How the Coronavirus Pandemic Impacted Irish Students' Lives, Mental Wellbeing, and

Education

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Abstract

Background: As the Covid-19 virus reached pandemic level life as we knew it changed. All educational establishments closed, resulting in students commencing online learning. The current study aimed to explore first-hand experiences of how 1st and final year college students coped with challenging times in their lives from an educational, mental health and social aspect.

Methods: Participants were recruited through convenience sampling using social media as well as snowball sampling (*N*=10). Participants were either 1st or final year college students from Dublin. Participants ages ranged from 18-23 years. This study used a qualitative analysis therefore semi structured interviews were carried out online through Microsoft Word to explore participants first hand experiences. Braun and Clarkes inductive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data. **Results:** Following the thematic analysis approach, five key themes were identified: (i) Adjustment to online learning, (ii) Preference towards in person learning and delayed communication online, (iii) Lack of emotional support and the importance of meaningful connections, (iv) Missed opportunities and negative thoughts, (v) Anxiety provoked thoughts and being more mindful of others. **Discussion:** The impact of Covid-19 resulted in increased anxiety, stress and loneliness. Lack of personal interactions and emotional support led the participants to an overwhelming time which very often resulted in negative thoughts. Young people also became more mindful of the vulnerable in society. Participants favoured in person learning as opposed to online but if given the choice the majority of participants would choose a hybrid model. Students discussed how they found the recorded lectures a great advantage and also discussed how they save time and money on travel which was a great benefit while online. Concerns addressed relating to online learning were poor Wi-Fi connectivity, lack of support from peers and lecturers and delayed communication.

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Introduction

In Wuhan central China the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) was first discovered in December 2019 (Zu et al., 2020). Originally it was referred to as an outbreak of Covid-19 then in February 2020 due to its rapid escalation in many countries and eventually worldwide it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Covid-19 is a highly infectious disease caused by a new strain of the SARS virus (Hossain et al., 2020). It is the only unprecedented event of its kind to reach a complete pandemic in recent history.

Coronavirus and the Effects of Previous Infectious Disease Outbreaks

A number of studies have examined the impact of infectious disease outbreaks on the mental health of individuals (Hossain, Sultana, et al., 2020; Huremović, 2019; Jalloh et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2010). For instance, Hossain, Sultana, et al. (2020) found that individuals who contract an infectious disease experience symptoms of severe anxiety in the shape of fear and hopelessness due to the precariousness of the situation and the fear of long-term health implications. Similarly, Peng et al. (2010) found following the Sars epidemic participants experienced a more negative outlook on life. They also had a fear of encountering Sars related discrimination and various mental health issues including severe anxiety and depression. In the event of the potential spread of the virus social distancing protocols were put in place by the government and by individuals due to worry and concern (Lo et al., 2005). Furthermore, to prevent contracting the virus attendance at large gatherings were stopped, educational institutes were closed, individuals were also encouraged to wear masks in public areas and were advised to stay at home unless absolutely necessary (Lo et al., 2005). Based on these previous findings, this may give an indication of what to expect from a mental health and educational aspect in relation to Covid-19 and also what the appropriate interventions are to prevent the spread of the virus.

Education

Looking back in history, one of the earliest pandemics of relevance to note was the Spanish flu of 1918 (Thomas & Foster, 2020). This pandemic had a considerable effect on colleges as unlike other infectious outbreaks it infected a younger age group including individuals aged between twenty to forty years old. At the time many students between the ages of eighteen to twenty-two attended boarding school therefore this placed an onus on the college to be more mindful of the risks involved.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and a spike in the number of cases educational institutes such as schools and universities globally were forced to close, with the ultimate aim to slow the spread of the disease. To facilitate this, online learning was introduced as an alternative to the conventional method of learning (Adnan and Anwar, 2020). As a result, private and academic life was grossly impacted (Voltmer et al., 2021). This affected 1.6 billion students in over 200 countries (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). In particular, during the first wave of Covid-19 all educational establishments in Ireland were forced to close between the months of March and September 2020, and early in 2021 (Mohan et al., 2020). Furthermore, the move to online learning has significantly impacted students' assessments and evaluations (Timmis et al., 2016).

 In all, there was a mixed response from participants regarding alternative teaching and learning. For instance, a study completed by Aristovnik et al. (2020) revealed most participants were satisfied with the move to online learning and support provided by staff members. However, lack of IT skills and the consciousness of greater workloads prevented them from improving their academic performance in the new learning environment. Similarly, Sahu (2020) reported many participants fear that the pandemic may affect their exam performance as they complete assessments from the home environment with many distractions. In addition, recent

studies discovered that the new e-learning system had posed specific challenges for the participants of less privileged backgrounds (Aucejo et al., 2020). Academic life was particularly disrupted for those participants in the absence of college digital facilities. Also, research found that due to poor internet connection and shortage of computers and IT equipment, as well as a reduction in family income which is problematic due to the steep cost of internet connectivity, it results in an interruption in the academic life of the students involved (Sahu, 2020); (Aucejo et al., 2020).

The overall consensus of a study by Ghasem & Ghannam (2021) revealed that participants favoured attending lectures from home and discussed how it saved their time and effort. Furthermore, up to 96.5% of participants believed that recorded lectures were valued reference materials during the online learning process. However, other participants in the study admitted to encountering technological disruptions and they generally acknowledged that they struggled with the lack of student-lecturer interactions. Similarly, another study had mixed opinions regarding online learning and teaching in third level college (Laili & Nashir, 2021). While findings revealed that it offers flexibility, issues such as poor internet connection presented as a hinderance. Some participants also discussed how they lacked motivation and found it difficult to converse with lecturers and fellow students online. Overall, 91% of participants favoured face to face learning as opposed to online.

Like other countries, the educational system in the Republic of Ireland had to adapt to the current situation by moving their teaching and learning online (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). As well as cancelling traditional college exams and replacing them with continuous assessments (Mohan et al., 2020). Also, students preparing for their Leaving Certificate examinations were among those most affected as the conventional style examination was postponed with a view to

an alternative evaluation (Quinn et al., 2021). This new system together with the enormous amount of study involved undeniably impinged on the regular lives they were accustomed to. The students of the Leaving Certificate class were placed in a period of uncertainty and enormous distress for many. Consequently, they received a state certificate of calculated grades with the choice of sitting the traditional examination later in the year, for those dissatisfied with their grades to ensure they reach their full potential to equip them undertake their next big challenge of their transition to third level colleges. In addition, a qualitative study was carried out by Émon et al. (2021) which investigated the experience the coronavirus had on Irish secondary school students in their final year. The format and eventual result were of great concern to all participants, as the outcome of the Leaving Certificate paves the passage to higher level education.

