Online Teaching Survey 2020-21: Reflections from NTU Psychology

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic resulted in the UK Government enforcing social distancing measures in March 2020. This marked the start of a period of emergency response teaching (ERT, Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020) by HE institutions in the UK, and prompted a swift transition to remote, online teaching and learning for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year. Teaching and learning continued to face substantial challenges during the following academic year (2020-21) with academic delivery across the sector adapted to reflect the changing landscape of UK government social-distancing restrictions. For NTU Psychology this required staff and students to adopt technology-mediated approaches to the general teaching model for the duration of the academic year. To set the context for this report, we begin by outlining the teaching model within NTU Psychology.

1.1 General teaching model within NTU Psychology

Courses in NTU range in size enormously. Some of the postgraduate (PG) courses have very few students (<10), while some of the undergraduate (UG) courses are very large (>500 students in each year). The general teaching model used by larger courses encompasses a variety of teaching methods, including:

- Large group lectures (Level 4-5 up to 300 students, Level 6-7 up to 100 students)

- Smaller 'laboratory' classes (around 50 students and 2-3 staff)

- Workshops (around 50 students and 1-2 staff)

- Weekly tutorial sessions (around 10-12 students)

- Project supervision (UG = small project lab (around 16 students and 2-3 staff) and one-to-one support; PG = one-to-one support)

This range of teaching approaches gives students the opportunity to gain personalised one-to-one support within tutorials and through interactions with staff in smaller group classes (e.g., 2-3 hr labs that have 2-3 staff present) and form supportive working relationships with their peers. The model also promotes opportunities for critical engagement with the curriculum through discussion and activity based enquiry.

1.2 Adaptations to the NTU Psychology teaching model (2020/21)

Prior to the pandemic the default position for sessions delivered as part of the general teaching model was for face-to-face delivery. The government restrictions enforced during the academic year 2020-21 necessitated a move to a technology-mediated approach. For NTU Psychology this adapted approach included:

- Some staff and students (Levels 4, 5 and PG) experiencing blended delivery (a mixture of on-campus and online sessions) from September to November 2020

- Level 6 students engaging with the curriculum online for the full academic year

- Hybrid formats were used for some sessions (e.g., tutorials) which were face-to-face but for which students could also dial-in remotely.

- All staff and students returning to a fully online mode of delivery (a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous online sessions) from December 2020 until the end of the academic year

The transition to this adapted approach to teaching and learning was monitored in NTU Psychology by the Psychology Course Leaders Forum, a weekly meeting in which Course Leaders provided updates and discussed teaching and learning issues. Within this forum there was concern about the lack of data available through which to understand how students and staff had experienced the transition to online teaching. A research project was therefore initiated to address this data gap. The following report provides an overview of feedback from staff and students in NTU Psychology, about their online teaching and learning experiences during the Academic Year 2020-21.

2. Online Learning Surveys

Online surveys designed to capture perspectives of the period of online teaching and learning during the 2020/21 academic year were distributed to staff and students in NTU Psychology at the end of the academic year (May – July 2021). The surveys contained a mixture of open-ended questions and rating scales. Respondents were invited to share their perspectives of the success of the online teaching and learning provision, the support they had received and their overall satisfaction.

An overview of the sample of respondents is provided below.

2.1 Staff Sample

Fifty-four members of academic staff from NTU Psychology responded to the survey. This represented an approximate response rate of 41% of the department. Most staff identified as Lecturer/Senior Lecturers (N = 41; 76%). An overview of departmental roles can be found in Table 1. Thirty-five staff members reported teaching undergraduate (UG) courses only, 5 taught on post-graduate (PG) courses only and 14 taught a mixed UG/PG timetable. Teaching experience across the sample ranged from 9 months to 30+ years (M_{exp} = 10.32 years, SD_{exp} = 8.94 years). All staff respondents had access to a home broadband connection while engaging with the period of remote, online teaching.

Table 1. Job roles reported by the sample (N = 54)

Job Role	N (%)
Lecturer/Senior Lecturer	41 (76%)
Principal Lecturer	1 (2%)
Associate Professor	4 (7%)
Professor	4 (7%)
Academic Associate	1 (2%)
Prefer not to say	3 (6%)

2.2 Student Sample

The student sample consisted of 584 students (M_{age} = 21.08 years, SD_{age} = 4.20 years; 79.8% female) from NTU Psychology. This represented a 21% response rate. The majority of students reported being enrolled on undergraduate courses (N = 525), with 59 responses from postgraduate students. Tables 2 and 3 provides an overview of the UG and PG samples by course.

Table 2. Overview of UG sample by course

Undergraduate	N = 525	Year of Study			
		1	2	2 (SW*)	3
BSc Psychology (including all pathways & SW)	384	153	177	5	49
BSc Psychology with Criminology (including SW)	107	41	48	1	17
BSc Psychology with Sociology (including SW)	24	10	10	0	4
BSc Psychology with Counselling (including SW)	10	10	0	0	0

*Year 2 on sandwich placement

Table 3. Overview of PG sample by course

Postgraduate	N = 59
MSc/PgDip Psychology	22
MSc/MRes Psychology Research Methods	2
MSc Psychological Wellbeing & Mental Health	6
MSc Forensic Mental Health	5
MSc Forensic	7
MSc Theoretical Foundations in Clinical Psychology	2
MSc Applied Child Psychology	4
MSc Cyberpsychology	9
Prefer not to say	2

The majority of students (N = 562) reported using a laptop / computer to access their online teaching resources and sessions. A small number of students reported accessing teaching resources and sessions via a tablet (N = 16) or a smartphone (N = 6). For most students, regular access to the internet was via a broadband connection (N = 560), although some students reported using a mobile hotspot (N = 13) or other means of connectivity (N = 11). While the number of students connecting to the internet via mobile or other means only equated to about 3% of the reported sample, it should be noted that if this pattern of results was to be replicated across the full NTU Psychology cohort it could imply that approximately 100 students were without a stable internet connection.

