Impact of Covid-19 on Perceptions of Asynchronous Learning in Higher Education: Students' Perspective

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Abstract

Education in the Caribbean has had a massive shift since March 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This novel virus has caused traditional teaching and learning to transition to online platforms to facilitate teaching and learning. This rapid change to e-learning while facilitating the continuity of both teaching and learning was not smooth sailing as it came with its many challenges, especially for students who have never experienced online learning before. This paper addresses the problems associated with remote learning from the Caribbean students' perspective who are pursuing a higher education and it seeks to recommend ways to make online learning experiences more student-centered and student-friendly. The experiences and views of the students were captured in the form of an online questionnaire of 300 participants. These findings showcased several trends in ages, countries, and challenges regarding the students' experience. The students' recommendations for improving the online learning experience suggested the need for more engaging, inclusive practices while addressing workload and mental health issues.

Keywords: remote teaching; higher education; pandemic; student perceptions; transition

1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is a kind of common virus that causes an infection in your nose, sinuses, or upper throat. (WebMD, 2021) It is transmitted from person-to-person through the respiratory droplets. This called for the need for urgent social distancing, quarantining, wearing of mask, proper hygiene practices and other preventative measures. As of December 2021, there are about 268,740,130 total cases worldwide of which 241,742,067 persons have recovered. Out of that number, the Caribbean had around 297,011 cases with 245,276 recoveries. (Worldometer, 2021) Listed in Fig. 1 is the breakdown of COVID-19 cases by Caribbean countries.

Country	Total Cases	Number of Deaths	Total Recoveries
Anguilla	1,469	4	1,383
Antigua & Barbuda	4,151	117	4,022
Bahamas	22,859	705	21,649
Barbados	26,565	246	24,064
Dominica	6,208	42	5,768
Grenada	5,910	200	5,647
Guyana	38,402	1,014	36,505
Jamaica	91,604	2,416	63,310
St. Kitts & Nevis	2,792	28	2,753
St. Lucia	13,067	283	12,682
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	5,645	76	5,096
Trinidad & Tobago	78,339	2,336	62,397

Source: Worldometer

This pandemic disease caused the biggest change in education to date, transitioning from traditional teaching and learning to modifying their pedagogy to facilitate teaching and learning on online platforms. PreCovid-19, university students were given the opportunity to earn their degrees fully online or on their campus. This opportunity was taken by most persons who were currently employed and still focusing on their education. The transition to Asynchronous learning specifically began around March 2020 for the Caribbean students. This abrupt adjustment to e-learning was not smooth sailing as many students indicated that it came with many problems including lack of internet connectivity, loss of social interaction, computer vision syndrome, shortage of educational materials – tablets, computers, and laptops along with the uncertainty and inexperience of operating online educational platforms such as Aeorion, E-Learning, Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Moodle, Discord, Trident Learning. In this paper, I will be addressing the problems associated with remote learning from the Caribbean students' perspective who are pursuing a higher education and it seeks to recommend ways to make online learning experiences more student-centered and student friendly. Their views were captured in a questionnaire completed by 300 Caribbean students in higher education. The Caribbean countries represented in this paper are Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, St. Lucia, The Bahamas, Antigua & Barbuda, Anguilla, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Dominica, St. Kitts & Nevis and St. Vincent & the Grenadines.

2. Methods

A survey was developed and distributed between the months of Feb 2021 – Sept 2021via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram to collect data needed for the research paper. This survey was completed by university students across the different islands in the Caribbean. The views and experiences of these students as it

relates to navigating the new waters of asynchronous learning were captured in this survey which comprises of 13 questions and over 300 university students participated.

