



# 'Engagement' Discourses and the Student Voice: Connectedness, Questioning and Inclusion in Post-Covid Digital Practices

SPECIAL COLLECTION:  
LEARNING FROM  
LOCKDOWN

ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 crisis has led to a rapid pivot to online teaching and student engagement across higher education internationally, due to public health 'lockdown' measures. In March 2020 in the UK this move was sudden, and universities were forced to move their provision to digital formats with little preparatory time, and in many cases, inadequate training and experience. In the subsequent period, higher education institutions have prioritised the enhancement of digital education, with a range of strategic initiatives and training programmes for teaching staff. This paper, written by a staff-student partnership of authors, reports on two institutionally-supported studies conducted at a large, research-focused university in England, in which student views were sought on their experiences and priorities surrounding online engagement during the Covid-19 crisis. In our discussion of the findings, we argue that the student accounts challenge some of the mainstream assumptions about constructs such as student 'inclusivity', academic 'community' online, and teaching which encourages 'questioning', requiring us to think more deeply about what constitutes a meaningful and rich online educative experience. In the spirit of 'lessons learned' from the Covid-19 pandemic, the paper proposes alternative conceptions of these values, emphasising relationality, communities, difference, and the importance of an ethos of care. We conclude with a discussion of findings, implications for theory, research, policy and practice in a post-pandemic context, proposing that an ethos of care be recognised as central to the development of digital education and the practices and ethics of student engagement.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 crisis has led to radical changes to teaching and student engagement across education, due to public health 'lockdown' measures and the closure of the majority of university face-to-face teaching. In March 2020 in the UK, provision was moved to digital formats with little time for planning. Since then, higher education institutions have worked to enhance digital education, with guidance for teaching staff, and advice provided at a national level. The paper will provide a critical analysis of a national-level advisory document for universities, focused on how to enhance 'student engagement' in digital education. We argue that this type of guidance, while apparently 'student-centred' in its nature, is ultimately derived from a somewhat simplistic conception of 'engagement' as situated primarily in student interaction. We describe an institutional initiative which proposed 'core' values for digital higher education, and report on two related studies. One consisted of focus groups exploring student perspectives on these values, the other was a survey focused more broadly on student experiences of different modes of digital engagement during the Covid-19 crisis. Our analysis found that in both data sets, strong themes emerged around what we propose to be a deeper, more affective set of values - those of relationality, respect, communities, difference, and the importance of care. We conclude with a critical discussion of how we might conceive of 'student engagement', with implications for strategy development, curriculum design and the development of pedagogic relationships, in the Covid-19 crisis and beyond.

## DISCOURSES OF ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL HIGHER EDUCATION

A substantial body of research literature has explored what constitutes 'high-quality' digital higher education. Although, rightly, no consensus exists surrounding this complex, varied field of practice, several themes have emerged which are regarded as desirable features, echoing priorities established on-campus. At the risk of oversimplification, a broad alignment with 'student-centred' pedagogy has taken place, with an emphasis on what is often termed 'active learning'. This marks a move away from a model of 'content delivery', towards a more interactive approach, explicitly informed by social constructivist beliefs about knowledge emerging via discussion and sharing of ideas. This has been accompanied by an emphasis on flattening of teacher-student hierarchies, and an ethos of inclusion and valuing of different positions and perspectives.

These moves are clearly positive, marking a departure from what some regard as a limited, formulaic 'chalk and talk' teaching methodology seen to have dominated previous eras. This shift is apparent across the sector, in teaching and learning strategy documents and approaches, characterised by constructs such as 'access', 'inclusion', and 'student engagement'. However, this ethos is not without its critics. As Kahn (2013) argues, the concept of student engagement has not been strongly theorised. The use of the term varies in different contexts; in the US, the emphasis tends to be on broad participation in campus life (e.g. Barkley 2010; Quaye & Harper 2015), while in the UK, it is used more to refer to engagement with 'teaching and learning'. Coates defined the features of student engagement as:

- Active and collaborative learning
  - Participation in challenging academic activities
  - Formative communication with academic staff
  - Involvement in enriching educational experiences
  - Feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.
- (Coates 2007: 122)

Although these features appear positive, a critical analysis reveals an emphasis on normativity, in terms of how the student is expected to behave, and to be. There is a strong focus on activity, collaboration, communication, and community here, also reflected in Trowler's influential (2010) review. Kahu (2013) provides a critical reframing, identifying student engagement as a 'metaconstruct', consisting of four perspectives; behavioural, concerned with teaching practice; psychological, focused on the individual internal processes; sociocultural; and finally, a 'holistic' perspective, which might integrate all of these. She points out the historical connection between behavioural perspectives and quality assurance, in which certain types of student behaviour have come to stand as a proxy for learning. Kahu and colleagues have developed

these ideas in subsequent work (Kahu & Nelson 2018; Kahu, Picton & Nelson 2020), for the purposes of this paper, the 2013 critique remains the most salient.

