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COPING WITH COVID; UNDERSTANDING AND MITIGATING DISADVANTAGES EXPERIENCED BY FIRST GENERATION SCHOLARS STUDYING ONLINE

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the implications of the transition to online or blended learning for first generation scholars (FGS) brought about by Covid-19. We present the findings of a mixed methods project that draws data from both in-depth qualitative interviews and a large quantitative survey of students at Durham University. We offer a comparative analysis of how FGS contrast to the general student body in relation to a range of key challenges that Covid-19 and the consequent 'online pivot' posed to university life including technological, social and resource based issues. Our findings demonstrate that FGS were particularly affected by this shift to online or blended learning. The final substantive section discusses a range of potential mitigation strategies adopted by the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, with the assumption that some, at least, of these, and our data, will be of wider relevance in the sector.

Keywords: First Generation Scholars, COVID-19, online pivot, blended learning

Introduction and literature

The Covid-19 crisis threw into sharp relief numerous, deep societal inequalities in Britain. In HE, the transition to online and blended learning it necessitated (Aguilera-Hermina, 2020; Mishra *et al.*, 2020; Nambiar, 2020; Wahab, 2020) brought concerning equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) implications (Montacute, 2020; Universities UK, 2020). Two months into the crisis the Sutton Trust reported (in early May 2020) that poorer A-level students had less access to online learning than their more affluent peers (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). First year undergraduates from working-class backgrounds in the academic year 2020–21 were projected to be 'twice as likely to have insufficient access to internet access, devices for learning or a suitable place to study, compared to those from middle class homes' (Montacute and Holt-White, 2020, p. 1). Working in SGIA (the School for Government and International Affairs, Durham University), we approached the potential

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problems the Covid crisis posed through the mechanism of First-Generation Scholars (FGS). These are students whose parents did not attend university before the age of 25 and are highly likely to be working-class and state educated, particularly if British. SGIA has a specific staff work-loaded FGS support role, to identify and address deficient facets of the department as well as provide an extra FGS social support network and liaise with other departments and colleges, as a core element of the departmental Widening Participation agenda.

The existence (since November 2018) of a departmental FGS group offered pre-existing good working relationships with some FGS studying in, and beyond, SGIA and a (short) history of implementing measures addressing institutional deficiencies in 'normal times'. Pre-Covid research suggests ways that FGS are disadvantaged. They are, for example, less inclined to seek academic assistance from staff and tend to underutilise other resources (Beattie and Thiele, 2016; Hicks and Wood, 2016). FGS also tend to complete fewer assignments (Yee, 2016). Further, being less likely to have the skills required for independent online study, FGS are placed at a greater disadvantage again in these circumstances (Barraket and Scott, 2001; Gorard and Selwyn, 1999; Gorard *et al.*, 2006).

Another area of considerable concern was the potential implications of the online pivot for student socialisation (Raaper and Brown, 2020). Important in determining choice of university (Hagel and Shaw, 2010), socialisation is chief factor in students opting for face-to-face teaching. It can also have a dramatic impact through influencing students' career choices, life-style preferences, aspirations and values (Weidman, 1989; Weidman et al., 2014). In 'normal' times. FGS who perceive a mismatch on the basis of social status, class or cultural norms can feel lower levels of comfort, inclusion and compatibility at university and are likely to suffer academically (Edwards, 2008; Edwards et al., 2006; Phillips et al., 2020). Challenges around inclusion are especially salient in 'elite' Russell Group universities, where FGS numbers are typically low and the culture can be especially hostile towards them (Boliver, 2015). A recent report by Lauren White (2020), a SGIA first generation undergraduate, powerfully evidences some of the most toxic elements of this culture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, FGS are also more likely to relate to networks at home and have less developed university networks (Stuart et al., 2011). From a socialisation perspective the online pivot posed FGS even greater challenges as it threatened to corrode perhaps already less extensive existing peer networks. Changes in networking and extracurricular socialisation are known to impact negatively on attainment and can mean FGS missing out on the social capital associated benefits that networking can bring.

An obvious hypothesis was that the online pivot would exacerbate preexisting inequalities, thereby further disadvantaging FGS. Not only were there likely material inequalities, but online or blended learning seemed set to disproportionately limit the ability of FGS – already faced with a hostile culture – to meet and socialise within the university environment and therefore further inhibit academic and social development and possibilities for enjoying university life. We were also conscious that we lacked detailed empirical knowledge of the specific problems SGIA students faced, though this is but part of a wider dearth of knowledge of these issues (Thiele *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, understanding complex and often highly challenging circumstances facing FGS requires an ongoing process of research to adjust and improve support offered (Schelbe *et al.*, 2019). With these considerations in mind we conceived a research project during the first national lockdown to develop a new evidence base to better understand the structural inequalities experienced by FGS, particularly in terms of the online pivot.

