

# University of Bristol

## Education Pulse Survey Results and Discussion

### Autumn 2020

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## 1. Background

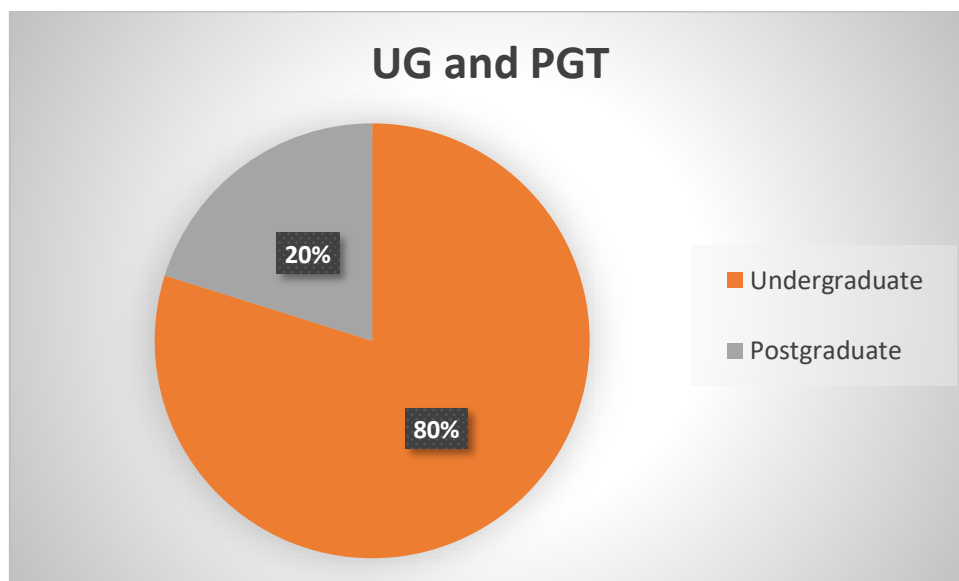
As part of the University's commitment to understanding blended learning, we conducted an Education Pulse Survey to elicit early feedback about students' experience of online and in-person education. The survey was open to all UG and PGT students from 28<sup>th</sup> October to 9<sup>th</sup> November. The survey was anonymous and received a 10% response rate overall. It contained both Likert scale and free text questions. The numeric data have been analysed using basic statistics, and free text comments have been thematically analysed.

