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Post-pandemic pedagogy: experiences of learning and teaching history before, during and after Covid-19

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Abstract

This article presents and analyses the findings of a nationwide survey of history staff and students conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. More than five hundred respondents from nearly fifty universities provided qualitative and quantitative responses which compared their experience of teaching and learning before and during the pandemic, and their preferences once the pandemic abated. In contrast to the upbeat assessments by regulatory bodies of the 'emergency pivot' to online learning, the most significant finding of this survey was that respondents adjudged the pandemic to have worsened teaching and learning in almost every respect. Much less uniform were respondents' favoured teaching practices after the pandemic. While most missed face-to-face seminars, only half advocated reinstating traditional in-person lectures and supervisions and fewer still wished to return to pen-and-paper exams. Further differences emerged between respondents at different types of institution, between staff and students, and between male and female academics. The overwhelmingly negative experiences of online teaching during the pandemic, and the variegated attitudes towards its continuation afterwards,

indicate that higher education institutions should develop a post-pandemic pedagogy that has been evaluated rigorously under non-emergency conditions, and which is sensitive to the needs of different groups of learners and teachers working in different disciplines.

Keywords history; pedagogy; Covid-19; pandemic; assessment; teaching delivery; e-learning; online lectures; seminars; tutorials; Britain

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated the greatest transformation to teaching methods in higher education during peacetime. The UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2020c: 1) accepted that the 'emergency pivot' enacted during the first nationwide lockdown in March 2020 was undertaken 'quickly and under extreme pressure'. Every in-person element of teaching and assessment had to be immediately replaced by an online equivalent. The indefatigability displayed by students and their tutors in transforming teaching overnight was remarkable. But what appeared to them to be short-term expedients were envisaged in a more long-term perspective by the QAA (2020b: 2) as having 'accelerated change, brought forward strategic plans, and instigated new ways of working' that had preceded Covid and were expected to outlast it.

Institutional- and sector-level analyses, in general, painted a picture of institutions responding successfully to the challenges of delivering teaching during the pandemic from March 2020 onwards (see Jisc, 2020a; OfS, 2021; QAA, 2020c). Such positive appraisals were used in some cases to propose quite radical changes to the delivery of programmes that extended beyond the 'emergency' phase of teaching. Having observed that the evidence base was too generic, institution-specific, partial and insubstantial to justify the proposed changes, this research project was designed to:

- address the experience of teaching and learning during the pandemic from the perspective of a single discipline: history
- gather discipline-level research that could inform history-specific frameworks for post-pandemic teaching, learning and assessment
- examine the perspectives of teachers and students alongside one another, rather than separately.

To meet these objectives, a survey of students and teachers of history in higher education in the UK was designed and subsequently completed by 565 people from 47 universities in 2021 (see Box 1).

Box 1. Universities participating in the survey

History staff and students from the following universities participated in the survey in a personal capacity:

Aberdeen, Birkbeck, Birmingham, Bishop Grosseteste, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Chester, De Montfort, Durham, East Anglia, Edge Hill, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Hertfordshire, Keele, Kent, Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Leicester, Lincoln, Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores, Loughborough, Northampton, Northumbria, Nottingham, Nottingham Trent, Open, Oxford, QMUL, Queen's Belfast, Reading, Robert Gordon, Roehampton, Royal Holloway, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, SOAS, Southampton, Strathclyde, Swansea, UCL, Warwick, Westminster, Winchester, York.

Literature review

While there is a significant amount of research on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education, a relatively small number of studies have focused on history teaching and learning. Although limited, these studies identify several positive and negative consequences of Covid-19-inspired changes to history teaching and learning practices. In what follows, we discuss the key themes that emerged from these articles, focusing on primary source work, assessment and accessibility.

The impact of Covid-19 on working with primary sources should not be understated, and it has been explored in a number of studies (for example, Barrett et al., 2023; Cooper et al., 2020; East et al., 2022). Primary and secondary source analysis is a core disciplinary skill within history that typically takes place during *in situ* classroom settings; as such, educators had to find appropriate solutions to support students in developing this skill while learning online during the pandemic. Collaborative annotation tools such as Talis Elevate or Hypothesis.is and digital bulletin boards (for example, Padlet) have been identified by researchers as effective platforms to engage students in critical analysis of primary (and secondary) sources during the Covid-19 lockdown periods (Barrett et al., 2023; Cooper et al., 2020; East et al., 2022). As Cooper et al. (2020: 10) argue, these platforms have the potential to impact positively on students' abilities not only to engage in primary source work in an online learning environment, but also to develop digital literacies and 'critical awareness of source quality and context'. Barrett et al. (2023) also identify a positive consequence of the pandemic on primary source work in their empirical study on the use of the collaborative annotation tool Talis Elevate among students in first-year core modules in the School of Humanities and Heritage at the University of Lincoln. East et al. (2022) compare data from collaborative reading activities on Talis Elevate before and during the pandemic, demonstrating significant increases in average per-student annotations in 2020/1 compared with previous years (Talis Elevate has been used in the history programme at Lincoln since 2018). This increase suggests a positive impact on the ways students read and interact with digitised primary sources; this finding is supported by responses to the survey conducted by Barrett et al. (2023), in which students reported that collaborative annotation activities (Kalir et al., 2020), such as adding comments to readings that were uploaded to a shared space, helped to enhance their understanding of historical sources and topics, among other factors that benefitted their learning (for example, supporting class preparation, participation in critical debates and planning assessments). The pandemic also helped to expand understanding of what 'counts' as primary source work and historical evidence (Laughlin-Schultz, 2021). The emergency transition to online teaching meant that some students no longer had access to primary sources such as diaries, letters and newspapers (to which, as Laughlin-Schultz [2021] observes, students typically gravitate in their work), as many of these materials are traditionally housed in undigitised library archives and special collections. In these respects, the pandemic served to broaden and deepen engagement with primary sources.

