

## Experiences in Digital Learning Webinar

7 December 2023

### Student Digital Learning Experiences

Since the first pandemic lockdown in 2020, the Centre for Online and Digital Learning (CODE) at the University of London has run series of regular webinars under the strapline 'Experiences in Digital Learning'. Five such webinars are planned in the series for the academic year 2023-24, covering a wide variety of topics including, for the first time, a curriculum-based focus on the humanities and on healthcare.

The first webinar in this series, however, was a panel discussion that focused explicitly on the students' perspective. It was held on 7 December 2023, with a recently appointed CODE Fellow, [Dr Margaret Korosec](#), in the chair. Margaret is Dean of Online and Digital Education at the University of Leeds, with responsibility for growing the University's portfolio of online and digitally enabled courses. The six panellists were all either students or recent graduates of online and distance-based MSc courses at Leeds:

- **Claire Ashdown:** MSc Disability Studies, Rights, Inclusion (student)
- **Sue Field:** MSc Engineering Management (graduate)
- **Chantal Jauvin:** MSc Sustainable Business Leadership (student)
- **James Maskill:** MSc Artificial Intelligence (student)
- **Alejandro (Alex) Sampedro Vila:** MSc Engineering Management (student)
- **William (Bill) Thomas:** MSc Sustainable Business Leadership (student)

**Margaret** began by asking the panellists to introduce themselves, saying a little about their backgrounds and what had led them to their courses of study.

**Alex** is an engineer, originally from Spain and now living in Sweden. He works for a multinational manufacturer and chose the online MSc to increase his business knowledge and leadership skills while keeping on with his full-time work and family commitments.

**Chantal** is a Canadian lawyer with an MBA who has worked in many countries and often mentored young professionals. She has now retired from that role and is seeking to use her skills to help sustain and protect the world that her generation will leave to the next.

**Claire**, in contrast, is at the beginning of her career. She graduated in art history but now works as a project manager at the University of Leicester. Inclusion is part of her portfolio, and she has become particularly interested in disability rights.

**James** is working in international development consultancy in Dubai. His work includes data analytics, which he enjoys and is keen to develop further in his career; he chose the MSc in Artificial Intelligence from Leeds as it is compatible with working full time on another continent.

**Sue**, the only MSc graduate on the panel, has worked as a chemical engineer and as a consultant in the public and private sector; she is looking to re-enter engineering after a long career break. She is based near Leeds but chose to study online as it fits into her work and family commitments well.

**Bill**, also from Canada, has retired from a successful corporate career, most recently as president of Western Union Corporation. He has seen the effects of climate change in many countries, including the Canadian wildfires of 2023, and now hopes to use his leadership skills in the environmental field.

Margaret highlighted the panel's diversity, with members from different counties (and continents), disciplines and career stages.

She then asked panellists to comment on their experience of interaction and engagement online. How far do (or did) they feel a sense of connection with their tutors and fellow students? Alex began by commenting on a difference between the Leeds course and previous online studies using Coursera. With Coursera, he studied more or less independently with much less interaction as compared to the Leeds online experience. The Coursera 'design model' is different to the Leeds one, with Coursera deliberately offering less interaction with the academic community but even more flexibility for students. Bill, who has taught at university level, suggested that group project work – which he has not yet experienced in his Leeds course – can engender a sense of belonging. And James suggested that students will be particularly keen to work together if the assignments are challenging. Claire and Sue both mentioned that membership of student WhatsApp groups, which were encouraged but not required by the teaching staff, had helped them feel part of the student community; Sue found this form of peer support particularly helpful because she 'hadn't studied for absolutely decades'.

Several panellists mentioned the use of asynchronous communication through discussion boards. Chantal commented on the 'democratic' nature of these in a course with a very diverse range of student backgrounds and experiences. Alex agreed that they were very useful but noted that they work best if students subscribe to them: in one case, this function had been lost when the portal was upgraded, and traffic had plummeted. This highlights the importance of checking that existing services will not be lost whenever a learning management system or the software it supports is upgraded.

Margaret then introduced a member of the audience, **Sarah Gatford** from the University of East London (UEL). She had invited Sarah to take part as she is the student rep for her cohort on an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology; UEL is one of only a few institutions worldwide to offer this course. As a distance student, she has found it difficult to interact informally with her colleagues; she misses the 'water cooler moments' that are a feature of face-to-face courses. However, when this type of interaction does occur it can be very rewarding. She remembers encountering one fellow student whose company that runs exactly the type of retreats that she is interested in organising. Several panellists agreed, commenting that timed interactive sessions such as Claire's regular Monday afternoon seminars can offer opportunities for informal chat.

Margaret then asked panel members whether they thought that social interaction between online students worked better if it was spontaneous or organised through the department or institution. Claire commented that when her cohort was sent into breakout groups to discuss a particular topic, they ended up discussing almost anything else. She has found these informal group discussions engaging and helpful, but she noted that they couldn't work for all students, not least because of the challenge of time zones: many of her colleagues based overseas found that the times of (necessarily optional) live sessions were just too inconvenient. This type of opportunity has to be 'nice to have' rather than 'must have'. Others, including Bill, thought that informal discussions would work best if 'self-organised' by a group of students who could pick a time that suited them. Social engagement is always harder online than in campus-based courses, but it can be worked on, and it can be very rewarding when it works well.

The next question was about motivation: did the panellists find it difficult to motivate themselves to get through their courses while studying online? Only Alex responded to this one: he said that he had valued the opportunity to start on a postgraduate certificate and only move to the Master's course when he was ready. If he had had to start by committing to two years of study at MSc level, he might not have done so. Margaret appreciated his point and suggested that the silence from other panellists meant that 'you're all motivated: I love it!'

Despite this 'thumbs up', she suggested that there are always improvements that can be made. The discussion had already touched on discussion boards, group work, informal social interaction and peer engagement, but could panellists think of any others? Bill suggested that the one hour a week of contact time he has with academics could be increased; others agreed but thought it could be optional as some students prefer to study entirely independently. 'Drop in' and scheduled one-to-one sessions can also work well. Another problem can be with keeping course materials up to date, particularly in a fast-moving discipline such as artificial intelligence. James recommended anyone interested in AI in education and learning support to look at the work of Professor Eric Atwell at Leeds, who had taught him data analytics and text mining.

The final question to panel members concerned their wider university experience: did they feel 'connected' to Leeds University as a whole, and how they found the services it provided. There was universal praise for the University Library and its staff, and Alex mentioned the specific point that generic skills development had helped him with critical thinking. Claire raised an issue with the generic communications sent out to all students, which, she said, are directed to young undergraduates based on campus; mature distance-based postgraduates have completely different needs. Margaret agreed that student information systems need at least to distinguish between on-campus and online students, and between undergraduates and postgraduates.

Margaret ended a fascinating webinar by asking the panellists for any final thoughts. Alex hoped that the wider community would take notice of their discussions. Others, including Claire, would like to see further opportunities for discussions of this type, and for more engagement between staff and students. Bill was pleased to have found common concerns with students from different backgrounds and disciplines. And, finally, Sarah from the University of East London hoped that there would be opportunities for discussions between online students from different institutions as well as disciplines.

This valuable discussion will doubtless continue in the next webinar in this series, which will take place on Thursday 26 January. The theme is one that must be of very wide concern: how climate change can and should be addressed in teaching throughout the university curriculum.