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- 'My biggest hope is regarding placement': A creative, narrative study of student engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Coexisting with Covid

You once so firmly grippled me,

my mouth, my nose, my face.

I struggled to breathe beneath you.

I objected and protested against the imprisonment of my face.

Yet time went past and soon I found; you were a virtuous keeper,

Hugging my face you kept me safe, now despite the restrictions you seem much easier.

As I try to navigate around this concrete maze

Bright signs assault my senses

Beware! Be safe!

Wash your hands!

Don't touch your face!

I am somewhat bombarded by these messages.

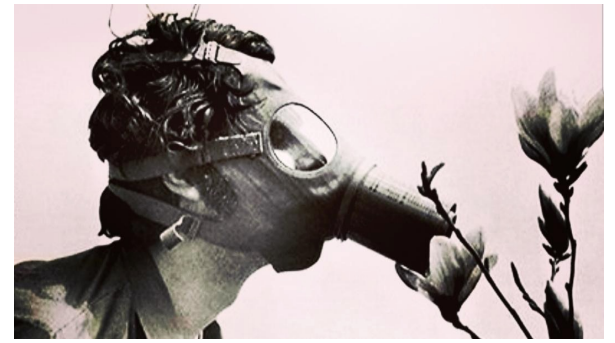While some think it's just a hoax,

propaganda; a government scheme

I know of those who have suffered.

I know those who are suffering unseen.

So I wash my hands, I keep my distance; to keep the figures low

This simple task unites us and I find commrandry with people unknown.

Newly made friends; none of us are alone.

Context

- The academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 have been unlike any other. Young people looking forward to moving into higher education (HE) faced school closures and cancelled exams, and students already at university faced abruptly ended work experience placements, a shift to online teaching and in some cases periods of self-isolation far away from family. Whilst these young people were at comparatively low risk from covid-19 it is important to understand how the unexpected and sustained changes to their social realities affected engagement with their studies.

- To understand the student experiences and perspectives of the pandemic and its effect on their return to or start at university.

- To understand how the pandemic might affect student engagement at university.

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Student engagement

- Student engagement understood as:

- *'The time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to outcomes of the college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities.'* Kuh et al (2009:683)

- Engagement important to a range of student outcomes including, satisfaction, retention and attainment. (Trowler 2010).

- No shared understanding, Kahu (2013) argues tutors view engagement as cognitive (self-efficacy and self-regulation), students view it as affective (feelings, emotions and sense of belonging).

- Student engagement is complex and multidimensional (Krause 2005) and dynamic (Boulton et al 2019), it means different things to different students and reflects an increasingly diverse student body.

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- Kahu (2013) brought together the different approaches to engagement including behavioural, focused on student behaviour and teaching practice, and psychological reflecting cognitive and affective domains.
- This holistic framework acknowledged the **wider social context** in which the student and institution are situated and identified four critical mechanisms to student engagement, **self-efficacy, emotions, wellbeing and belonging (**Kahu 2013).
- This framework was extended to include the **educational interface** and it is within this interface that the four mechanisms increase or decrease student engagement (Kahu Picton and Nelson 2020), the interface is a site for dynamic interaction between student and institution (Kahu and Nelson 2018).
- Four mechanisms used as the framework to analyse the data; **self-efficacy, emotions, wellbeing and belonging.**

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Methodological approach, methods of data collection.

- Qualitative study.

- Creative narrative. 2 collections points, start of Term 1 (October 2020 and Term 2 (January 2021)

- Creative output, stimulus for reflection, processing emotion and has therapeutic value (McBain et al.2015).

- Short narrative commentary, narrative has the potential to provide a complex and nuanced account of the individual (Dillon 2010), and intensive analysis of a small body of empirical materials provides a rich description of the social world (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

- Purposive sample, self-selected, from the School of Education and Professional Development,17 participants. All of the participants were female, 14 White British, 2 White Other and 1 BAMEA, 9 mature, 13 returners, 4 new starters.

- Ethics, BERA (2018), approved by ethics committee in the School of Education and Professional Development.

- Huye (2015) identifies that artistic output can be useful in supporting needed reflection however we provided each participant with contact details for a range of support services available at the University.

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- Most common emotion experienced was **'anxiety'** but **resilience** and **self-efficacy** demonstrated a **positive cognitive shift** to looking forward to university.

"like many others I have struggled with feelings of anxiousness and concern during the ongoing pandemic. I continue to try to focus on the positives. ….. I am eager to get back to university and to resume my studies."

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"I have suffered with my mental health – bouts of depression and constant anxieties………I was ecstatic and am still living on that high. Of course, with the pandemic still here, it has changed the experience that some people come to university for. For me however, I'm here to learn and develop and that is exactly what I feel is happening for me."

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Most significant finding was the centrality of **'placement'** to each of Kahu's mechanisms of engagement.

- **Belonging**

" I hope that I will be able to bond with the children on placement just as well as we could in the past before all these new regulations were in place"

"….my teaching placement is where I feel happiest because I get to connect with other people, and I'm treated well, even though I thought I'd find this the most stressful of all!"

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- **Self-efficacy**

" I also expect that things will not all go to plan and there may be further restrictions or our placements could be cut short again. I feel a lot more prepared for what is to come."

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Emotions

"I also feel excited to see my colleagues and get back into schools on placement to meet new children and work in new settings; doing what I love."

" I hope that this year I will be able to complete my full 8 weeks block placement as I fear that if I do not I will have missed out on valuable teaching practice."

"After missing all the time on placement…..at the end of the year I was left feeling like I don't know enough to go on to second year,"

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- **Wellbeing**

"I feel that the no knowing what was happening with lectures and placement left me feeling very worried even though I know university did as much as they could to let us know and they were as much in the dark as we were"

"I hope to find a good placement school with a good mentor that would help me to thrive as a trainee and develop on any aspects that are required"

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Placement is key

Belonging – Self-efficacy – Emotions - Wellbeing

"My biggest hope for the academic year is regarding placement. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic earlier in the academic year out block placement was cut short. I am hoping that when it is time for our next block placement that the situation will be less server: allowing for the full placement to be completed. Placement is my favourite part of my university experience and I was sad when the duration was cut short. I am also hoping for another placement which continues to push me as a professional and a person."

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Discussion/ conclusion

- Student engagement is a process and an outcome and self-efficacy, emotions, wellbeing and belonging are mechanisms supporting the process of engagement at the educational interface.

- Placement found to be a significant influence on these mechanisms for the participants in this study. However, further research is needed to explore the connection between placement and student engagement.

- Prompts the question where does placement sit within Kahu and Nelson's (2018) model, is it part of the educational interface, completely separate, or both?

- Despite reporting high levels of anxiety as a result of the pandemic the 4 mechanisms were instrumental in supporting engagement at the educational interface, stimulating a cognitive shift.

- The study has limitations, small scale located in one specific school with all female participants. Nevertheless, highlighted the importance of placement in developing student engagement.

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- If you would like further information or an opportunity to discuss this research with us we can be reached at

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