The student engagement literature has predominantly focused on the campus. However, a body of work has, in parallel, explored online engagement, in particular questions surrounding the ways in which ‘online presence’ might be enhanced. Foundational work by Garrison and colleagues explored the complexities of the construct (e.g. Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000, 2001; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005), crucially, in the latter paper pointing out that ‘interaction is not enough’ to foster a sense of presence. This echoes issues raised by Kahu, pointing to a need for a more nuanced understanding of student engagement, both face-to-face and online. Subsequently, the concept of ‘connectivism’ gained currency in digital education (e.g. Siemens 2005; Downes 2011). This approach involves a strong focus on interaction and participant-generated content, with learning seen as distributed across networks and nonhuman actors. However, despite its apparently radical nature, connectivism has been critiqued for reifying attributes already familiar in mainstream educational discourses, such as individualism, and for reinscribing normative demands for observable ‘active learning’ (Knox 2016; 2021). It can be argued that a normative stance may arise, potentially leading to various forms of *performativity* in students, as opposed to providing space for a range of engagement approaches, in a manner which exercises student academic freedom (e.g. Macfarlane 2017; Gourlay 2021). In educational philosophy, the related point has been raised that an over-emphasis on ‘learning’ over teaching may lead to ‘learnification’, rendering the idea of the figure of the teacher as somewhat redundant, or even problematic (e.g. Biesta 2012; Gourlay 2015, 2021). Bond et al. (2020) conducted an extensive narrative review of studies into digital student engagement, finding a lack of definition and theorisation, and in particular a dearth of qualitative research. This reinforces the need for more focused and critical examination of what we mean by the term, and for studies ‘...which reveal *how* people perceive this educational experience and the actual *how* of the process.’ (Bond et al. 2020: 22).

A recent publication from JISC, (the UK government body focused on the development of digital higher education), explores the nature of ‘Active Learning in a Digital World’ (Barrett 2020). Barrett poses three questions: ‘What is active learning?’ ‘What are the benefits of active learning in the digital world?’ and ‘What teaching methods can we use to enable and support active learning?’ She states:

‘Active learning is the opposite of passive listening. It focuses on what our learners are actually doing in our classes; what activities people are taking part in during our workshops; and how students are interacting with peers and resources outside class time.’

(Barrett 2020)

We see a particular emphasis here on group activity outside class time. Barrett claims that active learning can confer a range of benefits:

- Empowerment and confidence
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Lifelong learning
- Lifelong employability
- Health and wellbeing
- Social interaction and citizenship.

(Barrett 2020)

However, substantive content is not mentioned here, rather the list focuses on a more generic set of potential educational outcomes. The guide suggests a range of teaching interventions, promoting the following student activities:

- Researching and recording information
- Discussing and debating
- Reflecting and sharing ideas
- Collaborating on projects and presentations
- Taking part in games and activities
- Using digital resources.

(Barrett 2020)

This is a brief, practical guide to educators coping in a crisis, and it is not our intention to be overly critical of what are good suggestions. However, this does reveal some core assumptions in the sector about digital higher education. One aspect is again the emphasis placed on *interactive activities* as the solution to the challenges of digital education in the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as discussed above, this construct is under-theorised, and relies on a performative, and ultimately disciplining model of student engagement, which does not fully recognise the complexities of student orientations, affect, and difference. In the next section, we report on two research projects which investigated student perspectives surrounding digital engagement during the ‘lockdown’ and argue that the assumptions set out in the literature, and expressed in the JISC document, are profoundly complicated and challenged by the student accounts.

## FOCUS GROUP STUDY: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

A working group was commissioned in early 2020, to respond to the unfolding pandemic, and plan for the future of online education in the faculty. The group agreed that *core values* should guide development. A scan of digital education strategy in the sector revealed the ‘Near Futures Teaching’ project (Edinburgh University Centre for Research into Digital Education 2020). This two-year project was guided by futures-thinking (e.g. Facer & Sandford 2010; Amsler & Facer 2017) and design-based methodologies. Scoping research was conducted with 300 staff and students, and four core values were distilled: *experience over assessment, diversity and justice, relationships first* and *participation and flexibility*. Several connections were identified between this and our own university’s educational model, which proposes six dimensions of ‘connectedness’ in the conception of the ‘connected curriculum’ (Fung & Carnell 2017). The brochure includes the following aspiration:

‘Through engaging in research and enquiry, through taking students to the edge of knowledge, and through changing the nature of the dialogue between staff and students, UCL will offer an even richer and more rewarding education experience. Students will be better equipped with a range of essential skills needed for an unknown future; they will be more engaged with their learning, and will be more autonomous thinkers.’

