

Disrupted access and success: Students' transition to university in the time of Covid-19

Helen Inglis	Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa	helen.inglis@up.ac.za
Celeste Combrinck	Science, Maths and Technology Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa	celeste.combrinck@up.ac.za
Zach Simpson	Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa	zsimpson@uj.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The transition to university is complex and plays an essential role in determining students' success in higher education. In South Africa and other global South contexts, students come from diverse backgrounds, and many have to cross what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls an 'abyssal line'. Students in university in 2020 experienced an abrupt additional transition: to online learning, as universities responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. The current study investigates second-year engineering students' perceptions of the impact of the lockdown on their own studies, and their impressions of how first-year students might have felt this impact, through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We sought to uncover the particular discourses that students draw on when describing what it was like to experience engineering study within a global pandemic. Throughout the student narratives, we identify a multiplicity of discourses around their identity as university students: as formed through connections with peers, lecturers, the university and the physical campus; as challenged by conflicting demands when studying at home; positioned as able to manage time and work; and vulnerable to threat from failure and the immutable force of online learning. We conclude with implications for universities and student success beyond the pandemic.

Introduction

Transition into university is complex, with students having to enter into altogether new environments and practices and inhabit new identities. Overall academic success and student well-being is strongly linked to successful transition into university life (Schreiber, Luescher & Moja, 2016). The Covid-19 pandemic added to the transitions expected of students – when South African universities halted contact teaching in March 2020, students had to move from contact to remote learning, and adjust to learning from home when they had been learning at university. This paper investigates both the disrupted transition into university and the imposed transition to ‘lockdown learning’. We seek to understand students’ discourses around these transitions, and what these may mean for student identity and adaptation to university life in a ‘new normal’ of teaching and learning.

The present paper emerges out of a broader project to understand first-year engineering student success. In the larger study, we sought to elicit student perspectives on success in the first year of engineering study by interviewing second-year engineering students about their experiences in their first-year. When we collected the data for this study, four months into the Covid-19 lockdown, students were still not living in university residences and did not yet have access to university computer labs. Since we were conducting the interviews during this disrupted context, in addition to our planned questions about participants’ first year experiences, we asked them how they had experienced emergency remote online learning. We also asked what impact they imagined this might have on current first-year students, who had less than eight weeks’ exposure to ‘normal’ university life. Through their imagining of the disrupted first-year experiences, they articulated their own experience of transition into university, and placed into context their transition to online learning.

In this paper, we investigate the second-year students’ perceptions of these initial (disrupted) and new (imposed) transitions through the lens of discourse: how students construct themselves as learners, their institution and their adaptation to the academic community. Our use of discourse analysis allows us to uniquely privilege students’ voices in these discussions. We analyse the discourses that students draw upon in their reflections on the impact of the sudden transition to remote learning on their higher education experience. In our analysis, we juxtapose students’ perspectives with those of academic staff, collected at the same moment in time, by Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili and others (2020). The multiple and inequitable

contexts that shape student learning will continue to exist even in a post-pandemic world. To this end, the research seeks to address the following question:

How do second-year students draw on their experiences of emergency online learning to construct an account of transitions into and out of university?

This question is informed by the goal of investigating how second-year engineering students situate themselves in narratives of learning during the pandemic and how they construct their transitions both into the university and into learning under lockdown. The participants' self-reflections of their first-year experiences are set against the imagined experiences of first-year students in the pandemic.

Literature review

The transition from high school to university has been well-documented. The literature has shown the various challenges that all students encounter upon entry into the university (Eastman, Miles & Yerrick, 2019; Dias & Sa, 2012; Hellas, Ihantola, Petersen, Ajanovski, Gutica, Hynninen..., 2018; McGhie, 2017). Among these challenges is the significant identity work involved in 'being' a higher education student and ultimately becoming a graduate (Groves & O'Shea, 2019). Successful adaptation to higher education requires the student to align themselves with the institution's expectations and norms and become fluent in the disciplinary and contextual languages of the academy (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2012). Connections with mentors, teaching assistants and peers help incoming students to understand the unwritten norms of the university and to gain an identity as a university student (Smit & Wolmarans, 2010; Winberg, 2018), and forming connections with lecturers allows students to "feel seen" (Campbell & Ndamase, 2020:3).

