Student Views on Online Office Hour Provision: Evidence from a Midsized UK University[1]

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Abstract

Office hours (OHs) are one of the most direct forms of student-faculty interaction in British universities. Research has shown that OHs offer a chance to develop student-faculty relationships, improving students' focus and drive by providing a sense of empowerment and genuine investment in their education by the teacher, and forming a mentorship relationship. However, others have noted that there is substantial confusion about the role of OHs in modern higher education provision. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most universities were forced to innovate and deliver OHs online. Using a midsized London university as a case study, this research builds on 23 semi-structured interviews to assess student experiences with online OHs during the period between 2020 and 2021. Findings suggest that students' reasons to go to OHs fall along an instrumental-relational continuum. Students have heterogeneous reasons to go to OHs, and as such also have heterogeneous views on online provision. Online provision is found to be more convenient for time-pressed students and commuters. Additionally, some students find online OHs to be a lower-pressure environment. Students voiced hopes that online OHs would continue to be provided as an option.

Introduction

On the 19th of March 2020, our university closed the doors to its campus. It would not open again for 6 months, during which all educational provision took place online, including seminars, lectures, supervision meetings and office hours (OHs). This unprecedented shift to online-only teaching happened in universities across the country, the impacts of which are just beginning to be understood.

As master's students at the time, we reflected that the shift to online teaching had also changed the nature of our interactions with faculty, and the way that educational support was delivered more broadly. We thus engaged our university's student research programme to collaborate in a research study exploring how the nature of OHs had changed since the pandemic. The student researcher programme allows students to lead their own research project, supported with funding, resources and guidance. The overall aim of the programme is to allow students to gain research experience working alongside faculty, whilst also giving back to the university by researching issues related to educational provision at the institution. In this article we look at how the shift to online provision affected OHs, as arguably the most direct form of student-faculty educational interaction. The university hosted online OHs via video conferencing platform Zoom, during term time from March 2020 until the present, including the entire period of this study. This shift was facilitated by the university's

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introduction of an online booking platform for OHs. The platform replaced the previous (more informal) method of arranging OHs via email, drop-ins, or signup sheets on the door to a faculty member's office.

Background

Office hours and student-faculty interaction

Office hours are a *"time-honoured academic ritual"* (Mineo, 2017). They exist at most universities to allow students a chance to *"address questions, solve problems, or discuss matters relevant to their studies face-to-face with their teacher"* (Limberg, 2007, p.180). Several researchers note the importance of OHs as an educational tool, especially as it relates to the benefits of student-faculty interaction (Griffin *et al.,* 2014; Limberg, 2007; Skyrme, 2010). The instinct behind OHs is that they function as a chance for students to get one-to-one interaction with a faculty member, with the idea that this will allow students to take agency in clarifying concepts, thinking beyond the curriculum or gaining confidence. Research has noted that OHs also offer a chance to develop student-faculty relationships which can improve students' focus and drive by providing a sense of empowerment and genuine investment in their education by the teacher, and over time forming a mentorship relationship (Brophy and Good, 1974; Erkut and Mokros, 1984; Ellsworth, 1997; Lamport, 1993; Lents, 2010).

While OHs have continued to be common practice across higher education, the shift in the structure and atmosphere of academic departments due to professionalisation has made OHs feel increasingly anachronistic. Students comment that they feel confused about the purpose of OHs, not knowing what they should be used for, stating *"office hours are kind of weird"* (Smith *et al.,* 2017, p.1). The literature suggests OHs are too inefficient as a means to receive clarification on course content, and too inefficient and time-pressured as a means of engaging in meaningful interactions with faculty (Skyrme, 2010). OHs have arguably not been adapted to the new higher education paradigm and its expectations, and as a result attendance is falling and frustrations increasing. Yet despite these pressures on OHs, these out of classroom interactions with faculty still *"[correlate] positively with student retention, academic performance, higher educational aspirations and more satisfaction"* (Hooper *et al.,* 2006, p.1; Nadler and Nadler, 2000).

