### UNIVERSITY OF TARTU DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

### THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU AND THE UK UNDERGRADUATES' VIEWS ON ONLINE STUDYING DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

**BA** thesis

SILVIA VIHULA SUPERVISOR: ÜLLE TÜRK, MA

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor's thesis gives an overview of the University of Tartu Department of English studies BA students' attitudes towards their studies during the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak based on an online survey compares them to similar surveys carried out among the university students in the United Kingdom.

The thesis consists of the introduction, two chapters and the conclusion. the section dedicated for addressing the differences between Estonian and the UK university systems, literature review, an overview of the key findings from the HEPI polls conducted in the UK. The second section analyses the answers from the survey made for the students studying in the Department of English Studies in the University of Tartu and comparing the results from the UT survey and the poll conducted in UK, conclusion, and list of references.

The theoretical part consists of one section that is dedicated to give an overview of the differences there are in the school systems in Estonian and the UK universities and lists the advantages and disadvantages of studying in an online environment and lastly highlights the key findings from the HEPI polls.

The empirical part of this thesis consists of an analysis of the answers from the survey conducted for finding out University of Tartu Department of English Studies students' attitudes on the impact COVID-19 has had on their academic year and gives a comparison of the results from HEPI polls to UT survey and finding parallels and bringing out differences.

The thesis ends with a conclusion that brings together all the key findings each section was dedicated to. The list of references gives a thorough overview of all the sources used for the purpose of this thesis. This thesis includes 7 Appendixes.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Because of the way in which the Covid-19 outbreak reached Estonia and the UK in 2020 (World Health Organization 2020), higher education institutions were forced to quickly change their method of providing education. This meant abruptly moving their lectures and classes to an online environment where teachers could teach their subjects and students have an opportunity to study in the safety of their home environment (Montacute, Holt-White 2021). As there seem to be mixed feelings regarding the new learning environments, knowing students' opinions on them allows universities to improve their methods of delivering education in various online environments. Therefore, the aim of this study was to find out the University of Tartu (UT) the Department of English Studies (DES) BA students' attitudes towards online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak and find out which aspects were satisfactory and which aspects the students were least pleased with. To answer these questions, a questionnaire was compiled based on the surveys that had been carried out among the undergraduate students of the UK. Using similar questions enables us to draw comparisons between the undergraduate experiences in the two countries.

The university sectors in the UK and in Estonia have both similarities and differences. According to the Universities Act (1995) universities are free of tuition fees when the student studies in a full-time curriculum and the curriculum is in Estonian. This law of tuition being free for full-time students is the most underlying difference between the UK universities and Estonian universities and one of the main reasons that can determine the satisfaction levels of students. In fact, in 2010 the government of the United Kingdom passed the reform that set the fee to £9000 per annum (EuroEducation 2014). It is unclear whether the government will offer some compensation for the lack of face-to-face classes that the students have paid

for which there was a petition made by the UK Government and Parliament. Over 350 000 signatures were collected that supported the idea that all students should be reimbursed for their fees due to the cancelled field trips, disrupted student-staff communication and an overall decline of help. It is argued that this year "poor quality" of teaching and communication is not worth the fee of £9000 (UK Government and Parliament 2020).

The higher education institutions including universities in both Estonia and the UK are not owned by the government (British Council n.d, Riigiteataja 2012) which makes the universities independent legal entities that monitor and organize their management. Typically for universities, first degree courses (also known as bachelor's degrees) usually take three years to complete to be awarded "honours". Some schools have different degree classification systems, but several UK universities use the GPA (Grade Point Average) system, which the student must fulfil to graduate (EuroEducation 2014). However, Estonian universities use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) where the estimated workload ranges from 1,500-1800 hours in one academic year (Publications Office of the EU 2017).

Since universities in the UK and Estonia are responsible for their organizing their management in the question of dividing the proportions of online studying, independent work such as reading or writing, and the amount of contact lectures. Universities all over the UK and Estonia were advised to reduce face-to-face lessons (Department of Education 2021) yet as mentioned before, universities are independent entities, so the amount of contact hours and independent work is difficult to predict. However, in the case of Oxford University it has reported that most of the studying is likely to continue online even after the restrictions have been removed. Every department have the possibility to choose whether they can offer in-person teaching to students that are allowed to restart (University of Oxford 2021). A similar reaction to the COVID 19 pandemic can be seen in the University of Tartu where

face-to-face courses were brought down to a minimum and the focus was on virtual classrooms (Tartu Ülikool 2021)

Online courses have been available for quite some time now and are not a new concept in higher education institutions, but during the pandemic the most common tools of teaching were either virtual classrooms or changes in assignments (Dhawan 2020). Other aspects of interest are the students' grades and more importantly how were they affected by the sudden change of environment. Were students able to maintain their level of studying or did their results suffer? As there have not been any surveys or statistics made available to demonstrate the student's attitudes towards online classes in the DES in University of Tartu which makes this information valuable for further developments and improvements (if necessary) to make the experience for both parties more pleasant and studying during the pandemic efficient.

This study intends discuss the problems that have been previously brought out through literature review (communication, student life in online environments). This research paper also aims to find out the overall satisfaction of teaching and communication between universities and students in the DES of Tartu University and in the universities in the UK. The hypothesis formulated is the positive attitudes of students from different age groups in the same department. Another hypothesis is the expectations that many of the students were not pleased with the communication between lecturers, teachers, and university. The primary source for questions is the survey made available by HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) Poll conducted by Rachel Hewitt in June (2020) that showed the views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience among the undergraduates from the United Kingdom. However, in the process of writing this thesis a new questionnaire was published within the UK undergraduates (published in November 2020) inquiring their views on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their mental health. However, the more recent poll published in November did include some of the questions previously asked in the

June's HEPI Poll. For this research, the results of the 2020 June HEPI poll and (relevant results) 2020 November HEPI polls are compared to the results with the survey for UT DES students. The statistical analysis is supported by articles concerning this thesis' topic and literature reviews.

This thesis is divided into two chapters. Chapter One discusses the advantages and disadvantages of online studying and provides an overview of the key findings of the HEPI Polls conducted in June and November (Hewitt 2020). Chapter Two, the empirical part, focuses on the survey carried out among the Tartu University of Tartu BA students of English Language and Literature and compares the results to the UK polls results. The conclusion highlights the key findings from each section.