3. Staff Perspectives of Online Teaching

Staff were largely positive about the success of the transition to online teaching and learning with forty-four (81.5%) staff rating the move as successful or very successful. No staff reported perceiving the move to online provision as unsuccessful. Most staff (93%, N = 50) reported receiving moderate to high levels of support during this period. In terms of overall perceptions of satisfaction with the experience of online teaching, only 5 members of staff reported feeling unsatisfied, with moderate to high levels of satisfaction being reported by most (91%, N = 49).

3.1 Perceptions of online delivery

In response to questions about the delivery of online teaching and learning, staff indicated that the structure and organisation of online teaching and learning was clear in terms of instructions for both online teaching (72%) and assessments (83%). In terms of online staff-student interactions, most staff reported that students were understanding (80%) and respectful (76%) towards them and their peers (72%). However, fewer staff perceived

students as responsive during online interactions (46%) or engaged with their courses (57%). Only a third of staff perceived online learning to have successfully fostered collaboration (32%) among students. Just over half perceived online learning to have successfully fostered communication (52%) among students.

Staff were asked to rate their perceptions of the quality of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning materials at both UG and PG levels, and how well these modes of delivery had been received by students. Staff responded on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating more positive views. In terms of the quality of asynchronous and synchronous materials, there were no significant differences in staff perceptions of the materials at UG or PG levels ($p > .05$). In all cases, staff perceived the quality of materials to be moderate to high ($M_{range} = 3.57 - 4.02$).

A significant difference ($t(46) = 4.01$, $p < .001$) was evident between staff perceptions of how well UG students had received synchronous ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .66$) and asynchronous ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.01$) modes of delivery, with staff perceiving synchronous delivery as having been received more favourably. Staff perceptions of how receptive PG students had been to the two modes of delivery were not significantly different ($p > .05$).

3.2 Qualitative Staff Perspectives

A thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses was conducted to provide further insight into the staff perspectives of online teaching and learning during the academic year 2020-21. The analysis of the data highlighted four core themes (see Figure 1):
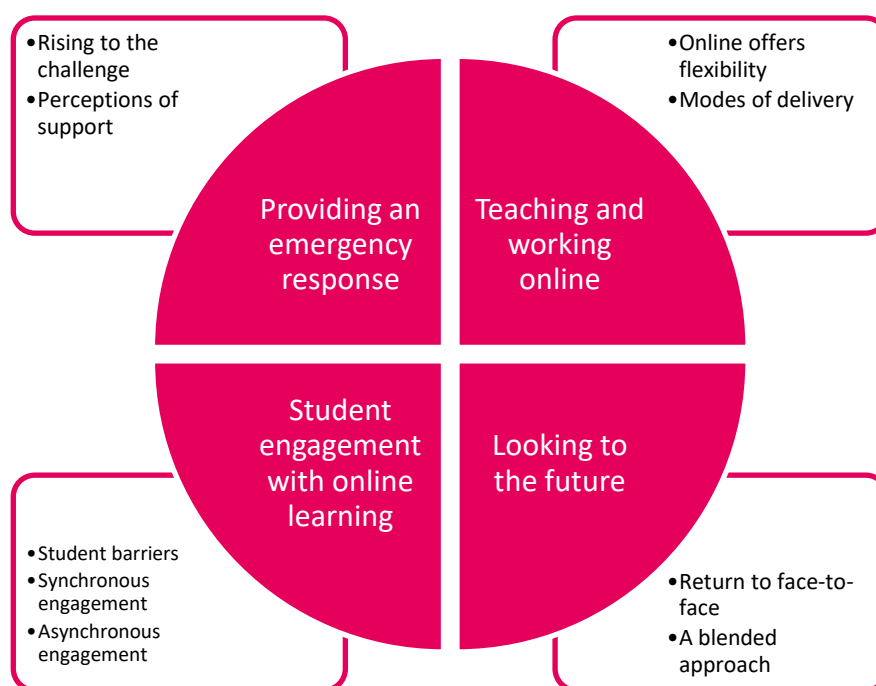

Figure 1. Overview of staff survey themes

3.2.1 Providing an emergency response

While there was an acknowledgement amongst staff that the move online had been an "*emergency response to a pandemic rather than planned online teaching,*" it was generally viewed as successful. Staff indicated a sense of achievement given the "*limited time to get set up*" and the steep learning curve that many had faced in terms of adopting technology and adapting their teaching to suit an online format. Remarks positively reflected the collective endeavours of the staff in NTU Psychology to provide students with opportunities to learn and access the curricula, with one even going so far as to claim, *"we pulled off something just short of a miracle.*"

A key enabler of the emergency response by NTU Psychology was the level of departmental support received by staff. Throughout the period of online teaching and learning, NTU Psychology offered a range of digital training and support opportunities in the form of synchronous online workshops, asynchronous guides and discussion-based forums (i.e., the Psychology Digital Guidance and Support hub on MS Teams). The support provided was positively received and ensured that all staff members had a minimum baseline knowledge and understanding of the technology solutions required:

> *"I didn't really have a clue how to record video on PowerPoints or how to set up short videos on NOW. I went to one workshop…and got everything I needed to know to do the basics."*

More generally, staff highlighted that support from peers, course and module leaders, and line managers had been largely forthcoming and appreciated, with one person stating: "*we all supported each other excellently.*" However, there was also a recognition that being online at times felt isolating and for some the online environment fostered a sense of disconnection from the department:

> *"I knew that people were there if I reached out to them mostly, but it didn't feel like anyone was actively checking or thinking about us."*

Perceptions of the support received from more central areas of the university were mixed. While staff acknowledged that managing a university during a pandemic was a difficult task, they highlighted that the clarity and timing of messages, particularly those relating to modes of online teaching delivery, were not always perceived to have provided adequate planning and preparation time for staff to be able to effectively adapt their teaching and learning content in response.