Socio-academic relations within OHs are often mediated by the students' confidence, level of English proficiency, and experience in talking one-to-one with faculty (Skyrme, 2010). Reflecting existing dynamics across various educational provisions, students from underrepresented backgrounds, national and ethnic minorities, or lower-income backgrounds where direct interactions with faculty would be new, often struggle to access the academic and personal benefits of student-faculty interactions facilitated in OHs. Skyrme (2010) further notes that students were worried about breaking unknown social expectations during OHs, and about the legitimacy of their questions (expressed in the title of the article "Is this a stupid question?"). These worries may also prevent students from attending OHs in the first place. Considering that OH attendance has been consistently found to be positively correlated with academic performance (Guerrero and Rod, 2013), it follows that underuse of OHs, or bad experiences with them, could affect students' educational attainment and

experience at the university. This disadvantage caused by not attending or benefiting from OHs would therefore be expected to affect students from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds most of all. Indeed, studies have suggested that there are differences in student-faculty interaction across gender, race, social class and first-generation status (Kim *et al.,* 2009).

If this is the case, these disparities in OH uptake may be in part contributing to attainment gaps which have long been stark at UK universities. Understanding why and how different interventions (such as online provision) might improve access to OHs across the board is therefore important in unlocking the educational potential of this tool.

The experiment of online office hour provision

The theoretical expectation arising from the literature, therefore, is that while OHs are a potential puzzle piece in addressing attainment gaps in higher education, they are being underused and have not adapted to the realities of universities today.

The shift to online provision during the pandemic is therefore particularly interesting in relation to OHs. In light of the indications in the literature that disadvantaged students use OHs even less than others, several studies which found that moving the primary environment for student-faculty interactions online positively impacts levels of engagement by underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, are therefore significant as we shift OHs online (Hooper, 2006; Nicholson, 2002; Lents, 2010).[2]

Hooper (2006) found that online OHs *"can help more students than we can in a traditional office hour, and [cater] to students with different learning styles"* (p. 192). However, this has not been a consistent finding in research conducted into online educational provisions and attainment gaps. Muresan (2013), for instance, found that despite the potential of "e-Learning" to democratise knowledge access, in reality "digital skills, self-motivation, self-driven learning capacity, good communication skills, including communication in foreign languages and cultural awareness" (p. 1) were all necessary factors in conducting and benefiting from online learning. Therefore, students who have weaker foreign language or digital skills could be further disadvantaged by online learning. In reference to the *emergent transition* brought about by the pandemic, Mpungose (2020) likewise argues that disadvantaged students face higher barriers to engaging with online learning. This is specifically emphasised by the digital divide, which is shaped by "socio-economic factors, race, social class, gender, age, geographical area and educational background" (p. 2). Both Dhwan (2020) and Mpungose (2020) agree that, in light of the pandemic and the emergency shift to online provision, universities need to plan ahead and be ready for crises affecting learning, to avoid negatively and differentially impacting students' experiences and attainment.

There is evidently a need for more research into online learning and attainment gaps to delineate the patterns that explain different results found in the existing body of research. Furthermore, no substantial study into the shift in traditional OHs online, and the potential

[2] It should be noted, however, that there is a scarcity of recent studies on the educational outcomes of OH provision.

impacts on student experience and attainment gaps, has been conducted. Studies have looked into augmented OHs, including both synchronous and asynchronous forums, anonymous chats, and instant messaging (Lents, 2010; Nicholson, 2002; Hooper, 2006), however no study has yet investigated the introduction of online provision of traditional OHs (open-ended, unstructured, synchronous, face-to-face and generally one-to-one meetings between students and faculty). This could be because before the pandemic, no large-scale attempt had been made to experiment with this model of student-faculty interaction online. While some studies have set out to study how the shift to online provision during the pandemic affected student experiences across a university (Mpungose, 2020; Khalil *et al.,* 2020), no study has so far looked specifically at how this emergency shift affected OHs. This pandemic-specific context is after all important and may yield different results, since the shift to online provisions in this context was immediate, urgent, unplanned, and was conducted by faculty and students who may have had little or no prior experience with online learning. We aim to fill this important gap in the literature and investigate whether, and how, this unique innovation in OH provision might have impacted the existing dynamics and difficulties observed with in-person OH provision.