#### 1 STUDYING ONLINE AND STUDENT'S ATTITUDES TO IT

This section is dedicated for discussing the advantages and disadvantages of studying online and giving an overview of the results of the HEPI polls conducted in June and November of 2020 (Hewitt 2020). However, there are significant differences between the Higher Education organizations in Estonia and the United Kingdom and knowing this background information gives a better idea of what the differences in attitudes may be and conducting trustworthy analysis.

#### 1.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Studying Online

Online studying has been around for many years and the first experimental classes of distance education were available in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when technology was rapidly becoming more affordable and accessible (Sumner 2000). Thus, there has been extensive research into the advantages and disadvantages of online studying. The Covid 19 pandemic

in spring 2020, however, created an unprecedented situation where universities had to give up face-to-face classes and move all their teaching online without any preparation time. This made the topic of the advantages and disadvantages of online education particularly topical.

The main advantages of online education pointed out in literature include controlling one's pace for learning, controlling one's learning environment and the lessened risk of infection of the Coronavirus. Having the ability to control where to study and learn (Heap 2017) gives the students the possibility to change their studying environment to their liking and increase their focusing skills. Some people prefer studying in a distraction-free room, yet others may prefer something that can take their mind off for a while. Compared to face-to-face meetings in university classrooms it can be a positive change of atmosphere to get the necessary work done. Heap (2017) also argues that self-motivation is not necessarily a disadvantage and can also be approached as a way of improving oneself. There is no one pushing the students which means that the online courses also teach people to plan their time and work out ways to become more self-motivated.

Some statistics (Lalani et al, 2020) show students obtaining 25-60% more information when studying online compared to face-to-face classroom meetings. Lalani adds that this rise of information learning may be caused by the fact that students can learn at their own pace by rereading some parts of texts or paying more attention to concepts they feel need improvement. The article further states that students use their senses to learn which means that higher engagement through different online ways of teaching increases students' engagement and increases their self-motivation. Dowson Tong (2020) says that teaching through online channels also give the teachers and lecturers a chance to promote inclusion and personalization by incorporating a range of various collaboration ways and engagement methods like personalized blog posts, podcasts, group projects etc.

Another advantage of online studying is the fact that by staying home and not attending face-to-face classes people bring down the risk of coming to contact with all kinds of viruses not just the current COVID virus (America Safety Council, n.d). This allows people to protect themselves and their family from illnesses and other risks that may be hindering their overall health.

The Covid 19 pandemic has revealed some disadvantages of online education, namely the lack of personal attention, workload distribution, disappointing university experience, lack of reliable equipment to attend or give classes. One of the biggest disadvantages of moving courses to an online environment is the fact that many teachers had to rethink their whole plan and because of the increased workload, teachers may find it hard to balance their work-life with personal life creating a struggle to find the right and efficient ways of delivering content (Hou. 2020). Michelle Miller (2020) highlights the fact that while studying online students can control their pace of learning, but the "power of learning" does not only come from the information-dense content the lecturers provide but also the active engagement of students with one another or the teacher themselves. Also, proper support for teachers must be provided by education institutions to give teachers the suitable tools and encouragement to successfully teach online and make the teaching as straightforward as possible. The fact that communication is a keyword in teaching brings forward another disadvantage (Dhawan 2020) as students lack the personal attention that one can ask in conventional classrooms.

One of the reasons why people find enjoyment in their university years is the communication between peers and other university staff. This, however, has changed in the virtual classrooms, since people are not seeing each other face-to-face it is harder to find connections between students and lecturers (Hou 2020). As John Weidman (2006) says higher education institutions have a big influence on the development of personal identity.

Through communicating with peers' students shape their values, beliefs, and attitudes but the current decreased rate of socialization between students and teachers may hinder the development of one's identity. This, however, can be argued by the fact that studying in a higher education institute may only be one variable that contributes to the shaping of beliefs and values. Kaufman (2006) states that due to the complexity of socialization processes it is hard to say if only the lack of interactions between students can have a detrimental effect on one's characteristic development. Students may feel that without socializing they miss out on a big part of the university experience.

Even though technology has been available for a relatively long time many do not have access to proper equipment and a steady internet to participate in online classes. In some cases, students who do not have reliable internet or suitable devices are the most vulnerable to the shift to virtual education (Greenhow 2020). The lack of help from people around them may lead to negative changes in grades and understanding. Since teachers also often require students to be present in their classes then people with insufficient internet access may find meeting this requirement challenging (Hou 2020).

### 1.2 The UK Students' Views on the Impact of Coronavirus on their Higher Education Experience

In order to determine how the pandemic has affected students' higher education experience in the UK, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) conducted two surveys, one in June and one in November 2020 (Hewitt). The HEPI polls included over 1,000 full-time students studying at the United Kingdom's universities in undergraduate programs. The poll conducted in June of 2020 was open between 12 and 16 June 2020 and the more recent poll was undertaken from 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> November 2020. The survey conducted in June of 2020 mostly focused on the students' satisfaction levels on the online education their university

has provided but the more recent poll conducted in November 2020 had a different approach and focused more on finding out the satisfaction level of lessons that replaced face-to-face lessons, providing of mental health support and whether universities have implemented enough safety measures to guarantee a safe learning environment to students. The survey conducted in November also asked students if they have face-to-face lessons, accommodation, and mental health. Even though the focus of these polls were different there were a few questions that were asked in both surveys. Those questions were in the regards of satisfaction of online learning their higher education institution put in place to replace face-to-face learning, opinions on the delivery of support services and opinions on the area of provisions for the next academic year and if they are applied.

In the area of communication from the poll conducted in June the feedback was mostly positive as well over half the respondents reported the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year has been either very or quite clear. As there was a lot of uncertainty surrounding the organization of studies during the upcoming academic year and nearly half the respondents answered that the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on their next academic year from their higher education institution has been either quite or very unclear. These mixed responses demonstrate the uncertainty caused by the outbreak and, as Mitchell (2020) pointed out in his article on the lessons of Coronavirus, the area being tested the most is communication.