3.2.2 Teaching and working online

Benefits and challenges associated with teaching and working online during the academic year were also highlighted in the staff responses. From a positive perspective, staff commented on how they had enjoyed the flexibility offered by remote working in terms of the perceived benefits to their work-life balance. Staff also commented on how moving interactions online had allowed them greater flexibility when it came to communicating and responding to student and staff communications. However, this was not a wholly positive experience for all, with some feeling that it promoted a "*constant expectation to be 'on duty'*" with "*students contacting us via email, via Teams and via private messages on Teams.*"

From a teaching perspective, some staff acknowledged that the move to online had allowed them to think creatively about how to engage students, allowing them to design online sessions that "*were more interactive than usual FTF (face-to-face) lectures.*" The workload

demands that the move to online teaching placed on staff though were considerable, with staff indicating that they had "*too much to do in too little time*". The development of asynchronous content was a particular issue, with staff highlighting how the process of designing and adapting content, recording, and uploading the materials to NOW, took considerably longer than preparing and delivering a face-to-face session:

> *"The struggle was in the pre-recorded content. This was fine to an extent, because I'm competent using technology and video editing techniques but the length of time it took was astronomical. 40 minutes of content could take around 2 days to produce. That's tough."*

In terms of online delivery, there was an acceptance amongst staff that online modes worked well for some modules and sessions, but not all. Modules such as Research Methods and Statistics, where blended approaches had been introduced pre-pandemic, were praised for their largely successful transition to a fully online model, combining asynchronous content with synchronous workshops and labs. Furthermore, for some modules that would previously have adopted a traditional front-led lecture approach, particularly where large cohorts were involved, the opportunity to use online asynchronous modes of delivery was viewed positively:

> *"Moving large cohort lectures to asynchronous was great - I could add in much more interactivity and multimedia than if I was teaching f2f. Teaching these large groups async also meant that we didn't have to teach the same lecture 2/3 times over which was really soul destroying."*

However, not all online teaching modes were viewed through a positive lens. The hybrid approach to delivering on-campus sessions (e.g., as used by tutorials) during Term 1 of the 2020/21 academic year was particularly unpopular, with staff highlighting how teaching to students in the classroom and remotely at the same time was difficult to manage and had a negative impact on student interaction and engagement:

> *"I found the blended [hybrid] approach very difficult. I would far prefer entirely online or entirely in person rather than blended [hybrid]. You need to repeat questions from the students in person to those online, for example. Group work is very difficult if some are there in person and some online. Relatively trivial things like asking students to discuss with their neighbour are not possible."*

3.2.3 Student engagement with online learning

Issues relating to student engagement with online learning were common. Staff highlighted barriers to student engagement, including student access to technology and internet connectivity, and timetabling. Being unable to connect via an appropriate device or stable internet connection limited the ability of some students to access and fully engage with both asynchronous content and synchronous sessions, as one staff member commented:

> *"When students have struggled with connectivity... it's like having a F2F session where one student has a broken desk or a chair with three legs... they are unable to participate, are distracted, etc."*

In terms of timetabling, staff raised concerns about the impact that timetabling decisions, such as not timetabling asynchronous sessions, had had on some students' ability to manage their time. Staff felt that *"better guidance about asynchronous / non-timetabled elements would be helpful for students"* and would help promote increased engagement with the content available.

Staff experiences of student engagement on their modules were somewhat mixed. For synchronous sessions, some staff reported positive experiences in terms of perceived increases in attendance and punctuality, however, it is likely that the social restrictions in place at the time possibly contributed to this as students had limited places to go. Furthermore, for some staff the affordances of the MS Teams technology used during synchronous sessions helped to promote engagement. For instance, the use of the Teams chat window encouraged students to ask questions (*"students were very open to telling me in the chat function when they didn't understand things"*) and breakout rooms facilitated collaboration and teamwork (*"Structured breakout rooms for small group discussion worked very well for level 6 students to engage with papers and a critical discussion of the module"*).

However, not all staff reported positive experiences of student engagement in synchronous sessions. Many staff commented on a perceived lack of engagement, especially with UG cohorts, with staff often feeling as though they were passively *"presenting to grey boxes on a screen"*, rather than actively engaging with and teaching students. Staff lamented the lack of face-to-face contact, indicating that it was difficult to easily gauge student understanding and enjoyment during an online session. Moreover, some staff commented on how students would sometimes log on to a session but *"were not engaging - didn't respond to their name or in chat and often were still there after the session had ended"*.

A common issue in synchronous sessions was the infrequent use of cameras and microphones by students in both main teaching sessions and breakout rooms. Staff felt that lack of audio-visual engagement stunted opportunities for students to interact with staff and collaborate with their peers, and at times hindered the dynamics of the planned sessions: *"My sessions, are not designed for me to talk AT students. Rather, talk WITH students."* While some staff were frustrated at what appeared to be an unwillingness by students to engage, there was an acceptance by some that the situation was potentially more complex. Some students may have been limited by their access to technology and a stable internet connection or may not have felt comfortable being seen or heard online. As one staff member commented:

> *"Students not engaging and not switching on their cameras (even in things like project labs) is pretty soul-destroying at times, but once I made the decision that this was due to student insecurity rather than my teaching, I just got on with it."*

Student engagement with asynchronous content was also the subject of staff remarks. Staff highlighted how asynchronous content provided students with accessibility and flexibility, which was perceived to be particularly appealing to PG cohorts who were *"appreciative of materials being available to them in their own time."* However, there were more general concerns over whether students (UG and PG) were actually engaging with the material, with some staff indicating that Panopto viewing figures for the pre-recorded content that they had created for their modules were *"very depressing"*. As one staff member noted:

> *"Many of my students are reporting not watching asynchronous lectures - modules with no synchronous teaching seem to be almost entirely ignored."*

While these perceptions will not necessarily be reflective of student engagement across all modules with asynchronous content, it was suggested that the reason students might have struggled to engage from week-to-week with some modules was that "*having only videos of lectures was too monotone and not motivating enough for students*".

