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Crew, Teresa; Märtins, T

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Students' views and experiences of blended learning and employability in a post-pandemic context

Teresa Crew [a],[*], Olivia Märtins [b]

[a] School of History, Law and Social Sciences, Bangor University, United Kingdom
[b] School of Human and Behavioural Sciences, Bangor University, United Kingdom

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Existing research has investigated university students' experiences of learning during restrictive lockdowns (e.g. Ela et al., 2021; Khan, 2021) as well as their perceptions of their own employability (Haekal et al., 2021; Plakhotnik et al., 2021). This study addresses a research gap, by exploring these topics from a post-pandemic perspective. Our research collected data with a cohort of university students at a UK institution, otherwise known as 'NorthSea', in relation to their views and experiences of both 'blended learning' (BL) and employability. The study had a multi-method design comprising of an online focus group (OFG) with n.18 respondents, n.10 semi structured interviews (SSI) and anecdotal data collected from n.6 students. Students were generally supportive of the continuation of BL due to its flexibility. Anecdotal data, collected six months after the original research study, noted further support for BL due to financial concerns about the cost of living crisis. Although other respondents preferred face to face teaching as they observed a disconnect between lectures being delivered online and in person. In terms of employability, respondents were complimentary of the support provided by the Employability Service, (ES), although mature did not always avail themselves of this support, and international students did not perceive that the service was available to them. Respondents also talked of wanting tailored information, advice and guidance (IAG) that considered their degree subject. Recommendations included further research in the shape of an action research project that focused on tailored IAG and included student unions, and for ES to take proactive steps such faculty endorsements, peer ambassadors (who have successfully used the employability service) and a university incentive scheme.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 led to unprecedented organisational challenges on all societal levels, including academia. Following the then, Prime Minister, Boris Johnson's address on coronavirus to the nation on 23 March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was imposed on all educational institutions. This was done to maintain social distancing and prevent the spread of COVID-19. After a brief pause over Easter and following intensive training, Lecturers at NorthSea, a Higher Education institution, shifted from face-to-face teaching to remote learning via an online communication platform[1]. Blended learning' (BL) has the efficiency and socialisation opportunities of the traditional face-to-face classroom with digitally enhanced learning possibilities (Dziuban et al., 2004). The shift to BL has presented challenges and opportunities. Universities UK (2022), who interviewed representatives from thirteen member universities, found that all used the opportunity to develop inclusive assessments such as open-book exams, quizzes, and digital portfolios. There have been challenges as this rapid shift online meant that Lecturers, who were already over-worked, were now required to deliver their teaching using completely different methods in a short space of time. There was an emergence of digital poverty for some students and staff, as well as access issues such as captioning on video content,

readable fonts and ensuring content was compatible with screen readers (Universities UK, 2022).

Existing research also found that students have been concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their future employment (Haekal et al., 2021). Estimates from 2017 demonstrate there are around 30 per cent more UK graduates every year than corporations recruit (Minocha et al., 2017). This discrepancy leads to a highly competitive UK graduate job market. Graduate employability was a key concern for universities prior to the pandemic as employability outcomes can affect performance in university league tables and in the Teaching Excellence Framework." (TEF). In a survey by Holt-White and Montacute (2020), 15 per cent of students reported not feeling supported by university career services during the pandemic. This finding is particularly troubling when careers support was one of the determining factors for students' self-perceived employability (Haekal et al., 2021). The shift to remote working has meant that new skillsets, such as video-conferencing skills, communication and collaboration will be required by employers, (Gill, 2020). Individuals with these transferable skills are likely be the preferred graduate to recruit.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Problem statement, rationale and research objectives

While a plethora of qualitative studies have investigated university students' experiences of learning during restrictive lockdowns (e.g. Ela et al., 2021; Khan, 2021) as well as their self-perceived employability (Haekal et al., 2021; Plakhotnik et al., 2021), this study addresses a research gap and explores these topics from a post-pandemic perspective[2]. The rationale for this research is that our study was conducted at a time (March 2022) when Covid restrictions were relaxing on a daily basis. Thus, we reasoned that respondents may be able to provide reflections on BL and their employability that were not exacerbated by anxiety about Covid 19. As such, this study offers an important addition to the literature. This small-scale qualitative research study had two research objectives:

1. To ascertain the views of a post-pandemic cohort of students, in terms of their experiences of 'blended learning' (BL) and;
2. To understand the support provided by their university employability service (ES)[3].