Primary source analysis was not the only area impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic also affected the types of activities undertaken by students (Barrett et al., 2023; Calabria, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; East et al., 2022; Larsen, 2021; Laughlin-Schultz, 2021; Reinke-Williams, 2021; Waetjen, 2023). Following the closure of universities and sites such as museums, archives, record offices and libraries, history educators had to find alternatives to key learning activities such as *in situ* field trips to museums and heritage sites. The pandemic created opportunities for students to access (inter)national field trips and engage in authentic learning experiences, as many museums and heritage sites opened their spaces and materials to virtual visits and viewings. As Ruth Larsen (2021) observes, this new way of attending museums and heritage sites enabled students to visit sites across the world, which may not have been an option for some students pre-Covid, if they had only been able to visit in-person. (For example, competing work responsibilities and financial constraints, among other factors, will have prevented some students from accessing field trips.) Studies in Brazil and South Africa suggest that while students judged that online instruction had some positive effects, including opportunities for discussion and collaboration, they preferred in-person teaching (Gonçalves and Urban, 2021; Iyer, 2020). At the same time, Khethwa and Mabalane (2022) note the destabilising effect of the rapidity with which changes were introduced, and the lack of consultation that accompanied shifts that were mandated by government or management.

It has also been suggested that the shift to online learning represented a valuable opportunity to rethink the types of assessments historians design and implement (Cooper et al., 2020; Jotischky, 2021). A particular focus in discussions about history assessments is the traditional in-person exam, which not only became impossible during the Covid-19 lockdown periods, but which also raises issues of accessibility and inclusion. Indeed, as Cooper et al. (2020) observe, traditional exams privilege certain types of students and disadvantage others, requiring history educators to develop new assessments that not only adapt to pandemic conditions, but that also promote equality of opportunity for all students undertaking the assessments. Innovative forms of assessment, which existed long before the pandemic, and which have been experimented with in the secondary sector since at least the 1970s (Sheldon, n.d., 2011), have been discussed as opportunities to move beyond traditional exams. Among these assessments, many of which had been trialled prior to the pandemic, are academic blogging, creating #un-essays and rewriting

Wikipedia pages on historical topics (Jones, 2018; Kumar and Deese, 2010; Matthews-Jones, 2019; West, 2018). For many other history educators (Cooper et al., 2020; Jotischky, 2021), the pandemic provided a chance to explore new assessment formats that have the potential to benefit students' learning into the future, demonstrating a positive, albeit unexpected, consequence of the crisis. However, it was the online 'take-home exam' that was most widely and hastily adopted by UK history programmes in the emergency transition to online teaching (Jotischky, 2021). This assessment format is similar to the traditional exam, but students complete it remotely, and usually over a longer period of time (for example, 24 hours rather than 2). While Jotischky (2021) acknowledges the accessibility-related issues potentially caused by this format (a point to which we will return shortly), he outlines a case for retaining this type of assessment beyond the pandemic because it provides students with more time to understand and structure their answers, often leading to higher-quality work, and consequently enabling students to reach their full academic potential. His views correlate with the preferences of some respondents in the Post-Pandemic Pedagogy survey: 46 per cent of students and 23 per cent of staff expressed a preference for 'take-home' assessments to continue beyond the pandemic because they were viewed as a fairer way of evaluating learning. Notably, these findings align with an evaluation of the Associated Examining Board's radical coursework-based A-level syllabus that was conducted in the 1990s (Fines and Nichol, 1994). This type of assessment needs to be well-managed and regulated for it to be equitable and academically rigorous, and it has come under further scrutiny since the pandemic owing to the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI). The release of ChatGPT in November 2022 postdates the research conducted for this article and so is beyond its immediate scope, but it has posed new challenges for history educators. Exams and other forms of 'live' assessment are seen by some as a more robust means of reducing opportunities for students to engage in academic malpractice. Others have seen the emergence of generative AI as an opportunity to develop students' critical thinking skills and to engage them in projects that make use of AI tools (for a review of initial studies, see RHS, 2024).