Mental Health

The main factor of fundamental importance that necessitated scrutiny in the student population was from the angle of coping, anxiety, and the effects of online learning on their mental health. The abrupt change from the conventional method to online learning caused a variety of different emotions. Voltmer et al. (2020) collected information on surveys carried out expressing students' reactions from various countries, the feedback included a quarter of Chinese participants experienced fear (Cao et al., 2020). Other studies discovered sixty percent of participants from Spain, Poland and France admitted to an increase in feelings of stress and anxiety (Díaz-Jiménez et al., 2020; Husky et al., 2020; Rogowska et al., 2020). Furthermore, in Germany forty to sixty percent of participants reported an increase in mental health stress, loneliness, and fear of the future (Schlichtiger et al., 2020). In contrast, about seventeen percent of Bavarian participants reported experiencing less mental stress throughout the pandemic.

However, due to the impact of the college closures there was a significant psychological impact on students' health furthermore disruptions to their set routines, a decrease in physical activity adhering to social distancing and changes in sleep patterns all contribute to the negative mental wellbeing of the student (Cao et al., 2020). Overall due to the rapid onset and contagiousness of the virus there was an inevitable increase in anxiety levels. According to Eren (2021) as anxiety levels elevated a greater number of individuals experienced poor sleep quality, revealing 5.1 percent of an increase. It was also noted by Jahrami et al. (2020) that medical students revealed high patterns of sleep problems compared to the general population with the exclusion of those with Covid-19 symptoms. Furthermore, Elmer et al. (2020) found the effects of the coronavirus between males and females was dissimilar with a higher instance of females experiencing a negative impact on their mental health.

The Current Study

Previous research has established that the social isolation and lockdowns put in place to eradicate Covid-19 have caused numerous problems in all aspects of individuals lives. In addition, there have been adverse effects on the mental health of individuals as well as the academic learning of students. Following thorough analysis of literature on the proposed topic it is visible that the majority of studies are quantitative in nature with the use of questionnaires and surveys and little qualitative research to date. Additionally, many studies have focused on Asian and American populations whereas there are few studies investigating the Irish population.

Unlike research previously explored there is a notable gap in the literature regarding qualitative studies concerning the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health and alternative education system within the Irish student population. However, Émon et al. (2021) carried out one of the only qualitative studies exploring the education and mental well-being of

students living in Ireland. This study sought an overview of the impact Covid-19 had on general life, impact on education and future plans of sixth year students approaching their Leaving Certificate examination. Moreover, this illustrates as the coronavirus disease is a new global disaster and ever developing it must continue to be explored.

Rationale and Research Objectives

The upcoming research project will investigate the impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on the mental health and educational learning of first and final year college students and request them to reflect on the past two years. Through the means of open-ended interviews, the objective is to encourage students to express their thoughts and feelings of their first-hand experiences throughout the pandemic. It is important to address this gap as if we can establish what predicts mental health problems or educational stress and difficulties it means we can develop sustainable interventions to put in place to help students. In addition, this study may give academic staff an insight into the preference of students regarding the three types of education including in person, online learning or the hybrid model. Also, this study could determine if students' mental health needs to be looked at in more depth, in the instance of Covid-19 having a severe impact on the above aspects' colleges may need to address this and put in affective interventions.

Objective 1: To explore first-hand experiences of how Irish college students cope with challenging times in their lives from a mental health, educational and social aspect.

Objective 2: To establish the impacts of isolation and the absence of social gatherings on students' relationships and whether their outlook on life has been altered.

Objective 3: To delve into the impact the online learning system has had on Irish students' mental health and education while identifying steps students take to enable them cope with unanticipated challenges they encounter.

Objective 4: To understand how 1st and final year college students cope with issues involving the alternative education system and to briefly explore students' thoughts on the Leaving Certificate examinations.

Methods

Participants and recruitment

Participants were initially recruited online through convenience sampling however snowball sampling was also used. Details regarding the study were posted on the social media platform Instagram through the researcher's personal account and in WhatsApp group chats where potential participants were asked to message the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study. As part of the inclusion criteria of the current study all participants must be living in the Republic of Ireland and attending third level education. They also must either be in their first or final year of college and having experienced the covid pandemic be willing to share their views on the effect it had on their education and mental health and wellbeing. In addition, students taking part in this research must be between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age. There is a minimal chance of the onset of negative mental health however as part of the exclusion criteria the study could not recruit a clinical group of individuals.

A total of 12 students attending college in Ireland during the covid pandemic showed an interest in participating in the current study. The number of participants nonetheless were reduced to 10 due to Internet connection problems, cancellations and not fitting the criteria requirements. There was a total of 4 female and 1 male first year students and 2 female and 3 male final year students involved in the study. There were 5 students recruited through the researchers personal Instagram page, 2 through WhatsApp group chats and 3 students recruited through snowball sampling. The age range of participants was from 18 to 23 years.

Data collection

As the design of the current study is qualitative by nature, semi structured interviews were carried out online by the researcher through Microsoft Teams. This allowed participants to explore

their first-hand experiences of living through the Covid-19 pandemic and the effect it had on their education and mental health and well-being without being required to adhere to a rigid interview schedule (see appendix D). Each interview question was carefully constructed by the researcher with the proposed research questions and aims taken into consideration, the topics of the questions were based on education, social interactions and mental health and well-being. Each question in the interview schedule were open-ended questions therefore participants were unable to respond with 'yes' or 'no' answers. Prompts were also used when necessary to enable the participants explore and expand on their first-hand experiences of the impact Covid-19 had on their education and mental well-being. The schedule was quite flexible with some interview questions being altered to accommodate the responses given by participants. The researcher used Microsoft Teams to transcribe all participants interviews verbatim for analysis.

Due to the interview schedule being designed by the researcher and not being used previously a pilot study was carried out with one participant. The aim of the pilot study was to enable the researcher to clarify that the data gathered from participants was relevant in relation to the research questions. The pilot student was deemed to be a success and the data gathered was used for analysis to determine the outcome in the current study.

Materials

Participants were sent a URL link via email to Google forms which contained an information sheet. Prior to the interview process participants were also sent a consent form through Google forms (see appendix B), the purpose of this form was to provide evidence of their willingness to participate in the study and their permission to be audio and video recorded. To be involved in this study participants were required to have a laptop and it was essential to

have the computer software Microsoft Teams downloaded onto their laptop to participate in the interview process.