Methodology

Given the novelty of online OHs in our research setting, we decided to undertake our research using an exploratory approach, setting out to describe and understand how students engage with OHs as a whole and, specifically, what they make of the differences between offline and online modes of delivery. We set out to answer the research question: *How did students experience online office hours during 2020 and 2021?*

In line with our exploratory approach, we decided to speak to students through semi-structured interviews to access first-hand accounts (Given, 2008). Semi-structured questioning allowed a degree of flexibility permitting students to deviate and discuss things they thought relevant to their personal experiences with OHs (Adams, 2015). Our interviews were guided by two overarching aims: (1.) To probe how students engage with OHs as a mode of student-faculty interaction – why they use OHs, what they like, and what they do not; (2.) To understand how students engaged with online provision of OHs. This approach to interviewing aimed to attain an understanding about what is relevant to students when considering whether an OH is a good use of their time. That is, by asking about (1.) we hoped to gain a more thorough understanding of (2.).

We interviewed 23 participants. Participants were sourced from across the university through a neutrally toned call-out distributed to all academic departments at the university. From a list of 300 willing participants, we purposely selected 23 students to ensure a balance in genders, academic backgrounds, international and home backgrounds, and postgraduate and undergraduate degrees. Table 1 shows an anonymised list of our participants.[3]

[3] Participants were given information sheets and provided informed consent ahead of interviews. They were given an online shopping voucher for their time.

Participant	Course/Department	UG/PG	Gender
1	LLB / Department of Law	UG	F
2	Geography / Department of Geography and Environment	UG	M
3	Economics / Department of Economics	PG	M
4	International Relations / Department of International Relations	UG	F
5	Actuarial Science / Department of Statistics	UG	M
6	Global Health Policy / Department of Health Policy	PG	F
7	International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies / Department of International Development	PG	F
8	Geography with Economics / Department of Geography and Environment	UG	M
9	Culture and Society / Department of Sociology	PG	M
10	Media, Communication and Development / Department of Media and Communications	PG	F
11	Social Anthropology / Department of Anthropology	UG	M
12	Geography / Department of Geography and Environment	UG	F
13	Politics / Department of Government	UG	M
14	Politics & Philosophy / Department of Government	UG	F
15	Political Sociology / Department of Sociology	PG	M
16	Econometrics and Mathematical Economics / Department of Economics	PG	M
17	Social Research Methods / Department of Methodology	PG	M
18	International Social and Public Policy with Politics / Department of Social Policy	UG	F

19	Economics / Department of Economics	PG	M
20	Economics / Department of Economics	UG	M
21	MPA / School of Public Policy	PG	F
22	Economics / Department of Economics	UG	F
23	International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies	PG	F

Table 1: Participant profiles

Interviews were transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. We coded units of speech into categories and then refined the codes until we were satisfied they reflected the data accurately (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding followed an inductive approach – we sorted codes[4] as they appeared, without developing a codebook ahead of time (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Findings

Our findings serve as an initial exploration of the complex subject of online student-faculty interaction. Students display a heterogeneous array of views on what OHs are for and what makes a good one. Following from this diversity, we find different views on the value of online OHs as an innovation. Our interviews suggest that the reasons for success or failure of online OHs may not be universal and depend on what individual students wish to take from them. A majority of interviewees expressed the view that online provision should be retained as an option. It is likely that online provision is thus valued for its flexibility and convenience by some students, and also for the added benefit of being in a more relaxing environment for the student.

Office Hours: Between instrumental and relational

It is worth briefly discussing the main reasons interviewees gave for accessing OHs. In order of prevalence, they were:

1. Seeking academic help, such as wishing to clarify content from lectures or seminars, seeking clarification on feedback received, and needing to ensure that a plan for a course-assessed assignment was “on the right track”.

2. To address career concerns, including seeking mentorship on future career decisions, and to a lesser extent networking with academics (specifically, for securing references).

[4] We used NVivo to assist the analysis.

3. To engage with academics. Several interviewees suggested that they attended OHs to simply learn more about an academic and their work. In a sense, to satisfy some sort of academic curiosity.

"I went to a lot of people in the philosophy department and [I like] just being able to book [and] be like 'Hello, I'm lost help me, give me advice.'" (Participant 14)

Considering the reasons for attending OHs, then, students display a range of motivations. Motivations seem to fall into a continuum between purely instrumental interactions (such as seeking academic help to reach a higher grade) and more relational interactions (where the students wish to engage with the academic personally). OHs therefore are not simply seen as a tool to reach higher educational attainment, but also for personal and potentially professional development.