However, this work of transition is not the same for all students. There are dimensions of marginalisation that transect gender, race, class and the urban-rural divide. Therefore, the access to higher education – physical, epistemological, and ontological – is unequal. Belluigi, Czerniewicz, Gachago, Camps, Agherdien and Marx (2022) highlight that higher education in the global South is scarred by colonialism, institutionalised racism, and socioeconomic inequality. These continue to be replicated by the education system. These are not just legacies of the past but continue to dictate the transitions that students need to make upon entry into higher education, the abyssal lines (de Sousa Santos, 2007) of identity, time, and place that they must traverse.

Fataar (2018), referencing Bangeni and Kapp's study (2005), discusses the incomplete identity formation of students who are marginalised by the institutions that they are entering. These students are alienated from their home identities but not fully assimilated into a new identity. The idea that rural identities are alienated from university culture has also been put forth by Mgqwashu (2016). Students from rural communities may experience the university expecting them to leave behind their beliefs and "become less rural" (Mgqwashu, Timmis, de Wet & Madondo, 2020:3). However, Bangeni and Kapp remind us that students' relationships and attachment with universities and home are not static but "characterised by fluidity, ambivalence, and change" (2005:3).

A crisis will be experienced differently by students from various backgrounds and contexts and can be exacerbated by inequality. As the academics writing in Czerniewicz *et al* (2020:949) argue, these inequalities are not new. Still, they have been revealed by the current situation: "tectonic layers pushing and shoving against one another, tectonic layers of intergenerational inequalities, unheard and ignored for too long". The pandemic could be seen as an opportunity for universities to address inequalities and create new, better ways for students to transition and learn (Czerniewicz *et al*, 2020). The changes needed are not just technological (providing internet data and electronic devices) but instead rethinking pedagogy in terms of "adequacy and quality" (Czerniewicz *et al*, 2020:954).

Many authors have described the severe pivot to online learning as 'emergency remote teaching and learning' (ERTL) to distinguish it from carefully designed online or blended instruction (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020; Peters, Rizvi, McCulloch, Gibbs, Gorur, Hong..., 2020). As one participant notes in Czerniewicz *et al* (2020), first-year students did not have time to transition from their school environments where less independent study was expected and had to adapt to self-study and online learning amid a global crisis. Flexible online learning relies on students who can work independently, be self-sufficient, and take full ownership of their learning (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021). These skills are not automatically present and need to be developed through the relationship between the university and its students. Online assessment also requires adaptation from lecturers, many of whom relied on familiar assessment techniques for stability and comfort in the crisis (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020) and worried about maintaining the integrity of assessments (Muhammad & Srinivasan, 2021).

We thus argue that there is a disjointed reality facing us in higher education: students and lecturers are expected to persist as though nothing is wrong. Yet, a great disruption and collective stress are being experienced at the same time. This manifests in the promotion of 'resilience', requiring individuals to submerge their trauma and continue as though all is well. When resilience is used in a

less practical sense, where thriving is expected despite a lack of support or during times of great distress, this can be characterised as the “dark side of resilience” or “cruel optimism” (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021:6). Continuity is understandable as students need to complete degrees, and universities need to continue doing business. The real problem lies in how the conflicting reality of distress can be acknowledged and handled while giving students and staff adequate opportunities to learn and work; here, the institution should play a role in actively supporting resilient responses (Adjei, Pels & Amoako, 2021). This constructive resilience is relevant not just in relation to the crisis of Covid-19 but should also be developed through curricula, in response to the ongoing challenges of inequality, gender-based violence, environmental degradation and other global problems.