(Fung & Carnell 2017: 3)

A salient, although implicit, point is the emphasis on community and relationships, and what it means to be ‘connected’ at a personal, affective, and relational level. The group identified three core values, combining the cutting-edge, evidence-based values derived at Edinburgh with the established internal strategy, proposing that digital education at UCL Institute of Education should be *connected, questioning, and inclusive*.

The value of being connected builds on the established strategy, with a greater emphasis on relationships and communities online. Arguably, the online environment requires particular attention, in the absence of face-to-face relationship-building. Questioning was proposed to capture criticality; questioning ideas, methodologies, and hierarchies. Again, this may be lost in digital formats, where a pragmatic, cost-cutting ‘delivery’ approach may predominate, limiting engagement, and rupturing pedagogic relationships. The value of being *inclusive* expressed that equitable access to engagement needs to be ‘worked on’ in an active, politicised, and ongoing manner, to combat structural power imbalances, which can become further exacerbated in digital formats. The Institute of Education had already funded the Moving Online to Teaching and Homeworking (UCL 2021b) study which investigated the impacts of the Covid-19 lockdown on university staff (Gourlay 2020; Gourlay et al. 2021). To explore student experiences and perspectives on these values, Gourlay, Katsapi and Warwick invited student representatives to take part in focus groups. Ethics clearance was granted, anonymity assured, informed consent granted, and focus groups were conducted via Teams. Twenty-seven students took part in six groups, ranging in size from three to seven. Under- and postgraduate taught students were among those participating in four of the groups (representing four departments), one consisted of doctoral students, and one initial teacher education students. Apart from the latter, all groups contained both international and ‘home’ students. The focus groups were recorded on Teams with consent, and the files were externally transcribed, anonymised, then analysed via close reading against the three themes identified above.

## SURVEY: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

During the same period, Riding, Campbell, Crisan, and Clark secured UCL internal funding under a student-staff partnership scheme (UCL 2021a) to undertake research in their department into postgraduate taught student (PGT) experiences of online learning during the Covid-19 crisis. The research utilised a bottom-up approach to project design and data collection, with two student representatives (Riding and Campbell) identifying key issues raised by their peers as the basis for the research. The study design was also underpinned by theory and processes of student-staff partnership; and provided a space for PGTs to reflect on their experiences of moving to online learning, not only to help prepare future students, but also to inform academic staff by making them more aware of the challenges students face when engaging in a wholly digital environment.

To elicit PGTs' views on the swift move to online teaching, the student-staff team developed an online survey using a range of question types available in Microsoft Forms (multiple choice, ranking, Likert and 'open' text). For example, multiple choice questions were used to identify preferred online learning environments (synchronous, asynchronous, no preference) and online learning experiences during 'lockdown' (masters modules, supervision etc.). Five-point Likert scale questions were used to gather information on specific aspects of learning online: students had the opportunity to specify their level of dis/agreement with statements such as "I have good communication with my peers" and "I am more comfortable collaborating online than face-to-face". Participants were also asked to rank learning activities in order of preference for synchronous and asynchronous learning environments (e.g. live/peer collaboration, teacher presence, posting in live chats, sharing in break-out rooms). Open text questions allowed participants to articulate pre-Covid online learning experiences, summarise any helpful hardware and/or software for online learning and share any online learning advice with the next cohort of students.