3.2.4 Looking to the future

Finally, staff responses considered the way in which they would like to see teaching and learning approached in the future. Staff indicated that they are keen to use the lessons learned from the period of online teaching to further develop their own practice and that of the department and wider university, however, the majority of staff indicated that they were keen to return to face-to-face teaching in some capacity. For many, being face-to-face offered opportunities to better facilitate personalised student support during sessions:

> *"I just think being around people, being able to see their faces, helps with a multitude of things - like if someone looks confused about something, you can check if they are understanding what you have said. Being able to look at student work 'over their shoulder' while they work in groups, is much easier than asking them to share on a screen."*

Some staff also stated that they felt that the return to face-to-face sessions would allow them to create a more engaging learning environment where they would be able to gain "*greater interaction and connection*" with students in the room, and support students to gain a sense of community by "*being with each other*".

However, not all staff were enthusiastic to move all sessions back to fully face-to-face formats, with staff highlighting that utilising blended approaches could be beneficial for some modules, notably tutorials and larger lectures, in terms of staff workload and student engagement. Staff commented on how they would like to see a flexible and sustainable approach to incorporating online learning opportunities in the curricula, with some staff indicating that they would welcome the use of asynchronous content to "*support the F2F teaching*". However, staff were keen to ensure that any "*videos should be followed up with some sort of live interaction every week*" to ensure that students had the opportunity to further develop and discuss their understanding of the content.

Staff also recognised that in order to facilitate more long-term blended ambitions there would need to be a commitment from the department and/or wider university to ensure that staff could access "*more tech support.*" There was also a recognition that more work would need to be done in terms of planning and designing appropriate online learning opportunities, drawing from the pre-pandemic experiences of the department and others to help guide further development, as one staff member suggested:

> *"If true online provision is to be further developed/remain in the longer term, we should look to areas that have done this previously outside the context of a pandemic and understand how it can be done / what tools/skills are needed etc."*

4. Student Perspectives of Online Teaching

Overall, most students were relatively positive about the success of the transition to online teaching and learning, with 263 (45%) students rating the move as successful and 241 (42%) as okay. Some 77 (13%) students reported perceiving the move to online provision as unsuccessful. Perceptions of support during this period were more mixed, with only 211 (37%) of students reporting that they felt supported. One-hundred and eighty-two (32%) students reported feeling unsupported during the academic year, with 176 (31%) holding a neutral stance. A similar pattern of results was found in terms of perceptions of their overall satisfaction with their NTU experience. While 246 students (43%) reported being satisfied, 163 students (29%) reported feeling unsatisfied with their experience, and 160 (28%) reported neutral thoughts.

A comparison of the mean responses at UG and PG level showed significant differences in ratings of success ($F(1, 565) = 10.69$, $p = .001$), support ($F(1, 565) = 9.31$, $p = .002$) and overall satisfaction ($F(1, 565) = 7.35$, $p < .01$). UG students reported lower perceptions of success, support and overall satisfaction than the PG students. An overview of the UG and PG mean responses can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Overview of mean responses for UG and PG

	Mean Responses (SD)	
	UG	**PG**
Perceived success	3.29 (.89)	3.70 (.89)
Perceived support	2.96 (1.07)	3.43 (1.16)
Overall satisfaction	3.08 (1.07)	3.50 (1.32)

A further comparison between the UG levels of study revealed significant differences across all three variables, success, $F(2, 508) = 16.75$, $p < .001$, support, $F(2, 508) = 22.66$, $p < .001$, and experience, $F(2, 508) = 26.00$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc tests showed Level 4 students perceived the success of the move to online and overall experience more favourably than both Levels 5 and 6, $p < .05$. Level 5 students perceived the level of support received to be significantly lower than the perceptions of Level 4 and Level 6, $p < .05$. An overview of the UG mean responses can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Overview of mean responses by UG level of study

	Mean Responses (SD)		
	Level 4	**Level 5**	**Level 6**
Perceived success	3.54 (.82)	3.07 (.90)	3.24 (.90)
Perceived support	3.30 (.96)	2.64 (1.05)	3.06 (1.15)
Overall satisfaction	3.47 (.97)	2.80 (1.04)	3.08 (1.07)

Student perceptions of NTU Psychology staff during the academic year 2020-21 were positive with most students reporting staff to be understanding (72%), respectful (82%), supportive (69%), responsive (69%), engaged (75%) and approachable (62%). During this period students also perceived their peers to be respectful (77%) and cooperative (56%). However, only 39% of students reported feeling comfortable with their peers in online sessions.

4.1 Perceptions of online delivery

In terms of the delivery of teaching and learning, students generally reported favourable perceptions of the organisation of online learning (58%), the instructions they were provided with to support their online learning (63%) and their assessments (69%). However, students were less enthusiastic about online learning fostering collaboration (39%) and communication (35%) with other students.