As important, we aimed to use the evidence generated to formulate practical measures that SGIA could implement to address the problems identified at departmental level. Our desire to make evidence-based recommendations was not reflected in much of the - particularly older - FGS literature. Rather, this is often characterised by a 'deficit' discourse wherein FGS are framed as 'lacking' skills, or failing to make use of opportunities or resources afforded them. The emphasis, then, is on the individual failings of these students and mirrors wider discourses around so-called 'hard to reach' groups (Shaw et al., 2017). Rejecting a deficit discourse, our approach was predicated on the understanding that existing HE institutions and services are classist; they are designed by and serve the interests of hegemonic middle-class social groups and cultures, and thus are alienating to typically working-class FGS (Allan et al., 2021; Common, 1988 [1938]). HE institutions and structures are deficient in recognising and meeting the needs of marginalised social groups like FGS (Crozier et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2009, 2010). Furthermore, the Covid crisis has rendered these inegalitarian structural biases - recognised by those who routinely suffer as a result of them - more visible to those who ordinarily do not. In this context it is hardly surprising that Lauren White's (2020) report emerged when it did; in September 2020, and after six months of pandemic, though the testimonies it details are depressingly familiar to all colleagues working with FGS.

In terms of the departmental processes, we both sat on the CODERG (Covid-19 Online/Digital Emergence Research Group), an ad hoc subcommittee of the departmental Education Committee tasked with formulating departmental policy for the online pivot from March 2020 onwards. Departments had a degree of discretion in terms of approaches to the online pivot though there was an institutional requirement that, when possible, Covid-safe face-to-face teaching would be conducted. All larger lectures were (necessarily) to be delivered online for the entire academic year. Departments had leeway in the balance struck between synchronous and asynchronous online teaching. Elements of departmental policy were also formulated in the light of university-wide established practices. For example, routine recording of lectures

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was standard practice at Durham before the crisis, not least due to the practice's important EDI benefits (Nordmann *et al.*, 2019). Recommendations drawn from our research findings were discussed in CODERG meetings and adopted as part of departmental policy for the academic year 2020–21. We also circulated a report of our evidence and recommendations to heads of other departments to inform their online teaching policies. This article offers the findings of this research (Section 2.), after first setting out the methodology. Section 3. then details our recommendations to mitigate the inequalities identified. In offering a case study that focusses on what could be done at departmental level in our specific context, we nevertheless anticipate that elements of our findings and recommendations will be of relevance to other HE institutions.

(1) Research design

We deployed a quantitative and qualitive mixed methodology common in pedagogic research (Thiele *et al.*, 2018), the project receiving clearance from SGIA's Ethics Committee. The quantitative data came from an online survey asking about technological, resource, social and competency based factors that ran from 23 June to 3 July 2020. Our survey questions were formulated from the relevant secondary literature (some of which is referenced above) and also from personal reflections on having worked directly with FGS. Data was collected on respondents' gender, ethnicity, fee status, and caring responsibilities, an approach adopted by other research into student outcomes, including FGS (Kim and Sax, 2009). The survey also carried open-ended questions about what the university might do to help. It was distributed via SGIA student email lists to all students enrolled on SGIA's Politics or International Relations undergraduate programmes and 309 undergraduates completed the survey, a response rate of approximately 25%.

We asked students to self-identify as FGS based on our definition (see above) and in the survey fifty-one did so. This is 16.5% of total respondents, a strong sample to compare against the wider cohort but, because data on FGS status is not systematically collected, we cannot know whether this is a representative percentage of FGS in SGIA. In the survey sample FGS are more likely to be female and be a home student. As can be seen in Tables 1, 64.8% of FGS students in the survey sample are female, which aligns with contextual data on FGS entrants to HE (Gov.uk, 2020). Eighty-three percent of the FGS participants were UK based, compared to 73% of non-FGS. Further, that 32.7% of the FGS sample have a BAME background is not surprising given that it is white working-class males who are proportionately least likely to go into HE (Gov.uk, 2020).

The qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with seventeen FGS, sourced through the departmental FGS group. While the survey data allowed for a clear understanding of resource differentials and general feelings

relating to online learning, the interviews facilitated exploration of the depths and specificities of FGS experiences, offering a greater opportunity to discuss problems and concerns. We asked interviewees about their experiences at university before the first lockdown in March 2020 and, fundamentally, for practical suggestions to at least mitigate the problems they were experiencing then or that they anticipated encountering. Nine of the interviewees were women and two of the eight male interviewees identified as BAME. Thirteen interviews were conducted between mid-June and mid-July 2020, with two conducted in each of August and September 2020. They varied in length from between thirty-eight and 90 min, with most around an hour long. The interviews were integral to deepening our understanding of FGS' problems and even more so to formulating our proposals for departmental policy. In this respect, the insights gleaned from them (and quotes) are well represented in the mitigation strategies section (3., below). A second qualitative, dialogic element to our research and recommendations was the ongoing input of colleagues. We sought their perspectives on elements of our research aims, findings and mitigation recommendations. While some was informal, a considerable amount of this dialogue occurred in the formal context of CODERG meetings, as we formulated departmental policy for the online pivot. We now move onto research findings.

(1) Findings

This section firstly considers findings regarding access to resources, followed by those relating to social factors. The third part then tests all relevant factors to determine what is driving the findings. Figure 1. presents a series of graphs that consider access to resources to study effectively online among FGS and non-FGS. As can be seen, similar proportions of students (FGS and non) have slow rates of broadband. Low bandwidth means interruptions in the sound or images of lectures or seminars and may prevent students from switching their cameras on (if their machines have them). It is particularly important for good communication in online seminars that the tutor and students can see fellow participants' faces to help develop social bonding and build a learning community (Brower, 2003). Proportionately more FGS (24%), however, access broadband rates that are barely adequate for online study (8-10MB/s) particularly given that speeds need to be high enough to sustain multi-device use in multioccupancy households where minimum thresholds for bandwidth will be split across devices (Supan, 2021). In these cases, problems may still arise depending upon the number of devices relying on the connection. While the overall percentage of students who have fibre optic broadband are similar, FGS are less likely to have access to strong internet connections (above 10MB/s) and a slightly higher percentage of FGS (5.5% v 2.4%) rely on a mobile network for

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Figure 1. Resources for Online Learning

internet access. Overall, FGS are more likely to have their educational experience negatively affected by a lack of basic internet services.

As some students were living at home at the time the survey was conducted, local infrastructure in more remote locations may have caused internet access problems. For others, finances render the best broadband services unaffordable. Some FGS were residing at (urban) university addresses when the data was collected, but even this did not guarantee adequate broadband access. One FGS interviewee found their privately rented student accommodation in Durham was tied into a specific broadband provider that offered an inadequate service for the needs of the student tenants. Frustratingly, this 'service' came as part of the accommodation contract and could not be changed. In this case more privileged housemates were equally disadvantaged by poor broadband. The data further shows that FGS are also less likely to have their own device to work on. Reliant on a shared or borrowed device, considerable numbers were unable to work during the day and could only access a quiet space suitable for online learning during the evening. This again suggests that FGS were significantly more likely to be negatively affected than the rest of the cohort by the online pivot. Furthermore, FGS were far more likely to have to utilise public areas and computer rooms as study spaces on university campuses, potentially placing them at greater risk of contracting Covid than their peers.

A larger proportion of FGS had caring responsibilities for relatives, placing pressure on possible study time. This finding, in accordance with the literature, is an extra and significant impediment to FGS learning at home (Day, 2019). There were even more concerning home situations for FGS, with significant implications for their ability to engage online. One remarked 'I have a very troubled home and do not feel comfortable at all participating in online classes'. A second commented: 'some of us have very troubled homes. I'm happy to work remotely but I can't necessarily participate in a class because family arguments happen multiple times a day, for example'. While these situations were by no means commonplace among FGS, it remained striking that none of the non-FGS respondents made comparable remarks.

Figure 2. reveals that FGS suffered more severe social consequences compared to other students. In terms of university support networks, FGS were already less likely to know someone on their course that they felt confident talking to about course-related issues. This potentially makes transition to online or blended learning even more difficult for FGS. We also see evidence of this related to wider friendship groups where FGS are less likely to talk to university friends when they are away from university and less likely to have attended an online college social event since Covid struck. Finally, FGS are less likely to exhibit extreme attitudes (either positive or negative) about asking questions in online lectures. This is one discreet area where the story was reasonably positive for FGS in terms of online learning, though of course asking questions synchronously demands a quality of broadband that FGS are less likely to access.