In the poll conducted in June 2020 in the area of overall satisfaction, the results show that the students are rather satisfied with the handling of remaining assessments, the learning put to place to replace face-to-face learning and the delivery of various support services as most of the students claimed they were either quite or very satisfied for all of these aspects. However, the statistics from the more recent HEPI poll (Hewitt 2020b) conducted in November show that more than half of the undergraduate respondents are either very or quite

satisfied with the teaching and learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching. This might be the indication that the teaching has improved over time or that the students have got used to online studies or both. However, Wong (2020) brings focus to the fact that even in the times of great uncertainty universities should take responsibility when choosing what assignments and results are going to define the students' future.

Even though students felt satisfied with the delivery of support services (as can be seen in the HEPI poll results conducted in June) including mental health support, the results from the more recent HEPI poll (November) demonstrates that nearly half the respondents consider their mental health having deteriorated during the Coronavirus pandemic. Communication plays a big role in spreading mental health awareness and (Zheng, et al 2020) which is why the question of fast delivery of information is topical. Universities needed to figure out a way to inform their students through different media channels. One of the most used communication environments was Twitter (a social networking company) where 94% of UK universities informed their students and staff of the upcoming changes through "tweets" (LSBU 2021). According to Omnicore Agency Statistics (2020), 15.25 million UK citizens use twitter, which makes it the one of the fastest ways to share information with a large group of people. This may be one of the aspects that contributed to the attitude towards messaging around their ongoing academic year and increasing awareness around mental health.

In the HEPI poll's section of provisions for the next academic year, the statistics show that a large proposition of students in June 2020 (Hewitt 2020) reported that they expect increased hygiene measures to be put in place. Many answers also show that the students expect that some learning online will continue next year and that there will be some social distancing measures across campuses. Just over half the students expect limited interaction with other students and assume there will be limited access to some campus facilities. When

asked about the limitation to courses then based on the answers students did not have any strong assumptions about their next academic year. The more recent HEPI poll (conducted in November 2020) also demonstrates that the universities have met students' expectations as all provisions for the next academic year have been put in place. However, Hewitt (2020) does highlight the fact that the more recent poll was conducted during the national lockdown in November and may not represent the measures throughout the whole academic year.

Based on the results seen in the two surveys, students have different and changing views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience. Since the situation has abrupted the standard way of studying at universities, it is understandable that students are not quite satisfied and hope to see more changes to be made in terms of online classes and delivery of support services. On the positive side, the results also show that despite the unexpectedness of the situation, the universities have reacted well to accommodate changes like messaging about the impact of coronavirus has on students' studies and what to expect next year. The last section shows that students have a realistic point of view for their next academic year and do not expect that everything will continue the same as it did before the outbreak. However, it is surprising to see that the students are generally satisfied with their university experience online as one could expect to have more lower satisfaction levels when the student fee for education in the UK universities can be considered rather high and the government does not plan to reimburse those sums to students (Sodha. 2021).

#### 2 ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE BA STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS ON THEIR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

This section discusses the views of students studying in the BA programme of English Language and Literature at the University of Tartu based on the survey that used the questions of the UK HEPI poll conducted in June 2020 and compares them to the views of the UK students as expressed in the HEPI poll.

The Tartu survey was conducted in March and April 2021 and was open to answers from 3rd March to 20<sup>th</sup> April. Google Forms was used to create the survey and to collect the responses. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) consisted of two background questions (on the respondents' gender (Q1) and year of studies (Q2)), five Likert scale questions (Q3-Q7) and two multiple choice questions (Q8-Q9). The Likert scale questions were accompanied by mandatory open-ended questions, which asked for the respondents' comments on and explanations for their answers. The questionnaire was in English and students were also asked to answer the questions in English.

To collect student responses, the link to the Google Forms questionnaire was sent to their university email addresses by the Academic Affairs Specialist at the Department of English Studies. The link was also shared through the Facebook group chats that each year has created.

#### 2.1 Participants

Out of the 123 students studying in the English Language and Literature BA programme at the time the survey was carried out, 35 (28%) filled in the questionnaire. The only background information the students were asked to provide was their gender and year of studies.

Whereas out of the 49 first year students 11 people (22%) responded, the response rate among the second-year students was 22% (out of the 29 students,8 responded) and among the third-year students 36% (out of the 45 students 16 responded) (see Figure 2).

28 (80%) of the respondents were female and 7 (20%) were male. Thus, the proportion of male respondents was somewhat smaller than it was among the English Language and Literature BA students in general (28%).

#### 2.2 Results

The survey responses are discussed in three groups: communication, satisfaction, and provisions for the next academic year.

#### 2.2.1 Area of Communication

When asked about the clarity of messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year, 77.2% of the students (27) answered that the messaging had been either very clear or quite clear. However, there were also five students (25.7%) who considered the messaging quite unclear or very unclear and three students (8.6%) who thought that the messaging was neither clear nor unclear (see Figure 1).

How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year been from your higher education institution?

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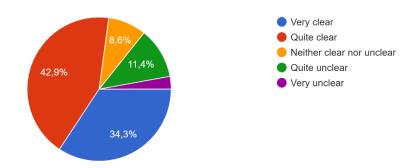


Figure 1. Responses to Question 1.

The students had to provide explanations for their answers. One of the reasons why the messaging was considered unclear was the information arriving too late or being "empty". Three students also pointed out that some lecturers have taken the situation very seriously, yet some think of it as a "hoax". Those students who thought the messaging was clear said that the information received by email was very detailed and made the impact of coronavirus on their studies very "transparent". It should be mentioned that it was the first-and third-year students who thought the messaging was unclear (see Appendix 2).

The participants were also asked about how clear the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on their next academic year has been. Here the responses were quite different as 51.4% of the students (18 students) thought that it has been either quite unclear or very unclear. There was also an increase in the number of the students who considered the messaging neither clear nor unclear (34.3% 12 students). Only 14.3% of the students (5 students) thought that the messaging had been very or quite clear. It should be pointed out that all the people who considered the messaging either clear or quite clear were third-year students who will soon graduate.

