

Mix and match: student choice in accessing digital or face-to-face academic skills support

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Presentation abstract

Given the choice, will students opt for face-to-face or online learning sessions? The 301 Academic Skills Centre at the University of Sheffield provides academic skills training (including study skills and maths and statistics support) to students in the form of workshops, one-to-one appointments, and online resources. The transition to online learning during Spring 2020 acted as a catalyst for us to develop our digital offer, which proved extremely popular with students studying remotely. As teaching has returned to the classroom we have been keen to retain some of the positive impacts of our online support and to continue offering students a choice in how they access our extracurricular service. Throughout the 2021-22 academic year we have provided the option of attending one-to-one appointments and workshops either online or face-to-face, which has provided us with a dataset of student preferences. We have been surprised by the ongoing scale of demand for online training and support, and student feedback on the service has provided us with an insight into the reasons behind this demand. This conference session presented data collected during the 2021-22 academic year to explore how and why some students may prefer an online learning alternative and how we intend to develop this delivery model in the future.

Community response

The community response to this presentation consists of two different perspectives on the way in which learning developers – and other colleagues involved in delivering tutorials – might respond to the continued take-up of online appointments.

Benjamin

There are obvious benefits to both face-to-face and online provision of tutorials, as Oli outlined for us. However, from a wellbeing perspective, I wonder if we have a role to play here in not only *offering* more face-to-face as we continue to revivify our campuses, but actively *encouraging it*? Online can often be the easier option, which is great, but can that *sometimes* be the lazier option, with some students continuing a house-bound ennui: a lethargic screen-based drift approach to their studies, when coming to campus and behaving in a more human way will have all the great energising benefits to mental health that were discussed? This encouragement of face-to-face could run alongside the offering of online, in much the same way that parents encourage outside play, while offering the convenience of the screen when beneficial.

Sonia

This was a very insightful session which raised some interesting questions. Why is it that students still continue to request online one-to-ones now they can have them face-to-face, and should we worry about this trend? In answer to the latter, and Benjamin's comment above, I am not sure we do need to worry or 'encourage' them in for face-to-face sessions. It is interesting that some students find online sessions less intimidating – and indeed our own research suggested that students do get anxious before meeting one of us for a one-to-one (something that hadn't really occurred to me). If we can get them to attend an online one-to-one rather than not see us at all, I think this is okay. In fact online one-to-ones work well for sharing documents and I still have many online meetings with colleagues, even though we are encouraged to be on campus. I can see this as an argument for online versus face-to-face teaching – but do see the mental health benefits of the latter.

I think one thing I will take away is that this year's cohort has had different educational experiences to the ones before so our traditional ways of supporting them may no longer work – and next year's cohort will be different again. It is also interesting to note that other universities have had issues with engagement this year. I don't know why this is and would be interested in any thoughts. I think we need to work closer with our School/College contacts to understand the expectations and experiences they come with – so we can prepare for the transition.

Editorial comments

The presentation and these dialogic reflections may serve as a reminder to us that there will be a complexity and nuance to student preferences which should guard against a straightforward policy decision on the offer of virtual and in-person appointments. A recent paper published in the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, for example, found differences in preferences according to level of study, subject area, and the idiosyncrasies of students' personal circumstances (Parsons and Johnston, 2022). Whilst we cannot infantilise students or take away their agency to choose, we also have a responsibility to design interventions that offer holistic benefits to students.

Author's reflection

My paper dealt with the relative demand for online and face-to-face academic skills support and the somewhat confusing picture that has emerged of student preferences. When submitting my abstract for this conference, I wavered, as our students have done, over the choice of presenting online or face-to-face. Participating online would be easier, more convenient, and would save me a long journey. I could eat snacks, put my feet up, and maybe get a few other things done during the other papers.

I decided, however, to choose the face-to-face option; it has been a few years since I have been 'at' a conference, so I thought I would give physical participation a go, just for a change. Yes, it was more of an effort, yes, it felt more intimidating, but it also reminded me what I have been missing. It was a pleasure to engage directly again in a series of presentations and to experience those off-the-cuff conversations between sessions.

For those reasons, I am inclined to agree with the reflection from an audience member, which we also discussed on the day: learning should not always be driven by what students *want* but should also recognise what students *need*. Online delivery will always have a place in our service post-pandemic due to the enormous accessibility benefits for students who are not able to make it to our building in person (as underlined by Sonia's comments above), but we will also focus on encouraging students back into our face-to-face sessions. With a greater understanding of what the additional benefits are of learning face-to-face, we can make the most of that environment to make sure that our in-person

sessions are interactive, discussion-based, and offer opportunities for peer-learning and sharing of ideas and experience. I can see our programme becoming more clearly differentiated in the future between more didactic, easily-digested online content and more active, face-to-face learning.

Next steps and additional reflections

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students were asked to adjust quickly to hybrid models of learning in schools and further education institutions, and across higher education. Their experiences of learning and the forums in which it takes place dramatically shifted. Students have adapted: how will we? Together, the community responses and author reflections here capture a conversation that is likely to be relevant to our community of practitioners for some time.

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References

Parsons, B. and Johnston, H. (2022) 'Understanding student preferences for one-to-one writing appointments post-pandemic', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Issue 24, September, pp.1-22. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi24.871>.

Author details

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