Interview schedule

As part of this research study a new questionnaire has been devised by the student researcher, see appendix D. The questionnaire is comprised of fourteen questions in total. Four subheadings including education which consists of five individual questions, social interactions consisting of three questions, mental health and wellbeing which comprises of three questions and closing questions of which there are three.

Demographics questionnaire

Participants were sent a demographic questionnaire provided in the Google form which informed consent was located, questions included their age, gender and year of education (see appendix E).

Study Procedure

After viewing the researcher's post on social media platform Instagram potential participants who were interested in getting involved contacted the researcher via Instagram direct message or by email. Firstly, the researcher ensured each participant met the criteria required for participation. Once selected to participate in the study, participants were sent a URL link directly to their email address containing a study information sheet that they were instructed to read, (see appendix A) This contained an explanation of what was involved in the study. If the participant was pleased with the information provided and wished to move forward with the study, they were then sent a consent form via email (see appendix B). All participants were informed of their right to cease participation at any point throughout the interview process and withdraw consent from the study at any time without penalty, up until the 14th of February 2022 by contacting the

researcher via email. Furthermore, participants were required to tick a box to state they provide informed consent.

Additionally, due to the uncertainty of the Coronavirus, the researcher conducted interviews online via Microsoft Teams. Each of the 10 participants were sent an invitation to join a meeting to conduct the interview at a date and time of their convenience. Moreover, on the designated day the participant joined the scheduled event through the calendar section of Microsoft Teams. At the beginning of the recording the researcher requested the participant to state they gave informed consent on record and explained they had the option to leave their camera on or turn it off. Following this the researcher began the interview process, participants were asked open ended and non-leading questions encouraging them to discuss their first-hand experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on their education and mental well-being. The interview process consisted of 14 questions (see appendix D). In the instance of feeling overwhelmed the participant had the right to pause for a break or stop the interview at any time they wished. The duration of participant's interviews was between 16 and 34 minutes.

Furthermore, immediately following participation students were sent a subsequent email containing the study debriefing sheet (see appendix C). This included information such as the researcher's name and contact details, the study title, the aim of the study, contact information if they would like to be informed of results of the study and information of their rights informing them that they could withdraw at any time prior to the 14th of February 2022 by contacting the student researcher and providing their unique identity number. In addition, participants were provided with mental health helpline contact details in the event they were distressed following the study.

Ethical considerations

Prior to a study in relation to human participants it is recommended that an ethical review application form is submitted to the National College of Ireland's filter committee. This research is regarded as category B research according to the National College of Ireland's ethics committee guidelines as it comes under the new research methodology subheading. Physical, social and ethical risks did not apply in the research carried out. However, this study involved a few elements which may have potentially caused minimal distress to the participant relating to questions regarding their mental health. Also, unpleasant thoughts may have arisen from individual experiences of isolation and loneliness or perhaps the loss of a loved one due to Covid-19 virus. Additionally, in relation to the interview process participants may have become distressed following disclosure of information of an upsetting nature shared. To address any concerns which may have arisen participants were supplied with information and a debriefing sheet explaining what the study entails and were provided with relevant mental health helpline details if needed (see appendix C). In addition, the debriefing sheet informed the participants of their fundamental rights, confidentiality and that their information would be anonymised, only identifiable to the researcher through a number. Furthermore, all participants were informed that they were able to review their interview transcripts and or withdraw their consent and data if they so wished before the 14th of February 2022.

Data Analysis

The theoretical position used was an essentialist, inductive thematic analysis approach at a semantic level.

Data analysis procedure

To analyse this research Braun and Clarkes inductive thematic analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This comprises of 6 steps which include familiarisation with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes and producing the report. As the data was automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams, in the first phase the researcher read over the interview transcripts several times to familiarise themselves with the data and corrected any errors generated by the software. At this time they also jotted down initial ideas. After familiarising themselves with the data the researcher identified codes or recurring patterns within the data. This involved reading each of the texts and writing synopses points of each participants transcripts throughout. The researcher created a Microsoft Word document with interesting extracts from participants and coded the data. Phase three consisted of sorting codes into potential themes and collecting all the data appropriate to each possible theme and subtheme, coloured text was used to identify each theme and extract used. In phase four the researcher checked to ensure the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the complete data set as well as the overall research question. In addition, phase five involved defining and further refining the themes presented for the analysis and analysing data within them. Names of themes changed numerous times before clear names for each theme were created. Coding samples and thematic map can be found in (appendix F). The final phase consisted of a write up of the thematic analysis involving the first-hand experiences of participants and extracts to back up their findings.

Results

A thematic analysis was performed applying the methods of Braun and Clarke (2006). The outcome of the analysis of the interview transcripts revealed five key themes: Adjustment to online learning, Preference towards in person learning and delayed communication online, Lack of emotional support and the importance of meaningful connections, Missed opportunities and negative thoughts and lastly, Anxiety provoked thoughts and being more mindful of others. Quotations deriving from interviews carried out with each of the 10 participants are presented throughout this section. Additionally, themes and their subthemes are illustrated in appendix F. It is important to note that the overall experiences of first and final year students were extremely similar therefore the researcher did not find it necessary to differentiate between the two groups.

Theme 1: Adjustment to Online Learning

One of the key focal points expressed across all participant interviews was related to the delivery of academic learning through online means. Some students were of the opinion that the home environment was more conducive to a stress-free study routine. A factor which contributed to this was less distractions from peers, as a result students were more focused and this enabled them to use their time more efficiently. Participant 2 stated, *"You just have more time and more space to do things sometimes if you're in college and you have a 2-hour gap you're with friends and can't really get things done, whereas if you're at home and you have a 2-hour gap, you could like re-read stuff or research for an assignment or something."*

The view that online learning was a more constructive means of learning was expressed by P1. They found this method an asset as they worked part time involving anti-social hours which results in fatigue. The *"hour and 30 minutes saved"* by P1 in travelling to and from college is an enormous advantage as the extra period of rest eventually contributes to a sharper

thought process *"Online learning was actually a good thing because like from my experience with the online I'd say I seem to save time and gain a lot more sleep because I work during college (...) instead of getting up at 7 I could get up at 8:30 for a 9am lecture"*. This participant also revealed that the money saved on commuting expenses and lunches in due course are substantial *"It also helped to kind of save money with like travel and lunches out which was a benefit. There are lots of restaurants and shops around my college where I would get lunches and also my friends and I go out every week for lunch."*

On the other hand, participants expressed they were more focused in the college environment and they found the lack of routine at home distracting: *"I find it a lot easier to kind of absorb the content in college and I find it very difficult to keep myself focused if I'm just in a room by myself and so I don't really like the online learning. Also, it can just be really tiring being by yourself. It's hard to get into a routine and stuff"* (3).