2.2. Participants

A convenience sampling strategy was used as the participants were recruited via the first author's (TC) teaching cohort of Social Sciences students i.e:

- one undergraduate module in the Social Sciences department, which had a possible sample of 34 students (n.30 'Home' students - residing in the UK, and 4 'International' students - residing outside of the UK), and;
- one postgraduate module in the Social Sciences department, with a possible sample of 41 students, (n.12 'home' and n.29 international students).

This is a popular sampling strategy as utilising the researchers networks can save time and money, but this means the research can lack

external validity (Saumure & Given, 2008). While this sample may not be representative of the general student population, a study by Rothwell et al., (2008) interviewed students across three universities and their results demonstrated little difference in student views (Tymon, 2013: 854). Our study also had a purposive sampling approach, in other words, it focused on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest to the researcher. In terms of this study all respondents had experienced BL and as employability sessions were embedded throughout their degree course, they had an understanding of employability. We did not require that students had explicitly engaged with ES, as it was felt important to be able to note the characteristics of students who reported they had not interacted with the university ES. Purposive sampling strategies are advantageous when the study requires respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and information-rich data (Kelly, 2010: 317). Yet this sampling method is prone to researcher bias as researchers are making subjective assumptions when choosing respondents. An invitation to take part in the research was extended to all students on both modules, thus potential bias was reduced, as there was an equal opportunity for each member of the target population to be part of the sample group.

2.3. Data collection

This study had a multi-method design comprising of one online focus group (OFG), followed by ten semi structured interviews (SSI) and then anecdotal data was collected from eight students in September 2023, six months after the original research (Table 1).

2.3.1. Online focus group

The OFG was held online using 'Microsoft Teams' as two respondents, both of whom were international students, had returned home, but still wished to take part in the study. OFG are a useful method as they remove geographical limitations. This means that data is not only gathered from the fullest range of participants, but it can also add rigor to a study (Higginbottom, 2004). Participants were given an information sheet that outlined the purpose of the study, how their data would be used and information about confidentiality, as well as a consent form. Their right to take part/not take part or withdraw from the study at anytime was emphasized and it was made clear that their participation (or lack of participation) would have no impact whatsoever on their marks for their assessments. All eighteen OFG respondents were postgraduate students, with n.12 respondents being female and n.6 being male. Two thirds were 'Home' students (n.12), defined here as residing within the UK, the remaining respondents were 'International' students from countries such as Ghana, India, Bangladesh, Kuwait, and two students were from Nigeria. We acknowledge that eighteen respondents is larger than the recommended size for a typical focus group. However, as the OFG was conducted online, and students were fully versed with being online in teaching and learning settings, both authors

Table 1
Characteristics of all respondents.

	OFG	SS1	Anecdotal data
Gender			
Male	6	4	4
Female	12	6	4
Age range			
18-24 ('Young')	3	6	4
25 + ('Mature')	15	4	4
Level of study			
Undergraduate	0	4	8
Postgraduate	18	6	0
Type of student			
Home	12	8	8
International	6	2	0

*Details of a lecturer who also provided anecdotal data are not included for anonymity.

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[2] Here we draw upon a presentation by Dr. Homer Yabut who cites a WHO definition of Post-Pandemic context as being a "decrease of pandemic surveillance due to a decrease in pandemic outbreak". https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/adaptability-is-key-real-talk-about-the-post-pandemic-transition/.

[3] This project received ethical approval from Bangor University. Reference Number: HLSS202122F002.

reflected on the ease on monitoring an OFG. Before the OFG started, respondents were instructed to use the raised hand function to indicate that they wished to talk and were also given the option to write in the 'chat' if they did not wish to talk, but wanted to contribute. The second author, OM, ran the OFG, while TC (the first author) monitored the chat function for any questions. As 'Microsoft Teams' provided a transcript, there was no need to take notes, nor produce a transcription from scratch. TC read through the OFG transcript and corrected any words that were unclear or incorrect.

A thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines was conducted with the OFG data. After correction of automatic transcripts (provided by "Microsoft Teams" and "Descript") and an initial data familiarisation stage, OM generated codes and collected data extracts for these codes using a manual colour-coding technique. The codes were then reviewed, and refined by both authors, individually and in collaborative exchanges, to produce a coherent outline of themes that were representative of the OFG data set. Three main themes emerged (*Mixed attitudes towards Blended Learning; positive thoughts about employability; unsure of whether ES is 'allowed' or useful for them individually*).

2.3.2. Semi-structured interviews (SSI)

Following the OFG, ten SSI were conducted. We asked the same questions from the OFG, accompanied by follow-up questions influenced by research themes from the OFG). N.6 females and n.4 males took part, all but four of whom were postgraduate students. Interviewees were given a copy of the information sheet, permission to record interview form and had the option to ask any questions regarding the research. Student preference meant that they were interviewed via MS Teams, apart from two interviews held in person due to technical faults.

A thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, procedure was also conducted with the SSI. The same themes emerged alongside an additional theme regarding the 'lack of opportunities to socialise'.

2.3.3. Anecdotal data

Six months after the research had been completed students began to talk to TC about the effect that a post covid cost-of-living crisis was having on their ability to attend their face-to-face classes. Anecdotal data was collected from one staff member and eight undergraduate students (an even mix of male and female, mature and 'young' students). The same themes emerged, with an emphasis on the cost-of-living crisis, but also on how students had enjoyed being back at the university in person.

2.4. Limitations and strengths of the study

One limitation of our study is the small numbers of respondents who took part in the study. Recruiting students can be difficult because like many institutions, students at NorthSea are asked to complete a multitude of surveys regarding their views about modules, courses and services. This has led to both low response rates and research fatigue. However, the response rates for the SSI in this study was 12 per cent for undergraduates and 14 per cent for postgraduates, while the response rate for the focus group (which only consisted of postgraduates) was much higher at 43 per cent. This is a reasonable sample size, although further research, that considers our research findings would be very useful. Our study has an obvious strength as it is an example of employability in action. The first author (TC) advertised for a research assistant as part of the university ES student internship scheme. The second author (OM) is the candidate who was appointed. This research article is a tangible outcome both for the internship, and OM's CV. A further strength of our study is that as OM was a student during the covid-19 pandemic and TC was a teaching academic, we brought our own lived experience into the research design. For instance, TC felt confident holding a large OFG as her students had comfortably discussed a variety of different social problems as part of her modules, while OM's experience as a student made her a particularly effective interviewer.

3. Findings

3.1. Mixed attitudes towards blended learning

Several participants in our study expressed the view that the sudden shift to blended learning had been challenging. As 'Bianca'[4] outlined:

> "It was like the hardest year that it could because it was all online and it was very confusing for everyone."

Nevertheless, most respondents reported being satisfied overall with the online learning arrangements, considering the emergency of the situation and constraints that NorthSea and HE in general was facing.

> "What went well was their strategy during Covid-19, the online sessions were arranged quickly and effectively." – ['Valmai']

Like other respondents, 'Valmai', reported being relieved that she was able to carry on with her studies, rather than having to defer her final year.

Attitudes towards BL were highly heterogeneous within our sample as we found examples of positive, neutral and negative opinions represented in the dataset, with most participants articulating mixed views towards BL. Positive attitudes towards BL were attributed to the flexibility and reduced travel time it afforded students, with several (n.3) mature students being positive about the convenience of online learning.

> "I've loved learning online … Wearing my Jim Jams at home, saving money on fuel and time." – ['Meeghan']

> "Despite there being a pandemic its been positive as I have been able to do my uni work and relax at the same time. I miss that now" – ['Julie'].

'Amy' mentioned that she too saved on travel expenses, food etc, while 'Valmai' noted, that BL was *"helpful in letting students create their own studies/life balance"*.