In order to confirm the validity of our findings, we need to consider other factors that may have a relationship with the preparedness to study online either from a resource or social perspective. In order to test this, Table 2. contains a series of regression models that utilise a variety of dependent variables to better understand whether or not the first generation characteristic accounts for lower resource and social factors that relate to changes in teaching environment. Models 1. and 2. firstly explore resource-based issues. They both represent logistic regression models where the dependent variable is a condensed variable that considers if students have; a) their own computer; b) adequate internet; c) a safe space to work and d) are willing to use webcams and microphones as part

Resources for Online Learning



Figure 2. Resources for Online Learning

of their learning experience. We run two models, one with and one without caring responsibilities to test the effect of this on the model. The results indicate that being a FGS is the only substantive significant effect within both models. This confirms that FGS are significantly less likely to have the required resources to participate in either online or blended learning. We find no significant effect of caring responsibilities, gender or ethnicity. This again reinforces the earlier evidence that finding solutions to resource-based issues has to be a priority to ensure that FGS are not adversely affected.

Models 3. to 10. illustrate a range of social factors related to university life (marginal effects in appendix). As can be seen, the most immediate finding demonstrates that BAME and International students are far more likely to feel

socially isolated compared to other members of their cohort. This appears to be true of a variety of social situations and of confidence to engage in academic settings. However, we still see weak negative findings among FGS. This is particularly true in relation to their courses' support networks (model 3.), more broadly among their university support network (model 6.) and in FGS being less likely to participate in seminars (model 7.). These are, however, significant to only the 90% level, given the smaller sample size of FGS, and the consistency of coefficient direction. Nevertheless, this does suggest that FGS are to some extent less likely both to have a support network and to have course mates to discuss work with than the rest of their cohort. Again, this demonstrates the importance of arriving at strategies to ensure that FGS can access the kind of support – social and institutional – that they need for effective university study.

Data analysis was conducted with the explicit requirement for formulating specific practical recommendations. We began with a thematic analysis of both the semi-structured interview data and responses to open-ended survey questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We quote elements of both below to illustrate and support our recommendations. In formulating recommendations, we supplemented this data analysis with best practices drawn from the secondary literature, together with insights drawn from critical reflections on our own direct experiences, and those of our colleagues. The next section offers the second substantive contribution of this article: offering practical recommendations to mitigate inequalities faced by FGS.

(1) Suggested mitigation strategies

Universities (and their constituent departments) are but one component of an unequal society. Nevertheless, there is a great deal that can be done to effect positive change in terms of addressing the structural disadvantages within – and perpetuated by – universities. Inclusive approaches such as recent ongoing efforts to 'decolonise' the curriculum are one recent, important example (Arday *et al.*, 2020; Doharty *et al.*, 2021; Harvey and Russell-Mundine, 2019; Seats, 2020). Within universities, some issues can only be addressed properly at faculty or university level, rather than by departments. High university tuition fees, for example, fall into this category. Numerous FGS expressed grievances in both the survey and interviews that fees were not being lowered as they regarded blended or online learning as inferior to face-to-face – a claim supported in the literature (Bettinger *et al.*, 2017) – though the Open University has operated a successful distance learning model for an heterogenous student base over several decades.

As we show below, much can be achieved at departmental level to mitigate structural disadvantages experienced by FGS in short-term uncertainty and enforced online learning. Furthermore, many of these recommendations remain pertinent to supporting disadvantaged students in 'normal

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times'. Indeed, the focus that the Covid crisis has brought on inequality in HE can, if properly and fully tackled, bring about longer-term changes to the significant benefit of structurally disadvantaged students. Finally, while our aim is to offer support mechanisms for FGS specifically, many of our suggestions will necessarily benefit all students during the online pivot and after. Indeed, there was remarkably little qualitative difference in terms of specific recommendations for extra support made in the open-ended survey responses from the FGS and non-FGS students. For example, and perhaps unsurprisingly, non-FGS were as likely to be angry about 'normal' levels of fees during the online pivot as their FGS counterparts. The recommendations subdivide into three overlapping areas that we consider in turn; resources, practices, and social factors.