While the pandemic created opportunities to make the study of history more accessible by rethinking assessment practices and approaches to teaching more generally, it exacerbated other equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues. For instance, Andrew Jotischky (2021) maintains that while 'take-home' exams can enhance the quality of answers by providing students with more time to reflect on the questions and structure their answers, this format also exposes inequalities such as digital poverty and lack of appropriate space to work. Cooper et al. (2020) make similar observations in *The Pandemic Pedagogy Handbook*, arguing that the pandemic exacerbated and/or created numerous barriers to (online) learning, including unequal access to technology, competing work and/or care responsibilities, physical and mental illness, and inadequate and/or unsafe home learning environments; these issues pose challenges for the creation of equitable teaching and learning practices. The pandemic exacerbated the challenges that individuals with disabilities and people from certain disadvantaged socio-economic groups already experienced in accessing higher education (Burgstahler, 2021; Godsell, 2020). Such inequities pre-dated the pandemic, and they have continued in its aftermath, despite the legal requirements for higher education institutions to ensure equitable access (Wanti et al., 2022). In a history-specific context, Andrews et al. (2020) identify similar issues of accessibility and inclusion in their empirical study, although the survey and consequent report focus specifically on LGBTQ+ histories and historians (drawing on 852 responses). This study, which was launched in July 2019 and completed under pandemic conditions, not only found that LGBTQ+ staff and student historians experience high rates of poor mental health due to discrimination (among other things); it also identified privacy and safety issues when teaching LGBTQ+ histories in online environments during the pandemic. Drawing on data collected from the survey, Andrews et al. (2020) argue that some students may not have access to safe spaces at home to engage in discussions that would normally take place in classroom settings, preventing them from (safely) participating in critical conversations for their learning development. While their focus differs, Andrews et al. (2020), Cooper et al. (2020) and Jotischky (2021) centre EDI principles in their discussions and encourage history educators to be mindful of the various barriers facing students – and staff – when designing learning activities during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Although videoconferencing tools enabled synchronous lectures, seminars and tutorials to take place, their efficacy was limited (Lowenthal et al., 2020).

The pandemic exacerbated other EDI issues, including social isolation, digital fatigue and digital literacy. While several empirical studies demonstrate that students value the different types of teaching they were introduced to during the pandemic (for example, asynchronous, flipped learning, synchronous live stream on MS Teams and mirrored learning), emerging evidence suggests that students generally

prefer in-person classroom teaching (Barrett et al., 2023; East et al., 2022) or a hybrid approach that blends face-to-face and online teaching (Alzahrani and O'Toole, 2017; Keeling and Haugestad, 2020; Keskin, 2019). Unequal access to technology (Gehring, 2021) and digital fatigue (Cooper et al., 2020) have also been identified as potential barriers to history teaching and learning during the pandemic, just as they were in a range of other disciplines (Watermeyer et al., 2021), although the Post-Pandemic Pedagogy survey did not reveal stark differences in attitudes of students along lines of gender, ethnicity and disability. Inequitable access to technology in the form of poor internet connectivity, lack of appropriate devices or software and having to work in suboptimal spaces are all issues that pre-date the pandemic and have continued in its aftermath, and which can affect staff as well as students at all educational levels (Czerniewicz, 2018; Ruiu and Ragnedda, 2024; Watermeyer et al., 2021).

Methodology

The survey ran from March to June 2021, first as a regional pilot, then nationally. Open to all staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students in UK history programmes, it was conducted using Jisc's (Joint Information Systems Committee) online survey software (https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/) and circulated using a range of methods: emails to history departments and local and national organisations; and social media. All responses were anonymous.

The survey was completed by 565 volunteers from 47 universities: half the total number of universities offering history degrees in the UK. Although the survey's reliance on voluntary participation meant that we could not ensure a fully representative sample of respondents, they were nonetheless a varied group. Roughly equal numbers of respondents taught or studied at pre-1992, post-1992 and Russell Group institutions. Staff constituted 20 per cent of all respondents. Of the students, 40 per cent were in their first year of undergraduate study, 25 per cent were in their second year, 24 per cent were in their third or fourth years and 11 per cent were studying for postgraduate degrees. Of respondents, 5 per cent were at Welsh universities, 1 per cent were at Scottish universities and just two respondents (0.4 per cent of the sample) were at Northern Irish universities. Of respondents, 58 per cent were female, 37 per cent were male and 2 per cent were non-binary. The proportion of respondents who self-identified as White was 87 per cent, compared to the 82 per cent who said likewise in the 2021 UK census. However, another 4 per cent did not disclose their ethnicity, and the proportions of Asian respondents (3 per cent), Black respondents (1 per cent) and mixed-ethnicity respondents (4 per cent) represent too small a sample to explore Black and minority ethnic experiences in any detail. Their answers are nonetheless analysed in relation to issues of inclusivity and diversity, as are those of the 11 per cent of self-identified disabled respondents.