## 2. Respondents

### 2.1. Level of study

UG students: 1,994 responses

PGT students: 503 responses



### 2.2. Year of study

Year 0/Foundation, 1:  $n = 927$

Year 2:  $n = 545$

Years 3,4,5:  $n = 522$

### 2.3 Home/International breakdown

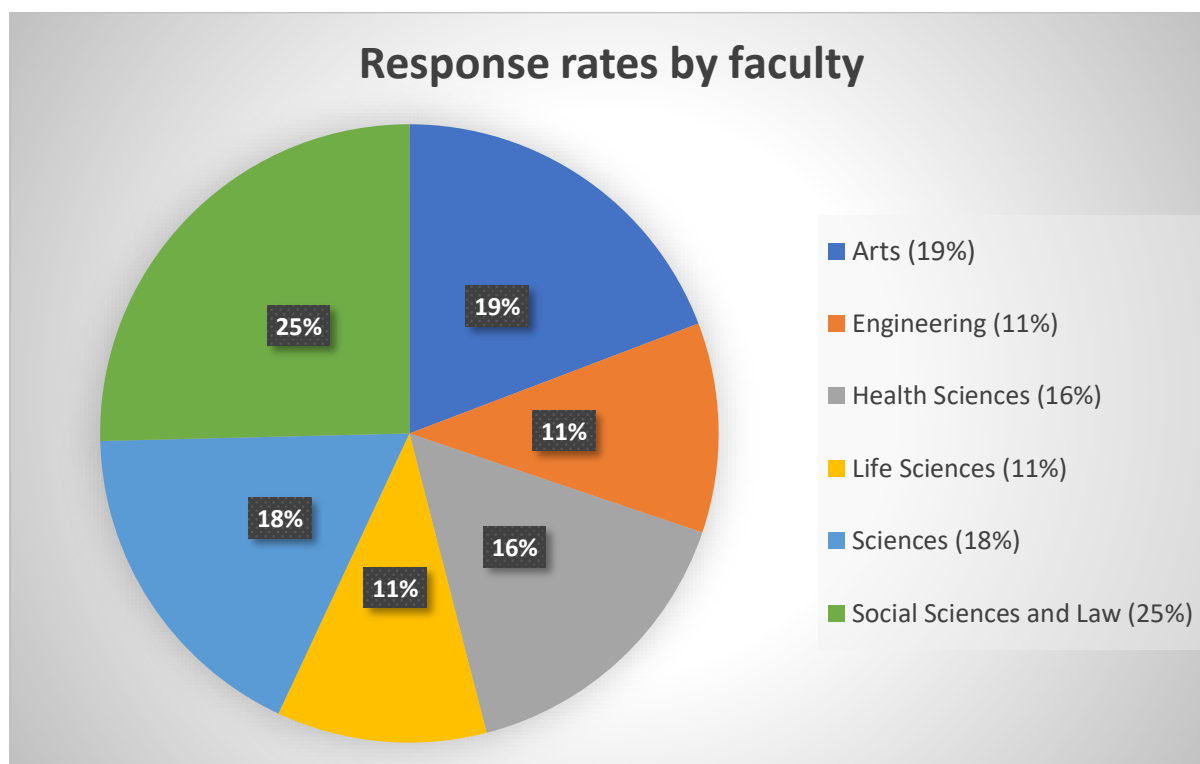
Home students: UG = 1737

International students: UG = 255

Home students: PGT = 257

International students: PGT = 245

## 2.4. Response rates by faculty



## 2.5. Mode of study

	<i>Respondents by mode of study</i>		
	Blended Learning	Temporarily online	Online only
<b>UG students</b>	71%	5%	24%
<b>PGT students</b>	51%	7%	42%

## 3. Comparative student experience

The following three tables show students' perceptions of the difference between their online and in-person teaching. Students indicate that they are learning more from online teaching (82% either compared to in-person teaching (74%). This is heartening, but not surprising given that most of students' learning experience is currently online. Students indicate that they are more motivated to study in-person (79%) than online (62%). This is supported in the qualitative comments, which indicate that self-motivation is a problem for some students. Surprisingly, UG students (72%) are more motivated to study online than PGT students (66%). Students report participating in online sessions (77%) more than in-person (72%). PGT students are more inclined to participate online (82%) than UG students (76%). In the qualitative data, students describe struggling to participate with mitigations (social distancing, face coverings and visors) during in person sessions, which may account for the lower proportion of students saying they participate in these on campus sessions.

The biggest discrepancy between in-person and online teaching is reported in items about teaching modes enabling students to connect with their teachers and helping to create a community with students. Almost double the percentage of students feel they can connect with their lecturers in-person (80%) compared to online (44%). PGT students describe feeling more connected to their

teachers both in person (89%) and online (54%). This is probably related to maturity and deepening interest in their discipline, bringing more confidence in interacting with teachers.

Fewer than one in five students (19%) say that the online environment helps to create a sense of community with peers compared to in person where nearly three out of four (72%) feel that they are able to create community with fellow students. This suggests that our online environment is not making enough space for students to feel comfortable chatting to one another as they would in a small group. It may also reflect that most small group teaching is in person while large group is online. In the qualitative data, some students report feeling anxious, awkward, shy, and intimidated speaking or asking questions in large groups online. Students often link feeling awkward to the invisibility of peers, cameras being off and poor sound, time lags and connectivity.

Nearly two thirds of students (62%) regard in person teaching as a positive experience overall, whereas only 42% regard online teaching as positive overall. The jury is out about online teaching to a greater extent (32%) than in person teaching (23%), which suggests that students are still curious about its potential.

### 3.1. All Respondents

	<b>ALL respondents</b>	
	<b>In person</b>	<b>Online</b>
I am learning a lot about my subject (very much/to some extent)	74%	83%
I am motivated to study <sup>1</sup> (very much/to some extent)	79%	62%
I have participated during sessions (Very much/to some extent)	72%	77%
Enables me to connect with teachers (very much/to some extent)	80%	44%
Helps to create a community with students in my class (as above)	72%	19%
Overall positive experience for me (Yes)	62%	42%
Overall positive experience (not sure)	23%	32%

### 3.1.2. UG respondents

	<b>UG respondents</b>	
	<b>In person</b>	<b>Online</b>
I am learning a lot about my subject (very much/to some extent)	72%	83%
I am motivated to study (very much/to some extent)	78%	72%
I have participated during sessions (Very much/to some extent)	72%	76%
Enables me to connect with teachers (very much/to some extent)	79%	41%
Helps to create a community with students in my class (as above)	69%	18%
Overall positive experience for me (Yes)	62%	42%
Overall positive experience (not sure)	23%	32%