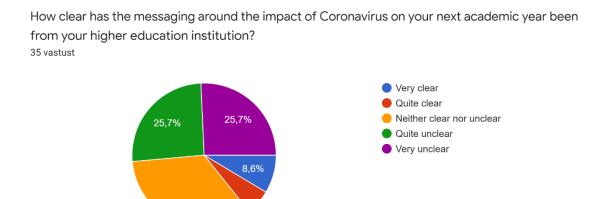


Figure 2. Responses to Question 2.

The main reason the students provided for considering the messaging unclear was the fact that many of them had not received any information regarding the next academic year. However, they did point out that they understand that the Coronavirus situation is difficult

for the university and that the university authorities do not know exactly what is going to happen either (See Appendix 3).

When asked about the way the University had handled their remaining assessments, 22 students (61.1%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with it. However, there were also 8 students (22.2%) who considered the handling of the assessments quite unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory and 6 students (16.7%) chose the option of neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.

How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution has handled your remaining assessments for this academic year?

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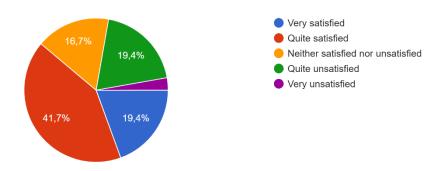


Figure 3. Responses to Question 3.

The students commented that even though they are overall satisfied with how their assignments have been handled, there had been an overload of written assignments such as essays, and they wish to hear more feedback from their lecturers. They did, however, mention the fact that they understand the situation and were expecting an increase in the number of written tasks but wish to see some increase in feedback. One first-year student also brought up the matter of university experience saying that they sometimes feel as if they are taking "random online classes and are not studying in a university". It is also worth mentioning that two of the students wrote that they like studying from home and are very pleased with the flexibility this situation has provided (see Appendix 4). All these examples

of the students' opinions demonstrate that the students indeed feel as if they are missing out on their university experience.

#### 2.2.2 Area of overall satisfaction

In the matter of online learning put to place to replace the traditional face-to-face learning, 62.9% (14 students) of the students were satisfied with the online environment the university has provided. However, 17.1% (6 students) of the respondents were quite unsatisfied and 20% (7 students) found it neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory.

How satisfied are you with the online learning your higher education institution has put in place to replace face-to-face learning?

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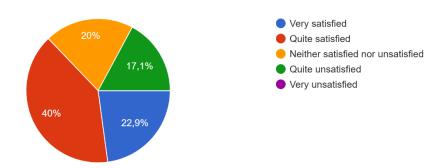


Figure 4. Responses to Question 4.

The students commented that online lectures can be a little "dehumanizing" and expressed the wish that the use of cameras were compulsory. One student also noted that one of the main inconveniences was the fact that different classes are held in different online environments (Zoom, BigBlueButton, MS Teams) and navigating between them can be confusing. Three students considered BigBlueButton the least satisfactory online platform as it causes technical difficulties the most. The students also mentioned that online learning makes it difficult to understand what is expected as some lecturers do not hold video meetings and rely on written instructions. On the positive, students expressed that studying

in an online classroom gives them a chance to talk to their course mates in an environment where communication has significantly decreased (see Appendix 5).

How satisfied are you with how your higher education institution is delivering support services(such as careers support, mental health support or other advice) during lockdown? <sup>35 vastust</sup>

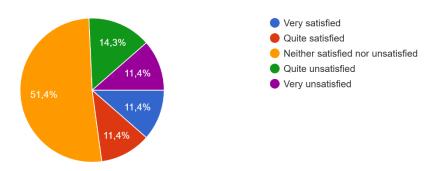


Figure 5. Responses to Question 5.

The question resulting in least clear views was the one about support services (Q7) as 51.4% of the students (18) were neither satisfied nor satisfied with how the University of Tartu delivered support services such as career support or mental health support during the lockdown. 22.8% (8 students) of the students were satisfied with the delivery of support services and 25.7% (9 students) were unsatisfied. The results give the impression that the students either have not much information about the services or simply do not use them.

The most common explanation provided was that they personally have not needed to use any of these services which is why they have not focused their attention on the support services provided by the university. There were, however, two students who mentioned that their mental health has suffered, and they wish to see more support and the promotion of mental health awareness by incorporating TED talks or seminars that inform students of the different support services the university can provide. One student also noted that there is a lack of information on this matter in the emails received. At the other end of the spectrum,

two students appreciated the efforts their lecturers had made to reduce stress and burnout due to increased workload (See Appendix 6).

#### 2.2.3 Provisions for the next academic year

As for the expectations for the next academic year, the students were asked to share what they expect in the areas of hygiene measures, whether they expect online studying to continue, social distancing measures, interaction with other students, access to on campus facilities, limitation to courses and lastly if they expect a delayed start to term. The results of the survey show the expectations about the next academic year, where 24 students said that they expect increased hygiene measures to take place. 19 students also expect some learning online like large lectures and 12 students expect there to be social distancing measures across campuses. As for limitations for interacting with other students, 8 students expect this change to be made and 12 respondents expect limited access to on-campus facilities. Only 6 students expect any limitations to course, and 4 students expect a delayed start to the term. Even though the situation is unpredictable only 8 of the students who answered expect all classes to continue online in their next academic year (See Appendix 7).

To sum up, the students were asked how the pandemic had affected their general academic performance and 51.4% (18) claim that the effect was negative. 20% (7) of students thought that the conditions benefitted their academic performance and 28.6% (10) of the respondents said that the conditions did not affect their overall academic performance.

Based on these results, it can be said that the areas where the students were satisfied the most were communication on the impact on this academic year, handling of the remaining assessments and online learning replacing face-to-face learning. The answers show that the situation is difficult, and adjustments are still in progress, but the students display a sense of understanding and sympathy for the institution and its staff. The survey

shows mixed views on the impact of Coronavirus on their university experience where messaging is satisfactory, but students wish for some additional information both from the University as an institution and from their lecturers such as additional info on the upcoming academic year, support services, or feedback on assignments.

The students also considered the online environment (Moodle) the University of Tartu uses to supplement as well as to replace face-to-face classes a good way of providing education, but they s do feel that there could be some changes that would make their overall university experience in term of communicating with other students a little better such as incorporating video cameras in lectures.

The students displayed realistic expectations regarding the next academic year as they did not expect their university experience to be the same as it had been before the lockdown. Instead, they expected some form of social distancing and increased hygiene measures which include the limitations in some on-campus facilities.