The first half of the survey asked respondents to evaluate whether 13 dimensions of teaching and learning had improved, deteriorated or stayed the same after lockdown in March 2020. Because first-year undergraduate students who had matriculated in autumn 2020 had not experienced pre-pandemic higher education, they were asked to complete an amended version of the survey that asked them to rate the same 13 dimensions of teaching on a five-point Likert scale. The 13 dimensions of teaching were established through discussion among the project team about key elements of history education for both staff and students in higher education. The second half of the survey asked respondents to categorise the methods used in a typical lecture, seminar, one-on-one supervision, examination and feedback before and after March 2020, and to express their preferred method once the pandemic had abated. For example, they were asked whether lectures were typically delivered in-person, online or in a hybrid format before March 2020 and after 2020, and then to state their post-pandemic preferences. Again, first-year undergraduates' lack of experience of pre-pandemic teaching methods meant that they were only asked about methods during the pandemic and their preferences afterwards. Because we wanted to differentiate between students who had extended experience of university-level history prior to the pandemic, this article distinguishes in several cases between the responses of first-year undergraduate students and those of what it terms 'advanced students': that is, postgraduates and undergraduates at a later stage in their studies (second year and beyond).

Multiple-choice questions were supplemented by free-text questions. For the first section, respondents were asked to write about the most effective and most challenging aspects of teaching and learning during the pandemic. For the second section, they were invited to explain why they would prefer any particular teaching method in the future, and to provide their final thoughts.

Assessments of history learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic

The survey captured the transformation that occurred during the pandemic, when most in-person teaching was cancelled, and respondents typically taught or learnt online. Before the pandemic, almost all lectures, seminars, supervisions and out-of-class group work were experienced in person, whether in lecture halls, seminar rooms, staff offices or on-campus study spaces. Just one in fifty respondents (2 per cent) reported having experienced primarily in-person teaching in the year or so since March 2020. Over half (56 per cent) had supplemented online teaching with some in-person interactions, while 41 per cent had experienced all their teaching and learning online. Online-only teaching and learning was most prominent among postgraduates, only 38 per cent of whom had experienced any in-person tuition.

Multiple-choice responses indicate that most staff and advanced (non-first-year) students thought that teaching and learning had worsened during the pandemic in almost every respect. Table 1 shows that greater numbers of staff and advanced students saw a deterioration rather than an improvement in 12 out of 13 aspects of teaching and learning (that is, a negative net score). For example, for every respondent who considered student learning to have improved during the Covid pandemic, there were six others who thought student learning had declined. The one exception was that slightly more staff thought that feedback had improved (22 per cent) than declined (14 per cent) during the pandemic. However, advanced students disagreed, with twice as many of them adjudging feedback to have been of poorer (30 per cent) rather than better quality (15 per cent) during the pandemic.

The overall tone of free-text answers was correspondingly negative. Most respondents assessed pandemic teaching in history for what it lacked, especially in comparison to the 'normal', in-person experience. For example, one student testified that 'Zoom seminars were very interactive and gave a classroom feel but not as good as an actual seminar.' Online platforms were felt to lack the authenticity of in-person classes, particularly because they were not being used to promote interaction between students or with staff, except in the case of Q&A sessions, with a resulting reduced sense of community, as in the case of this staff response: 'many of us – staff and students – want to return to the pre-pandemic arrangements as quickly as possible. There are good reasons for this, not least the erosion of community, peer group and motivation/engagement which has taken place online.' Staff and student respondents at all levels from all institution types felt that online platforms made it easier for some students to disengage. 'The teaching has been hit and miss because the teacher exudes anxiety when students leave all cameras off and cannot be seen. It is painful all round,' was the all-too-typical experience of one student participating in the survey. Group work, field trips and discussion were missed by many students and staff, not solely for their academic importance, but also because of the lost opportunities for socialisation and community building. 'It was impossible to have a non-classroom experience, e.g., field trips or social events,' stated a member of staff. 'That's a significant loss. It detracts from the experience of being a student and a teacher.'

Respondents to the staff survey critiqued all modes of online or blended delivery, with the consistent message that they were not as good as in-person teaching. At the same time, some members of staff appreciated the opportunity that the shift online had provided for pedagogic experimentation and innovation. Others noted that it had forced them to focus on their teaching more and to adopt a more organised and structured approach. Staff and postgraduates both noted that asynchronous activities had been positive, encouraging students to participate in learning at a time of their choice and providing greater flexibility for engagement.

A small number of students bemoaned that 'Tutors all too often have not accommodated the full potential of online resources,' but many more recognised that their lecturers had tried their best in difficult circumstances and made more positive than negative references to pedagogy in their written comments. Students applauded teaching methods which managed to make online sessions 'interactive and engaging'. Some of the methods were synchronous and some were asynchronous, but key elements include the extent to which they encouraged students to engage with one another in or before online seminars, or helped them to prepare for class. However, many judged virtual encounters to be no substitute for the real thing. 'I missed the interaction with others, the lunch cafes and generally seeing people. Would be great to get back to that – even if masks required,' one student mused.