Microsoft Forms' built-in data visualisation tools greatly assisted with data analysis; stacked column displays were used to allow part-whole comparison of students' responses to the ranking and Likert questions, which identified the percentage of students ranking an item (first to last) or specifying level of agreement for a statement (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Over 400 PGTs were contacted about the study. The 28 PGTs from the department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment who responded based their answers predominantly on learning experiences related to their respective Spring/Summer Masters modules (23), webinars (16), personal tutorials (15) and supervision (9). The participants represented all modes of study across a broad age group; 14 were full-time students, 7 part-time (over two years) and 7 on the flexible mode (3–5 years). Of the 28 respondents, 6 volunteered to contribute to a video: 'Preparing for Online Learning - Tips and Advice from the COVID Cohort'. Despite the low rate of response, the analysis of the data provided a valuable insight into the experiences of our PGTs. The survey data fed into both a report, that was shared with staff at the UCL Institute of Education via department leads for learning and teaching. The scripts for the videos were written by the student participants to reflect broad themes within the data, through the more personal and immediate lens of their own experiences. These themes included: managing the experience for students with different responsibilities, asking questions, dialogue and communication, and practical concerns. Participant contributions were recorded remotely and were then compiled to create the video, which was disseminated to prospective UCL Institute of Education students for 2020–2021. Throughout the study, there was a strong focus on student experience and student input: the project was conceptualised by a student (Riding), who was then supported by two staff members (Crisan and Clark) and another student representative (Campbell), who then worked with participants to develop their video contributions. The aim of this approach was to give a platform for students to document and share the complexities of their experiences on their own terms. Although the two studies were not connected from the outset, they had a shared focus, and strongly overlapping themes, which we will explore in the next section.

## FINDINGS

The findings will be considered in terms of the three values discussed above (*connected*, *questioning* and *inclusive*). The focus group study was explicitly designed to explore these three

values. In contrast, the survey study arose independently as a ‘bottom up’ and more open investigation of student experiences in one department. Despite this, in analysing the data, what struck the two study teams were the common issues and underlying priorities reported by student participants, with regard to the three values – and it is these commonalities in particular that we report on in this paper.

## FOCUS GROUPS: ‘CONNECTED’

Participants noted the importance of feeling connected with staff and other students, and that they missed on-campus activities such as study groups, forums and discussions. These were especially important for undergraduates, with interactions and friendships reported as one of the main reasons they attended university. Feeling connected with the department was also said to offer stability and peace of mind. Some undergraduates lived in ‘crowded’ flats without adequate technology to engage effectively online. It was noted that online interaction can feel uncomfortable, and that the ‘etiquette’ was different. They suggested that asynchronous teaching might encourage students to disengage, or ‘zone out’. PGT students expressed frustration with the Covid-19 circumstances, with some stating that online learning and teaching felt ‘limited’. Some also noted collaborative work could be difficult online, especially when promoting investigative learning and independent thinking.

Participants suggested how to improve a sense of connection. Three broad areas were mentioned: social events, support for wellbeing, and academic development. The importance of ‘structuring in’ social events was emphasised, such as moving on-campus events such as photography, tai chi and tango online via a Moodle ‘creative space’. Such events, it was suggested, helped make students feel part of the faculty. The Student Support and Wellbeing team were said to be ‘very good’; personal tutors, it was suggested, could remind students of this service. More broadly, building a *caring ethos* emerged as an important theme. Regarding academic development, it was suggested that more lunchtime lectures and links to research centres could be offered. Some participants had run a research-based seminar, with academics invited. This, participants noted, had helped students to develop a sense of ownership of academic work, also breaking down hierarchies.

Some PGT participants had set up weekly peer-learning groups to discuss assignment questions and share ideas. These were moved online via WhatsApp and Zoom, and they noted that such peer-led activities should be more actively promoted by lecturers. The use of social media and online platforms to stay updated and to socialise were said to be ‘powerful’ in sharing experiences about programmes of study, engendering a sense of not being alone, with the creativity of students to connect virtually noted. Where lecturers had connected via the University VLE or through ‘coffee catch-ups’, on Teams or Zoom, facilitation of reading groups and email updates, this enhanced feeling connected, promoting ‘a sense of belonging’. Some suggested additional opportunities supported by Postgraduate Teaching Assistants could be added, including careers advice, and facilitating student connections across programmes to discuss ‘crossover’ themes and build new networks.

These findings suggest the central importance of *relationality*, *belonging* and *care* to the notion of being *connected*. The desire to interact informally, and via synchronous contact, was emphasised. Importantly, these activities were not presented as recreational, extra-curricular, or as optional ‘add-ons’. Rather, they appeared central to engagement, belonging and motivation. While such social elements have perhaps been theorised in the educational literature as somehow ‘outside’ of educational practice, in the data these encounters emerged as fundamental to students’ concerns. In a face-to-face setting, by their nature, these subtle, semi-private, ephemeral forms of interaction often take place in the interstices between ‘official’ ‘teaching and learning’, such as the corridor chats, and coffee break questions. These small and seemingly inconsequential exchanges may make a student feel ‘seen’ and part of a community. It might be argued that digital formats risk having much of that personal contact, human connection and serendipity ‘stripped out’, leaving a bare ‘delivery’ model, unless they are deliberately and actively designed in.