Contrary to the expectation that the students will express dissatisfaction with information the University as provided them about the changes in their studies, based on the results, the messaging has been mostly clear, and the students feel only uncertainty towards the next year. at the same time, the students mentioned in the survey that they understand the uncertainty of the situation and can see why they have not received any information about the upcoming events.

#### 2.3 Discussion

This section reflects on the results of the survey conducted in order to relate them to the results of two similar studies carried out in the UK. This comparison of results of the surveys conducted in different cultural and academic environments would possibly lead to suggestions as to what could be done differently to raise the satisfaction levels in areas where changes could be introduced.

The two surveys show that the undergraduates in UK and the students studying at the Tartu University English Department share a level of satisfaction as far as the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year goes. This shows that the students received information regarding the situation at hand and information that was connected to their studies in their current year of studies. However, the surveys also suggest that the rise of confusion regarding the next academic year arises as to the percentage of students who found messaging around the impact of coronavirus on their next academic year to be still unclear. This suggests that the students in the UK also display a sense of uncertainty like the students in the TU English Department who voiced their concern for the lack of information regarding future events.

These statistics also show that both, students in UK and TU English Department were satisfied with the way their higher education institution handled their remaining assessments for their academic year. The percentage of satisfaction for both groups of students was over 60% which suggests that students were able to complete their tasks and did not encounter any big problems that would make their experience especially negative. Based on the feedback from the students who were very dissatisfied this research assumes the feedback or thought process could be the same as those in the UK. Although the main difference in opinion could be determined by the fact that education is not free in the UK which made the dissatisfaction level does not depend on the rise in homework but instead the feeling of not getting their money's worth (Coughlan 2020).

Since the online learning environments such as ZOOM, or MS Teams are available in both countries it is not a surprise that students from both groups found the online alternative to traditional face-to-face studying satisfactory. The main difference, however, is that in the UK there were also students who were very unsatisfied with online learning their higher education institution has put in place but there were no students in TU English Department

who felt the same way. This again comes down to the fact that students in the UK pay for their education which may make them feel like they should get more contact hours in school which could make their online university experience more frustrating (Obordo, Bannock 2020).

A large percentage of students in both UK HEPI polls and TU English Department survey answered that they were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied with how their higher education institution is delivering support services such as mental health support or other advice during lockdown which could come down to the high frequency of students who said they did not feel the need to use such services and therefore not seek any information about it. It is worth noting that based on the results from the HEPI poll conducted in November 2020 an increasing number of students feel the stress and academical pressure take a toll on their mental health. From the surveys, more people were unsatisfied with the delivery of support services in TU that could be also explained by the answers provided from students who said that the awareness around mental health could be more promoted in universities. This may not be as big of a problem in UK higher education institutes as in 2016 UUK adopted a mental health programme policy to improve the mental health of students and staff across higher education (Universities UK 2016).

When it comes to provisions for the next academic year then students in both groups display a realistic point of view where the majority expect changes to be made like increased hygiene measures, some lectures continuing online (such as large lectures) and social distancing across campuses, limited access to campus facilities. However, a difference of expectations is visible when asked about the limitations of interactions with other students as TU English Department students do not expect many changes in that area meaning that the interreacting with other students will continue the same as it was previously. UK undergraduates and English Department students also have the same views when it comes

to the limitation to courses, delayed start to the term and learning online as most respondents in both groups do not think that these are the changes that their higher education institution will make to operate in the next academic year. An interesting aspect of the area of provisions for the next academic year for students studying in the UK universities reported that all expectations were met, and changes implemented to lower the risk of contagion.

However, it is also important to note that the results of these surveys cannot be compared as a matter of fact as the survey taken in UK was published for students in the year 2020 and since then the situation has changed in Estonia as the UK had much more stricter restrictions last spring (BBC News 2020). There is also the matter of availability of vaccines in Estonia (vaktsineeri.ee 2021) that were not yet developed in the UK last year, which may have influenced the expectations and attitudes towards this years' academic year.

#### CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed at establishing students' attitudes towards the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had had on their university experience in the University of Tartu Department of English Studies. The first section was dedicated for literature view in which the author discovered that the most underlying difference between Estonian and the UK universities is the fact that students need to pay a tuition fee for their higher education. The literature review also highlights that the advantages of online studying are the flexibility of choosing one's learning environment and having the opportunity to control the pace of learning. The second section was dedicated to analysing the survey which was compiled of questions regarding the areas of communication, overall satisfaction, and their expectations on provisions for their next academic years. The questions for this survey were taken from the 2020 HEPI poll conducted by Rachell Hewitt for undergraduate students studying in the United Kingdom, however students studying in the University of Tartu were asked to further elaborate on their choices to provide a more detailed overview on their opinions and give the university a detailed overview to improve their way of providing online education. In addition, the students were asked to share if their academic performance was affected by the distance learning. Later the results were compared to draw parallels between attitudes between two different cultures and see whether undergraduate students in the UK and undergraduate students in the UT are struggling in the same areas.

The questions were divided into three sections, area of communication, overall satisfaction, and provisions for the next year. Area of communication was dedicated for finding out if the messaging between the university and its students was clear which was first predicted by the author to be the area in which students would be the most unhappy with. For the authors surprise, however, students studying in both the UT and in the UK had

relatively positive attitudes towards the messaging the universities provided. The level of clarity around information was notably lower in terms of messaging around the next academic year which could be explained by the lack of establishment of personal connection and attention between the university staff and students (Hou 2020). The biggest difference between universities in Estonia and the UK id the fact that students in the UK are obligated to pay a tuition fee (EuroEducation 2014) yet this aspect did not affect the results as significantly the author anticipated as the results from the polls were relatively positive.

From the literature review on the advantages and disadvantages of online studying the key findings included that the major advantages of online studying are the flexibility of customizing ones studying environment (Heap 2017) and controlling one's pace of studying (Lalani et al, 2020). This was also mentioned by the students studying in the UT (See Figure 19) who said that they prefer to study in the comfort of their own home however they did mention that it was sometimes hard to concentrate and find motivation to keep their focus for a long period of time. This disadvantage also came up in the literature review where Miller (2020) points out that students may find information dense materials difficult to grasp.