Students were also asked for their views on synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods (Table 6). Questions related to either how much students liked the different teaching methods ("Enjoyment"), or how much they felt the different methods supported their learning ("Learning"). Two 2 x 2 mixed ANOVAs were conducted on these different measures. Both analyses revealed that PG students were more positive than UG students (Enjoyment, $F(1, 563) = 11.03$, $p=.0009$; Learning, $F(1, 564) = 9.79$, $p = .002$). Additionally, overall synchronous teaching was rated significantly higher for Enjoyment ($F(1, 563) = 5.63$, $p = .018$) but not for Learning ($F(1, 564) = 2.07$, $p = .15$). There was no significant interaction for either Enjoyment ($F(1, 564) = 2.07$, $p = .15$) or Learning ($F(1, 564) = 0.11$, $p = .74$)).

Table 6. Overview of mean UG and PG responses to asynchronous / synchronous delivery

| | | Mean Responses (SD) | |
		UG	PG
Enjoyment	Asynchronous	3.25 (1.13)	3.46 (1.14)
	Synchronous	3.36 (1.01)	3.86 (1.05)
Learning	Asynchronous	3.27 (1.14)	3.59 (1.09)
	Synchronous	3.38 (1.00)	3.77 (1.14)

4.2 Qualitative Student Perspectives

A qualitative, thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses was conducted to provide further insight into the student perspectives of online teaching and learning during the academic year 2020-21. The analysis of the data rendered 4 key themes (Figure 2).
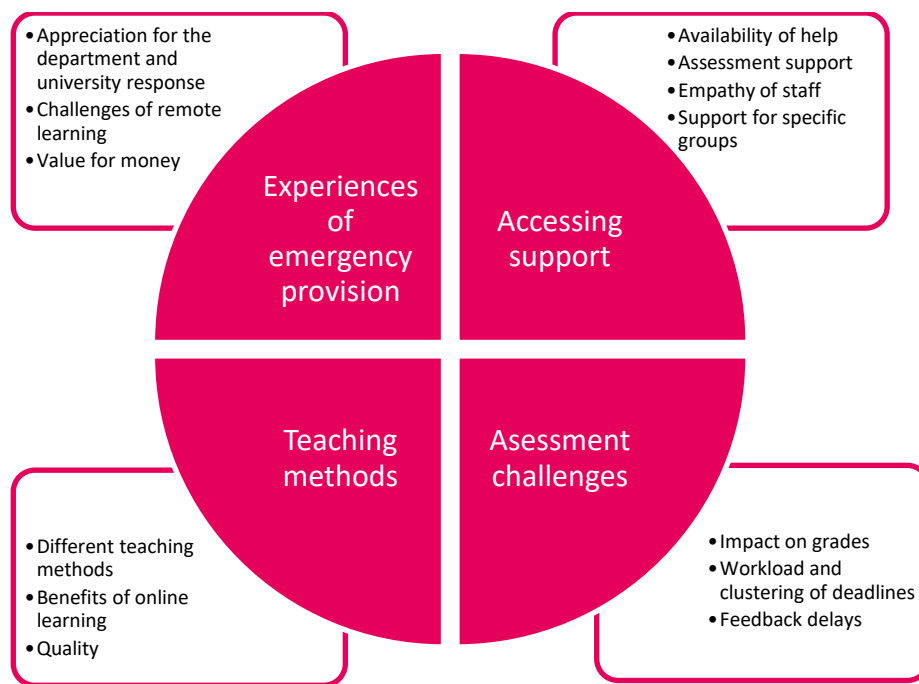
Figure 2. Overview of student survey themes

4.2.1 Experiences of emergency provision

Students expressed a diverse range of views regarding their overall experience during the period. Many students reported appreciation for the department and university and acknowledged that the situation was managed well under the circumstances, as indicated by comments such as "*you did your best during unprecedented times*" and "*I think I've gotten the best education possible in the current climate.*" Some students also showed their appreciation for the efforts that staff went to in delivering their teaching online:

> *"I can see that your move to online learning has been done with a lot of time and dedication! You guys have tried your best to make this move but of course it has been strange and difficult for all of us."*

Several students praised the organisation and management of the teaching and learning, with one commenting "*Everything was organized very well it felt like you always was kind of preparing for something like that*", and many appreciated the frequent communications from course and module leaders. Some also reflected on a positive year overall, stating that "*despite the circumstances I had a brilliant first year I really enjoyed it*". Others commented that they enjoyed the flexibility the online provision had provided.

As is to be expected, students reported a number of challenges from the experience. One of these was a lack of sense of belonging. Many students struggled to form connections with other students or staff, and reported feelings of isolation and loneliness:

"I've felt lonely and out of the loop I've made no friends I've found it overwhelming I've had to teach myself everything using mostly YouTube which is free anyway. I find it extremely difficult to just do uni work at home on my own with no other students to talk to or teachers to check if what I'm doing is right"

Students reported that it was more challenging to get to know staff when working online, with them highlighting that "*lectures have been supportive however it has been difficult to get to know lot of them. When teaching is in person it is much easier to get to know people and create a bond with them.*" Furthermore, some commented that they felt a general sense of disconnection with the university, with some reporting that they did not feel like a student, and some perceiving that they taught themselves the teaching and learning content for their modules: "*My main concerns are about having to teach myself the majority of the material and feeling like no one cared.*"

Students also felt that they missed out on opportunities to meet and bond with other students, with limited opportunities to socialise, as highlighted here by a student who felt that they were "*particularly socially unsatisfied struggling to make course friends which I believe to be important*". Live sessions that made use of breakout rooms were one route that students could communicate and collaborate with one another. Some students reported that breakout rooms helped them form relationships with others, but many commented on the difficulties with breakout rooms, given that many students opted not to turn their microphones and cameras on or communicate with one another:

> *"Breakout rooms have also been quite unsuccessful I have found because people tend to not talk in them so when a large majority of the time is spent in breakout rooms the time is basically wasted because they are silent"*

Many students suggested that camera use should be enforced, but some students were resistant to this approach, stating that staff should "*connect with your students properly and stop forcing us to turn the camera on in our own homes. I do not want to be treated like a school child under my own roof*".

