverse group.

Equity acknowledges that people have different starting points, and that specific barriers are faced by some groups of people that may need to be removed or overcome in order for them to participate meaningfully.

Another useful way of considering these connected concepts, is that diversity can be considered the 'what', inclusivity can be considered the 'how', and equity can be considered the 'goal'.

My name is XXXXXX and I'm coordinating this focus group. We are recording it via Microsoft Teams which will produce automatic transcriptions that we will then edit for accuracy. The transcriptions will be analysed by the three research teams on the project at the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. All data will be anonymised before it gets reported to anyone else in the universities.

We have a number of ground rules.

1. We want you to do the talking. We'd like everyone to participate, and I might call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while. This is not an assessment, I'm not marking your performance, I just know that sometimes people like me talk more than others and I want to make sure nobody is missed out.
2. There are no right or wrong answers. I don't assess any of you. I want to know about your opinions, and they're all important. If you disagree or agree with something that's being said it's important that I know that. All opinions matter.
3. This should be quite a fun chat, and I don't think anything will make you feel uncomfortable or unhappy, but if you feel you don't want to answer or are getting uncomfortable please feel free to say and it is fine to leave at any time.
4. As you've read in your form, we will be recording the group so we can capture everything you have to say. We may use some of the information in future

publications to help other universities make decisions about how they educate their students, but we won't identify any of you by name. Your anonymity is guaranteed. I will make sure I anonymise all data before it is passed on to other members of staff. Does anyone have any questions at this stage?

When consent is established the recording will be turned on.

**Ice breaker exercise (approx. 5-10 minutes)**

What was your favourite TV show/film/book you watched/read over lockdown?

Did you take up any hobbies during lockdown?

**After participants warmed up:**

What has been challenging to you during online learning? Why?

- Prompts:
- What was your experience of accessing and using technology this year?
- How has your study space been this year? (Did you share it with other family members, did you have access to a quiet space?)
- How has online learning affected your motivation and productivity?

How has your workload been this year?

What was your experience of engaging with in academic activities, for example, engaging with members of staff or students on your course, using office hours, or participating in discussions either on Zoom or via text for example on Teams?

Prompts:

- How did your engagement compare to previous years?
- Did you go to fewer or more events than usual/expected? Why?

What was your experience of engaging with the university community regarding extra and co-curricular activities (e.g., societies, social events, academic talks not related to your course)?

Prompts:

- How did your engagement with the community compare to previous years?
- Did you go to fewer or more events than usual/expected? Why?

What aspects about online learning have you enjoyed/found positive? Why?

- Follow-up: What aspects of online learning would you like to retain in the "new normal"? Why?