This research demonstrates that the students' attitudes in both the UK and Estonia on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their university education were similar meaning that the universities and students seem to struggle in the same areas. However, the author hopes that the results of the survey conducted for the students studying in the Department of English Studies in the University of Tartu highlights the issues to further improve their ways of providing education through online channels.

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#### **Appendix 1: Google Forms Questionnaire**

#### Tartu University English literature undergraduate's opinion on online teaching during the pandemic

My name is Silvia Vihula and I am a 3, year student in English Language and Literature in Tartu University English Department. For my Bachelors thesis I am studying the satisfaction level of online teaching during the pandemic among undergraduates studying in Tartu university's English Department. My aim is to find out what aspect of online teaching the university has provided for its students were least and most satisfactory. This will help the university and teachers make necessary improvements to the existing form of providing education. For better understanding please provide a short explanation of your choice.

The survey should only take 10 minutes and your responses are completely anonymous. Later the results will be compared to the responses of UK students' views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience, a poll conducted by Rachel Hewitt, HEPI Director of Policy and Advocacy.

\* Kohustuslik

*
○ Female
O Male
*
Studying English Language and Literature in 1. year
Studying English Language and Literature in 2. year
Studying English Language and Literature in 3. year

How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year been from your higher education institution? *
O Very clear
O Quite clear
Neither clear nor unclear
O Quite unclear
O Very unclear
Comment your answer *
Teie vastus
How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on your next academic year been from your higher education institution? *
O Very clear
O Quite clear
Neither clear nor unclear
O Quite unclear
O Very unclear

How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution has handled your remaining assessments for this academic year? *
O Very satisfied
O Quite satisfied
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied
Quite unsatisfied
O Very unsatisfied
Comment your answer *
Teie vastus
How satisfied are you with the online learning your higher education institution has put in place to replace face-to-face learning? *
O Very satisfied
O Quite satisfied
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied
Quite unsatisfied
O Very unsatisfied
Comment vous angues *
Comment your answer *
Teie vastus

	How satisfied are you with how your higher education institution is delivering support services(such as careers support, mental health support or other advice) during lockdown?	*
(	○ Very satisfied	
(	Quite satisfied	
(	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	
(	Quite unsatisfied	
	○ Very unsatisfied	
•	Comment your answer *	
	Lühike vastuse tekst	

Thinking about the next academic year, what is your expectation of how your higher education institution will operate? $^\star$				
	Expected	Not expected	Unsure	Not applicable- I am in my final year / not continuing next year
Increased hygiene measures in place	0	0	0	0
Some learning online (such as large lectures)	0	0	0	0
Social distancing measures across campuses	0	0	0	0
Limited interaction with other students	0	0	0	0
Limited access to on campus facilities e.g. sports facilities, libraries etc.	0	0	0	0
Limitations to courses e.g. reduced module options	0	0	0	0
Delayed start to term	0	0	0	0
All learning online	0	0	0	0

How did the pandemic affect your academic performance? *
Conditions negatively affected my performance.
Conditions did not affect my performance.
Conditions benefitted my performance.
Thank you!
Saada ära

## Appendix 2: How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year been from your higher education institution?

Quite unclear	Information delivery was slow
Quite clear	All the necessary information was there but would have like a little more extra information
Very clear	Not sure if I understood it correctly, but I answered it as - how well were we informed about the changes to our day-to-day studying conditions, not about the impact of Coronavirus itself.
Quite unclear	There were many emails but they were all kind of empty. I would have liked it if they would have just said "Okey, we also don't know what is going to happen, lets take it a week at a time". Would have been more helpful than "We are all having a hard time. Lets just adjust"
Quite clear	It's been clear but at times a bit late.
Quite clear	the faculty has given their best to keep us informed, however sometimes things are not in their control
Very clear	Various news related to the spread of covid-19 were quickly forwarded.
Very clear	It is known well beforehand how long we have to be at home and what does it mean for us as students.
Quite clear	We have been
Quite clear	The institution has been quite clear in notifying students about the decisions and measures that the school has taken.
Quite clear	The messages tend to come later than sooner, but I understand that it is difficult to know the situation beforehand. I just have anxiety and it is difficult to be unsure whether there is school next month or not. However, before the beginning of each month, the message of distance learning has been made clear so it is fine.
Quite clear	The institution has been quite clear in notifying students about the decisions and measures that the school has taken.

Quite clear	We have been provided with a plan and instructions for this academic year, although the situation has been changing rapidly and it has been a bit difficult to make plans. However, the university has done its best at providing us with all the current information and informed us of everything in advance.
Very clear	our department has been sending emails regarding the new regulations
Very clear	I have had no troubles understanding the situation.
Quite clear	The institution has been mostly transparent with plans and happenings
Quite clear	We get informational emails quite often
Very clear	I feel that I have received all the important information I need to know about the current situation. I am positively surprised about how accommodating and understanding all the professors have been during this difficult period.
Quite clear	It has been quite ok, but there could be some improvements
Neither clear nor unclear	I wanna point out that not everyone identifies as "male" or "female" if you really felt like that affects something you should have at least used sex assigned at birth.
Neither clear nor unclear	Different lecturers have had different stances one it. Some have taken the situation very seriously while others think it's all a hoax.
Quite clear	Information was clearly delivered
Quite clear	Everything is clear
Quite unclear	i am quite confused and uncertain of some things
Very clear	We have received information about the situation, and instructions how to operate.
Very clear	All of the information regarding distance learning has been sent to our email.
Quite unclear	unclear
Quite clear	All the necessary information is accessible for me.
Neither clear nor unclear	At times I have been anxious because I feel like I don't know what will happen. Fortunately now I know that until the end of this semester everything will be online and I don't have to worry if I can get to Tartu in time and so on
Very clear	all good
Quite clear	Everyone knows this has not been a positive change to learning outcomes or academic life
Very clear	Weekly newsletters detail different types of info well.
Very clear	The emails about the situation have been regular and very thorough.
Very clear	It has been clear

# Appendix 3: How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on your next academic year been from your higher education institution?