Others (n.4) had a more neutral view on BL. For instance, 'David', suggested that while they had personally enjoyed online learning and they would prefer to have online lectures alongside the in-class provision, they felt uncomfortable as they "couldn't help notice that pandemic had deepened digital inequalities". N.2 students expressing neutral views suggested that:

> "It won't affect me at all because I came with a purpose, and the purpose is to fulfil what I didn't complete [her masters degree]. [It] wouldn't matter to me if it was a thousand people … or nobody there." - ['Diana'].

This participant suggested that how classes were delivered was of secondary importance, their main concern being to complete their degree studies.

Like Ajjawi et al. (2022) students spoke positively about the work/life balance that BL offered, such as *"attending lectures in your pyjamas, a … [mixture] … of study and relaxing time"* (p.7). Although the data also highlighted concerns (n.5) that BL did not match the value of university fees they would be paying back after graduation[5].

> "Studying in your pyjamas" … And we … pay the same amount of fees? It is wrong." – ['Heddwyn'].

Despite the benefits BL offers students, many UK institutions faced

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calls for tuition fee rebates as students who had set up petitions around the UK argued that online materials were not worth fees of up to £9,250[6]

3.2. Lack of opportunities to socialise

A further common complaint related to the BL modality was the lack of opportunities to socialise, which students reported had a negative impact their wellbeing and learning progress:

> "We missed out, the social side, going to the pub between lectures to discuss what we learned, no graduation" – ['Mary']

> "The students that were already high tech might have been OK, but they missed out on human interactions that would help them, especially the more geeky they are..the less they integrate with people."- ['Diana']

Throughout the pandemic NorthSea held various online bi-weekly events such as zoom 'cuppa's, study spas (online writing events), employer talks and research seminars as alternative ways of socialising. The employer talks and study spas were the most successful, particularly with mature students, as they had a practical element, while although the zoom 'cuppa's and research seminars were attended by a small, core group of staff and students. These online events offered some opportunity to 'get together', but they could not fully substitute socialising in person, and as such, no respondents acknowledged these initiatives in their interviews. Despite the concerns above, participants noted that support from NorthSea was available whenever required.

> "Staff been available within a couple of days via email. They have been very good."- ['Heddwyn'].

Participants also referred to the social support they had from family members/friends

> "You expect to kind of being isolated and … all those rules imposed on you to affect you … I felt …, at least academically …, maybe because of how my course is, it didn't affect me as much, and I had a lot of help from lecturers or my sister, about the essays and whatnot so".- ['Bianca']

As pro-active help seeking behaviour is often needed in order to receive help, some students may have struggled:

> "[W]hen it comes to asking people for information I am good at that, but some, no matter what the situation is like, they will never ask" – ['Taleisha'].

The high ratings respondents gave to NorthSea in terms of the support they gave may be related to our particular sample consisting of pro-active type students (it could be argued that there is a high likelihood for this since they responded to the study advertisement which required a pro-active step). However, there could also be an institutional explanation as NorthSea consistently receives awards for pastoral care.

3.3. The cost of living crisis and its impact on views of BL

Just as we had almost completed the writing up of this article, TC started to note some more positivity towards BL. Recalling to OM about walking past a group of students who mentioned that they missed BL and on another occasion, TC had been sat in one of the cafeterias on campus and had heard several, separate conversations bemoaning that their lecture was in person, especially when it could have been held online, saving them the trouble of coming into the university. Alongside this, a member of staff at NorthSea commented that a small but vocal group of students preferred BL and wished that the university still streamed classes. These students, the staff member said, argued that BL is easier

for students who work, have children or have caring responsibilities. The cost of living crisis[7] was an additional factor. Discussions with n.4 students who cited increased spending on travel due to the rising price of fuel (as well as tax and insurance for drivers), and then the cost of purchasing lunch and other refreshments. For these reasons, BL was seen as being more financially viable than on-campus study. In response to reports of students in financial crisis[8], with many needing to cut essential spending on food, heating and transport, NorthSea, like many other universities, expanded their hardship funding, reduced the cost of hot lunches in their eating establishments to £2, and also promoted the university as being a place where students could come to keep warm (thus saving students the cost of heating their accommodation during the day). Despite these concerns, n.4 other respondents, all 'young students', mentioned to TC how much they had enjoyed being back on campus. For them, BL meant low attendance/class engagement, boring, uninspiring classes (due to staff being unable to set interesting tasks) and a lack of community in the school. 'Marie' who deferred her degree studies during the pandemic, and returned when covid restrictions eased, felt there was a disconnect between a lecture being delivered online and in person:

> "People are much more likely to connect in person than over the computer. Class contribution is higher in person as it allows students like me to [hear] opinions and learning points that I wouldn't have [heard] before. I've personally noticed it's a lot more positive in person because of this".

She, alongside the younger students providing anecdotal data, said that attending university in person had a positive effect on their mental health too:

> "we see more people this way and get to enjoy more fresh air etc".

While in-person teaching is still a priority for most students, there is an appetite to keep some digital provision, especially in light of the cost of living crisis. The timing of this study provides only a snapshot of students' experiences during the cost of living crisis, but it serves to highlight an area where further research is necessary.

3.4. Optimism about their employability skills and the employability service

3.4.1. Employability skills

Students' perceptions of their future employability during the pandemic was a theme of interest. Employers will require new career competencies in a post-pandemic job market, with organisational skills and competency with IT being predicted to be important skills moving forward (Gill, 2021). Respondents had an optimistic outlook about their employability skills, while also being aware of new challenges awaiting them in the post pandemic job-market. For instance, respondents discussed how the online nature of their assignments would help them beyond graduation:

> "One thing the pandemic has taught us is that we have to be flexible. If you're rigid … you gonna fail." – ['Heddwyn'].

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[6] https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/302855.

[7] Since late 2021, the global economy faced steep challenges, shaped by the lingering effects of three powerful forces: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a cost-of-living crisis caused by persistent and broadening inflation pressures, and the slowdown in China. https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/10/11/world-economic-outlook-october-2022.

[8] Data from the Student Cost of Living Insights study published in November 2022, found half of students nationally had financial difficulties, with one-in-four had taken on new debt in response to rising cost of living https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/bulletins/costoflivingandhighereducationstudentsengland/24octoberto7november2022.

"It has been a good experience in terms of skills like using online platforms. [T]his [is an] advantage someone who graduated during covid will have over some of my colleagues who graduated a year or two ago."- ['Taleisha'].

Some respondents reflected that they had missed the opportunity to develop practical skills due to the nature of hybrid learning. As noted by Sam (2022), some degree programmes may have a greater need for practical in-person classes than other courses. For instance, Natural Sciences students may have lost chances to develop relevant skills such as laboratory or field experience during the pandemic compared to, for example, those from the Social Sciences. One skill, relevant to all courses, that our respondents suggested could not be fully replicated during the pandemic was the ability to deliver a presentation:

"… [Y]ou're not really presenting … You can turn off your camera, you can say your camera doesn't work. It's not really like a presentation." – ['Bianca'].

'Meeghan', noted that she lacked "confidence in front of an audience". Because her presentations had all been online. There is some validity to these concerns as the ideal graduate would be a confident presenter, both in person and online. Although if we take job interviews as one example where the ability to present is needed, pandemic restrictions meant that organisations adapted with online recruitment processes. The Future of Work Survey 2020 found that 82 per cent of hiring managers said they would continue interviewing candidates online (O'Connell, 2020).

3.4.2. Views on support from the employability service

There are concerns that Covid-19 may render the graduate job market more insecure (Holt-White & Montacute, 2020), thus university ES will likely become more important than ever. NorthSea's ES offers support to both their students and graduates, with the aim of helping them to reach their career potential during their studies and beyond graduation. It offers a wide range of services such as work experience, internships, and jobs fairs. Students can also book an appointment with an Employability Adviser for practical guidance with their CV, job applications, as well as to provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) for career planning. In response to the pandemic and the challenges graduates might experience, NorthSea also set up a Graduate Support Programme for alumni from 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Respondents were very complimentary about the support that NorthSea's ES provide. Respondents who engaged with the ES (5 interviewees and 4 OFG respondents) were satisfied with the service, reporting that they felt prepared for graduate job market:

"They looked at my CV, cover letters. The feedback you get, I really can't complain. The self-help material which they provided is very useful … In terms of the support from the Employability and Careers Service, I couldn't speak highly enough [about] the help they've given me" ['Collin'].