"Normally I go to office hours just to consult with the Tas and to clarify mainly the lecture materials for some courses (…) I have some areas or things that I don't fully understand, so I usually clarify with them on these parts and other than that I also asked for some questions about the problem sets." (Participant 20)

When investigating what students appreciated in OHs when they had good experiences, we noted that this continuum between instrumental and relational also presents itself. A substantial majority of our interviewees noted that clarity and straightforwardness in the content of the answers was greatly appreciated. For instance, an interviewee noted that a good OH was "when they actually answer my questions and don't skirt around it." (Participant 1), and another as *"[when] they actually listen to you and they engage with your question and that they give as concrete as advice as possible"* (Participant 11). Clarity and conciseness, then, is associated with the instrumental objective of getting answers regarding course content, feedback on grades or future plans for assignments.

A group of interviewees also noted that an academic's relational style was influential in the enjoyment of the OH interaction. That is, students realise and value when academics are genuinely open, interested, and engaged with the students' academic (and sometimes personal) life. Participants mentioned feeling welcome into the OH space and reassured that the academic was willing to have a conversation with them.

> *"This sounds like it's so like superficial [that it] shouldn't really be a good enough reason, but your relationship with whoever you're going into office hour to [matters]" (…) "it feels a lot more like the therapy in a way."* (Participant 12)

Whilst the design of this study does not allow for reliable testing of how different reasons to attend OHs affect preferences for online and offline OHs, it does provide some illustrate the instrumental-relational continuum in how students approach OHs. Whilst some interviewees referred to OHs as an exercise in getting feedback and clarity on educational content, others referred to it as a personal interaction motivated by a desire to engage with an academic. We suggest it is plausible that reasons for preferring online or in person OHs may interact with this observed continuum.

Time as variable of interest

Interviewees raised time as a main barrier to access and enjoyment of OHs. Our analysis reveals that students consider time deeply when choosing to access an OH, and whether it is productive. For instance, students mentioned that the standard 10 to 15 minute OH slots at the university were too short to be useful, for both students that want to get academic help, and students seeking some form of relationship with academics.

> *"I don't think an office hour would help too much, like 10 minutes, I don't think would make a big difference."* (Participant 14)

Time thus appears as a main consideration for students. Several interviewees referred to how they deeply consider whether they should take up an academic's time by booking an OH, with reference to how busy academics were and whether the academics would feel the OH was a waste of time. An interviewee mentioned feeling *"rude taking up their time"* (Participant 2).

> *"It's just not enough time to have courage."* (Participant 12)

Interviewees also recalled how much time attending in-person OHs took when they were available. Some students mentioned how it could feel overly burdensome to travel into campus for a very brief interaction with an academic, considering the time spent commuting and waiting outside the office.

> *"I've been in several office hours, where the academic will be like you know I'm really short on time, (…) and then I'll feel a bit kind of constraint."* (Participant 2)

Time appears as a major theme determining the usefulness and enjoyment of student-faculty interaction. It is therefore likely that the usefulness and enjoyment of online OHs will interact with time. We noted that time and expedience play a factor influencing those preferring online OHs. That is, online OHs prove to be more expedient (without needing to commute, etc.) and may have a qualitative feeling of being less burdening on an academic's time. We expand on this in the following subsection.

Student views on online office hour provision

Having discussed background factors that we identify as potentially influential to the issue of online OHs provision, we come to discuss findings that answer our main research question. Our interviewees displayed a broad range of heterogeneous views on the comparison between online and in-person OHs. Again, the instrumental-relational continuum appears here, where in some cases students will value getting answers in a quicker or more convenient way, and others will value relational aspects. However, there is no straightforward correspondence between instrumental/relational approaches and online/in-person provision. That is, whilst students show different reasons (on the instrumental/relational continuum) for preferring online or in-person OHs, this does not imply that if a student values instrumental aspects they will prefer one mode of provision over the other.

For some, in-person OHs were preferred for reasons such as ease of relationship building, the value of body language, and a feeling that going into the office itself was a meaningful event.

