**[Lockdown in London – COVID reflections](https://nitro.edu.au/articles/2021/4/23/lockdown-in-london-covid-reflections)**

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*By Associate Professor Lucy Brown*

It’s been a year of momentous change. I started my job at London South Bank University (LSBU) during lockdown, meeting my team for the first time online in 2020, in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic.  My day was quickly filled with back-to-back online meetings, whether sat in my office on campus admiring the view of the Shard, or working from home in the north of the city.

VIEW FROM LSBU WINDOW

COVID has upended what we thought we knew about teaching creative practice in higher education. University staff are exhausted from working exceptionally hard to rapidly pivot to online teaching. Uncertainty continues but as we emerge from this extraordinary year, we are seizing the opportunity to reflect and ask ourselves how we should best deliver practice based courses in a meaningful way, ensuring mental health and well-being are supported whilst keeping everyone safe and protecting staff from burnout.

LSBU is a widening participation university and it is vital we focus on equity of experience in terms of access to technology and equipment and consider individual circumstances. The pandemic has exposed the barriers many students face, and it is important that we tackle inequalities, ensure equal access and create a sense of belonging to nurture students and support confidence in digital delivery.

My department consists of predominantly practice based courses, and COVID-19 raised particular challenges for learning-by-doing pedagogy which relies on studio facilities and high-end equipment. In the autumn term staff did a fantastic job to safeguard access to campus by transforming teaching spaces and rethinking delivery to meet both the needs of students who could travel to campus and those who were isolating.

We were faced by another lockdown in the UK in January 2021, resulting in all of our delivery moving entirely online. There are undoubtedly benefits to virtual learning including greater flexibility and convenience for staff and students, and access to high profile industry speakers who may not have had the time to physically travel to campus to deliver a masterclass or lecture. However, we need to be cognisant of the possible impact on students, particularly first years, beginning their university journey on how much knowledge is gained by osmosis and being surrounded by peers and tutors in a physical university setting.

Mental health issues are on the rise and impacting staff and students. We need to embrace a pedagogy of care but how do we reach out virtually to help students hiding behind turned-off cameras? Many students are feeling disconnected from their peers and miss coming to campus for face-to-face sessions. Hybrid teaching creates an opportunity to redesign our spaces and build caring physical and virtual environments where time and energy is given to educational and social spaces to connect, learn from each other and socialise.

We are still learning what works. We need to listen to student feedback and adapt our teaching and delivery. We know it is not enough to replicate how we teach face-to-face. Student feedback reveals there is a sense of online fatigue with some students reporting that they are struggling to concentrate and feel overloaded. We also need to support academics who can feel like they are teaching into a void. This requires rethinking engagement by having shorter, smaller online sessions, prioritising listening and encouraging inclusive interactivity, without frightening students away.

Now in the UK there is a sense of relief – Spring is in the air, the evenings are getting lighter and longer, and kids are back at school; a huge relief for who have been balancing home schooling with a full time job. I am immensely grateful for the support I have received from my colleagues. In this unprecedented year of radical uncertainty we have often felt at the mercy of government guidance and I have witnessed my colleagues’ dynamism, creativity and resilience. It’s been challenging but I am optimistic that we are well placed for whatever comes next.

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