Neither clear nor unclear	I am graduating this year
Neither clear nor unclear	Still unclear what exatly will I be doing next year

Neither clear nor unclear	It is clear that they wish to have contact lessons if possible, the decisions are made monthly based on the current situation not about the whole academic year at once.
Very unclear	I have no idea what will happen in MA level.
Neither clear nor unclear	I have no idea what is happening next year but then again, I'm graduating, so, they might not be communicating that information to me.
Neither clear nor unclear	-
Very clear	In our department the decisions related to distance learning were made quickly and also quickly forwarded to lecturers and students.
Very unclear	Nothing has been said about next year but also we cannot know anything beforehand anyway as the situation is always changing.
Very unclear	We have not received any information about the next year I believe
Very clear	I will be a graduate
Neither clear nor unclear	This is my last year.
Very clear	I will be a graduate
Quite unclear	I do not have information about how the next academic year will be like.
Very unclear	nobody knows when the pandemic is going to end, so yea
Quite unclear	I don't think anyone knows what will happen next year.
Neither clear nor unclear	I'm graduating this year so no info on next year
Quite unclear	No one knows what is going to happen, thus there is no information
Quite unclear	We have not received any information about the next academic year, however I completely understand. It is quite difficult to predict anything during these times.
Very unclear	So far I haven't heard anything about next year
Quite clear	-
Very unclear	I don't think I've received any information about it.
Quite unclear	I am unsure of what happens next
Neither clear nor unclear	nobody knows what is going to happen
Quite unclear	I still have no clue what is going to happen next year
Very unclear	Havent received any information about that
Neither clear nor unclear	We have not gotten any information regarding next year, or at least I do not recall any.
Quite clear	clear
Neither clear nor unclear	Its an "one day at a time" situation, future is a blank entity.
Very unclear	As of right now I have absolutely no info and the future seems very uncertain as it seems pointless to pay for an apartment in Tartu if I live in Tallinn for most of the school year.
Neither clear nor unclear	a bit unclear but nobody knows what to expect
Very unclear	Zero information
Quite unclear	I don't think this has been commented on anywhere much at all.

Quite unclear	I think they don't know what the impact would be themselves.
Neither clear	
nor unclear	I do not think I have received any information about next year.

# Appendix 4: How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution has handled your remaining assessments for this academic year?

Quite satisfied, Quite unsatisfied	The amount of feedback is dissatisfactory
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Some are good, some not so good
Quite satisfied	Most of the teachers have taken into account the possibility of no contact studying until the end of the semester and made their assessment plan accordingly.
Very satisfied	Everything was excellent. The essays were easy and interesting to write. The exams were handled 10/10 as well.
Very satisfied	I have knowledge on how the rest of the semester will go.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	On one hand, it is easier to pass classes, on the other the bar seems to be lower and thus the quality as well
Quite satisfied	There was an overload of writing assignements but it is understandable.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I have not received information how the assessment are going to be organised but I was quite satisfied last year, so I think it will be the same. I would be more satisfied if I knew the information earlier.
Quite satisfied	Everything has been understandable, all the necessary information has been provided
Quite satisfied	I think the assessments has been handled well, there are no problems.
Very satisfied	There is certainty and I like to know how things will be conducted.
Quite satisfied	I think the assessments has been handled well, there are no problems.
Quite satisfied	In some disciplines, the assessment has remained the same. In others, vital corrections have been made if presence in class is not possible. I am satisfied with these solutions as they are quite flexible.
Very satisfied	nothing really changed, the assessment is the same, all is good
Very satisfied	I'm happy with working from home.
Quite satisfied	Maybe slightly too much focus on homework but otherwise fine
Quite satisfied	I think everyone are doing their best
Quite satisfied	Taking into account that we cannot attend lectures, I think that the professors have dealt with this relatively well. Technical issues happen very rarely and usually everyone is very understanding if there are such issues.
Quite unsatisfied	I feel like we're doing triple the amount of work right now
Very unsatisfied	I feel like they don't really understand that this is new and hectic for us.
Quite unsatisfied	One of the most frusturating things is that attendance is graded in almost every subject, which doesn't make sense to me especially considering the tumultuous times we have to navigate and possible health issues as well.
Quite unsatisfied	I do not get any feedback from my tasks

Quite satisfied	I like the amount of work but feedback from teachers could be better
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	could be better but also could be worse
Quite unsatisfied	Specifically this semester, i feel like we are overloaded with assignments and despite being at home, i have literally no free time to relax and I'm always busy with school.
Very satisfied	Considering the situation, I think everyone has done their best, in order to finish this semester positively.
Quite unsatisfied	too much homework from everyone
Quite satisfied	A lot of work is indeed possible to do virtually from the comfort of my own home.
Quite satisfied	I feel like most teachers understand the difficulties and take into account the situation.
Very satisfied	satisfied
Quite unsatisfied	Quality of education has suffered a lot, quality of an academic experience almost abolished, this feels like taking a random online course, not university. But I manage and my performance is fine, some others don't seem to manage it quite as smoothly.
Quite satisfied	I think they have done pretty much the only thing they could have in that regard.
Quite satisfied	I am satisfied with how the institution has handled my remaining assessments.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	It depends on the class. Some have clear instructions, some do not.

### Appendix 5: How satisfied are you with the online learning your higher education institution has put in place to replace face-to-face learning?

Quite satisfied	I am pleased with video classes
Quite unsatisfied	Very hard to concentrate and actually learn something
Quite satisfied	It is not an ideal situation and maybe last year some teachers were not prepared for online classes, but right now I would not say I would learn more or better if I would be face-to-face with the teachers.
Very satisfied	The video meetings were nice. Noone forced us to have our cameras on (thank them for that please. As a person with anxiety and low self-esteem I did not have to worry once about showing my face).
Very satisfied	I have a mix of classes: some as seminars and some as independent work. The independent work is harder and more difficult to feel motivated to do but I'd prefer it over monotonous lectures.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Some professors handle the whole online learning thing a lot better than others.
Quite satisfied	Although the lecturers have found various ways to help students, for example language courses are now certainly less satisfactory result-wise as we can't have as much practise. Also because connection is often unstable, there is a lot of wasted time. Again, it is understable but unfortunate.
Very satisfied	I only take two course (Irish film and German) from my institution this semester, so there is not much to comment on. Both of these lessons have interesting and useful face-to-face meetings combined with independent work.
Very satisfied	I am pleased wih everything (I also like the concept of online learning more in general)
Quite satisfied	Most lectures are conducted online, which I like, however, there are subjects where you have to do all the learning on your own.