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Table 1. Evaluations of teaching and learning before and during the Covid-19 pandemic by staff and advanced students

Teaching	Staff (*N* = 115)				Advanced students (*N* = 272)			
	Better	Worse	Similar	*Btr−Wrs*	Better	Worse	Similar	*Btr−Wrs*
Teaching methods	20	59	21	*−39*	13	63	23	*−50*
Teacher–student interaction	11	73	15	*−62*	15	67	18	*−52*
Assessment	23	35	43	*−12*	27	31	41	*−4*
Feedback	22	14	64	*8*	15	30	54	*−15*
Learning	Staff (*N* = 115; **N* = 36)				Advanced students (*N* = 272; **N* = 68)			
	Better	Worse	Similar	*Btr−Wrs*	Better	Worse	Similar	*Btr−Wrs*
Student learning *	11	54	31	*−43*	12	74	15	*−62*
Independent learning	27	40	33	*−13*	24	45	30	*−21*
Attendance	30	43	27	*−13*	23	38	39	*−15*
Student interaction/community	1	96	3	*−95*	5	89	5	*−84*
Access	Staff (*N* = 115)				Advanced students (*N* = 272)			
	Better	Worse	Similar	*Btr−Wrs*	Better	Worse	Similar	*Btr−Wrs*
Access to technology	17	46	36	*−29*	8	45	47	*−37*
Access to study spaces	1	91	6	*−90*	2	89	9	*−87*
Access to primary sources	14	65	21	*−51*	8	69	23	*−61*
Access to secondary sources	16	69	15	*−53*	12	60	28	*−48*
Equal learning opportunities	8	68	23	*−60*	4	51	45	*−47*

Notes: All numbers are percentages; net percentage, given in italics, is calculated by subtracting percentage answering 'worse' from percentage answering 'better'. * A lower number of respondents were asked about student learning because student learning was omitted from the national version issued to staff and students beyond their first year of study.

Lectures saw the most dramatic change in format. Before March 2020, over 94 per cent of staff and advanced students had attended lectures in person; after March 2020, under 1 per cent did so, and 89 per cent switched to online-only provision. Although staff noted that the recording of lectures had improved their accessibility and, for some, had reduced their anxiety, for students this was by far the most positively received element of online teaching. They liked the fact that pre-recording meant that lectures were available ahead of time, could be (re)watched at their own pace and were accessible for those with disabilities. This allowed students to reflect on their content, and it meant that they were helpful for assessment. Students who preferred pre-recorded lectures testified that class time was freed up for engaging with peers and tutors: 'Not having to waste time at lectures, instead just doing prerequisite readings and then discussing them in class seemed a much better use of my time and I felt I learnt far more this way.' Whether replacing live lectures or preserving them for future use, recorded lectures were the sole form of digital learning introduced during the Covid pandemic which became a permanent fixture in those universities which had not hitherto provided them on a routine basis.

Seminars accounted for the largest amount of hybrid teaching during the pandemic. A hybrid combination of in-person and online teaching represented the typical experience of 15 per cent of staff and advanced students in seminars. However, hybrid forms of group work reportedly declined,

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and written comments dwelt on the issue of whether students had their cameras (and, less often, their microphones) on or off in class. Staff consistently reported that not being able to see their students was personally demoralising, inhibited efforts to build a sense of community and, especially due to the lack of visual cues, meant that it was much more difficult to check whether students were actually engaged. There was a strong sense among staff who raised this as an issue that students should have their cameras turned on, and there was infrequent reflection on the reasons why students might choose not to do so. A small number of students discussed the 'camera-off' issue, and respondents were split evenly between those who emphasised its negative effects and those who focused on reasons why students might not have wanted to be seen.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on assessment was immense. Before the pandemic, closed-book exams were typically experienced by 57 per cent of staff and advanced students, compared with the 5 per cent who experienced open-book exams. Almost no one had closed-book exams during the pandemic. Instead, open-book exams were set or taken by 54 per cent, and the proportion dispensing entirely with exams increased from 24 per cent to 37 per cent. In line with quantitative data, qualitative responses suggest that changes to assessments during the pandemic were viewed a lot more positively by students than they were by staff. Students from institutions which traditionally make more use of closed-book exams (generally Russell Group and pre-1992 institutions) were overwhelmingly positive about their cessation during the pandemic. Across the board, students repeatedly stated that exams were unfair, and references to them being little more than a 'memory test' were so frequent as to be almost ubiquitous. Open-book tests (and/or, ideally, coursework) were considered a fairer test of knowledge and skills in history that led to better quality work.

Many academic respondents were also very positive about the diversification of assessment during the pandemic on the grounds that exams only 'do well at assessing people who do well on exams'. Other staff made a sustained critique of open-book exams on the grounds that they lacked rigour and led to increased plagiarism, consequently arguing for the return of closed-book, timed examinations in future. As one academic reasoned,

> Of course, students hate exams. They are not making an informed argument, just one out of personal preference. Supervised exams are the *only* effective way to assess students' overall absorption of module material across the breadth of the module. They are also the only method by which one can reliably prevent cheating.