> *"They just feel more meaningful"* (Participant 12)

Participants mentioned that in-person OHs allowed them to explain themselves better, also noting elements such as using a whiteboard alongside the academic or being able to perceive body language to ascertain whether an idea was 'good' or 'bad'.

> *"a bit more exciting or a bit more fruitful" "[there's a] situational niceness."* (Participant 13)

Other reasons for preferring in-person OH had to do with how online OHs play out, such as technical and connection issues that prevented both students and academics from engaging in a conversation.

Other students preferred online provision, especially due to convenience but also for some relational aspects (e.g., "less intimidating; "less formal"). The interviews suggest that online OH provision may also lower barriers to access, for instance by lowering the level of pressure by allowing students to speak from a more comfortable place. Especially if the student may feel daunted by going into a faculty member's office.

> *"You can get really nervous and like stumble and hesitate, whereas I feel like with zoom I do less of that like I can because I'm at the comfort of my home, and I can just you know get straight to it."* (Participant 12)

Students frequently mentioned how online provision also made OHs more convenient. The main aspect of this convenience relates to time, and how it was less burdensome for students to access online OHs from home rather than commuting to campus. This further suggests that online provision may lower barriers for students who live farther away or work part-time.

> *"I think zoom is so nice for office hours, just because it's, you can do it from anywhere. And you can just click on your laptop, like, open the window, it's so much easier than scheduling and being on campus and finding the office."* (Participant 14)

> *"I only came into Uni three days, because I commuted from home. And then if the office hours [was in] one [of the] other two days, I just wouldn't go even if I had something to ask. I think [now] it's been online. I [have] just been like, oh, I can actually make that."* (Participant 22)

Most interviewees expressed a wish to keep online OHs as an option when the university returns to in-person provision, mostly for convenience reasons, such as not having to travel to campus.

> *"I don't think my office hours have been different because they're online."* (Participant 18)

Students suggested that keeping online OHs as an option would allow them to balance their preferences for different types of OH interactions. Additionally, online options would allow for flexibility in terms of commuting, part-time work, and comfort.

Discussion and implications for practice

Students do not have homogeneous views on the value of online OHs. Rather, their views on online OHs are likely to be the result of a mix of their overall views on the value of online interactions, and their objectives for the OH along the instrumental-relational continuum. We theorise that these goals depend on the characteristics of each student: their department, programme, background or – potentially – minority status. This is not something that we could measure for in our study but would be a fruitful avenue for further research with the aim of identifying how OH can address student outcomes more effectively.

We found a diversity of student views which reinforced the expectations arising from the literature that accessibility, both in terms of practical and social accessibility, are central to OHs engaging under-represented students (Ariel, 2006). While we heard differing views on the comparative accessibility of online OHs, the trend was that online OHs provide generally greater accessibility due to the fact that time considerations, travel and the social anxiety barriers are reduced by online interactions. These benefits were mentioned more frequently than worries about digital skills and connection issues. Noting that time, expediency, and relational aspects appear more often as barriers for entry to, or enjoyment of, OHs, it is likely that online provision will not – by itself – solve issues of underattendance or lack of enjoyment.

However, our findings suggest that students believe optional online OHs can go some way to improving accessibility and access to OHs in general. Our interviews provided some initial but inconclusive indication that they could serve as a specific tool to target barriers faced by under-represented students. They do not, however, address the issues of uncertainty around the purpose of OH, which were represented by the relational-instrumental continuum in our findings, and which suggested a lack of satisfaction on both sides of this continuum. Addressing this, and forming a more targeted framework for OHs, is therefore essential to tackling the lack of confidence and sense of illegitimacy many students face in making use of OHs, both online and offline.

The study has some implications for practice:

- Students expressed a wish that online OHs would remain an option post-pandemic. Further, this added flexibility could improve the ability of students who have caring responsibilities, part-time work, or long commutes to attend OHs. We found time to be a large constraint (both in terms of attending OHs, and finding them worthwhile). It is possible that allowing students to choose from different length options could improve use and efficiency.
- It is clear that many different views of the purpose of OHs exist in student communities. Academic institutions could engage students to further understand specific needs and adapt OH provision to them.
- Academics and students should be encouraged to critically reflect on their objectives for an office hour interaction, so that these can be tailored appropriately. For

instance, booking forms could require a ‘purpose’ section so that academics can plan accordingly.

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