When asked if they encountered issues involving online learning technology many participants discussed poor Wi-Fi connectivity. *"I think it was a bit of an adjustment and definitely the Wi-Fi end of it wasn't great, we kind of realised that soon enough. I couldn't hear what the teacher was saying and stuff"* (P4). Another participant discussed how their academic performance was impacted by poor Wi-Fi connection, they stated *"if the connection is a bit choppy or anything, it can be frustrating, but it like it really effects being able to learn"* (P3). *"Wi-Fi and the laptop breaking was my worst experience"* declared (P2), they described how they had to share a laptop with siblings and at times could not attend classes live. This participant called the recorded lectures a "blessing" and this opinion was shared by all participants. Participant 10 revealed they found the recording of lectures *"a great advantage as I missed some classes and could catch up easily"*. Some participants also explained how they had poor

broadband due to where they lived. *"I live in the countryside so here would be really bad for connection. A couple of times I've experienced bad connection or like power outages where I'd have to email my year head that I wouldn't be in class due to a power outage that happened"* (P5). *"Recorded lectures were really a great benefit"* stated (P9) as they declared they lived in a densely built-up area. Furthermore, it was apparent that recorded lectures were a great coping mechanism to overcome challenges encountered during the online learning process.

When asked to explain their views on the continuous assessment method of evaluation as opposed to in person exams, a total of 9 out of 10 participants interviewed were found to favour continuous assessments both in college and at leaving certificate level. Overall students feel that continuous assessment is a more just system and report less stress and less feelings of anxiety, *"I feel I'm not as stressed or under as much pressure"* stated P10. Participant 2 acknowledges the effectiveness of traditional exams but prefers the new system of assessment brought in as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic *"The traditional exams have worked for years, but I don't think they give some people a chance. Like if you are a person like me who studied hard and you probably know as much as the person beside you but get stressed out and overwhelmed you won't do as well."* Another participant captures the intense feelings of pressure felt in the exam room environment which is influenced by other students around them and can be quite distracting *"You're not like watching other people and seeing how much like they are writing or how quick there are. If they're not struggling and I am I panic so like I just I like being by myself, so I just have to focus on myself."* (P7) An additional participant declared *"I feel like anyone could have a bad day. I definitely feel like you need to have kind of a continuous assessment to be honest"* (P5).

Theme 2: Preference Towards in Person Learning and Delayed Communication Online

More or less all participants were of the opinion that the college environment was more conducive to learning than in the home setting as they have the support of their teachers on hand and they can also rely on other students for help and generally to share ideas. *"Not being actually in lecture halls was tough for topics that you might be struggling with. You know the help wasn't there in hand you weren't working beside other students who maybe you could've kind of thrown ideas around with, brainstormed and stuff"* (P9). Participant 4 stated *"Personally, I find it like so much easier to learn like in a classroom-based environment I find that you learn a lot from the people around you as well as the lecturers"*. Similarly, participant 10 expressed that they *"Get motivated more around others and like get like very easily distracted at home"*. Another participant declared they were more energised in the college environment *"In college, you're interacting with people, you kind of feed off their energy and stuff and it keeps you going for the day"* (3).

One participant also discussed their initial fear of moving their education completely online but ultimately felt "proud" of themselves *"Originally when I heard we were going to be completely online I said, I won't be passed in college I won't be able for this online everyday and nobody to help me. But actually I shocked myself I am able for it I can deal with it. I have the best friends that like if I don't understand something I can just text and be like how did you do this or how did you do that? I'm so grateful for my amazing friends"* (P2). It is evident from the findings of the interviews that students greatly appreciate and require the support and assistance from staff and peers and find it vital to cope with the transition to online learning.

Following the commencement of the delivery of teaching remotely on digital platforms and the lack of personal interactions participants felt a strain on the student/ lecturer relationship

and struggled to form a bond with their lecturers, some participants stated *"I don't think I have a bond or a connection with any lecturer in specific at all. I wouldn't even say they remember my name"* (P2) and that *"It's harder to get like the bond with your teacher. You know what I mean and like not hearing their voice or seeing their face like apart from the live classes was just a bit strange overall"* (P4). Participant 9 disclosed that they *"had a lecturer for a whole semester for a class and he was kind of the exception to the camera thing. He didn't even turn his own camera on. It made it so much more difficult to concentrate and was quite distracting just listening to his voice and not seeing him. It's actually mad though thinking of it, I wouldn't be able to, you know, if I walked by him on the street, I wouldn't recognise him."* This participants experience was unique, and no other participants encountered this issue. There is a host of significant elements associated with remote learning that reflects on the student/lecturer relationship involving the overall feeling of unfamiliarity as a consequence of a lack of personal contact.

An emphasis is placed on good student/ lecturer relationships from the students' perspective they feel more comfortable discussing topics in person as lecturers can sense if they are struggling with topics through their body language. One participant relayed *"I'm quite shy so I wouldn't kind of like unmute myself and you know, like ask questions in front of the whole class online, but I wouldn't really have a problem in person cause the teacher can see what you're like you know with your facial expressions. If they say something and you don't understand it and you kind of like make a face, they can see that, whereas like online, they don't really see that. So I just think it's better interacting in person and you like build a better relationship with your teachers"* (P7).

The rapid and unplanned transition to e-learning may have brought about feelings of frustration for some students as they struggled with issues such as delayed communication. Many

students discussed how they felt there would be better communication in person as they could ask questions there and then and get immediate responses. Participant 7 disclosed *"I feel like in person it would have been a lot easier just to have a conversation about something you're having an issue with, rather than sending back and forth emails the whole time and like just waiting a few days for an answer sometimes."*

Also highlighting the change in communication participant 2 stated *"If you need something, and you are in the class, you could ask the lecturer whereas when your home you must wait till the class is over and you have to go online and then email them. It could be a two-to-three-day process sometimes before they get back to you."* Another participant described that they always felt that lecturers were available to help but communication would have been smoother offline *"Teachers were kind of always on hand definitely when I needed anything, but I did find it kind of more difficult to get proper responses for the questions than if it was on a live class. I found that it was a bit kind of almost like robotic, when like you're emailing your teacher, it's like a bit unnatural"* (P4).