### 3.1.3. PGT respondents.

	<b>PGT respondents</b>	
	<b>In person</b>	<b>Online</b>
I am learning a lot about my subject (very much/to some extent)	82%	81%
I am motivated to study <sup>2</sup> (very much/to some extent)	85%	66%
I have participated during sessions (Very much/to some extent)	70%	82%
Enables me to connect with teachers (very much/to some extent)	89%	54%
Helps to create a community with students in my class (as above)	85%	29%

<sup>1</sup> the online result includes aggregate of responses to two questions (synchronous and asynchronous)

<sup>2</sup>

Overall positive experience for me (Yes)	67%	44%
Overall positive experience (not sure)	25%	32%

### 3.2. Technology and Connectivity

Two items on the survey were about technology issues and internet access interfering with learning. About one in eight students (13%) experience problems with technology (access to computers etc) 'always' or 'often'. In the qualitative data, a handful of students indicate that their learning is taking place on a smart phone because of hardware issues. Internet access is a more widespread problem with almost a quarter (23%) of our students experiencing connectivity issues 'always' or 'often'. In the qualitative comments, students describe more connectivity issues with Blackboard than with MS Teams or Zoom.

<b>Statements about online learning (UG &amp; PGT)</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Often</b>
Technology issues (eg access to computer) interfere with my learning	3%	10%
Internet access (eg wifi) interferes with my learning	6%	17%

### 3.3. In-person specific items

More than one fifth of students (22%) are extremely worried ('very much') while a further 22% are worried ('to some extent') about in person teaching because of Covid-19. Approximately one in eight student's experience has been compromised by low attendance at in-person sessions (13%), while a further 24% report their experience being compromised 'to some extent' by low attendance. 43% of students have enjoyed in person teaching 'very much' which a further 36% have enjoyed it 'to some extent'.

<b>Statements about in person teaching</b>		<b>ALL</b>	<b>UG</b>	<b>PGT</b>
I am worried about in person teaching because of Covid-19	Very much	22%	20%	32%
	To some extent	22%	21%	29%
My experience has been compromised by low attendance	Very much	13%	13%	12%
	To some extent	24%	24%	26%
I have enjoyed in person teaching	Very much	43%	43%	48%
	To some extent	36%	37%	38%

### 3.4. Explanations for missing classes

More than one third of students who have missed classes cite self-isolation as the main reason, with 904 or 36% of the students in the sample recording this reason. The high proportion of self-isolating students absent from in-person classes may reflect the survey sample being weighted towards first years (37% of all respondents), a cohort where the highest case rates were recorded in the opening weeks of TB1.

About one in eight students has missed classes because of concern for well-being and almost one in ten report having missed classes because of difficulties communicating related to Covid-secure measures. Concerns about both well-being and masks and visors are reflected in the free text comments.

<b>Main reasons for missing in-person teaching (for those who have missed sessions)</b>	<b>Those who have missed by number</b>	<b>% of sample population</b>
Self-isolation	904	36%

Away from campus	352	14%
Concern for well-being	340	12%
Difficulties communicating due to Covid safety measures	215	9%
Not learning much	147	6%

### 3.5. Preferences

One in four students (25%) would prefer the University to continue with the current proportions of online and in-person teaching during Covid, while about one in five students (19%) would like more online teaching. The overwhelming majority of students (56%) would like more in person teaching if possible.

The qualitative data indicates that many students are disappointed with the low levels of in-person teaching they have participated in up until taking the survey, which may account for the high percentage wanting more in person teaching. Value for money is often cited alongside low or no in-person teaching, particularly among international and PGT students who have higher fees.

I would prefer to...	ALL	UG	PGT
continue with current proportions of online and in person teaching	25%	24%	27%
have more online if possible	19%	19%	18%
have more in-person if possible	56%	56%	55%

## 4. Qualitative data analysis

The following sections provide an analysis of free text responses to Questions 15,16 and 17. The analysis uses headlines to cluster thematically analysed sections as a way of privileging student voice while clustering themes. Section 5 which follows scopes out implications and suggested actions.