Very satisfied	As far as I'm concerned, everything has gone great.
Quite satisfied	Most lectures are conducted online, which I like, however, there are subjects where you have to do all the learning on your own.
Quite unsatisfied	Face-to-face learning is almost eliminated and this creates a feeling of alienation. Maybe it would be better if cameras were obligatory.
Very satisfied	again, nothing has changed. i see no difference between the regular lectures/seminars that took place in class and the lectures/seminars that r now taking place online
Quite satisfied	There is one class where the professor has piled on too much work, making it difficult to complete all my other tasks.
Quite satisfied	BBB is a janky platform but the overall execution of online learning is fine
Quite satisfied	We use different places for online seminars, but i would like to use only one place (MS Teams) which is the easiest. Right now we use three different places, which can be quite confusing.
Quite unsatisfied	I do understand that the university and all the professors are doing their best to still teach us online, however I still feel less motivated to do my assignments and attend lectures. At the moment, the main focus in our courses, at least, is doing group works: therefore we need to switch on our cameras and microphones quite often. It is a bit annoying at times and I wish I could just listen to the lecture without doing active participation. Still, I try to understand that doing so makes the lives of our professors easier and I do understand why this is necessary.
Neither satisfied nor	
unsatisfied	Somethings are good, some are quite bad
Quite unsatisfied	same answer as last
Quite satisfied	It's adequate. Zoom and Big Blue Button meetings work as well as they can.
Quite satisfied	I prefer online meetings but I do not like the breakup rooms
Very satisfied	no problems with online meetings
Quite satisfied	I prefer zoom to Big blue button but overall satisfactory
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Gets a bit repetitive, also independent workload is bigger
Quite satisfied	The online classes are fairly convenient. However, we sometimes face connection problems and I realize that this cannot be always fixed by the lecturer.
Quite satisfied	its okay
Quite satisfied	It is satisfactory. Everything goes for me.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I feel like teachers have had to adapt quickly so at times it is difficult to understand what is expected from students.
Very satisfied	satisfied
Quite unsatisfied	It is dehumanizing. That said, on the bright side, some tasks are easier to complete and I've taken advantage of that.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Online learning is less efficient by nature, so they make up for it by assigning tasks to be done at home, which I dislike. This does not apply to all courses.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I am not satisfied with the situation but there are no alternatives. The institution can't do much else.

Quite	
unsatisfied	I dislike online learning in general as it is difficult to motivate myself.

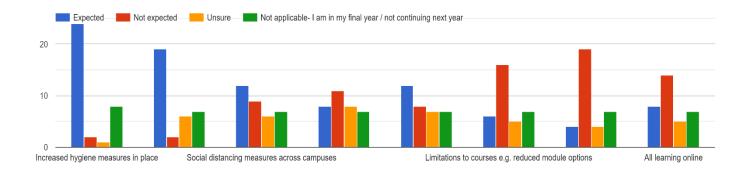
# Appendix 6: How satisfied are you with how your higher education institution is delivering support services(such as careers support, mental health support or other advice) during lockdown?

Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I haven't got much information about these support services
Very unsatisfied	Haven't seen/heard about anything that my institute is offering
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	These services exist, but I have not used any of the them so I cannot comment on it.
Very unsatisfied	Just sending an email saying that "we're all in this together" isn't very helpful. Maybe should have had more advertisements for mental health seminars that the university allowed. Or sharing some on topic TEDTALKS.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I am not aware of this as I have not sought this information.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Haven't really checked it out, but i am aware that they offer some kind of mental health support and advice
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I haven't used any support services. However, the lecturers have been quite supportive and lenient.
Very satisfied	I have not used anything but there is the possibility to talk with Jane every week and there are many webinars about mental health etc available.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	To be honest, I do not know, as I have not had the need to use any kind of support services. However, the informative e-mails we have received have been nice
Quite satisfied	These support services are provided and very needed at this time. The waiting time for these is quite long so it is difficult to find a time.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I haven't really looked into it.
Quite satisfied	These support services are provided and very needed at this time. The waiting time for these is quite long so it is difficult to find a time.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I have seen that the help has been offered in emails sent to us, but my knowledge of this subject is limited.
Very satisfied	i personally do not need mental help (for now c':). in the case with other support, i would say we can always drop an email or call uni staff and consult them if we want some advice i dunno
Very satisfied	I think communication is working well and I can ask for help any time.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Haven't used such services
Quite unsatisfied	I think the institute doesn't really support us in any way. These aspects are never mentioned and it seems like the only important thing for the institute is completing all of our courses.
Quite satisfied	I was very glad to see that our programme director genuinely feels worried about us and is always there for us whenever we have a problem. We recently had a survey about our mental health, where we were able to speak with co-students. This helped me to see that I am not the only one who finds online leaning stressful.
Quite unsatisfied	So far I've heard of only mental health support regarding school work
Very unsatisfied	I've not heard any talk about this.

Quite unsatisfied	I haven't reached out because even before all of this began the mental health services, for example, were already very "over crowded" and people had to wait a really long time to get any actual help.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I have not received any information
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	have not needed those services
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	have no need of these services
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I feel like our mental health is not valued enough, workload should be decreased even just a little bit to accommodate our stress and burnout
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I am aware of the services, but I have not used any of them myself.
Quite unsatisfied	unsatisfied because grtting in touch with psychologists is not easy
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I am not sure as I have always been dealing with them alone.
Quite unsatisfied	I have personally not received any info on that. But maybe if I needed some help and was to write to someone I could get help.
Very satisfied	information is available
Very unsatisfied	There is none besides 1 teacher offering a consultation to those who desperately need it
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I don't have the experience of asking for support, so I wouldn't know too much, but they do remind us from time to time that support of that kind is available.
Quite satisfied	I think they are doing the best they can in the given situation.
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	I have not looked into it.

Appendix 7: Thinking about the next academic year, what is your expectation of how your higher education institution will operate?

Thinking about the next academic year, what is your expectation of how your higher education institution will operate?



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