2.1 Survey Questions

- What Caribbean Island are you from?
- Age Group
- Do you prefer Physical School or Online School?
- If you said you preferred physical school, explain your reasoning.
- If you said you preferred online school, explain your reasoning.
- On a scale of 1 - 10, how excited are you about attending online classes?
- How much effort are you putting into your classes right now?
- What would you say the transition from physical to online school felt like?
- How much are you learning during remote learning compared to regular school?
- What challenges are you facing during online learning?
- How would you rate your university's take on Online Learning?
- Which areas of your life has been affected mainly by online learning? Choose one
- If you could change one thing about online learning, what would it be?

3. Results

300 completed questionnaires were collected via social media platforms. These results showcased different trends in countries, ages, and challenges regarding the students' perspective with asynchronous learning. Of the 300 university students who participated, 50% were ages 20 and below while 42.3% were between the ages of 21-30, 16% ages 31- 40 and 2% over 40 (Fig.2).

Fig.2 Age Groups of University Students
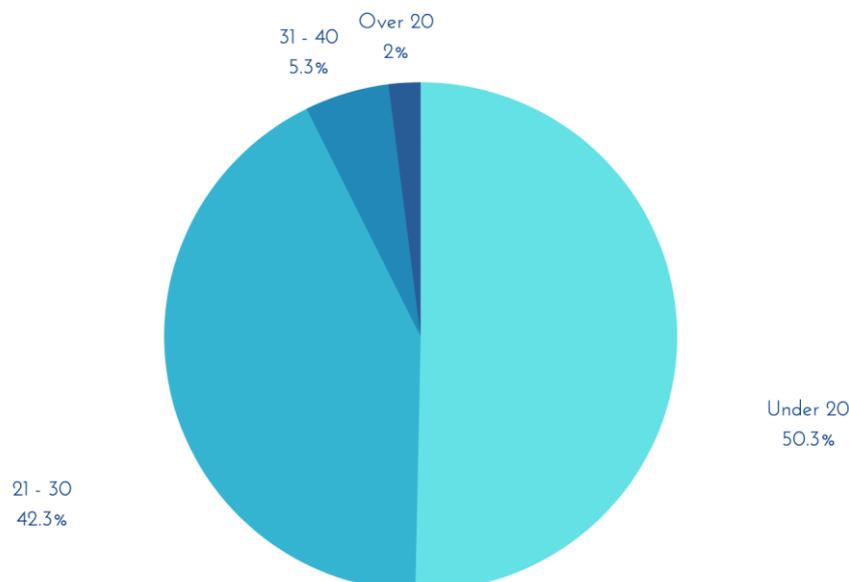
(Source: Author)

A bulk of 62% of students preferred physical school as opposed to online/asynchronous learning while 38% the minority, preferred online school (Table 1). On a scale of 1 – 10, 18.3% of students being the most said they ranked their excitement to attend class at 5. What piqued my interest was that 51.7% of students indicated that even though they are in a new environment, their learning capacities are still the same or somewhat better (Table 1). 50.3% of all students were affected mentally during the school with 39.7% being socially affected and 10% physical (Table 1).

Table 1
**Student response to a survey on Covid-19 and Asynchronous Learning**

Do You prefer Physical school or Online School?	Total n	Percentage %
Physical	186	62
Online	114	38
Which areas of your life has been affected mainly by online learning?		
Mentally	151	50.3
Socially	119	39.7
Physically	30	10
How much are you learning during remote learning compared to regular school?		
Learning much less	43	14.3
Learning somewhat less	102	34
Learning about the same	108	36
Learning more	32	10.7
Learning much more	15	5

(Source: Author)