## **SURVEY: 'CONNECTED'**

This analysis explores participants' 'affective connection', rather than the technical elements of 'being connected', such as issues with broadband connectivity. Initially, over half of the participants reported finding remote learning isolating, and the majority felt particularly disconnected from their peers. For some participants (57%) it was not just the face-to-face learning they missed, but also the peripheral social interactions, as described above. As an example, one participant in the video emphasised the importance of dialogue with other students outside of formal sessions, and how the loss of this social group had taken away their forum for informal discussion about their experiences and ideas relating to the programme over dinner after class.

Synchronous sessions were the preferred mode of online engagement for most participants (61%), which may be related to the fact that this environment may better replicate the 'connectedness' of a face-to-face environment. When asked to explain this preference, participants stressed the importance of being able to engage in real-time dialogue and discussion, and described the value of being able to 'see other students', albeit through virtual means. Some participants indicated that synchronous sessions helped them stay connected to a regular routine and prevented 'timewasting'. One participant reported that synchronous learning felt more active, and another claimed that asynchronous discussion threads were incomparable to the real-time discussions afforded by synchronous environments;

'Students also miss the opportunity to engage in live discussion, which cannot be compared to a discussion thread. There is no chance for collaboration. Asynchronous learning seems to lack the qualities of effective learning that we endeavour to enact in our own practice.'

(Survey)

In contrast, preferences for asynchronous learning were largely driven by practical constraints; participants were working full-time, and/or in different time zones, although one full-time participant championed asynchronous learning because s/he could 'fast forward when people ask questions which are not very interesting', hence initiating a greater degree of autonomy. Broadly, both synchronous and asynchronous learning were praised as becoming more interactive over time.

To delve deeper into the specific learning activities of synchronous/asynchronous learning, participants were asked to rank features, such as 'peer collaboration', 'sharing work in breakout groups' and 'posting to forums'. For synchronous learning, 'peer collaboration' (42%) and 'teacher presence' (38%) were cited as the most enjoyable aspects of this real-time learning environment, whereas 'sharing work in breakout groups' was favoured less by (8%) participants. 'Peer collaboration' was ranked as the least enjoyable feature (57%) in an asynchronous environment, but instead, watching recorded presentations was the preferred activity (57%) for asynchronous engagement.

Despite the fact that this study did not directly address the concept of being 'connected', there are clear echoes of the findings reported in the focus groups with regard to this value. Around half the students in the survey also reported a sense of isolation in the Covid-19 crisis, although more than half reported it was easy to access information; again reinforcing the point that feeling 'connected' is more than a functional quality of digital education, but is necessarily affective and relational. The social aspect of being able to see interlocutors live in synchronous engagement was also favoured by participants, cited as a way of keeping 'on track', perhaps through a sense of obligation to the community. Again, the importance of relationships and belonging was emphasised, with a focus on being able to 'see' each other. This data, taken with the focus groups, appears to complicate the rather simplistic discourse of 'interaction = active learning', as critiqued earlier in this paper. Instead, the subtle, affective, incremental, relational aspects of belonging and community are revealed.

## **FOCUS GROUPS: 'QUESTIONING'**

Responses focusing on how educators might encourage 'questioning' covered a range of areas. Participants suggested discussion should not be confined to academic papers; but could

include consideration of relevant news and current affairs. However, participants emphasised the importance of a sense of a 'safe' environment where they can express different views, with *respect* and *autonomy* mentioned as values to uphold. Participants found reflective questions helpful in developing a questioning stance, and they highlighted the importance of modelling the application and synthesis of ideas, to develop criticality. They felt it was important to provide enough space online for questioning and the deconstruction of knowledge. The need to avoid dominant orthodoxies was emphasised, to ensure different sides of arguments were presented alongside different approaches and theories. An introductory session on academic study was suggested, showing what a 'questioning approach' might look like, with a need to push students out of their 'comfort zones' by modelling how to express disruptive thought. Students also emphasised the importance of being shown how to identify evidence-based resources, and how to critique ideas. The need for mature students, in particular, to be guided in getting back into studying was emphasised, and the importance of involving the faculty Writing Centre from an early stage was also raised. A suggestion was made to set up a 'journal club' with discussions on the literature, and the use of smaller synchronous groups using online chat and spoken interaction, to build rapport for discussion.