I. RESOURCES

Only one FGS remarked specifically that the university should provide 'Computers for those who do not have access to them'. Nevertheless, this seems a basic requirement and, given the evidence cited above on resource availability, this is likely to be a much bigger problem; several students stated they relied upon university computers and hot desking in IT suites. Where possible, departments should seek to provide computers on loan to FGS, perhaps working with other departments within the university to address this problem with additional support. A means tested grant scheme to pay for broadband strong enough to allow full access to synchronous online lectures or seminars for the duration of online learning would substantially benefit FGS living at home or in private accommodation. In cases where low bandwidth is unavoidable, it is important to consider formats that will allow students to participate as much as possible even if this makes live (synchronous) online lecture and seminar attendance difficult (discussed further in the next section).

Departments can have a dramatic impact regarding student finances when selecting learning resources. Modules that rely heavily upon expensive core textbooks increase the costs of participation, creating inequalities between those who can and cannot access or purchase them. This caused concern in many FGS interviews and in the survey for both first and non-first generation students alike. It also ties in with 'value for money' as an interviewee remarked; 'with the amount I'm paying I feel like they can afford to put all core textbooks online'. Making as many resources as possible available freely online is a good way of reducing inequality among students and became part of departmental guidance regarding reviewing reading lists in light of the online pivot. Not only would this have an immediate positive impact in a year of disruption and predominately online learning, it also benefits future students. In searching for appropriate resources, we advised module convenors to avoid, as much as possible, the pitfalls of licencing limits or texts that are not available as e-books (there is a surprisingly high number of these). Online resources reduce costs incurred in travelling to libraries and prevent FGS feeling pressured into buying texts in order to compete with their peers. Where essential resources have to be housed in a library, it is imperative that departments draw library staff's attention to their importance, impress the need for multiple copies and for producing e-offprints where necessary. Processes of making more resources available online were in place in SGIA before Covid, but the unprecedented situation certainly gave them a significant new impetus.

Another resources requirement from many FGS (and non-FGS) students was for 'As many contact hours as possible', and 'Regular contact hours; more contact hours than face-to-face'. 'Contact hours' here means timetabled activities such as lectures, seminars and workshops for example, as well as other optional possibilities for students to speak to staff face-to-face such as during office hours (see below). Unfortunately, this is an area (along with fees), where students' needs ran contrary to decision-making processes and the wider dynamics at play. Concerned initially about large numbers of high fee-paying international students not attending, universities initially looked to cut costs by reducing temporary staff by, for example, not renewing short-term contracts for teaching fellows and cutting PhD student teaching associate (TA) funds. This meant more work falling on remaining colleagues simply to deliver the same amount of contact hours as in the previous academic year (Ross and McKie, 2020).

Teaching preparation time was expected to rise too, as converting standard face-to-face content for online delivery was anticipated to be more time consuming (Tarman, 2020; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021). In addition, there were the potential extra pressures of the need to proliferate contact hours as face-to-face seminars might only be possible (given available teaching room sizes and the need for social distancing) for classes that were half their usual size (say seven students instead of fifteen). On top of all this, colleagues with school-age children were under extra pressure, perhaps being required to care for their children at home during lockdowns or localised outbreaks of Covid-19. All of these factors militated against making more contact hours per student a realistic possibility, while still maintaining teaching quality and the wellbeing of the staff required to deliver them.

Nevertheless, one of the facets of extra contact hours were several FGS requests for more, or more frequent, office hours. These allow students to 'drop in' (so they do not require pre-booking) at weekly fixed times during term-time to ask questions about their studies. In normal times, staff testimonies and the literature suggest that office hours tend to be a rather underused resource by students, though this does vary. Indeed, research suggests that FGS are even less likely to use office hours and are generally less satisfied with them (Kim and

Sax, 2009). Considering office hours are extra, one-to-one contact time offering bespoke academic support to individual students, their pedagogic and wider support values should be considerable. We suggested that staff should regularly remind students about office hours, invite individuals to them, reminding them of the importance of office hours for students' continued learning all the while presenting themselves as approachable and eager to help and support students. Further, planning office hour time to suit anticipated peaks and troughs in demand, for example around assessments, also enables maximum availability of help at the most stressful times for students. Staff were also encouraged to offer international students living in sometimes very different time zones office hours that were convenient for them.