The dire verdict given by staff and advanced students on almost all changes to teaching and learning induced by the pandemic contrasts markedly with the evaluation by first-year undergraduates (Table 2). Since they were unable to compare their experience of higher education before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were instead asked to rate the same aspects of learning on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *very good* to *very poor*. The results are not fully comparable with those of staff and advanced students; nor do they appear to be describing the same event. Whereas staff and advanced students gave negative net scores for all but one of the 13 categories, first-year students did the exact opposite by giving positive net scores in all but one category. Their principal complaint concerned student interaction and sense of community, and they were fairly evenly divided on whether access to study spaces and interaction with teachers was good or poor. Over three times as many first years judged student learning during the pandemic to be good than poor, while six times as many thought likewise about teaching methods. Outright majorities evaluated attendance, independent learning, equal learning opportunities, assessment, feedback, access to technology and secondary sources as being *good* or *very good*, and a plurality was positive about access to primary sources.

First-year students' relatively upbeat answers can be explained in part because they were comparing their educational experience at university favourably with their experiences at school, over and above any comparisons between the opportunities for learning before and after the onset of the pandemic. School also served as a major point of reference for first-year students disappointed with their university education. One student bemoaned the fact that while schools had returned to in-person instruction, their course had not, and another said that they preferred the idea of in-person supervisions because 'it makes it feel more like at school whereby it is easier to discuss any affairs, and it makes it less forced through talking on Teams'.

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Table 2. Evaluations of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic by first-year students

Teaching	First-year undergraduates (*N* = 178)			
	Good	Poor	Fair	*Good–Poor*
Teaching methods	59	10	31	*49*
Teacher–student interaction	36	*29*	35	*7*
Assessment	65	11	24	*54*
Feedback	59	15	27	*44*
Learning	First-year undergraduates (*N* = 178)			
	Good	Poor	Fair	*Good–Poor*
Student learning	49	14	37	*35*
Independent learning	55	11	34	*44*
Attendance	65	18	18	*47*
Student interaction/community	6	72	22	*−66*
Access	First-year undergraduates (*N* = 178)			
	Good	Poor	Fair	*Good–Poor*
Access to technology	59	18	23	*41*
Access to study spaces	35	32	34	*3*
Access to primary sources	49	20	32	*29*
Access to secondary sources	65	11	24	*54*
Equal learning opportunities	52	23	25	*29*

Note: All numbers are percentages; net percentage, given in italics, is calculated by subtracting percentage answering *poor* from percentage answering *good*.

First-year students were more likely than advanced students to prefer studying at home, but they displayed no greater overall preference for online-only or hybrid teaching sessions. It should also be noted that satisfaction rates were lower in all 13 categories among first-year students who had experienced online-only teaching. The average net score for first years taught solely online was just +4 per cent, in contrast to the net score of +38 per cent awarded by first years experiencing a mix of remote and face-to-face methods.

Post-pandemic preferences

Given the overwhelmingly negative verdict of staff and advanced students, one might expect there to be correspondingly strong support to return to the status quo ante pandemic. In fact, the percentage of staff and advanced students who expressed a preference for the same practices after the pandemic as they had personally experienced beforehand varied widely from question to question.

Of those who expressed an opinion (that is, excluding *don't-knows* and non-responses), about four-fifths wanted to continue with pre-pandemic practice for independent study (83 per cent) and seminars (80 per cent). There were also clear, if smaller, majorities in favour of reverting to pre-pandemic forms of feedback (70 per cent) and out-of-class group work (60 per cent). For lectures and supervisions, however, only half of the respondents wished to restore the methods they had experienced before the pandemic. The other half of respondents advocated replacing in-person lecturing and supervising with hybrid or (more rarely) with online-only delivery. Just 41 per cent supported a return to pre-Covid forms of assessment, a significant rejection of closed-book examinations. This assessment method had been widely used by two-thirds of respondents before the pandemic; then, as we saw above, it virtually

disappeared after March 2020. Only 27 per cent of those who had once been accustomed to closed-book exams favoured any return to the examination hall.

Preferences for future teaching methods were not greatly affected by the degree of online provision experienced during the pandemic. A very small proportion of the respondents who had experienced remote-only provision during the pandemic wanted such methods to carry on once the pandemic had abated. For seminars, the figure was 3 per cent; for out-of-class group work, 4 per cent; for supervisions, 16 per cent; and for lectures, 17 per cent. These figures are little different from the proportions who experienced other forms of teaching during the pandemic, indicating that remote-only provision made few converts among those who experienced it.

Table 3 aggregates results from all respondents (staff and students at all stages of study) about preferences for teaching methods after the pandemic. It shows that in-person provision was the most popular choice for every teaching format: lectures, supervisions, out-of-class group work and, especially, seminars. Students who experienced exclusively online teaching during the pandemic were scarcely more likely to advocate for online-only versions than those who had retained some face-to-face teaching. Differences nonetheless emerged over seminars, with those who had experienced some in-person teaching being less open to the possibility of hybrid seminar delivery. Staff and students displayed similar preferences for the format of lectures and seminars after the pandemic. Just under half of the staff (45 per cent) and students (49 per cent) advocated in-person-only lectures, and the great majority of respondents preferred in-person-only seminars.