"… it has really prepared me because it has given me a lot of opportunity and platform. I learned a lot about the job market, what employers need. I'll give you an example, when I check my blackboard I have employability skills as a course on it and when I became a research support officer they also added other cues related to jobs. It has helped me to prepare for what employers want from employees. I have also attended workshops where they spoke about what you need to consider for your application … the things you should do. [T]he employability service helped me a lot."– ['Taleisha'].

A further student discussed the mini online courses on the university employability website, mentioning that she had made use of them several times:

"There's a hub basically … It is online. [T]hey have little courses, generic courses …. You can do it in a few minutes … and then they give you a certificate. I … have been working towards that I um recorded that I've been working part time and you can do multiple things there." – ['Bianca']

Students at NorthSea appeared to understand that employability skills were needed alongside their degree, and equated the ES positively with gaining this experience.

A further finding was that a small number of respondents (n.4) used the Covid-19 pandemic to be proactive in developing their skillset, and in contacting the ES to understand more about the labour market.

"I used the pandemic to speak to the ES about a career, what skills I needed to develop and to spend the time getting those skills. It's given me the advice and skills I need for the post-covid "[Jade].

"Covid gave me a chance to get experience and new skills. The careers service helped my confidence that I can cope when I graduate "[Lucy].

Both reflected that the skills they had developed from BL and support they had received from the ES meant they felt prepared for difficulties they may face in the post-covid labour market. While only based on the experiences of four respondents, it still highlights that some participants identified positives arising from COVID-19.

Those respondents who had not engaged with the university ES, said that they were aware of the service and knew that, when needed, support was available.

"It's visible [the employability service]. But I haven't engaged as much as I could. The signpost is there, if you need it. If you ask, you get it." – ['Diana'].

While complementary about the work of the ES, both mature and international students suggested that the service was not relevant to them:

"The support has generally been good, although the advice you receive sometimes feels generic - students on the same course are sometimes treated the same irrespective of differences in their career plans." – ['Collin']

"I already have a strong CV as a mature student who had a career. Unsure what benefit the employability service could offer." – ['Meeghan']

"I will return back to my country, so I haven't as I don't need that support. I'm international so need support that understands that" – ['Stephen']

These extracts were typical as both cohorts reported feeling confident in their employability skills and, as such, did not feel the need to consider the ES. International students also had a lack of engagement due to a perception that the ES was not available to them as international students. The latter is especially concerning as it reasserts the outsider status often cited by international students' (Marginson, 2012).

4. Discussion

4.1. Views on blended learning

This study demonstrated varying attitudes towards BL. The flexibility it offers often influences student satisfaction, but generally, in-campus study was preferred – although the cost of living crisis may change this. O'Neill et al. (2022), found that respondents preferred online study as it was a way of avoiding travel expenses. The cost-of-living crisis has served to increase such incidences at NorthSea. Anecdotal responses highlighted that students were financially strategic and would avoid traveling to campus if they were timetabled for only a single lecture or seminar. Jisc's annual digital experience insights survey surveyed more

than 33,000 HE students from 41 institutions in 2022, demonstrated that 45% preferred a mix of on site and online. These views on BL have parallels with previous studies that noted preference for online over in-person learning increased in relation to the students age i.e. mature student were more likely to prefer online study in comparison to 'younger' students (Steimle et al., 2022). While our research demonstrated that there is an appetite to keep some digital provision, in-person teaching is still a priority for many students. This finding supports the Advance Higher Education and Higher Education Policy Institute Student Academic Experience Survey 2021 which found that 57% of students would still prefer to learn 'mostly in-person' (Neves & Hewitt, 2021).