### 4.1. The most engaging thing for me has been...

Headline 1: In person teaching, because it builds social cohesion, community and enables students to ask questions

- *In-person seminars have been most engaging for me, as there it was possible engage in proper discussion, which I feel is essential for my course.*
- *In-person practical sessions and presentations have been very informative and allowed us to start building a sense of community.*
- *Getting to go to in person teaching even if it is only for short lectures as it gives me a sense of normality.*
- *The in-person teaching has been by far the most valuable learning experience. It has made me feel closer to the cohort and having face-to-face contact with the teachers is a completely different (and less scripted) way of learning.*

Headline 2: Online teaching is flexible and engaging, especially when it is interactive

- *The most engaging learning experience for me has been the live seminar sessions on Blackboard and Zoom. It has really helped me to see the power of technology in facilitating easy learning. It is really mind blowing.*
- *Blackboard seems much more taken care of and developed compared to last year where it was only recordings and some quizzes. I like that things are nicely broken down into chunks, which is very needed for people like me, and I wish we had more similar organisational help in my first year.*

- *I've found online sessions with quick questions and instant polls to be the most engaging learning experience so far.*
- *The short online videos have helped me to pay more attention to the lecture content, I can rewind or go over bits again if I don't understand, and I can do my lectures when they suit me.*
- *I feel that blackboard collaborate has enhanced my interaction with my lecturers because I am able to ask more questions. I enjoy this blended way of learning in general because of the freedom to plan my day.*
- *Being put into smaller break out groups online on blackboard - it is nice that the lecturers are keeping it interesting.*

Headline 3: Well-structured asynchronous activities help to deepen students learning, in flexible, self-paced ways

- *The online work has been excellent - I feel like I perhaps engage at a deeper level as I am doing it in my own time - I'm more likely to access the extra reading / resources (especially if easily linked) than I did last year.*
- *Having a detailed structure whereby the work we are assigned is clearly laid out alongside the estimated amount of time it will require. Having all the materials we need to learn in one online folder is also very helpful in tracking my progress in each learning cycle. The freedom of being able to go back to them in the future also makes accessing important information that might've been missed much more convenient. Overall, online learning has been a more effective use of my time.*
- *The use of discussion boards, videos and quizzes- the variety has been very engaging.*

#### 4.2. The most problematic thing for me has been...

Headline 1: Feeling isolated and lacking a sense of community

- *I feel that I don't really know the other students well and I don't feel like I belong in a sense of community.*
- *Feeling disconnected from everyone on the course, feeling like the days are blending together and not being able to differentiate between lectures in my mind because I do them all in the same place at my desk and I don't see the lecturer's face only hear either a male or female voice through headphones.*
- *It's been very isolating not being surrounded by people on my course to learn. Difficult to ask questions when confused. Difficult to know what to do at times.*

Headline 2: Not feeling motivated by less structured online learning

- *Finding the motivation to do asynchronous work, and the time management skills to keep up.*
- *Staying motivated and on-top of all the online work. I find that sometimes it can take much longer than the time-tabled hours to get through all the work and this means I am spending most of my day working and not leaving much time for myself and wellbeing.*
- *I'm really struggling to find the motivation to do online learning. It's difficult not being around other students on my course and being in my room on a screen all day. It's also hard for me to work out if I'm doing the work to the correct standard (without having other students around me).*

Headline 3: Internet and technology issues are disrupting a seamless learning experience

- *WiFi problems, meaning I miss key information, and can be unable to participate in group discussions.*
- *Issues with Blackboard and Internet connection speed when in online live sessions. Blackboard is very temperamental for me and has resulted in me being unable to login to some sessions. My Internet is occasionally too slow to be able to follow what is going on in a session.*

- *I frequently have connectivity issues.*

#### Headline 4: Online discussion can be awkward and stilted

- *I am too shy to talk in front of strangers when it's not in person.*
- *In some of the larger groups they put us into breakout rooms, often this is people we don't know at all which feels really awkward online. Especially when we are fumbling for the activity if it isn't still shown on screen after they have put us into the breakout room.*
- *Online discussions are sometimes a bit flat. People don't have the confidence online to express their ideas.*

#### Headline 5: Social distancing, face coverings and visors make in-person teaching difficult

- *It's difficult to ask questions in the in person tutorials as both the tutor and us are wearing masks and visors as well as having to sit a certain distance away, so it makes it very difficult to be loud enough to ask a question or to hear what's being said.*
- *The masks and visors in lectures make it unbearable. It's hard to see and breathe and feels so unnecessary. It also stops me from wanting to contribute in class as no-one can hear me, so my questions go unanswered.*
- *In person seminars are largely pointless in discussion- based subjects because it's difficult to connect with a group when you are distanced and all wearing masks and visors.*
- *In person lectures with masks, visors, and social distancing is not at all viable for me.*