In March 2020, students, who were engaged in the already-complex processes of transition to university and identity formation, had to make an unexpected transition to online education, with complex and entangled disruptions to workspace, family responsibilities, time pressures and identity (Czerniewicz *et al*, 2020). Much of the existing literature on the sudden transition to remote learning focuses on the perspectives of academics (often about students). In the current study, we give attention to the discourses that second-year engineering students draw on in accounting for their own experiences in this regard. Our focus on discourse allows us glimpses of the underpinning mechanisms that have endured before and may continue to endure after the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This study uses semi-structured interviews with students to explore the discourses surrounding student transitions before and during the pandemic from students' perspectives. Within the broader approach of discourse analysis, we adopt a discursive psychological approach (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Bergström, Ekström & Boréus, 2017). Traditional discourse analysis has a linguistic focus which would not have suited the nature of this study. Discursive psychology is concerned with ‘interpretive repertoires’, defined as those concepts that exist ‘out there’ that people draw on to support their arguments (Goodman, 2017). Our interest is in the interpretive repertoires of students when discussing the lockdown, their learning, and the imagined experience of first-year students. These interpretive repertoires allow for an examination of how students construct the relationships between themselves, lecturers and the institution.

Participants

During the data collection period, South Africans were required by law to shelter at home under lockdown. Consequently, students had to rapidly transition from face-to-face learning to online learning. As part of a broader study, we had planned to conduct in-person focus groups with second-year engineering students to investigate their perspectives on first-year success. We quickly adapted our research methodology to a more feasible option, which was telephonic interviews with individual participants. As an additional part of the interviews, we asked students to describe their own experiences of learning during lockdown, and to imagine the effect of the lockdown on the learning experiences of first-year students.

We adopted a stratified sampling approach and selected second-year engineering students who identified their population group as 'African' in their University application and registration documentation and were at the margins of success (defined as having a first-year average of between 45% and 65%). We selected this sample because we wanted to privilege the perspectives of these students in our understanding of success. We emailed an invitation to participate in this research to all students at a large research-based institution in South Africa who met the criteria. In total, fourteen students agreed to participate: nine male students and five female students. The median age of these students was 20 years old, and five came from disadvantaged schools located in rural areas or townships. Most of the students spoke an African language as their home language, and four of the students were the first in their families to attend university.

Data collection

The interview guide was designed and refined collaboratively by the authors. The interview questions were extensive and asked about the participants' experiences of the first year, their transition into university, strategies they believe contribute to success, and advice they would give to new first years. For the purpose of this paper, we have focused on the participants' responses to only two questions from the interviews:

1. What effect do you think the lockdown is having on first-year engineering students?
 - a. Prompt: Do you think it will be more difficult for them?
 - b. Prompt: How are you dealing with the lockdown?
2. What should the university do to help first-years succeed?

We do not present a summary of the students' answers to each question in turn, but rather discuss the discourses that students draw on in their responses.

Data were collected over three weeks, approximately four months after the lockdown. We called students at pre-arranged times and recorded the telephonic interviews for transcription purposes. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors of this paper and a research associate.

Discourse analysis

Our discursive psychological analysis aimed to identify the primary interpretive repertoires, sometimes also referred to as 'subject positions' (Goodman, 2017). The discourses are the ones that participants drew on when discussing the impact of the lockdown on their learning and the potential impact on first-year students. We contend that by asking participants to imagine the experience of others, rather than simply to describe their own experience, they would draw on their own experiences but situate this more explicitly in a rich array of interpretive repertoires.

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and checked by the authors and a second transcriber. Once transcribed, initial coding of the data pertained to what was being said, that is, what Goodman (2017) calls the action orientation of the transcribed interview texts. After that, we conducted the discourse analysis collaboratively over an entire day. The narratives were read aloud, and we then noted and discussed our thoughts about the data, manually capturing the discursive repertoires we identified on cardboard posters placed around the room. The notes were refined into discursive themes that are the subject of this article.