What is striking here is the level of detail and the nuanced insights that the students provide. There are also broader themes which can be identified within this data. One is a granular focus on the 'how' of questioning and criticality – the students appear to view questioning and criticality as a set of *practices* - rather than an abstract value. In this regard, they recognise that there are components of questioning which must be made apparent and worked on, as an epistemic practice. Application and synthesis of ideas, specific techniques such as reflective questions, showing different sides of arguments, explicit teaching of how to enact a 'questioning' approach, how to source and evaluate appropriate evidence, how precisely to exhibit criticality in assignments, modelling of disruptive thought, and the analysis of published work, are all mentioned. A second theme focuses on *relationality*; in which the need for respect and autonomy, space for questioning, plurality over orthodoxy, diversity of material, support for mature students, pushing beyond comfort zones, and nurturing rapport are all raised. The practical, yet sensitive nature of these advice points stands in contrast to the somewhat abstract, aspirational, and broad-brush advice by JISC, which arguably remains at a relatively superordinate level of activity types. Again, we propose that relational, affective, and care-based values are central to the enactment of criticality and questioning. This, arguably, contrasts with how criticality is often presented in mainstream educational discourses - as a hyper-rational practice, enacted by the unencumbered individual human subject in an idealised, smooth and friction-free interactive setting, emerging almost 'by magic'.

## **SURVEY: 'QUESTIONING'**

The results of the survey also suggest the importance students place on the role of questioning in their learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Crucially, there was considerable overlap between 'questioning' and 'connectedness', as students seemed to feel that being connected and comfortable with teachers and peers was an essential *prerequisite* for engaging in 'questioning'. 61% of the participants reported experiencing good communication with teaching staff, who they could contact via a range of communicative platforms made available by the university, inclusive of emails, Zoom, Teams, Blackboard Collaborate with both audio and video options, and virtual rooms or break-out rooms for group activity. After the adjustment to online learning, the teacher-led live discussions in synchronous sessions were reported to have helped promote a more interactive (53%) and interesting experience (50%). One student reported,

'I prefer being able to ask questions and clarify things with the person teaching me. I also get a sense of community and joy when I am virtually meeting with my course mates and lecturers'.

(Survey)

'Questioning' is presented as embedded in communities; one student in the video disclosed that they had become more certain of the importance of dialogue in helping to deepen understanding, advising other students to 'pluck up the courage and ask questions'. As the students' familiarity with the style of teaching developed, they reported being more confident

in participating and interrupting the lecturer, further demonstrating their willingness to actively and critically engage with the experience. One participant stated that ‘...depth of understanding comes from dialogue – challenging and being challenged over ideas’.

Overall, it appears that the modifications made to teaching strategy by the university staff were successful at nurturing student relationships with peers, ensuring that dialogue was accessible through a host of communicative forums, as well as within taught, synchronous sessions. The data shows that engagement and dialogue were also regarded as necessary during asynchronous work (ranked as first choice by 57% of the respondents), to encourage active engagement and dialogue, creating more opportunities for questioning. While participants were not asked to discuss specific techniques employed by staff to encourage questioning, the survey study does however share a connection to the theme of *relationality*. Within the participants’ narratives, *rappport* came across as a particularly important aspect or expectation, which was more evident during this period of distance learning during Covid-19. Here we can see an overlap between the themes of ‘questioning’ and ‘connected’, where rapport with the teacher and peers made students feel more comfortable to challenge and critique ideas being discussed on the course. One student reported in the video that they regarded questioning and challenging as ‘part of being a student’. They remarked that they had found this ‘impossible to replace’ in a fully online environment, although they had increased their interactions with the lecturer in synchronous sessions. The shared online experience and teaching interventions facilitated interpersonal relationships within the context of the cohort, but the data implies a lack of social experiences outside the online learning portals, and hence a modified support network with a lesser sense of familiarity and community. As evidenced through data on asynchronous experiences, students alluded to how a community is not an optional ‘extra’, but a fundamental tool in developing and questioning knowledge and understandings more critically. Some students also expressed the development of a sense of autonomy in the way that they chose to interact with staff and course content, suggesting that students were engaging in *questioning* and challenging the approaches and materials designed by staff.

## FOCUS GROUPS: ‘INCLUSIVE’

In discussions around being *inclusive*, the groups identified the importance of representation across all areas, with one stating: ‘diversity in leadership as well can be quite an inspiration’. Within sessions, they argued that they found it more inclusive when lecturers or seminar leaders raised points applicable to a variety of contexts, e.g. different countries, religions, and ethnicities, to be discussed in depth. Referring to the curriculum and resources, students acknowledged efforts to decolonise and diversify the curriculum; but felt more action was needed. Students asked for more references from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic academics on educational policies, change and legislation.