### 4.3. One thing which would improve my experience would be...

#### Headline 1: More in person teaching

- *In-person studies, even in smaller groups, would help a lot. We would get to talk with each other and the professors and get a slightly better connection.*
- *More smaller in-person groups like seminars to chat through the work we've been doing.*
- *Having things like problem classes and workshops in person as this is a much easier way to have discussions.*
- *At least one in person session for each module. I regain my passion for a subject after something is face to face. I definitely have more of a love for practical sessions because of the varied formats of learning.*

#### Headline 2: More interaction with and guidance from teachers

- *Having access to talk to people about stuff face to face as it is personally very difficult to grasp concepts just through online videos where I can't ask questions and interact regularly with staff.*
- *More guidance on how to cope with so much content and to retain it all, suggestions on how to schedule your days or things you can do to aid your learning.*
- *A small session every couple of weeks to go through anything we have missed /don't understand /weren't able to ask in class.*
- *A little more communication between lecturers and students to check on us and see how and if we are improving in certain areas.*

### Headline 3: More opportunities to engage with other students

- *Some small group, potentially in-person events, these could have an academic or social focus as a method of building up a support system.*
- *Being put in 'family' groups, being able to have a lab partner feels like a necessity. Being able to talk to classmates and lecturers more easily.*
- *The opportunity to meet more course mates in person in order to form a community and be able to work with others from my course*

### Headline 4: More live synchronous online lectures

- *If we can't have live in person classes, then it would be nice to have some live online classes instead because sometimes the asynchronous activities are a bit repetitive and boring, like we don't really have a schedule of any kind.*
- *More online synchronous content over asynchronous because it's more engaging and motivating.*

## 5. Themes and actions

### 5.1. Innovation and best practice

The Pulse survey indicates that some students are finding online synchronous and asynchronous learning well-structured, engaging, and helpful for learning. Students identify bite-sized content, activities, short films, quizzes, polls, and the ability to ask questions in live sessions, as positives. Breakout groups are working well in some circumstances. Students identify positives about in-person teaching, despite the mitigations. Human connection, a touch of normality, and getting away from screens are valued and students report that building friendships and community seem to be easier in-person. The structured learning design on many courses has helped students to learn with prepared materials feeling more intentionally designed on many courses, with the result that some students are finding their learning better than in previous years. Students are enjoying the flexibility of online learning and the ability to go back to, pause and replay material is useful.

#### Actions:

- Share best practice with staff through Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching (BILT) workshops (December)
- Run Digital and Blended Design course for staff incorporating innovations and lessons learnt from TB1 (January)

### 5.2. Barriers to blended learning

The main barrier students describe is not having enough in-person teaching and having both face coverings and visors in socially distanced on campus teaching. Students value the spontaneity and presence of in-person sessions, even with the Covid-19 mitigations. In the online environment, some students find the shift from lots of structured *teaching* (lectures, seminars, labs) to lots of structured *learning* online (mainly asynchronous content) quite burdensome. This is compounded when units have highly variable online content, with some consuming disproportionate effort and student time, compared to others. On some programmes, students have struggled to navigate Blackboard because of different layouts and feel that they need more help structuring their learning. Given that asynchronous activities are not timetabled, some programmes have provided helpful ways for students to make sense of this content. Students have asked for more live synchronous sessions, smaller online groups, and describe breakout groups as working variably. Technology and connectivity are problematic for some students, and this seems to relate especially to Blackboard Collaborate.



## Actions

We're grateful to the many students who participated in this survey at a time when Bristol, like all universities, has been navigating new systems and new ways of working. We intend to build on the results of the survey during 2021 in these ways:

- In response to the survey and following a careful review of how best to apply the scientific advice to keep our teaching spaces Covid-secure, we are removing the requirement to wear visors in classes so that there is a much better educational experience for students and staff in the classes we run on campus. Students are now required to wear face coverings only.
- Because our students want more in-person teaching, we are asking all our degree programmes to increase on campus teaching hours in the second teaching block of the year from late January (subject only to any new public health requirements)
- We will review our asynchronous content to ensure that workloads for students are manageable and proportionate across their teaching programmes. Based on student feedback, we will also review our asynchronous content to ensure that it is better structured
- Our Digital Education Office (DEO) is providing guidance and templates to programmes on consistent layouts of online resources so that students can navigate their learning materials more effectively
- Breakout groups can work well online, and we are introducing new training for academic staff to build on best practice
- We will be reminding students of our [Digital Equity Policy](#) which enables them to get support for technology and connectivity problems

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30 November 2020