Table 3. Post-pandemic preferences for teaching methods by all respondents

	In-person only	**Remote only**	**Hybrid**	**Blank/DK/NA**
Lectures	48	16	33	3
Seminars	80	3	14	3
Supervisions	39	12	29	21
Out-of-class group work	40	2	30	28
	None-coursework	**Closed book**	**Open book**	**Blank/DK/NA**
Exams	31	12	41	16
	Written/recorded	Face to face	Hybrid	Blank/DK/NA
Feedback	35	15	40	10
	Working environment	Home environment	Blank/DK/NA	
Independent study	52	28	20	

Note: All numbers are percentages; DK/NA = don't know/not applicable.

Although there was a high degree of congruence between staff and students in response to many questions, they did not see eye to eye over the future of supervisions, exams and feedback. For staff, online supervisions represented a rare example of a successful teaching innovation introduced during the pandemic. Two-thirds of them (twice the proportion of students) accordingly suggested either retaining them or introducing a hybrid model. The reverse applied to assessment. Here, twice as many students wished to keep the open-book exams which, from their perspective, were one of the few positive Covid-induced changes. Staff were more likely than students to favour coursework-only assessment or closed-book exams. First-year students were more likely than advanced students to prefer open-book exams.

Staff were also less keen than students on replacing or supplementing written or recorded feedback with face-to-face debriefs. In this case, students' enthusiasm for face-to-face feedback does not seem to have stemmed from their experiences during the pandemic, when, as we have seen, the use of such methods actually declined. Furthermore, the strongest proponents of face-to-face feedback were first-year students who had no experience of pre-pandemic feedback methods.

Marked differences also emerged across university type. History staff and students (especially first years) at Russell Group institutions perceived the pandemic as having a more deleterious effect

on teaching and learning than was the case in post-1992 universities, with pre-1992 universities falling somewhere between the two.

Analysis of staff and student evaluations of teaching under the Covid-19 pandemic reveals few clear-cut differences relating to disability. Among staff and advanced students, respondents with and without disabilities awarded similar average net scores for the 13 aspects of learning and teaching. Respondents with disabilities were, overall, keener than respondents without disabilities on implementing hybrid teaching methods after Covid for lectures, seminars and out-of-class group work.

The small number of non-White respondents cautions against drawing conclusions about ethnic variations in the survey data. After all, a single non-White respondent constituted 3.3 per cent of the entire non-White sample, so any apparent differences (such as non-White respondents' greater partiality for open-book exams) are based on a handful of answers. Much the same proportion of White and non-White respondents preferred in-person lectures, seminars, supervisions and out-of-class group work. This limited evidence suggests that ethnicity was not a major determinant of preferences for post-Covid-19 pandemic teaching methods, although further study would be necessary to reach reliable conclusions on this matter.

The data on gender are more extensive, and therefore more revealing. Male and female students expressed similar preferences in relation to most aspects of teaching after the pandemic. Almost half (49 per cent) of female students were more likely to favour written feedback to be supplemented by face-to-face discussion, in comparison with 27 per cent of male students. Slightly more male students preferred exclusively in-person lectures and to study from home, while the 11 non-binary students participating in the survey were less keen than other students on all forms of in-person teaching.

Much more pronounced were the gender differences among staff. Male academics evaluated 12 of the 13 dimensions of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic more negatively than female academics. For example, two-thirds of male academics thought that student learning had worsened during the pandemic, and none thought that it had improved. In comparison, two-fifths of female academics identified a decline in student learning, while a fifth detected an improvement. For every man who thought that teaching methods had improved, there were another seven men who thought that they had deteriorated. Women were more divided on the matter, with 29 per cent seeing an improvement and 47 per cent seeing a decline. Female staff were also strikingly more sanguine about the effect of the pandemic on independent learning, teacher–student interaction, assessment and feedback, and access to primary and secondary sources.

The differing perspectives of male and female staff on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic translated into different preferences for post-pandemic teaching methods. Male academics were more likely to advocate the revival of orthodox teaching methods: in-person only lectures, seminars, supervisions and out-of-class group work, closed-book exams and (especially) written or recorded feedback, which was the preference of 77 per cent of male staff, but just 17 per cent of female staff. Female historians were more attracted to using a mixture of in-person and online methods. The male staff were older (38 per cent being in their 50s and 60s, versus 12 per cent of women), but most gender differences persisted when further analysis was undertaken comparing male and female staff of similar ages. Only in certain matters, such as younger staff's greater enthusiasm for online-only lectures and coursework-only assessment, did staff divide less on gender than on generational lines.

Conclusions

The post-pandemic period offers a unique opportunity to take stock and reflect on teaching. The Covid-19 pandemic concentrated minds and focused efforts on teaching methods to an extent inconceivable in normal circumstances, when it vies for attention with research and other responsibilities. Establishing what did and did not work during the pandemic for different groups and different disciplines within higher education is essential for successful teaching in the future, as was recognised by one of the staff respondents to the survey: 'We shouldn't rush back to how things were pre-pandemic. This has been a sharp learning curve, but an important one to bring our practice into the 21st century.'