Furthermore, increased checks on students' ongoing learning can also facilitate an environment that helps them judge their progress without reliance upon additional direct contact hours. For example, the use of online quizzes more frequently - they can be quick to create and upload allows students to check their academic progress regularly. This is likely to be even more beneficial for FGS interviewees who feel less confident using office hours. Finally, increased and better use of academic advisors can also offer students an opportunity for advice and guidance that is commonly underutilised despite being seen by the university, at least, as an important part of the student support and learning process. Encouraging the full use of office hours and academic advisors offers a good way of signalling opportunity to students without increasing staffing costs, as these are usually already accounted for. In other words, better use of resources and time already allocated to all students can help FGS, but the onus is on the department and its staff to explain what these roles and opportunities are to students and how to use them, as well as to be as approachable as possible.

Better use of office hours and the academic advisor systems revolved around better communication from colleagues and the department. Students asked for more, and faster communication by email; a 'shorter turn-around time on email responses when completing work from home'. But they also, understandably, did not want to be 'bombarded with emails containing zero or unnecessary information'. Communication from departments or colleagues to students thus needs to be targeted, economical, clear and timely. Another specific communication-based recommendation aiming to minimise confusion was also suggested by a FGS participant; 'A clear and efficient document expressing what is the plan for next year's study'. This tied in with another student's expressed desire for 'Guidance to use and benefit from the online format as much as possible'. This document explained the hows and whys of online learning as well as offering a rationale for all the choices made in terms of platforms used or neglected. Several FGS suggested a named point of contact for those struggling with specific online learning problems. This person was, in SGIA, the FGS staff lead.

A third related communication issue relates to the availability of information on services and support currently offered by universities. Departments need to ensure their students have clear information about where to get financial aid and other forms of support from alternative sources within their institutions. Our data revealed that only 28% of FGS understood where to find financial resources that the university already provided. Collating and widely distributing this information alone can be invaluable in supporting FGS highlighting, for example, that the university has a mean tested scheme to provide laptops to students.

II. ONLINE TEACHING PRACTICES

Our second area of recommendations relate to teaching practices shaped by an awareness of the needs of FGS. By the time we collected our data, the vast majority of SGIA students had experienced at least one online class or consultation. In many cases, what FGS (and, indeed, non-FGS) said would help them are practices already suggested in the literature. Again, some of these practices do have resource implications as well, in so far as, say, preparing detailed, annotated lecture slides takes more staff time. Often, however, the time required is minimal and the positive impact for FGS significant enough to justify it. And, again, for most of what we suggested, FGS will likely be the major, but by no means the only, students to benefit. An example of this is using a single platform to deliver all online teaching (lectures, seminars and one-to-one sessions). In practice, however, the differing functionality of competing online platforms for different elements of teaching complicates things. SGIA's policy was to utilise as few different platforms as possible, aiming at minimising confusion by allowing students to get comfortable with a limited number of software packages. Initially, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra (BCU) was designated the sole platform for all lecture and seminar teaching (with MS Teams for one-toone meetings.) But, as familiarity with the platforms' strengths and weaknesses grew though use in autumn term, the policy was altered to allow use of Zoom as well.

In terms of delivering online teaching, several FGS said they required what one vocalised as 'More freedom to participate at a time suitable to them. Not forcing students into a schedule that they may not be able to participate in from home'. While the terminology was not used directly, this was clearly a call for asynchronous delivery of online content. This would allow FGS to learn at such times as suited them permitting, if necessary, flexibility for paid work, and for them to choose the quietest or most appropriate study times if they had stayed at – or returned – home.

Broadband width is also of course another important factor here, with those on limited broadband speeds typically unable to engage fully with synchronous content, a problem that was very apparent in our quantitative data. Several of the interviewees thought that lectures were very important for their learning, even though research shows that students learn more, and better, from more interactive modes of delivery (Machemer and Crawford, 2007). The literature also suggests that synchronous delivery of lectures is superior to asynchronous as it is more likely to generate engagement with students, helping to build a learning community (Acosta-Tello, 2015; Brower, 2003; Martin and Bolliger, 2018; Skylar, 2009).

Asynchronous delivery offers more of a level playing field for students with poor quality internet connections but FGS can still benefit from the vibrancy of online synchronous teaching, as recordings of it can be made available for asynchronous access after the event. Furthermore, the MP4 recorded format offered through Panopto on platforms such as BCU can also be easily converted into MP3 format, making an audio version that requires even less bandwidth to access. Naturally, there are tensions to negotiate: MP3 recordings of sessions by themselves would of course be more challenging for students to engage with successfully asynchronously. MP3 audio combined with accessible, annotated lecture slides would improve the learning experience somewhat. But this does ultimately take us back to the vital importance of student access to good quality broadband, something promised in Labour's December 2019 manifesto and since regarded as even more urgent in combatting the burgeoning educational inequality created by Covid lockdowns (Labour Party, 2019; Ribeiro-Addy, 2021; Sharp et al., 2020). There may be occasions when it is impossible or undesirable to record lectures delivered by, for example, guest speakers, or on sensitive topics that could involve personal interventions from speakers and/or students. In these cases, module leaders can support students missing out on the synchronous event in other ways, perhaps through asynchronous online discussion boards or extra lecture-specific office hours.