Theme 3: Lack of Emotional Support and the Importance of Meaningful Connections

Feelings of sadness and loneliness resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic were evident in the way participants spoke about various aspects of their lives. Some participants missed the college setting as it was one part of their lives in which they could get together with friends. Participants discussed the inability to share problems with one another, the need of emotional support and the loss of connections *"It's been very tough not seeing my friends. I've been going through a lot recently; my mam was diagnosed with a serious illness but like it's not stuff that you want to text somebody. Or if you call them sometimes people are busy. Whereas if like I was in college more I could talk about it."* (P2)

Participant 10 expressed how difficult it was to communicate with peers if they were going through a tough time. This participant declared *"You're not going to text somebody bad news like it's, it's just not right."* Some students discussed the loss of emotions through text messages and social media and the need of reassurance from friends in order to feel better *"All I could say was oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. I feel it's so much more difficult to express your emotions through text like there's no empathy."* (P6) Another participant expressed that they are not in favour of communicating with friends through text and worry how they come across, *"If I'm short with them over text I don't mean it but like sometimes it can come across as if I don't want to talk to them, so I think that it did kind of make me drift from my friends a bit"*.

Other participants discussed the loss of confiding in others and the difference in support from friends as opposed to family members *"I always kind of rely on my friends you know like when I'm going through something like I wouldn't go to my mom about it but I would want to tell my friends and it's not the same like through social media and stuff. It's not like you can see their actual reactions and facial expressions".* (P5)

The lack of interpersonal relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic had an evident psychological impact on participants as they longed for the support of their friends to confide in when faced with complex issues. One participant described how they felt *"restless and on edge"* and "*desperate"* for things to go back to normal. *"I just wanted things to go back to normal and have someone to like really talk to. I had like my family, but you know you'd talk about different things with your friends then you would with your family, just never been able to really let off steam"* (P3).

Another participant recalled times when they experienced awkward silences in conversations due to a lack of personal interactions and perhaps the inability to converse as a

consequence of being completely detached from normal living. "*We were all sitting in our rooms trying to do a zoom and like it just wasn't the same like you kind of run out of things to talk about almost as well and like you kind of realise who your true friends were then, because they are the people who kinda kept in contact with you*" (P4).

Theme 4: Missed Opportunities and Negative Thoughts

A common belief across all participants was that the Covid-19 had a negative impact on student's education, mental wellbeing and social interactions. Many participants felt that they were excluded from the norm and described how they missed the opportunity of the college life experience due to Covid-19 restrictions. One participant stated *"My life particularly college I didn't really experience the college life. It's been rough because I feel like I didn't really get the most out of it"* (P8). Another participant anticipated that college would be a major part of their lives and declared "*I feel like college is also a major thing like, it's a life experience. Just you know societies and meeting people*" (P3). Participant 10 discussed how they regretted the lack of interactions with lecturers and classmates *"As a result of online learning I've missed out on building a connection with my lecturers and making lifelong friends through college events such as freshers week".*

Feelings of being deprived of or being erased from significant life events was a common concept portrayed by participants. One participant described how Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown had an enormous impact on their lives and spoke about how it hindered their freedom, *"I was kind of at the age where I was only starting to go out and have more independence, then it kind of all just came to a halt like when we were properly getting into it"* (P4). Similarly, describing how they were deprived of the adventures of life in their early twenties another participant stated, *"In my 20s I always wanted to travel with people and be able to experience*

new cultures that has all been affected, and you know, festivals, concerts all those things have been impacted. I just would say like my early 20s has been ruined" (P3).

Also discussed by some participants was the missed opportunity to have a debs or a conventional graduation from secondary school. One participant stated *"My debs that was meant to happen last August but it's just kind of being postponed and postponed, numerous times it still hasn't happened. We really don't know if it ever will kind of happen almost at this stage and then like my, my graduation from secondary school like my parents couldn't go"* (P4). All participants encountered a similar belief denoting the substantial number of missed opportunities and the inability to form happy lifelong memories.

Throughout the interviews almost every participant discussed the Covid-19 restrictions implemented in a negative light. A lot of mental energy was focused towards the situation they found themselves in, this took the form of negative thoughts: *"fed up"*, *"mentally drained"*, *"losing my mind"* and *"overthinking"* were frequently used terms. It was apparent that this had a blatant psychological impact on their lives. One participant declared *"Nothing felt fulfilling or anything you didn't feel like huge enjoyment out of it"* (P3). Another participant stated, *"Football is a big part of my life just to like relieve stress and anxiety and stuff like that, so that really had a negative effect on the way I was feeling when I no longer had that escape"* (P8).

Other participants felt that they had changed their outlook on life and had become fixed in their opinions and habits, *"I think I have just got too comfortable now being on my own being in my house. The whole idea of getting up, getting dressed, going out and spending money feels like such an effort"* (P2). While another said, *"I used to be a person that would love to go out and I don't like it as much as I used to now I would rather walk my dog or something"* (P6).

Theme 5: Anxiety Provoked Thoughts and Being More Mindful of Others

The emotional response to the Covid-19 pandemic triggered the foundation of anxiety and an overall awareness of the more vulnerable. One participant disclosed sensitive information referring to a family member whose health was a matter of concern, because of this they had to adhere to strict guidelines: *"People live with people that are vulnerable, so they don't want to risk it, personally my mam is sick so I have to be very careful because of the virus even still"* (P2).

Feelings of awareness of themselves and the strict adherence to appropriate guidelines such as social distancing and mask wearing were shared by some participants, in particular participant 8 who revealed concern for themselves and others *"I have to be so cautious anyways for my own sake and my family sakes, so it's just kind of keeping to social distance and wearing masks and stuff"*.

Fear of contracting and spreading the virus to the vulnerable was a specific concern for participant 3 who took strict precautionary measures to ensure the safety of others, *"I was constantly aware of you know who have I been in contact with? How many people? If I knew I was gonna visit elderly family members I thought okay, I'm going to avoid social interactions for the next two weeks"*. A second participant discussed the importance of antigen testing and their use of them as a precautionary measure, *"Whenever I have like a large group event we all kind of take the antigen test before we go out, just as like cautionary measure"* (P1).

Participants also discussed how they developed a disrupted sleep pattern as they had become anxious and worried due to the Covid-19 situation, *"I felt as if I was so consumed with worry that I just could not sleep at night anymore, I would lie awake for hours"* (P2). Furthermore, participant 4 declared how they were preoccupied with negative thoughts of

contracting and spreading the virus *"When I was in bed at night I would just worry about spreading the virus to vulnerable family members, it was a terrible feeling, I really struggled to get off to sleep"*

Discussion

The current study used a qualitative approach to delve into the experiences of Irish first and final year students during the Covid-19 pandemic and to establish if and how they were impacted from an educational, mental wellbeing and social perspective. Following a thematic analysis of the interviews, five key themes were identified from the data: Adjustment to online learning, Preference towards in person learning and delayed communication online, Lack of emotional support and the importance of meaningful connections, Missed opportunities and negative thoughts and lastly Anxiety provoked thoughts and being more mindful of others.