Lacking a sense of community was also raised by some students "*the one shortcoming is with regards to community building among students; I find it difficult to interact with my batchmates and find means to participate socially discuss and find peer support with regards to course content and student life*" although some acknowledge the efforts of the department and university in this respect "*I still had opportunities to be part of the NTU community despite everything being remote*". Related to this, some students felt negatively impacted by the size of the course.

Students acknowledged that the period of remote teaching and learning was a generally challenging time both personally and educationally, with some reporting that it was difficult to adjust to online learning, finding the process confusing and lacking guidance:

> *"At the beginning everything was very confusing and nothing was really explained on how to use ntu now or how to work teams but after a while of figuring out myself it got easier."*

Many students reported struggling with their concentration and motivation, with one suggesting that *"due to the nature of this year I have had a hard time focussing and self-motivating to work at my best.*" The wider situation also took a toll on some students' mental health, with one student highlighting how "*students are not only isolated terrified and struggling with mental health but watching people die.*" Some students commented that staff lacked empathy for their position, suggesting that "*some lecturers seemed to have no*

empathy for what students are going through". However, others commented that staff were very understanding, and that they were "*…provided with all the essential information and I feel that my lecturers were very understanding.*".

Finally, some students raised issue about the use of all three teaching terms, with some feeling as though there was very little contact in Term 3. Students suggested that the university should "*stop cramming learning into two terms - there are 3 terms for a reason and it is unfair we have to pay for 3 terms of university yet we only get taught by the uni for 2 of those 3 terms.*" Related to this, there were concerns raised about value for money during the emergency response, with one student commenting that "*some of us haven't entered the university once this year yet have not been offered any compensation from NTU.*"

4.2.2 Accessing support

Another key theme that emerged was students' experiences of seeking help. Many students reported feeling very supported by staff in the department and were very positive. This is exemplified by the following comments from two students:

> *"I have felt very supported throughout the year any issues problems requests for help in understanding or making sense has always been met and exceeded in some aspects"*

> *"Anytime I felt down or needed support there was always someone to help and I felt that tutors really cared about our wellbeing."*

Other students, however, reported challenges and delays in seeking support from staff, and some noted inconsistencies in the support offered between staff and modules. For instance, some students perceived that there was little help available to them from lecturers via email:

> *"The support from staff was needed more than ever but we were told by most that we were unable to contact lecturers via email because they would not respond. I understand this is due to the high volume of emails they would likely receive however it definitely left many of us feeling isolated and unsure of the work we were submitting".*

One concern was that emails or Teams messages were sometimes not replied to, and at times there was a delay in responses, with one student highlighting that *"most lecturers or lab leaders took a long time to reply to questions. Most of the time would have figured it out by the time the question was answered in a few days."* Furthermore, some students commented on the general difficulty in accessing help online, and feeling like a burden to staff:

> *"I don't think it's anything to do with the uni personally but just everyone struggles a little more online - the availability to ask for help is not there as much- yes albeit there is teams etc. But if you don't understand something it's not very easily understood over teams so I find myself not asking questions because I need someone there in person to sit me down and explain something to me"*

Issues of accessing support were further emphasised in terms of assessments, with a common concern being cut-off dates for questions in advance of an assessment. The use of

cut-off dates was put in place for certain modules, e.g., Research Methods 2 and Individual Differences to ensure that staff were able to deal with queries during a set time-period in the lead up to the assessment deadlines. However, for some students this was problematic, as highlighted here:

> *"not allowed to contact members of staff about assessments after a certain date- some of which I missed as they were before the previous assessment to this was due to I hadn't started the assessment yet as I was focusing on the previous one that was actually due."*

Contact with staff was also raised in terms of access to personalised support, with some students noting that during the period of online teaching opportunities for one-to-one discussions with a tutor outside of sessions were not always available. While some staff were able to offer such support, the work-life demands of the pandemic rendered this difficult for some. For students though, these one-to-one opportunities were perceived to be beneficial and important, with one commenting that they "*…would like to have at least a few designated individual meetings with my tutor throughout the year.*" In Psychology, group face to face tutorials allow for time to take individual students aside and discuss their work and how they are progressing. Many students also stay to talk to their tutor after the session about more sensitive issues. Tutorials were prioritised for teaching face-to face initially, but then had to move online, and it is possible that this meant that these important tutorial elements were unintentionally lost.

The student responses also highlighted issues relating to support for specific groups of students, with some international students, mature students, and students with disabilities raising specific concerns about feeling isolated and unsupported in their studies. Such concerns are exemplified by the following comment: "*I am a student with a particular detrimental disability (loss of a sense). I've felt completely left behind during the pandemic.*".

In addition to department support issues, centralised support offered by the university was also discussed. Perceptions of mental health support from the university were mixed. Some students praised the mental health support "*Student support services have also been incredible and the mental health team have been really considerate*", while others flagged concerns, with one indicating that "*apart from the occasional email about mental health and stress there has been no contact from the uni with regards to my individual experience and mental wellbeing*".

4.2.3 Teaching methods

A large number of comments related to the relative benefits of online teaching and learning methods. Key benefits reported included the accessibility ("*I have access to all my content it is easy and quick to access everything*") and flexibility ("*you are able to access asynchronous materials whenever you wish which is beneficial*") that the move to online had afforded many students. Furthermore, online learning was seen to provide benefits for some students with disabilities, with individuals commenting that they enjoyed the experience of online learning:

> *"INFINITELY more comfortable working at home better for people (like me) with social anxiety better productivity when working at home on my desktop rather than those in the library or a laptop etc less commuting*

safer more independence… many many benefits. Online learning has been perfect for me."