Despite this, a global survey conducted by the Times Higher Education (2022) which received 339 responses, the majority of which were based in the UK, found that there was a low level of attendance and engagement post pandemic. Asked about the typical level of attendance at in-person lectures is, 29 per cent said attendance was between 41 and 60 per cent, while 26 per cent put attendance at between 21 and 39 per cent. This compares with pre-pandemic levels of above 60 per cent for more than two-thirds of respondents. When asked about engagement, 54 per cent of respondents say engagement is worse than before the pandemic, with only 9 per cent noting an improvement. We mention attendance as one interviewee and two students anecdotally commented that moving forward, they would prefer to have compulsory attendance as it was felt that this would lead to a greater sense of engagement and an academic community. This was an interesting comment as it was made in the context of feelings of loneliness during COVID-19, and how a stronger academic community would have supported them. Our study is not able to investigate this but we do propose there is scope for research to examine academic communities as a way of combatting student loneliness.

4.2. Views on students employability and the employability service

The optimism and understanding of our students' perceptions of their future employability stands in contrast to Haekal et al.'s (2021) findings, whose participants (first year undergraduate students) did not appear well informed about potential difficulties when entering the covid job market and the "naive" belief that a university degree directly leads to employment. Other studies concerning employability in a covid context, demonstrated that most student respondents expressed a gloomy outlook and high levels of anxiety related to their future employment prospects (Capone et al., 2021; Ela et al., 2021; Villa et al., 2020). The University of Southamption and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) surveyed 2871 recent graduates and conducted 56 interviews with the same population of graduates. Just under three quarters had become less confident about their future employment prospects (72%), and felt they would face greater challenges finding employment than they expected (71%). Conducting this study in the aftermath of strict covid restrictions meant that our students reflected positively on the challenges they had faced and the skills they had developed. Despite numerous studies that have discussed the obvious negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, Prati and Mancini (2021) and Williams et al. (2021) have explored positive experiences during the pandemic among more general populations. A small number of our respondents too reflected that while the pandemic had been difficult in many ways, this 'pause', as 'Lucy' termed it, was used to approach the ES for IAG, and to develop the types of skills that would be needed in the 'new normal'.

That only under half of students at NorthSea engaged with the ES despite its visibility is in line with data collected by Bradley et al. (2021) who found that only 50% of students were actively involved with the ES. Although it should be restated that those students who didn't engage with the ES in our study said that they would engage at some point. Bates et al., (2019) argues that ongoing engagement with ES is always the preferred approach. Mature students are a diverse group, but as they

tend to have characteristics associated with disadvantage e.g. from lower-socio-economic backgrounds, have a disability, from an ethnic minority and have family or caring responsibilities (Hubble & Bolton, 2020), it is a fair assumption that this cohort could potentially benefit from the support of the ES to enhance their graduate trajectory. When supporting mature students a university ES may need to highlight those 'tweaks' needed to develop a 'graduate identity'. The ES should draw upon research when talking with mature students, and point to studies that highlight the positive and negative impact that factors such as age, social class and ethnicity, can have on one's graduate options. Graduates who were mature students are more likely to be immobile, so may need to develop local employability skills. For instance, Crew (2018) conducted research on regional labour markets, and using north Wales as a case study, found that speaking Welsh, being able to drive and having a driving license were often vital for graduate employment in the local area. Further research on the skills required for other regional labour markets would be useful.

A consistent comment from our respondents was that they wanted tailored support, one that considered their specific subject areas. If not already doing so, our respondents felt that the university ES should direct students towards degree-specific associations (e.g., British Sociology Association; Social Policy Association etc.) that may offer them access to a subject specific network and relevant job opportunities. Taking international students as an example, scholars such as Findlay (2011) argue that as a group of mobile people, international students have been surprisingly under-researched (p. 162). Of note is that employability is cited by international students as the main motivation for studying abroad (Soares & Mosquera, 2019). Universities ES like NorthSea may want to reach out specifically to international students to ensure that they are aware that their service is for them as well as 'home' students. Alongside promoting some of the vital skills they do have such as language skills, encouraging them, where needed, to develop their professional English language skills. A joined-up approach with academic schools could provide international students with work experience (within visa restrictions) during their time at university.