The experience of Covid-19 has demonstrated that it is possible to deliver almost all teaching online, but this study indicates that, in most cases, online provision is perceived to be second best for history students and staff. Teaching of the kind provided during the pandemic has been demonstrated to be an inadequate model for future practice. That lecturers did not alight on radically superior teaching

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methods in their improvised responses to a global emergency would not be surprising, were it not for the remarkably utopian tone adopted by national higher education bodies at the time. A Jisc report entitled *Learning and Teaching Reimagined: A new dawn for higher education?* envisaged online provision during the pandemic as a rising sun which was 'illuminating new digital models of learning and teaching, while at the same time casting a shadow of darkness across some traditional, increasingly old-fashioned, ways of working' (David Maguire in Jisc, 2020a: 4). The Office for Students (OfS) offered an equally sunny appraisal in its *Gravity Assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future*, which likened the pedagogical impact of the pandemic to the 'gravity assist' employed by a NASA probe to propel it past Jupiter to Pluto, notwithstanding the makeshift improvisation of the former and the meticulous planning of the latter (Michael Barber in OfS, 2021: 3). The QAA (2020a: 6) likewise reported that 'providers and sector leaders' shared the belief that 'all future higher education programmes will incorporate a substantial component of digital learning'.

The optimism expressed by the QAA, Jisc and the OfS about online teaching during the pandemic appears in retrospect to have been sorely misjudged. The 'new dawn' was a false one; the 'gravity assist' returned to earth with a bump when overall satisfaction in all disciplines was scored at 75 per cent in the 2021 National Student Survey, in comparison to the 83–4 per cent figures achieved in the previous four years from 2017 to 2020. Official bodies accentuated the positive and eliminated the negative during the pandemic, attributing any difficulties as 'challenges' to be overcome, and as areas requiring 'further development' (Jisc, 2020a: 6–7; OfS, 2021). But this research shows that misgivings about online teaching cannot be dismissed as teething problems, technical issues, inertia and the 'preparedness' of teaching staff. They indicate widespread concerns among both teachers and learners, borne of real experiences, preferences and needs.

As this study indicates, the pandemic has thrown up more questions than answers. There is only one example in our data of an overwhelming consensus favouring a return to pre-pandemic norms in history: the preference for in-person seminars. In other respects, the pandemic has undermined existing practices without establishing widely accepted new ones in their place. Thus, the in-person-only lectures and supervisions which predominated before the Covid-19 pandemic are the preferred option by a plurality of respondents after the pandemic, but, in both cases, their numbers are matched by the combined total of respondents favouring hybrid and online-only methods. The lack of support for reinstating closed-book exams represents the sole example of a widely popular change introduced during the pandemic, but, as we have seen, this is not unproblematic (Jotischky, 2021). Among respondents, 46 per cent of students and 23 per cent of staff expressed a preference for 'take-home' assessments to continue beyond the pandemic because they were viewed as a fairer way of evaluating learning. Whatever types of assignments are used, the basic principle that assessment incentivises and measures intended learning outcomes must be maintained (Biggs, 1996). Even though a wholesale return to sit-down, pen-and-paper exams does not seem likely, serious questions remain about the rigour and integrity of off-campus replacements. In the Jisc (2020b: 12) survey, only 55 per cent of university leaders considered online assessment tools to be *good* or *excellent*, and 51 per cent thought likewise about plagiarism detection tools.

Universities should also consider the varying expectations of their staff and students. For example, Russell Group universities should not underestimate the pitfalls of a rapid shift to online teaching. The greater dissatisfaction among Russell Group students found in this survey helps to explain why not a single Russell Group university featured in the top quartile of history programmes for overall satisfaction in NSS 2021, and only two of them (Durham and Glasgow) appeared in the top half of the league table. Ten of the twenty lowest scores for overall student satisfaction were obtained by Russell Group history programmes. Since history programmes at Russell Group universities traditionally offer fewer contact hours and rely more on examinations for assessment, the Covid-19 pandemic therefore introduced greater disruption to their assessment regime.

Flaws in research methods conducted during the pandemic indicate how future research could be improved. First, researchers should be explicit about what they mean by 'blended', 'flexible' and 'hybrid' learning, which are in peril of becoming marketing terms rather than practical, never mind analytical, ones. In some ways, it is more useful to distinguish between synchronous and asynchronous learning and assessment than between in-person and online learning. Second, the views of teaching staff need to be given more consideration. Key organisations advocate on behalf of students or university managers. We know that students were highly critical of teaching during the pandemic in spring 2021 thanks to the National Student Survey and Student Academic Experience Survey, but we have no

comparable surveys of teaching staff opinions from this period. Third, findings need to be evaluated in a dispassionate fashion. This was not always the case during the pandemic, when the upbeat assessments of the regulatory bodies indicated a tension between their role of assuring educational quality and that of protecting the international reputation of UK higher education. The wholesale introduction of online teaching during the pandemic neither proved nor disproved its long-term efficacy. Further experimentation and evaluation are required to produce an optimal balance between in-person and online teaching, in history and in other disciplines.

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Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Loughborough University ethics committee.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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