Interestingly, 19.7% of all the students stated they are giving the best effort into their classes (Fig. 3). With each student ranging from different universities majority, 20.7% rated their university's take on asynchronous learning at 8 (Fig. 4). Some students faced many challenges during online learning such as, lack of Wi-Fi connection, lack of motivation and attention, lack of technological devices, time management, overwork, and burnouts. The transition from physical school to asynchronous learning as mentioned by most students was stated as very difficult, sudden, stressful, challenging and depressing. Most students who preferred physical school stated their reasoning based on "less distractions, better learning environment, more interaction with students and teachers, a hands-on experience of learning" while those who preferred online school said it was more flexible and cheaper. If online school could've had any more changes, students suggested the need of more interaction, engagement, hybrid classes, mental health awareness, less workload, better communication and more on hand experiences.
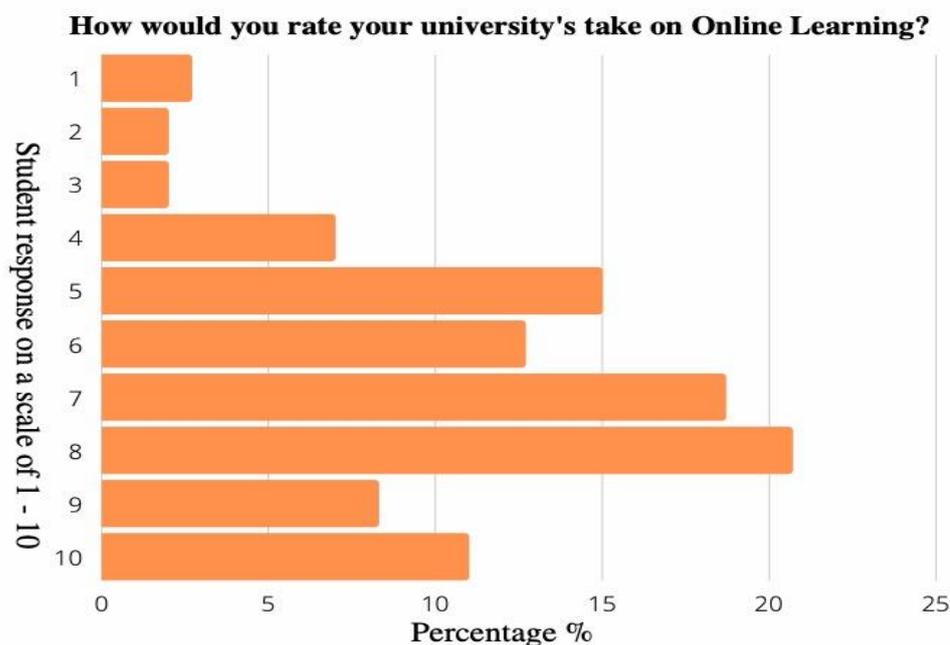
Fig.3 Students' Effort for Online classes on a scale of 1 – 10.

HOW MUCH EFFORT ARE YOU PUTTING INTO YOUR CLASSES RIGHT NOW?
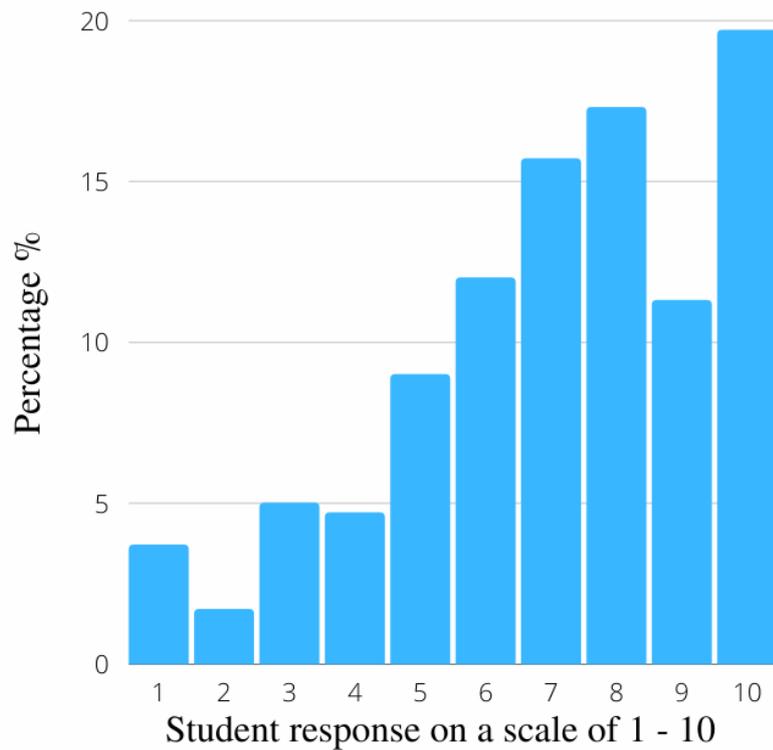
(Source: Author)

Fig.4 Age Groups of University Students

How would you rate your university's take on Online Learning?