Ethics and trustworthiness

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was formally obtained from the engineering faculty ethics committee and Deputy Dean of Research at the large research-based university in South Africa at which this research was undertaken. Participants completed an online consent form using Qualtrics and were given opportunities to opt-out of the study. The consent form assured prospective participants of their right to withdraw at any time – and explicitly requested their permission for the interviews to be recorded. The consent form also stipulated that the interview was being conducted for research and that students' academic results would not be impacted through (non-)participation in this research. The interviews were conducted with students while they were on recess. The data

collection was conducted by research psychologists not affiliated with the engineering faculty (including one of the co-authors of this paper) to ensure that students did not feel unduly pressured or anxious when participating.

The rigour of qualitative research lies not in the statistical generalisability of findings but in the trustworthiness of the interpretations offered (Yin, 2011). Such trustworthiness, in this study, was enhanced through various means. First, the transcriptions were checked both by the authors and by a second transcriber to ensure that they constituted an accurate reflection of the participants' words – and meanings. Second, a sample of the initial codes, which were generated by one of the authors and an external research associate, was re-checked and validated by the remaining authors. By the end of the data analysis, no 'new' findings were generated and data saturation was reached. In our reporting of the results obtained, we include quotations from the data collected to further augment our interpretations' trustworthiness.

Findings

Disrupted transitions: "It's the first year of varsity and it's such a drastic change"

The transition from school to university is always tricky, with Participant 4 describing the first year of university as a "drastic change". In this first part of our discussion, we address the discourses drawn upon by the participants to discuss the transition into higher education. In this regard, we identify related categories of discourse remarked upon by the participants around expectations, which are experienced and internalised over time and through relationships.

The participants constructed the task of understanding the expectations of the university as a significant aspect of transitioning into higher education. Many participants spoke of experience (such as "the experience of sitting in classes" [P3]) as a critical step in developing an understanding both of what students should expect of the university, and of what the lecturers (representing the university) expect of students. This is clearly articulated by Participant 14:

I think it's more difficult for first-years, because first of all, they are starting to go to university, they don't know what to expect. At least us, we were there at campus physically. You can see the lecturers, they can tell us what to expect and stuff like that... us second-years, third-year, we already know the experience of the varsity people.

In the view of this participant, “physically” engaging with the people and places of the university offers a clearer sense of the expectations of higher education. Participant 10 constructed a broader vision of identity formation through being on campus:

I remember, last year I learned a lot on campus, not during lectures but on campus that helped me become a better student and also a better person too.

As Participant 6 points out, ‘new’ first-year students, because of their different understanding of the expectations of higher education, may hold a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to ‘be’ a university student:

I feel as though their understanding of what university is, is very different to ours because midway through their first semester... that’s when the lockdown happened.

Implicit in this view is that the first-year students had insufficient time to form an experiential bond with the institution. This was a dominant discourse in our participants’ responses, and is argued explicitly by Participant 8:

[the lockdown] happened too quickly... and they had to go through online learning without the experience of how it was attending the lectures and tutorials and practicals on campus.

Participant 13 concurs:

So, I don’t know that two months, I don’t think it was enough... to actually experience the actual, to orientate yourself around the university.

These comments echo the argument of Burke and Manathunga (2020: 663), who contend that higher education processes “produce particular dispositions or positionalities in and through time and space”. In our literature review, we have already illustrated the extent to which the transition to higher education constitutes significant identity work through processes of ‘alignment’ (Inglis & Matemba, 2021). In their attentiveness to notions of time, the participants draw attention to these complex identity formation processes, which are represented by “attending the lectures and tutorials and practicals” [P8] and “orientat[ing]” [P13] oneself to the university – that is, understanding and meeting the expectations of the institution.