All groups discussed their experiences with synchronous and asynchronous sessions and offered suggestions for future practice. Their overall message can be summarised as: ‘live is more engaging, but asynchronous is more inclusive’. Some commended the use of breakout groups during synchronous sessions, as a ‘replication of peer-to-peer student discussion and engagement that you get in a classroom environment’. They valued opportunities to reflect together, discuss readings, and share thoughts. Lecturers going in and out of breakout groups and supporting the discussions was compared to going around the classroom to facilitate. Using icebreakers, polls, chats, or other live opinion collection tools was seen as useful. International students mentioned they were not always comfortable with their level of English, and being in large groups could be intimidating, so small break-out groups felt more inclusive. However, synchronous sessions were also deemed problematic, for several reasons. Firstly, they were seen as potentially exclusive for international students in different time zones, or those who study part-time and have work commitments. Secondly, some students live in crowded home environments, lack the technology needed, or reliable internet connections. There was also reference to students with learning difficulties, or mental and physical difficulties finding synchronous work challenging, emphasising the importance of not marginalising students with disabilities. In one student’s words: ‘Inclusion doesn’t just benefit the person with the difference. It spreads far and wide to tolerance, to understanding and to scaffolding up the talents and understanding of those people who otherwise are thought of as being ‘less than’.’ Students

acknowledged efforts to overcome these challenges by providing a variety of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. They also identified adjustments that promoted inclusivity, such as good organisation of material online, e.g. handbooks, pre-recorded sessions, and information about support. They felt that material should be available in advance to accommodate students who learn at a different pace, and should be accessible in different formats for different devices and software, such as for the visually impaired. They also referred to assessments in terms of encouraging inclusivity and diversity, suggesting a module assessed only via one assessment may be challenging. In their view, the use of more components within each module would offer an opportunity to demonstrate more all-round knowledge. They would like the assessment types to vary, to include presentations, group work, tasks and portfolios, allowing students with different abilities and preferences to show their full potential. Across the groups, the importance of including the student voice and feedback to inform future decisions and practice was emphasised, to provide ownership of space and procedures. Moreover, they asked for research seminars, cultures, environments and networks to be designed with students in mind. Once again, in this analysis we see the affective and interpersonal complexities of what being inclusive might actually entail, with an emphasis on relationality, rapport and belonging, in addition to broader points surrounding curriculum content, diversity and access.

## **SURVEY: 'INCLUSIVE'**

In the survey, the theme of social inclusion was not specifically explored. However, the students in this study made references to the digital resources needed to create opportunities for inclusivity when moving to remote engagement. For example, 61% of the respondents mentioned how the digital environments provided by the university enabled their access to the learning resources, and facilitated their communication with staff and peers. The students mentioned those resources made available to them to use immediately after the start of the lockdown in March 2020, and went further to share what worked for them especially well in the new circumstances: VLE and other platforms for hosting courses and modules; Moodle, Lecturecast, Collaborate, Teams and Zoom for live events such as meetings, tutorials, supervision, conferences; and Skype for supervision and conferences. Although half of the survey respondents did not feel the need to invest in new technology, the other half bought new hardware items to improve their online learning experiences: a new bigger computer monitor, noise-cancelling headphones, a printer, a new laptop and stand, a webcam and headphones, an office chair, wireless keyboard, iPad with apple pencil were all mentioned. The survey indicated that 86% of the students were able to access the technology with ease when needed, while most of them found it easy to access the information needed to learn online (support, module content). The survey also indicated that digital inclusion through availability and ease of access of the digital resources was paramount for students to participate actively in the learning.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper opened with an examination of the relevant literature and also a recent guidance document for universities, focused on enhancing student engagement with digital education, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Barrett 2020). 'Active learning' is proposed, via a series of activity types. However, the document does not go into detail as to *how* these activities might inculcate beneficial engagement. As discussed in the review of the literature, there is a recurrent preoccupation with observable interaction as a 'gold standard' for student engagement and desirable student behaviour online, one which can move from aspirational, to normative, to performative. Taking a critical stance towards these assumptions, with reference to leading sector practice and an institutional development focused on enhancing digital education, we reported on two studies which sought to uncover student experiences and perspectives of their experiences of online engagement at a more fine-grained and nuanced level, with reference to the reported lived experience, detailed practice, and affective and relational dimensions of student engagement and a sense of belonging in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The student data suggests the central importance of *relationality* in digital education for these students, with 'live' synchronous interaction in particular valued as an important element of feeling connected, to feel a '...sense of community and joy'. A 'caring ethos' was emphasised,