4.3. Conclusions

The first research question focused on respondents views of BL. While mainly mature students appreciated the convenience of online learning with regard to reduced travel time and costs, there were also complaints about the online delivery did not match the value of the tuition fees. Students also reported some struggles with the social isolation often linked with online learning, despite NorthSea's attempts to compensate via online social events. Although, in contrast to other rstudies conducted during the pandemic (e.g., Villa et al., 2020), our study showed effective student-staff communication throughout the pandemic – although this again may be linked to the timing of when we conducted our study. Participants' academic performance and wellbeing appeared to be strongly linked to family support and the willingness to proactively reach out to the university for help. Previous research such as Plakhotnik et al. (2021) suggests that the level of perceived support in students during the pandemic may depend on their pro-active help seeking behaviour. While overall having a preference for on-campus study, students cited a variety of reasons (inclusivity, flexibility, work/life balance, cost of living crisis) for why they were supportive of the continuation of some form of hybrid learning.

Students were then asked for their views about employability service during the pandemic. The main takeaway from our research is that as the study was conducted in the aftermath of strict covid restrictions, students reflected positively on the challenges they had faced, the skills they had developed and some talked of using this time to develop their skillset. Respondents noted that the online nature of their assignments meant that they could confidently enter a workforce that requires graduates with these technical skills. Some respondents were concerned that they may not be fully versed in delivering an in person, face to face

presentation, although they acknowledged that the skillset they had developed from recording online presentations were likely to help them. Respondents reported being satisfied with the employability service and feeling confident entering the graduate labour market. Mature students taking part in our research reported that they had already felt confident in their employability skills and did not need any further support. Whereas a small number of international students reported being unaware that they were able to access university ES. While respondents were generally very complimentary, some respondents felt that the support from the ES was generic while they would appreciate IAG related to their specific discipline.

4.4. Strengths of this research study

The differences in findings between our study and previous research could be traced back to the time point of the data collection. Participants of studies conducted during the middle of the pandemic (Capone et al., 2021; Ela et al., 2021; Haekal et al., 2021; Villa et al., 2020) might have felt more insecure due to the uncertainty of the covid pandemic. The strength of our research is that as our participants were interviewed post covid, they appeared to have developed more resilience in dealing with such uncertainties. This view matches findings from positive psychology examining individuals' capacity for growth after experiencing social crises or trauma (Peterson et al., 2008). Although as our respondents were final year undergraduates and postgraduates, they may just have had more understanding of their employability skills and the graduate labour market. Some respondents reported approaching the pandemic in a positive manner by developing their skillset, and contacting the ES for IAG. This study has a further strength in so much that it also provides an early snapshot of students' concerns during the cost of living crisis. Anecdotal data collected while we were writing up our findings found that while students preferred in person teaching to BL, the cost of purchasing lunch and other refreshments, alongside travel costs, meant they were not always able to engage with face-to-face learning, leading them to request a return to BL.

4.5. Recommendations

Universities need to strike a balance between the needs of mature students, who typically valued the flexibility of BL, and the requirements of mainly younger students who tended to appreciate on campus study. In light of the cost of living crisis, this study would recommend further research, in the form of a larger, co-produced action research project with NorthSea's staff and students, to understand how universities can provide a vibrant campus culture that has both flexibility and inclusive learning at its heart. Engaging with stakeholders as the co-producers of knowledge, NorthSea can gain promote sustainable approaches towards BL.

Going forward there are several proactive steps that university ES can take:

- Recruit peer ambassadors (who have successfully used the employability service) to communicate the value of the ES.
- Build relationships with mature and international student groups within student unions. The ES could canvas views on what these students require from an ES and could collaborate with them for future employability events.
- Develop a university incentive scheme, one that provides points towards free coffee, snacks, but also larger rewards such as opportunities with local employers.
- Provide students in year one with a skills assessment to identify their strengths and weaknesses, set career goals, and develop an individual plan for achieving those goals.
- Move away from generic services to a more personalized, subject specific approach.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Teresa Crew: Conceptualization, Visualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, preparation, Writing – review & editing. **Olivia Märtins:** Early draft preparation, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, preparation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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