With reference to the theme "adjustment to online learning" the current study established that there were conflicting viewpoints with some participants citing online learning in a positive light, while others had a preference towards in person teaching, similar results can be found in a previous study (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Some students interviewed expressed the view that the home environment contributed to a more stress-free setting to concentrate on their study routine. A number of factors were identified which gave rise to this way of thinking, such as the absence of distractions from fellow students which permitted them to be more focused on their studies. While other participants revealed they found college a place where they were more focused as opposed to the lack of routine which they encountered in the home setting. This belief was consistent with previous research (Sahu, 2020). Time saved on travel was also highlighted as a benefit of online learning and recorded lectures were identified by all participants as a valued tool to refer to in the event of students missing live lectures, some students described them as being a "blessing", a "great advantage" and "benefit" to catch up. A study carried out by Ghasem & Ghannam (2021) revealed similar findings. In addition, technology issues such as poor Wi-Fi connectivity, power outages and sharing laptops was seen as a predicament with many students

citing their academic performance being impacted. These findings are recurring throughout various previous studies (Aucejo et al., 2020; Laili & Nashir, 2021; Sahu, 2020). From an Irish context Mohan et al. (2020) investigated students' viewpoints on the continuous assessment of evaluation introduced during Covid-19 as opposed to in person examinations. The overall findings of the current study were in favour of continuous assessments with 9 out of 10 students expressing that this method is less stressful, less anxiety provoking and generally a more just system.

In relation to the theme preference towards in person learning and delayed communication online the majority of participants supported the idea that the college environment was the more advantageous setting for learning. The assistance of lecturers and fellow students in person for prompt assistance and support was of the essence. Interacting with other students in person was believed to aid motivation and enhance efficiency. These findings were consistent with previous literature (Laili & Nashir, 2021). Great significance was given to good student/lecturer interaction across all interviews. Several participants disclosed that they would not feel comfortable turning their camera or microphone on to contribute to topics in class. Hence, in person communication was where participants felt most comfortable, as they discussed that lecturers could sense if they had issues with topics by monitoring their body language and facial expressions. In addition, the transition to online learning brought about frustration for many students as the emergence of delayed communication became evident. They described how the online system was "robotic" and there was an issue where at times it took days to receive a reply to emails. However, interestingly eight out of ten participants revealed a hybrid system would be their preference alternating between online lectures which would enable

them to save money and time traveling and in person tutorials still giving them the opportunity to share ideas and ask any questions they may require assistance with.

Participants frequently felt overwhelmed with feelings of loneliness and desolation associated with the effects of Covid-19 restrictions on their lives. Schlichtiger et al., (2020) established similar results highlighting loneliness, mental health stress and fear for the future. It was revealed that participants missed the college environment as they expressed their dismay at their inability to connect with one another for emotional support. Participants highlighted feelings of isolation and loneliness, as well as their inability to share problems as they could not lean on their friends for support, previous research validates this revealing less perceived friend support leads to loneliness, depressive and anxiety symptoms (Rogers et al., 2021). Findings showed that it was evident that some participants were not in support of communicating with friends by means of texting as they have concerns as to how they may interpret the content, a qualitative study by McKenna-Plumley et al., (2021) also highlighted the insufficiency of communicating through social media. Also discussed was the loss of emotions and meaningful connections through text messaging. Furthermore, confiding with friends as opposed to family was found to be favoured as individuals would discuss matters which they would not with family.

All participants shared a common belief that their mental wellbeing, education and social interactions were greatly impacted by Covid-19. Their college life and freedom was hindered by the restrictions imposed by the Government, this resulted in missed opportunities for example missing out on college life and interacting with lecturers and fellow classmates, study findings that were comparable can be found (Voltmer et al., 2021). Some participants described how their independence came to a halt in their early twenties, they found themselves deprived of important

events and forming happy lifelong memories. The situation participants found themselves in had a psychological impact on their lives. Various terms to describe their mental health were used for example mentally drained, losing their mind and overthinking. Additionally, lack of physical activity had a negative effect on participants mental health when they could no longer avail of that escape, this is corroborated in previous research (Silva et al., 2020). Other participants mentioned they had become fixed in their habits and as a result of the effects of the pandemic they had changed their outlook on life.

Finally, the theme anxiety provoked thoughts and being more mindful of others, showed the majority of participants referred to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in a negative light. It was revealed that participants attitudes became altered as they were more aware of the vulnerable and aimed to prevent contracting and spreading the virus to them. Consistent with previous research by (Kök Eren, 2021) some participants developed a disturbed sleep pattern as their anxiety and worry increased as well as their concern of transmitting the virus to vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, there is extensive research carried out surrounding the mental health and wellbeing of students and the general public personally during Covid-19 (Husky et al., 2020; Schlichtiger et al., 2020). However, it is important to note there is extremely limited research investigating how young people became more mindful of the wellbeing of others and feared spreading the virus to the vulnerable.

Strengths and weaknesses

The current study could be the base of research going forward. As to the researcher's knowledge, topics investigating the education and mental health of students during Covid-19 have mainly been conducted using a quantitative design. This research is unique as it is the first qualitative study investigating the impact of Covid-19 on the education, mental health, and social

interactions of first and final year students. Benefits of this research is that it gives an insight into the topic and allows participant to explore their first-hand experiences.

Another strength of the research is that the eventual result of the study gives awareness to academic staff going forward of students' preference towards learning. Interestingly students favoured in person learning to online however nine of ten students preferred a hybrid system.

The study also could determine if the needs of the students from a mental health perspective need to be addressed and whether colleges need to put interventions in place to confront these issues and effectively solve this problem.

A limitation of this research may be that the sampling method used could contribute to bias within the findings. Both convenience and snowball sampling were used. The researcher advertised their study on social media platforms therefore participants most likely were familiar with the researcher, this may have impacted some of the participants responses and perhaps if there was a more generalised sample participants may have explored their first-hand experiences in greater detail.

In addition, all participants resided in Dublin, therefore broadening the participant sample to rural areas in Ireland as well as different countries may have given a different perception of the proposed topic and may have enhanced diversity and consequently strengthened the research.

An additional limitation of this study was that the participants who volunteered were slightly disproportionate regarding gender, with six female students and four male students.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet

How the Coronavirus pandemic impacted Irish students' lives, mental wellbeing, and education

Welcome to this research study!

You are being asked to participate in a study regarding the effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 on the Irish student population. This will be carried out by an undergraduate psychology student in the National College of Ireland as part of her final year project.