One of the reasons that time is important is that it is necessary for the formation of supportive relationships, as Participant 8 relates:

I met this first-year and ... she did not have time to make friends and to make a group of friends that will help each other academically.

The second-year students argued these relationships helped them develop their identity as university students and form a connection with the institution. Relationships with peers help students to access course content, as argued by Participant 3:

I'd find some of my friends who maybe have a different perspective on the material... they explain to me what they understand from what we have learned.

Participant 12 also emphasises this:

Because you know when you're not with people that can show you how to get through some of the things, it now becomes way harder all of a sudden.

These relationships also offer necessary psychosocial support, as also indicated by Participant 12:

I'm always in communication with my friends, we always try to motivate each other to keep on going and try and help each other out as often as we can.

We argue that peer support is vital for first-year students to cope with the transition to higher education, as they "become alienated from their homes upon entering the university" (Fataar, 2018:603). Students' friendship groups offer a sense of recognition and understanding that might not be afforded by the institution more broadly.

If entering higher education is a process of 'unhoming' (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005) and of forming new identifications and relationships, it is crucial to consider the impacts of the forced 're-homing' necessitated by learning under lockdown, to which our analysis now turns its attention.

Forced transitions: "I think that it's been very tough on them"

The transition to emergency remote teaching occurred soon after the first-year students had entered higher education. Our second-year students almost unanimously recognised this challenge.

I think that it's been very tough on them because while they're trying to adjust then there's a major change that happens and some of them may come from places where they've maybe not even seen a computer before or they don't own one and now they're in a situation where their entire learning is dependent on a computer they don't even know all that well.

In describing this transition, we see that this participant draws on discourses of home and identity and discourses of managing, which are the focus of this section.

When students return home, they return to an assortment of different environments. We can see this in practical terms by considering their different home experiences of resource-constraint around network and data. Participant 5 argued that:

It is challenging... with network connections and data and all of that sometimes, even last night I couldn't write some test due to network failure.

In contrast, Participant 2 was forced to return home to seek better network access, as her on- or near-campus accommodation did not have a reliable connection. The focus of much university intervention immediately after the implementation of the lockdown was on solving these urgent resourcing problems regarding data and devices. However, as Czerniewicz *et al* (2020) contend, the complexities of returning home go beyond technological resourcing, and lay bare ontological inequalities tied to home identities.

For some students, 'home' was constructed as fairly comfortable. For example, Participant 13 says "I just don't have to worry about commuting and cooking because I'm at home". Similarly, Participant 10 mentioned having to do "chores sometime", feeling "lazy" and struggling to wake up despite "tell[ing] my mom to wake me up early". In these instances, as the participants enter into their home environment, they return into relationships of dependence, leaving behind the responsibilities and expectations of living independently away from home. However, returning home for many other students involved taking on considerable additional family work and commitment, which clashed with their study goals. Participant 2 (female) stated that:

When I got home it was really difficult to focus on my studies because I had to do things like cleaning... then cook when they come back. So it was really difficult for me to juggle my schoolwork and my home chores because I'm not used to that. I am used to me having my room and then study, that's all I do but when I go back home it was a battle.

Participant 6 (male) experienced similar challenges:

I told you that I live in the village so I'm a man, there's certain things expected of you to do, there's livestock and what not that you have to take care of, and you just can't simply ignore that just because you're a student studying.

It is striking that these discourses of home are gendered, and intricately tied to questions of identity. Both of these participants articulate the difficulties and "battle" [P2] of inhabiting multiple identities in conflict. Their identity as university students is being squeezed out by the (gendered) social roles and expectations of their home environment. As Fataar (in Peters *et al*, 2020:28) points out "instead of isolation, the majority student experience is one of intense engagement with the existing resources

and infrastructures of their environments”. It is important to note that this is not because of the Covid-19 pandemic – the pandemic has only served to bring what were already-existing disjunctures to light.

