

The Student Perspective: The Reality of Being the “Lucky Student”.

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Abstract.

This reflective piece looks at the impact of the COVID-19 emergency on the learning, academic engagement, and student experience of an undergraduate student in Ireland. The piece highlights the practical difficulties that an undergraduate student faces while conducting their academic studies from home, the worries facing students as a result of the pandemic, and the question of whether problems are arising as a result of working from home or from the COVID-19 emergency itself and how it has changed people's lives. Furthermore, the author illustrates how they are privileged in terms of their living conditions and current student experience, and that the struggles of other students may be exacerbated by their financial, housing, and social context.

Keywords: academic engagement, covid-19; learning; pandemic; student experience.

1. The ‘Lucky Student’.

I am one of the lucky students. I have just finished my third year, which was not graded and solely involved research and work placements. These placements were not interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis so I continued to work as normally as possible until the end of the semester. I had no exams to be disrupted, no final lectures to say goodbye to, and no final memories of my student experience that I missed out on. I get to go back to university next year, in whatever capacity that may be, and continue my student experience.

And yet, even though my student experience has not been nearly as affected as others, there are still times of struggle. I moved back to my family home from my university accommodation a few months ago, and thus have had no access to my usual study spaces. I have found it so

terribly easy to pick up my smartphone and procrastinate, or Google something completely unrelated to my work, or simply put down my laptop and walk away. These all sound like things I could do regardless of where I would be working but being at home means I am not in an environment that feels conducive for learning. I am not working alongside my peers and my surroundings are not built for the sole purpose of furthering my education.

To make matters worse, I have been more tired than I have ever experienced over the last few months. My mind is tired and focusing on academic work for a 9-5 workday is a monumental struggle. Some days are better or worse than others, but I am getting sick of feeling like my brain is foggy, or that I cannot connect with my work, or any of the other difficulties I have had to deal with whilst trying to continue working throughout this crisis. On top of everything else, identifying these issues has led me to the frightening realisation that this is probably the worst state my mental health has been in throughout my time as a student.

However, it is possible that the home environment is not the problem. Research from around the world has found that working from home has a positive influence on the effort employees' put into their work (Rupietta & Beckmann, 2018) and on productivity and work performance (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015). Outcomes of satisfaction and perceived productivity when working from home have been found to be related to organisational or job characteristics rather than individual or household ones (Baker, Avery, & Crawford, 2007). So, what is the problem?

The current health crisis changed our lives and how we live day-to-day at a drastic pace. All of a sudden, all education institutions were closed, and students were left wondering, "*What now?*". I never anticipated finishing the rest of my academic year at home, and the anxieties of what is happening in the world and what will happen next year for my studies are hard to ignore. Most people have experienced uncertainty, and fatigue, and loneliness as a result of what is happening. So perhaps it is not that we all have been forced to work from home, but rather the fact that we must stay at home and work despite our fears and unhappiness in order to keep everyone safe.

And yet, I am still incredibly advantaged. Not only was my academic performance not threatened

by the current circumstances, but I am in a safe, financially secure, and comfortable home with family members I get along with and that respect my workspace. It must be considered that if I am struggling, a student in a privileged position, then how must other students be coping? Although academic institutions have been doing what they can to support students throughout these strange times, there are many factors that students face that cannot be directly helped, such as difficult relationships with families, financial insecurity, and poor internet access. It is vital that these students are not forgotten and left to suffer by their institutions. There must be understanding and compassion if we are all to get through this together and in one piece.

2. References.

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