Research question: How do Irish third-level students who have experienced living through the pandemic understand how it affects their mental wellbeing, education and social interactions?

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of Irish college students during the Coronavirus pandemic from a psychological and social aspect. The researcher also seeks to understand how 1st and final year college students deal with issues involving the alternative education system

What will happen?

As part of this study you will be sent an invitation through Microsoft Teams which will consist of a date and time of the expected interview, in which you must click and accept. Moreover, on the designated day you must join the scheduled event through the calendar section of Microsoft Teams. At the beginning of the recording the researcher will ask you to state you give informed consent on record. You will have the option to leave your camera on during the interview if you so wish, however if your decision is to leave it on video recordings will be deleted as soon as your audio is transcribed. All audio recordings will be transcribed using an automatic transcriber called Otter.ai. As part of the interview process you will be asked open ended and non-leading questions with the intention of gaining insight into your first-hand experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and its

effect on your mental well-being and education. There will be a total of 18 questions involved. In the instance of feeling overwhelmed you have the right to pause for a break or opt out of the interview at any time. According to plan the interview in its entirety should absorb just twenty to thirty minutes of your time, however you will be able to stop and ask questions at any time. Furthermore, immediately following participation a debriefing sheet will be sent to the provided email address. Finally, having read the above information if you wish to proceed please inform the researcher who will arrange to forward you an online consent form.

Time commitment

The interview process typically takes 20 to 30 minutes to complete.

Participants rights'

It is your privilege to cease participation in the research study at any given time without explanation and any data you have disclosed should immediately be erased if you so wish.

In addition, during the interview process it is your prerogative to omit or refuse to respond to questions asked.

Furthermore, it is your right to have your questions about the procedures answered. Moreover, If you have any questions that you require clarity with as a result of reading this information sheet, you are advised to ask the researcher before the study begins.

Benefits and risks

By participating in this research, you should not experience any risk or harm, however there are some benefits in participating. As a result of your participation in this undergraduate research project you may gain an understanding of the field of psychology. Your participation in this project is greatly appreciated as you are contributing to a topic which is not yet greatly explored and as a result this will benefit future research**.**

Cost reimbursement and compensation

I am obliged to inform you that your participation in this study is voluntary therefore you will not receive compensation in return for your participation.

Confidentiality and anonymity

The entire data of this study will be fully anonymised. Interviews and transcripts will be secure on a password protected laptop and saved on one drive which requires the researcher to sign into an account also using a password. Should you disclose personal information which would make you identifiable once the study is completed, the researcher will blank out said information such as your name or area from which you are from. Furthermore, to ensure complete confidentiality you will be assigned a code or number which is only recognisable to the researcher.

For further information

You are at liberty to contact the student researcher or supervisor of the study if you have any further questions. Also, if you wish to find out about the final result of this study, you are requested to leave your contact details with the researcher and they will get in touch with you. In addition, in the event that you experience any distress following the completion of the survey, you should contact your general practitioner, or the following contact information may help:

AWARE freephone - 1800804848

Pieta House freephone 1800 247 247 or text "HELP" to 51444.

 If you have any queries or require further information,

Contact: Hayley Carolan (x19471854@student.ncirl.ie)

Appendix B

Consent Form

Title: How the Coronavirus Pandemic impacted young people's lives, mental well-being and education

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. ☐

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use my data up to the 14th of February 2022 and I am aware that all data will be kept for up to five years. ☐

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me through an online information sheet and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. ☐

I understand that participation involves taking part in an interview. ☐

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. ☐

I agree to my interview being audio-recorded. ☐

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. ☐

I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. ☐

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in this research study. ☐

I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk. ☐

of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission. ☐

I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a secure password protected laptop until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation. ☐

I understand that data where all identifying information has been removed will be retained for five years from the date of the exam board. ☐

I understand that I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time including the transcript of my interview if I wish to see it. ☐

I understand that I am free to contact the individual involved in the research to seek further clarification and information. ☐

Researchers name: Hayley Carolan

Course: Psychology

Contact details: x19471854@student.ncirl.ie

Participant: By ticking this box a give informed consent regarding project o

Date:

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher: Hayley Carolan

 Date:

Appendix C

Debriefing Sheet

Title of project: How the Coronavirus pandemic impacted Irish students' lives, mental wellbeing, and education

Dear participant,

I would like to extend my appreciation to you for being so liberal with your time to engage in this research as a result of your generosity I can conduct this project. The project you have participated in enabled me to explore your emotions and experiences. Your views will be greatly valued as you all may have handled your experience in a different way. The aim of the interview in which you just took part in was to explore your personal concept of the pandemic with the focus on education, social interactions and mental health and wellbeing. During data analysis your interview responses will be scrutinised, and comparisons will be made between participants to come to a conclusion in relation to the impacts of the restrictions stemming from the coronavirus.

If it is your desire to find out the outcome of the results from the research project your welcome to email me at x19471854@student.ncirl.ie. You are also welcome to contact me via email if you wish to read over the transcript of your interview. All data relating to the study is required to be stored for up to five years as this is the policy of the National College of Ireland. It is also your prerogative to withdraw the data from your interview before the 14th of February 2022 without any consequences. In conclusion again I would like to extend my deepest gratitude for your participation in the project.

Kind regards,

Hayley Carolan

Appendix D

Participant Interview Questions

(a) Education

1. Explain your views on the new online alternative way of learning introduced during the pandemic

2. If you had a choice of the online system or the traditional method of learning which would you prefer, or would you rather a combination of both?

3. Explain in a short synopsis your views on the new continuous assessment system as opposed to in person exams.

4. Could you explain if you have ever had a problem with online learning technology for example poor connection

5. Explain how you find the teacher/ student relationship when studying from home

(b) Social interactions

1. Reflecting back since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, describe how your social life has been impacted?