As well as requesting lecture recordings, FGS also asked for additional or more in-depth lecture slides that are downloadable and made available well before the lectures. SGIA departmental policy advised colleagues to 'chunk' their online lectures, subdividing them into sections and, if delivered synchronously, allowing gaps of time after each chunk for questions in the 'chat' function (Skylar, 2009). If no questions are forthcoming, the lecturer might provide a quick exercise or quiz to break up the material, using, for example, the 'polling' or whiteboard functions on BCU. Another dimension to promoting spontaneity and interaction between lecturer and students online is the opportunity that students have for 'writing' directly onto the lecture slides in BCU as the lecture is being delivered. In a similar vein, another potentially useful innovation is to have a second colleague, perhaps a PhD student with suitable expertise, sitting in on lectures to answer questions in the 'chat' function as the lecturer delivers the material. This can work well, speeding up the question and answer, or discussion processes. Feedback after an experimental lecture run this way suggested that students appreciated the extra dimension to their learning brought to a lecture with two members of staff present when there would ordinarily be one. Such a policy can benefit PhD students as well, financially and in terms of extra teaching experience though, naturally, pressures on departmental finances imposed by this very crisis represent something of an obstacle to this practice.

SGIA colleagues were notified that the total time taken to deliver a lecture might end up being longer than the usual fifty minutes. Departmental policy required colleagues lecturing to offer students time at the beginning and end of lectures, as extra opportunities to ask questions if they need. The 'chat' function on online platforms also offers students possibilities for interacting with each other, thereby providing a possible mechanism for generating a sense of an online learning community similar to that generated in a normal classroom environment (Brower, 2003). Synchronous lectures with a regular weekly meeting time also offer another means of monitoring students' online learning, as they allow for maintaining some form of regular contact (and thereby helping to develop a better working relationship) between module teachers and students (Acosta-Tello, 2015). Those FGS (and others) who cannot access lectures synchronously can be encouraged to ask questions directly to the lecturer via email, or during office hours. Asynchronous online discussion boards on platforms like BCU can foster a good degree of useful interactivity through students typing in questions, feedback or ideas. In general, colleagues need to recognise the importance of - and various mechanisms for supporting all students missing out on any synchronous teaching.

III. SOCIAL FACTORS

Generally speaking – and as noted above – FGS tend to be more socially isolated with smaller friendship groups and fewer course mates. One FGS suggested that they needed 'A way to interact with other students in the course in a medium without lecturers. In physical lectures, even without knowing individuals, it is easy to approach peers and ask questions about lectures/general information'. This emphasises the important socialisation role that even a face-to-face lecture can offer students. As suggested above, there are some possibilities for this kind of interaction between students in synchronous online lectures but it is clear that more is needed. SGIA policy urged module leaders to be proactive, canvassing students' opinions

in setting up a time and space for students on their module to interact with each other online, safe in the knowledge that staff members would not be present. Alternatively, a staff member could initiate discussion in an online meeting before leaving the session to the students to do what they would like with it. This is the kind of practice that could usefully be continued in 'normal' times. One of the many things Covid-19 has taught is that working from home and contacting friends and colleagues online is quick, easy and effective (given adequate technology and albeit still inferior to 'unmasked' face-to-face communication).