Related to this, many students commented favourably that they were able to engage with materials at their own pace, particularly for asynchronous content, and that online materials were very helpful for revision. Some students reported that they liked the inclusion of quizzes, they found Q & A sessions helpful, and that they felt that online learning had increased their independence: "*I do think we gain more independence and in a sense agency over our studies*".

The quality of the materials was also a source of many comments. Many students reflected favourably on the quality of the materials ("*I have been very impressed by the quality of the teaching this academic year and in most cases I do not feel like I have missed out from an academic perspective*"), but others perceived the overall teaching quality to be lower than it had been in previous years, suggesting that "*teaching has not been up to same standard as in person*" and that some sessions had appeared disorganised. Technical difficulties were also highlighted, with students suggesting that not all staff were proficient with online modes of delivery ("*A lot of technical issues with some tutors struggling to use teams*"), and that certain sessions had been marred by poor audio quality.

Specific points were raised about experiences of synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery. Advantages of synchronous delivery were that students were able to ask questions during the live sessions (via microphone or Team's chat) and many enjoyed the interactivity and potential for discussions in these sessions. Some commented that more live sessions would have been beneficial to their online teaching experience, and that synchronous sessions increased their sense of connection to NTU, as exemplified by the comments below:

"The live classes have been closer to normality than the pre-recorded."

"I think live sessions are important for all modules therefore scheduling time to interact with each module would benefit students. This ensures students don't feel lost and unsure who to contact."

Contrary to the synchronous sessions, students commented on the lack of interactivity with asynchronous content, and that these sessions at times contributed to a feeling of disconnection with the university. Specific issues with the structure of asynchronous lectures were also raised with some students' sessions indicating that videos were too lengthy. Many students suggested that for asynchronous lectures short chunks of learning and shorter videos were preferred. Accessibility concerns were also raised, as not all materials produced by staff had accurate subtitles.

Another issue related to asynchronous content was the effect that this mode of delivery had on a student's motivation to engage with and complete the content, with students highlighting that at times "*asynchronous learning makes it exceptionally difficult to remain motivated.*" For some, this led to students falling behind with their work as they struggled to effectively manage their time. As highlighted by one student, the flexibility afforded by the pre-recorded content allowed them to procrastinate, putting off their learning to a later date: "*I was getting lazy to watch the pre-recorded lectures because I had on my mind that I would be able to watch them whenever I want and that sometimes made me fall behind*". This was further exacerbated by the lack of timetabling for asynchronous lectures, with students

highlighting how "*asynchronous sessions not being put on the timetable makes it easy to forget about.*" Students also called for asynchronous materials to be released at a specific and consistent time of the week to help them plan their week of studying.

Despite some of the concerns linked to asynchronous delivery, many students did see value in asynchronous lectures and commented that they were an effective method for supporting their learning:

> "*The asynchronous sessions particularly…the lecture content was great! It allowed me to make sure my notes were what they could be and could guide my readings around the topics. When it was live it was harder to navigate.*"

Notably, students acknowledged that the flexibility to play and pause videos, and work at their own pace through the content, allowed them to more effectively engage with the learning content. Although, there was a recognition that this was most effective for front-led information sharing type sessions, rather than collaborative / small group sessions:

> "*Synchronous content was paradoxically harder to engage into and I ended up performing the worst in modules that were delivered live. I guess this was because in asynchronous lectures I could have screen breaks go back to see what I missed etc and it was hard to engage in a virtual lecture in real time. If I had to choose between virtual asynchronous or synchronous I would always choose the former unless it was a small group (like the tutorial sessions).*"

4.2.4 Assessment

A final area of concern for some students was the impact of the pandemic on their grades, with some reporting that they felt that their grades had dropped as a result of online learning. The lack of a safety-net policy was also commented on, with students raising concern that "*we have not had any safety nets even though this year has been just as tough (if not tougher) than last academic year.*" Others however commented that their grades had not been negatively impacted ("*I have seen grade improvements over the past year despite the challenging times during covid*"), suggesting that the perception of the effects of online teaching on grades over the academic year were not altogether consistent.

 A common thread of concern, however, was apparent in terms of perceptions of workload and deadlines. Some students felt that "*workload sometimes feels like there is too much going on*" and commented that deadlines for their assessments were clustered closely together, making it difficult to manage the demands of their studies. With this in mind, some students called for more flexibility and understanding surrounding deadlines, suggesting that the department / university should "*provide more flexibility with assignments for students struggling*". Finally, some commented on the fact that their feedback for assignments was occasionally delayed.

5. Recommendations

A number of key recommendations emerge from this report:

1. **Supporting students: Online learning should afford opportunities for students to engage with their learning community**

Courses / modules adopting online modes of delivery should provide opportunities for students to engage with staff and their peers. Such opportunities could take the form of live online discussions, in-person follow-up sessions, engagement with Teams chat / pages, discussion boards and/or other opportunities for group discussion and collaboration. Promoting interaction between students and their learning community will foster higher levels of support and connectivity.

2. **Supporting staff: Communication needs to be clear and timely**

If staff are teaching fully online there needs to be clear communication between them and the department and regular monitoring (check-ins) put in place to prevent a sense of disconnect. This may be applicable in 'normal' times for large departments and when many staff have flexible working arrangements as was the case during lockdowns in the pandemic.