Embedded and ‘intensely engaged’ with their diverse home environments, the participants constructed the challenges facing first-year students in their ability to manage the demands of academic study. As Participant 10 suggests, when studying online:

probably you won’t take the schoolwork as seriously as you should because you think you have enough resources to get by but that’s not necessarily the case.

Participant 12 concurs:

It’s going to be tough, especially if you’re a first-year, where this is all new to you and you feel like you can relax maybe and then comes test time and exam time and you realise that’s not the case.

Participant 11 states that:

I actually do think it is very difficult for them because they are not necessarily used to the way university works and managing their own time and managing the workload and the demand of just all the different modules.

In their narratives, the students construct the identity of a ‘successful’ student as one who can manage time and workload, and balance demands. When asked “what advice would you give to someone to be successful in first-year engineering?”, Participant 11 said:

I would say balance, but balance this year is a bit difficult, with the lockdown and restrictions. But if there was no lockdown, I would definitely say balance. Just like balance your social life, balancing your academic life and balancing family.

This task of finding balance became more difficult for some students who now had to manage the competing demands of their home and university identities:

I have to wake up ... and [take care of] my other responsibilities, attend my class, make my notes and then, even midway through that, there’s disturbances and all of those things. So, there’s a lot that you have to contend with, but you have to keep your work at the back of your mind, that I left my work at this place and then I want to continue and finish. [P6]

In contrast, for Participant 9, the lockdown removed distractions and improved her ability to focus on her studies:

The only positive I can take from this is my study routine has changed in a positive way. So on campus, normally if I’m behind in a class, I’ll just go to [a local student hangout]... But the positive of now is that even if I miss a class due to some reason, in the afternoons I have nothing else to do but to study, so I do study, I don’t go out of the house to go

anywhere... I see a lot of people, the way they study. They study more often, and they make sure they got the concept of that week in that week.

The participants again drew on time discourses to discuss the complexities of managing the demands of participating in university online. Participant 2 laments:

I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it but you never do, you feel that the day passes and that tomorrow passes again not doing a thing.

Participant 10 echoed this sense of time slipping away:

I know every time I put an alarm to wake up early, for some reason I don't, ... when you're home, you technically don't need to, you can just sit wherever you are and start working. So I think I would like to go back to campus.

Time is constructed as needing to be managed. For Participant 5, "the main problem with university is time management, and since you are home it even becomes harder." Participant 12 solves this problem: "I'm starting to follow a certain timetable where I know at this time I'm doing this, and this time I'm doing this."

What strikes us about these comments is the fact that already in the second year, the participants seem to have bought into the notion that the 'problem' of higher education is not what Fataar (2018:602) calls universities' "lack of optimal resources and relatively dysfunctional learning environments", but students' own (self-)efficacy. According to the participants, there is a "way university works" [P11] (as we have already shown, this is evident in the unstated expectations of the academy, which students require time and peer support to develop an understanding of) and managing their own time is the responsibility of the student. Failure, within such a discourse, is a result of the student not taking the "schoolwork as seriously as you should" [P10], and articulates an identity threat. Although they acknowledge that "it must be really tough to be a first-year right now" [P12], the participants do not attribute this challenge to unreasonable demands and structural problems within higher education. Herein lies a danger: that the opportunities presented by the pandemic to transform higher education teaching and learning will be missed if these underlying structural problems, which pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic, are not recognised and addressed.

Carrying on the business of the university: "I feel like the university is doing enough, but it still is not enough"

Despite the challenges discussed in the previous section, the participants were subject to the requirement to continue the university's business and find some (dis)comfort in that continuity. We

identify discourses of learning, which is imagined through the lens of resources, and prominently through the lens of assessment. We note discourses that position the university and its response to the pandemic as immutable, and in this context, we examine students' discourses of distress and resilience.