A departmental FGS group offered a means of promoting social links between FGS, fostering communication and community as well as offering extra academic and other support if required. This group was anticipated to have a particularly important role during the online pivot and it has grown significantly since September 2020. However, while important, this work, too, has resources implications; it requires at least one staff member to facilitate and organise, and, given the already greater pressures on staff time, this work needs to be work-loaded. Peer mentoring can also help to bridge social gaps and provide a greater support network, particularly with teaching moving online (Goodrich, 2021). A departmental FGS group is well placed to promote such a scheme among its own members. Extending a student peer mentoring scheme to all students would also be highly desirable particularly during the online pivot, but, again, this requires significant staff input to run properly. A student peer mentor scheme could be tailored in such a way as to pair first year FGS with their more experienced peers, offering an important extra plank of academic and social support (Hall et al., 2020; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2021). SGIA established such a scheme for the academic year 2020-21 and is hoping to assess its impact.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated empirically that substantial inequalities exist between first-generation scholars and their peers in relation to online learning. We have identified how the core areas of inequality have been worsened by the online pivot. Many issues identified can be tackled at a departmental level, and we have produced a set of data-based recommendations aimed at improving FGS' ability to engage with their learning during highly challenging times. While often of benefit to all students, we hoped that our recommendations would have a particularly positive impact on FGS in trying to level the playing field in terms of resources, learning environment and the integral social aspects of university life.

We focussed on what can be achieved at a departmental level within the short-term, given the fluid situation that pandemic brings. Ongoing research into

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inequalities and best practices at a departmental level remains of considerable importance (Schelbe *et al.*, 2019) and can help identify further appropriate changes to practice that could be more effective in the long-term, including developing a more accommodating and sensitive institutional culture for FGS and other WP students. While a short-term, departmental-level remit has necessarily determined our approach, we must acknowledge wider structural factors at play and recognise that many potential improvements rely on progressive changes in government policy.



Marginal Effects of FGS

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APPENDIX

	First Generation	Non First Generation Scholars
Female	64.8%	53.0%
BAME	32.7%	44.9%
Home Fee Student	83.3%	69.2%
Caring Responsibility	29.63%	21.30%

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics

Resource and Social Factors	(4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10)	Attend Talk to Communicate at Confident in Confident in Office Confident Online	Social Friends University Seminar Lecture Hours Lecture	0.790* 0.00210 0.510 -0.343 -1.314** 0.285 0.494	(0.358) (0.347) (0.352) (0.334) (0.366) (0.333) (0.357)	0.196 0.198 -1.099** 1.027* 1.154** 0.279 -0.323	(0.403) (0.408) (0.415) (0.448) (0.426) (0.424) (0.430)	-0.542 -0.189 $-0.702+$ $-0.610+$ 0.280 -0.585 -0.367	(0.411) (0.407) (0.384) (0.358) (0.407) (0.368) (0.397)			-1.728^{**} -0.784 -0.0265 -0.992^{*} -0.667 -0.987^{*} 0.149		(0.563) (0.493) (0.432) (0.467) (0.469) (0.444) (0.476)	-1.278** -1.195** 1.689** 1.335** -1.011** 1.305** 1.344**	(0.301) (0.287) (0.309) (0.284) (0.277) (0.280) (0.291)	215 217 217 216 216 215	
	(8)	Confiden	Lectu	-1.314	(0.366)	1.154*	(0.426	0.280	(0.407)			-0.66		(0.469)	-11.011	(0.277	216	0.080
	(1)	Confident in	Seminar	-0.343	(0.334)	1.027*	(0.448)	-0.610+	(0.358)			-0.992*		(0.467)	1.335**	(0.284)	217	0.042
Factors	(9)	Communicate at	University	0.510	(0.352)	-1.099**	(0.415)	-0.702+	(0.384)			-0.0265		(0.432)	1.689^{**}	(0.309)	217	0.055
and Social	(2)	Talk to	Friends	0.00210	(0.347)	0.198	(0.408)	-0.189	(0.407)			-0.784		(0.493)	-1.195^{**}	(0.287)	217	0.013
Resource	(4)	Attend	Social	0.790*	(0.358)	0.196	(0.403)	-0.542	(0.411)			-1.728^{**}		(0.563)	-1.278^{**}	(0.301)	215	0.079
Aodels of	(3)	Course	Mate	-0.0673	(0.293)	0.0338	(0.357)	-0.580+	(0.328)			-0.284		(0.388)	0.739^{**}	(0.249)	216	0.013
ression h	(2)	Online	Learn	0.0320	(0.287)	-0.0138	(0.347)	-1.071 **	(0.356)			-0.492		(0.383)	0.133	(0.239)	218	0.038
gistic Reg	(1)	Online	Learn	0.0452	(0.289)	0.0559	(0.353)	-1.033 **	(0.358)	0.556	(0.367)	-0.373		(0.395)	-0.376	(0.413)	218	0.046
TABLE 2. Log				Female		BAME		First Gen		Caring activity		International	Student		Constant		Ν	pseudo R^2

Standard errors in parentheses + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

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