alongside opportunities to take part in social activities normally held on campus, and ways of bonding with other students socially to deepen learning through informal discussion. Informal contact opportunities with lecturers such as coffee breaks online, were also emphasised. The students also expressed a desire to be more connected to the academic community for example via seminars, particularly in a capacity which made them feel more like ‘members’ of that community, rather than spectators. Again, this seems to reflect the importance of affect and identity in meaningful engagement for the student participants, as opposed to the assumption of a more transactional or pragmatic desire to ‘access’ materials, resources and activities in an instrumental and outcomes-focused manner.

The findings around *questioning* were noteworthy in their focus on the fine grain of *how* to enact a critical approach in academic work. The student responses focused on detailed aspects of how they might learn to take part in critical reading, discussion and writing, through demonstration, direct guidance and practice. Here, questioning and criticality is recognised not only as a *stance* towards learning, but crucially as a set of *epistemic practices* which need to be learned and developed. However, these are not portrayed as simply a set of technical procedures to be copied and applied. Here we also see an intertwining of the relational, the personal and affective. Space, autonomy, confidence, a sense of belonging, and respect are mentioned as central to the project of engaging in questioning and criticality. This presents a challenge, we argue, to the mainstream notion of criticality as a technical or instrumental orientation, to be applied via generic technique. Instead, the importance of *who* the students feel they are, and whether they are clearly ‘seen’ and positioned, and the extent to which they feel they belong in relation to the group, the lecturers, the ideas, and in the institution, seem prior and necessary to any development of *questioning*. The final category of *inclusive* is perhaps most obviously based on relationality, and students again make cogent points about how this value might be enacted in the day-to-day flow of digital education, in terms of the curriculum design and assessment, but importantly also demonstrated in the micro-practices of relationality, enacted via interaction, trust and mutual respect.

In conclusion, analysing the data through relational and affective lenses in some respects undermines the principle of a three-part set of values, or any similar model, and we argue, serves to further undermine the somewhat simplistic assumption of some of the literature critiqued above. The subtle, complex, relational and affective dimensions of student online engagement, we suggest, have been under-theorised, in parallel bodies of research which have placed an over-emphasis on the inculcation of ‘activity’, while paying insufficient attention to what underlies student ability to be ‘active’, their willingness to participate and their sense of belonging, all necessary for engagement to take place. This might contribute to what Kahu (2013) called a more ‘holistic’ perspective on student engagement, and may also inform the literature focused on online ‘presence’ (e.g. Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005). The required ethos, commitment to, and meaningful enactment of these values appear to be highly co-constitutive, entangled and mutually developmental. This has arguably always been the case in the campus setting, but it might be speculated that the current response to Covid-19 resulting in a pivot to mass digital education has exposed ‘cracks’ which may open up, in a context in which people are forced physically apart, only able to communicate via screens in challenging and often isolating circumstances, as opposed to being co-present in the ‘protected’ space of the physical campus. Although it is important to bear in mind that the campus is also a space riven with highly problematic inequalities and exclusions, in the context of the move to fully online, any social ‘glue’ of serendipity, ephemerality, spontaneity, and shared co-presence has largely disappeared. The advice of agencies such as JISC clearly seeks to address this, with helpful suggestions for interaction and activity. The pre-Covid focus of education strategies such as the Connected Curriculum (Fung & Carnell 2017) also emphasises the need for community of various kinds. However, as these studies suggest, there is a particular need for higher education to nurture relationality, belonging and trust - which are necessary for any meaningful education. This is arguably more crucial than ever in digital education, while seeking to respond to this profoundly unsettling and isolating crisis. If there are to be meaningful and critical ‘lessons learned’ from reflections on this intensely challenging and disruptive episode in the history of digital higher education, in terms of how to ensure sustainable engagement and accessibility for all, then we propose the following: a persistent, subtle, sensitive orientation towards affect, relationality and care is required, one which focuses on the unfolding detail of student

experience online, recognising its messy, contingent, affective and complex nature. As Bond et al. conclude, ‘...in order to more fully and comprehensively understand student engagement as a multifaceted construct, it is not enough to focus only on indicators of engagement that can easily be measured, but rather the more complex endeavour of uncovering and investigating those indicators that reside below the surface.’ (2020: 23). Without recognition of these strands, the heart of student engagement and the core values of higher education itself, may be lost.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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