Students' resources to access learning are diverse, including physical infrastructure, lecture and curricular materials, as well as access to people, such as peers and academics (Simpson, Inglis & Sandrock, 2020). Participant 3 points out that without access to physical resources, learning can be underdeveloped:

I have also been experiencing some difficulties, especially in engineering. It's difficult doing it at home because some of the stuff you learn is in practicals in labs, and so when you don't have that, it's a little bit difficult to grasp some of the theory work that you do.

Students grappled with the dual nature of learning from home, where unexpected resources such as watching recordings [P8] and re-watching videos [P7] are construed as somewhat mitigating the consequences of not being able to ask questions in class. Students felt that recording lectures and making videos available would be helpful even after lockdown ends.

Contact with lecturers and academic staff is a resource that participants felt was hidden and difficult to access remotely. Participants had nuanced discourses about the role of lecturers during the transition to online learning. Multiple participants felt that contacting lecturers online was far more complicated and would significantly impede the learning of first-year students, as articulated by Participant 11:

It's easier to have support around you and have contact lessons with lecturers when you can just quickly raise your hand in class and then get those matters out of the way there and then.

Approaching lecturers online was constructed as "nerve-wracking" [P4] or even as "impossible" [P5]. In addition, there was the awareness that lecturers are working from home and contacting them could be interpreted as intruding on private space: "because I'm approaching a person at his home and his comfortable place" [P4].

Participants talked about learning most often in the context of assessment. Participant 1 and Participant 9 constructed online assessment as devaluing learning by emphasising summative marks and a lack of conceptual understanding due to open-book exams. Participant 9 says the knowledge is only "on the surface of our brains". In contrast, Participant 8 argues that assessments based on

scenarios require deeper understanding which drives effective learning. There is a recognition from Participant 8 that learning under lockdown means you have to focus on understanding:

They [lecturers] are testing the work differently. They are testing your understanding, so I have to understand, and it's not a matter of opening the textbook and getting the answer from there.

Like lecturers (Muhammad & Srinivasan, 2021), students were ambivalent about online assessment. This ambivalence leads to a conglomerate of narratives which include the advantages of online assessments, such as having internet resources during testing and access to books [P5, P10, P13]. Participant 5 explains this by saying first-year students may have more resources while writing tests and constructs these resources as positive: “they [first-year students] might be at an advantage because they can use the internet whilst writing tests.” This quote highlights students’ uncertainty about what constitutes ‘cheating’ in this new learning paradigm. Participant 13 speaks about the inevitability of cheating and articulates this as a moral identity issue:

I feel like why wouldn't [cheating] happen? But I feel like that's on your moral basis, to be honest with you – if you care versus your integrity.

Echoing Veletsianos and Houlden (2020), Participant 11 constructed the perceived increase in the difficulty of tests and exams as being the result of lecturers feeling a loss of control and felt that lecturers were targeting students:

I feel like the lecturers are demanding and set the questions to be extra hard than it would have been if we were still on campus. The lecturers can't control the conditions where we are writing our exams and stuff like that. I just find that a little bit unfair.

In the context of ambivalence and “unfair[ness]” [P11], both the pandemic and the learning institution were nevertheless seen as immutable, forces to be accommodated. Students are deeply embedded in the university as a reality, for most to such a degree that they are like fish swimming in water that cannot comprehend their immersion. Most students said they do not know what more the university could do to support them, as “I'm not in their shoes, so I don't know” [P6], and “I feel like the university is doing enough, but it still is not enough” [P1]. At times, the immutability is constructed as comforting, “keep in mind that there’s a global pandemic” [P13], suggesting that this acts as mitigation for any lack of support offered by the institution.

This contrasts with the academic staff perspective on emergency remote teaching and learning, captured in Czerniewicz *et al* (2020), which is much more distrustful of university management, with lecturers speaking of “alienating practices”. The different positioning of students and academic staff gives them access to different discourses with which to critique the institution's role. Academic staff

perceive the ways in which university hierarchies and policies replicate inequality and fail to foster student well-being. Meanwhile, students experience the institution as immutable and as such, they do not articulate ways in which the university could change. But this immutability is also distressing for some students, as it leaves them vulnerable and powerless: “it’s really making our lives very difficult” [P2].

