

My Experience of Contracting COVID-19 While Adapting to Online Learning of Higher Education at Maynooth University

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Abstract.

This article will reflect on my personal experience of contracting COVID-19 while adapting to online learning of third level education. Throughout this piece, the difficulties that students were faced with while adapting to the online learning environment will be discussed, alongside my own experience.

Keywords: COVID-19; Student Experience.

As a first year Arts student, who entered university directly from Leaving Certificate, this academic year was not what I had expected it to be. Initially, I found the transition from secondary school to university extremely difficult. I struggled to settle in for months but eventually, I became accustomed to this new routine. Shortly after I had settled into this daunting new environment, the coronavirus hit Ireland. While I understood the tragedy that it had caused in Wuhan in China, I was still under the impression that it would not spread as violently in our country or affect our lives as much as it has.

COVID-19 has affected everyday life as we knew it, and has sadly taken the lives and health of loved ones. Online learning was one of the complications that affected thousands of students across the country more than anything else during this pandemic. Adapting to online learning was extremely difficult within itself. I struggled to keep track of what assignment was due and when, where to find each lecture/tutorial and to keep up with everything that was going on. There was a significant amount of work to be done, a higher quantity than usual in most cases, which was rather stressful. A survey carried out by Maynooth University Student Union provides

statistics on the wellbeing of the students during this pandemic, along with their experience of adapting to online learning. 1,007 students took part in this survey and the majority indicated a decline in wellbeing during this pandemic. 78% of students indicated that they felt “*that everything was an effort*”, more often than usual in the 30 days preceding the survey, while 61% reported that they felt more than usually “*hopeless*”, (COVID-19 Survey Results, Maynooth Students’ Union, 2020).

Unfortunately, I am a student who has been directly affected by COVID-19, which made life during this period even more wearying for me. I had just come home from a weekend in Galway at the start of March when I started showing symptoms of the virus. Crèches, schools and universities had just closed, as it was the very beginning of the pandemic. There were very few cases in Ireland when I first started showing symptoms, which led me to believe that I had a common cold. I first developed a dry cough, which I thought nothing of initially as I did not feel unwell in any other way and because the virus had not really hit the country badly at this stage. It was shortly after that that I then began to get headaches and I felt quite fatigued, but still did not feel very unwell or overly concerned. Although my family believed that I was fine and that I was “*just worn out*” from my weekend, I took responsibility and went ahead to get tested for the virus, as I did not want to put others at risk. I rang my GP and described my symptoms. He was sceptical at first but sent me forward for testing anyway. The process of testing and receiving results took 10 days in total. Those 10 days of impatiently waiting were excruciatingly nerve-wrecking. When told that I had tested positive, I felt completely gutted and extremely overwhelmed.

Of course then, I had to self-isolate, which really took its toll on my mental health at the time. I stayed in my bedroom for twenty-four hours a day and could not see anyone, not even my family members, as they could not enter the room. At mealtimes, my family left my meals outside my door and I ate them in my bed. I spoke to them through the door and could not even go downstairs to sit in their company. This also made it extremely difficult to do my college work. I had lost all motivation to engage with lectures, assignments and tutorials and felt extremely down. I could not bring myself to do my work, which led me to fall behind and left me with a lot to catch up on. Thankfully, lecturers and/tutors that I spoke to about it were very understanding and allowed extensions if needed. I eventually caught up with my work after a week or two when

I had recovered and kept up to speed with my deadlines and lectures from there.

Many lecturers and/tutors were understanding and helpful, and checked in regularly. This recognition of the struggles that students faced meant a great deal. For example, some students were working more hours than they usually would be due to being considered as a frontline worker. Others may have been faced with other pressing circumstances, such as technological issues (no laptop at home, poor internet connection, etc.), causing them to fall behind in their studies. This whole period has been overwhelming for everyone, students and faculty, and has had an impact on a lot of people mentally and it is important to recognise this and to provide support.

The mental health of all supporters of student learning and development is equally important and should be recognised and considered when dealing with issues, such as this pandemic. I know from my own experience that it has been a huge struggle and a strain mentally and understand that others are the same too, which we should all be accepting of.

1. References.

Maynooth Students' Union (2020). *Annual Survey of Student Opinion (2020): COVID-19 Questions Report*. <https://www.msu.ie/news/article/6013/COVID-19-Survey-Results/> 24 June 2020.