(Source: Author)

4. Discussion

Going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic meant you experienced the curveball that came with it. The moment our universities transitioned to online learning, us the students and teachers were sent on a rollercoaster. Majority of the students expressed the transition felt like "A bus hitting you on an empty road; Strange, difficult, depressing and frustrating." While on the other hand, some explained the transition was very easy and normal. However, this change came with its benefits and disadvantages. For those who were Pro Physical Learning, it accounted for less distractions, better learning environments, more interaction with students & teachers and a hands-on learning experience. During Asynchronous Learning, these benefits that came with physical learning were suddenly gone. On a scale of 1 – 10, 53.6% of students expressed their excitement for classes 5 and below. For those who were Pro Online Learning expressed it was more beneficial to students who wanted to work & go to school; less anxiety and more control over assignments; more organized and customizable to the way a student learns; more convenient and flexible & cheaper – (travel, food, and clothes). Since school was

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online, money which would have been allocated to accommodation, plane tickets, clothing and food supplies is now being saved. The physical learning lacked the customization that asynchronous learning comes with, while asynchronous learning lacked the interaction and hands-on experience. Even with these benefits came the dreading aspect of it: Mental Health of the students. This period has been a difficult season for university students as we are suffering with coping in a new environment. Over 50.3% have been affected mentally over the past year. This new impact can lead to social isolation, increased stress & anxiety, and virtual learning fatigue/burnout. (High Focus Centers, 2020) Over 39.7% of students also expressed how Asynchronous learning affected their social life by not having the ability to interact with their friends more efficiently. Not only did online school came with baggage, but it also came with the inexperience of operating online platforms along with the lack of technological equipment. Alongside all these challenges, we the students remained resilient. Even in these new waters of Asynchronous Learning, their learning capacities are still the same and somewhat better.

4.1 Solutions

After listening to the students, they have come up with some solutions to this problem. Students have indicated the desire for more interactions with teachers. These interactions could be getting to know the students more, asking how they are doing and talking with them instead of too them. Interacting with other people has proven to be quite effective in assisting the learner to organize their thoughts, reflect on their understanding, and find gaps in their reasoning. (Okita S.Y, 2012) Secondly, a petition for more blended/fully online courses. Sitting and looking at a screen all day can cause eye strains, blurred vision, headaches, and back/neck pain. More blended courses would help to defeat that purpose. For those who don't know, "Blended courses are an approach to learning that combines face-to-face and online learning experiences." (Teachthought, 2018) Thirdly, for more seminars. These may focus on Mental Health, Productivity and even career showcases. Mental Health Seminars would be more beneficial as 48.5% of students stated in the survey that their mental health was severely affected. Fourthly, Students are requesting for a reduced workload & extension of deadlines. During this period, some teachers have taken it upon themselves to overwork their students and assigning lots of work to be completed in a short space of time, while other teachers think that it is only their class that we are taking, and this then puts a lot of pressure and stress on us students. Lastly, students would like more online socials/ games nights to ease the pressure that online school brings. There, students can have fun and enjoy themselves while interacting and creating bonds with their fellow students.

5. Conclusion

In Conclusion, COVID-19 has caused a major disruption and shift in the Education system. Will we ever get back to the way things were before? Only time will tell. The only way we can move forward beyond a pandemic response is by listening to the solutions brought by the students and working together to improve the online learning experience.

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