Half of the students constructed the lockdown as distressing, speaking about the experience as having “impacted them terribly” [P12] and as being “really a disaster” [P2] and said that interacting through a screen is challenging: “the screen... it’s kind of frightening in a way” [P14]. Students also reported feeling panicked, overwhelmed, and depressed: “I was a little bit depressed. The lockdown thing is really overwhelming to me” [P2]. Failing modules also contributed to feelings of isolation and distress, especially when students had built their idea of the year as being one of success and academic achievement before the pandemic occurred: “I was having that energy saying no at this year I’m gonna get distinctions that kind of thing and then boom corona comes” [P2].

In contrast, some students focus on resilience. As discussed earlier, the resilience narratives included positive aspects such as being empowered to spend more time on their studies due to a lack of social distractions. Participant 12 also focused on the freedom of studying at home at one’s own pace: “personally for me I prefer this online type of teaching” [P12]. There is also a discourse of the ‘dark side’ of resilience where the responsibility to overcome and negate the problems faced during the pandemic lies firmly with the individual, as we discussed in the literature review (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). On the dark side of resilience, students construct failing academically as evidence of being lazy or unmotivated, hence of not attaining the identity of a successful student: “it just goes back to wanting to pass... I think those who really want to pass will pass” [P4]. Adopting a “a positive mindset” [P10] is proposed as a requirement to deal with the challenges, and Participant 4 claims “there’s always a way to find answers.” We note that discourses of resilience are related to socio-economic circumstances: the student who most strongly recommended self-resilience [P4] came from a highly-resourced school and lived in a home where both parents were present and supported him, making it easier for him to view academic success as the responsibility of the individual.

Conclusions and implications

The advent of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns disrupted students’ transition to university and the development of their student identities. The literature and our results have shown

a significant challenge facing higher education entrants. Transitioning to university requires that students form and maintain strong social bonds. Students establish a relationship with the institution through their relationships with their peers and with lecturers. One core finding is that learning online requires students to form and maintain these relationships while being physically distanced, making it more challenging to transition academically and socially into university. The transition to university, under lockdown, transects with transitions back to the home – and the attendant challenges these bring concerning balancing both time and competing identity demands. These multiple and non-linear transitions are complicated by class position and individual circumstances; although surfaced by Covid-19, they existed well before the advent of the pandemic and will persist long after. As such, significant attention needs to be given to developing teaching and learning approaches that allow students to do more than learn how to meet expectations and manage time and workload. Higher education should offer students opportunities to reflect on how their home and university identities can be harnessed – in tandem – to achieve personal growth and effect social change.

The work of the university and the business of learning have continued despite the Covid-19 pandemic. Our participants constructed learning through the lens of assessment, and the pandemic has raised critical questions about the purpose of assessment. Our data shows that assessment has not been experienced as seamlessly continuous during the lockdown. Universities have not yet solved the problem of what assessment should mean in teaching and learning in the 21st century. In the realm of assessment, we argue that the Covid-19 pandemic presents significant opportunities for reform.

The implications of our study are summarised as:

- **Supportive relationship opportunities:** Our study has emphasised the importance of opportunities for students to form bonds with staff and peers, to augment their relationships and learning.
- **Transitions openly addressed:** Our study brings to light the need for universities to be aware of the shifts that students undergo – whether expected or forced. There is also a need to account for the impacts these shifts have on the socioemotional and educational functioning of students.
- **Culture of universities becoming more flexible:** Higher education institutions can create a culture that better recognises students from various backgrounds, rather than making the

academy an insular institution to which students must either adapt or face failure, which our data suggests is how students experience university.

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