3. **Digital communications: ensure staff and student expectations are aligned**

Staff should set clear expectations with students concerning mode of communication and frequency/timing of responses at the start of a course/module and staff should be mindful of the requirements relating to the timing of responding to student queries. During various phases of the pandemic, many staff were working hard to move teaching online whilst juggling caring responsibilities, putting pressure on effective student communication. Where staff may feel unable to respond fully to a query in the designated timeframe and/or are receiving a high number of queries on a specific topic, the use of holding messages and/or redirection to FAQs could provide useful strategies to ensure that student queries are acknowledged and signposting is provided to either some guidance or to expectations on further communication set. In situations where staff feel that student communications are not aligned to the course/module expectations, signposting should be provided to effective communication skills.

4. **Effective time management should be promoted**

Modules should ensure that required learning activities and assessments are communicated to all students and staff involved. Modules should provide a clear and consistent overview of weekly learning structure and expected learning outcomes via the newsfeeds on the NOW learning rooms. Such messages should also be reinforced in the main content by all modules adopting a consistent approach to presenting information in the weekly session templates provided. Where applicable, timetabling of sessions should reflect face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous sessions to promote engagement and ensure modules are not overlooked. Furthermore, where changes to mode/location are required session timings should facilitate a smooth transition.

5. **Develop students' confidence in engaging with online learning.**

Ensure that all students have a minimum baseline of digital proficiency that will enable them to engage with the diverse digital requirements of the curricula. Signpost students to development opportunities / support to enhance their skills, confidence and engagement with NOW, Teams, digital research / data handling tools and digital content creation. Where possible, to facilitate the expectation that students should make use of cameras and microphones in small-group online teaching sessions and meetings, to help them develop connection with others when working remotely. Enhancing digital proficiency across the student cohort will support course and graduate outcomes.

6. **Online / blended learning needs to be well planned and pedagogically appropriate**

Online delivery should be appropriately structured and make effective use of online teaching and learning approaches. Notably, asynchronous sessions should be delivered in a format that combines small chunks of content and provide students with the opportunity to interact with activities such as quizzes and discussion boards (or suitable conversation-type alternatives). Student motivation and engagement should be at the forefront of online delivery plans. It is therefore advised that staff consider the perspectives of students during course/module redesign processes via processes of co-creation and/or evaluation of content.

7. **Students and staff need to have access to appropriate technology and internet connectivity**

The university should ensure that all staff are sufficiently resourced to provide effective online / blended learning opportunities on and off campus. Minimum digital requirements should be clearly communicated to students (preferably in advance of their enrolment). For students who lack the required technology and/or internet connectivity signposting to appropriate mechanisms of support and/or on-campus study locations should continue to be provided to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to engage with the curriculum.

8. **Staff need support and sufficient time to create engaging digital content, and to learn to effectively teach online**

The successful creation of digital content to support online teaching and learning opportunities requires time, an understanding of online/blended pedagogy and digital skills. Consideration therefore needs to be given to the workload provided for staff to plan and prepare digital learning content. Staff should also be encouraged and supported to engage in training to develop their understanding and awareness of effective online teaching practices, new developments in online teaching and digital skills. Additionally, the University should look to increase their central support for the design, content creation, editing and maintenance of digital assets. Academic staff, regardless of digital ability, should have the opportunity to provide online opportunities for their modules. Much has been learned during this period of emergency response teaching, but without ongoing training and time to learn to teach effectively online, future developments will be limited.

6. Conclusions

The transition to online emergency response teaching was challenging for both staff and students but was largely successful. Staff and students acknowledged the enormous efforts

involved in placing the curricula online at short notice; staff reported good support from the department with technical challenges, and many students reported good levels of support from their personal tutors and module staff.

Feelings of isolation and disconnection from other students and staff were common and finding a way to encourage more communication between students in an online setting is a key challenge for the future. Some students commented that additional one-to-one sessions with staff would have been beneficial. The model of teaching in Psychology provides time for one-to-one discussions within group tutorials and students commonly ask for one-to-one discussions at the end of a tutorial for more serious issues and students are encouraged to contact their tutors if they need additional support. During the period of emergency response teaching it is likely that students felt less able to request one-to-one support, and speaking to staff individually during their teaching sessions would have been more difficult, particularly if online. In the future, if online-only teaching is required then some one-to-one contact with tutors should be provided.

There was also tension between the demands placed on staff and expectations from students; staff faced enormous workload pressures in translating their materials for use online at a time when they were also being impacted by the pandemic (e.g., social isolation, home-schooling), but students felt frustrated when they did not receive an immediate response from staff. Managing expectations for both staff and students is key going forward, as is incorporating live sessions to support with any asynchronous content.

It is clear that many staff and students saw value in online teaching, and there were benefits of both synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods. Many students and staff felt that lectures in particular worked well asynchronously online. Students liked the flexibility and self-paced nature of the materials, and how easy they were to revisit for revision purposes. Moving forward the success and sustainability of such online teaching and learning approaches (notably, the development of high quality asynchronous resources) requires adequate resourcing and support. Online teaching materials require careful planning to ensure that they are pedagogically appropriate, consistently applied across modules and courses, and demonstrate equivalence to face-to-face teaching and learning opportunities. Provision of high quality, flexible online learning opportunities therefore presents some key and complex challenges. Firstly, it requires staff to have both a pedagogical understanding of blended learning approaches, and the technical skills with which to enact their plans. Secondly, the development of flexible, online opportunities has the potential to be a time-consuming endeavour, placing pressure on the workloads of staff.

The lessons learned from the period of online teaching and learning, place NTU Psychology in a good position to embed flexible, high-quality, digitally mediated learning opportunities in the curriculum, therefore supporting the digital ambitions of the University Reimagined Strategy (detailed in the 'Becoming the most digitally sophisticated University in the UK' position paper). However, the success of any future redevelopment of teaching and learning opportunities will require careful consideration of the complex needs of the students and staff involved.