2. Could you explain if any events of importance in your life have been interrupted due to the pandemic?

3. What significance did the absence of social gatherings have on your relationships with friends and how did you re-adjust as restrictions eased

(c) Mental health and well-being

1. Could you explain the impact Covid-19 has had on your mental health and well being?

2. How did the isolation and absence from your friends affect you?

3. What types of activities or hobbies did you pursue to alleviate your boredom?

(d) Closing questions

1. What are your thoughts about the alternative Leaving Cert and do you think going forward classes should have both options of continuous assessment predicted grades and traditional exams

2. Has the online learning process taught you anything about yourself?

3. Looking back since the onset of the pandemic has the whole experience been as challenging as you initially envisaged

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Age:

Gender:

College year:

        a.   1st year student

        b.   Final year student

Appendix F

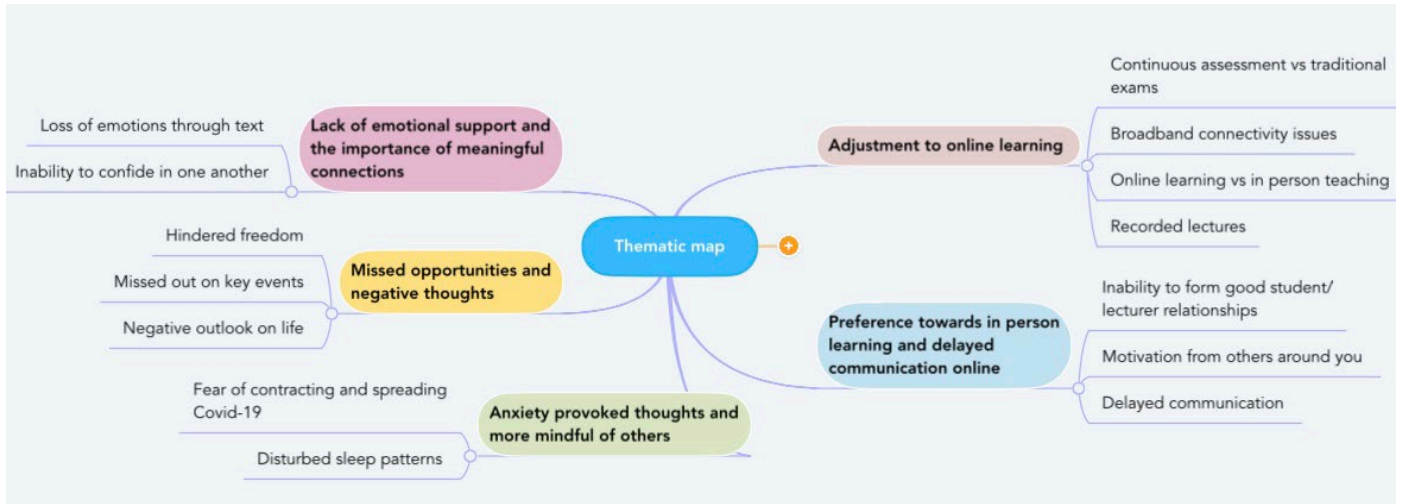**Thematic Map and Coding Samples**

Figure 1: Thematic Map

Figure 2: Coding samples

P2	P2
You just have more time and more space to do things sometimes if you're in college and you have a 2 hour gap you're with friends and can't really get things done, whereas if you're at home and you have a 2 hour gap, you could like re-read stuff or read your book.	Home environment positive Less distractions More time at your disposal as you don't have to travel etc
It's been very tough not seeing my friends. I've been going through a lot recently, but like it's not stuff that you want to text somebody. Or if you if you call them sometimes people are busy. Whereas if like I was in college more, I could talk about it. On the other hand. A friend of mine was going through a tough patch and we were just texting. But all I could say was. Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. I feel it's so much more difficult to express your emotions through text like there's no Empathy.	Loss of connections with people Lack of ability to share problems Emotional support No reassurance when in need of someone to make you feel better
If you need something and you're in the class, you could ask the lecturer whereas if you're home you have to wait till the class is over and you have to go online and then email them, it could be a two-to-three-day process before they get back to you.	Delayed communication Better relationship when in college Inconvenient

P3 in your 20s you kind of want to travel with people and be able to experience new cultures that has all been affected, and all kind of like, you know, festivals, concerts all those things have been kind of just I just would say like your 20s youth I found it so hard to get motivated. I didn't have a reason to get up and get dressed. 'cause where am I going? And it didn't feel like anything was kind of you felt like you're reliving the same day over and over again and so that was, you know, really hard to kind of to get motivated and it kind of made you feel a bit rubbish and then as things started to ease anxiety.	**P3** Social life affected Loss of forming new memories Missed opportunities Lack of motivation Fed up Nothing to look forward to Becoming stagnate in everyday living
P4 I think that it allows people with all different abilities to like kind of shine and show it in different way. Like I think it relieves a lot of the pressure from just it being like all of your learning, just being like focus on one exam like I think it's so much better shared as a continuous assessment because it kind of encourages you to actually engage with the material actually to learn the stuff because you're kind of almost learning it in small sections rather than trying to learn everything at once Personally, I find it like so much easier to learn like in a classroom-based environment. I find that. You learn a lot from my people around you as well as just the teacher.	**P4** CA Less stressful Different abilities More fair system Easier to learn in class environment Support of friends and teachers Helpful with work

1. **The delivery of academic learning through online means**
- An alternative approach to the traditional system of acedemic learning
- Less distractions and better time management
- Student lecturer relationship

'You just have more time and more space to do things sometimes if you're in college and you have a 2 hour gap you're with friends and can't really get things done, whereas if you're at home and you have a 2 hour gap, you could like re-read stuff or read your book.'
Less distractions and better time management
Home environment positive
More time at your disposal as you don't have to travel etc
Online system is less stressful

'if you need something and you're in the class, you could ask the lecture where is your home you have to wait till the class is over and you have to go online and then email them.
two to three day process before they get back to you.'
Student lecturer relationship
Delayed communication
Better relationship when in college
Inconvenient

'The traditional exams have worked for years, but I don't think they give some people a chance. Like if you are a person like me who studied hard and you probably know as much as the person beside you, but get stressed out and overwhelmed you won't do as well'

An alternative approach to the traditional system of academic learning
Unfair
In favour of continous assessment
Acknowledges trad exams work but feels there should be both

2. **Lack of Emotional support**
- Loss of connections

It's been very tough not seeing my friends. I've been going through a lot recently, my mam was recently diagnosed with an illness but like it's not stuff that you want to text somebody. Or if you if you call them sometimes people are busy. Whereas if like I was in college more I could talk about it.
I don't really feel like there's much communication because you're not going to text somebody bad news like it's, it's just not right
On the other hand. A friend of mine. Was going through a tough patch. And we were just texting. But all I could say was. Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. I feel it's so much more difficult to express your emotions through text like there's no Empathy.

Loss of connections with people
Lack of ability to share problems
Lack of Emotional support
No Reassurance when in need of someone to make you feel better

going a bit like restless and on edge like having no one really to like to talk to and it made you feel a bit. Maybe feel a bit like desperate sometimes in terms of like oh, I just want things to go back to normal and and having someone to like really to talk to, I had like my family but You know you'd talk about different things with your friends then you would with your family. just never been able to really like let off steam
Missing out on confiding in friends
Emotional support