

The Covid Cohort and Silent Seminars

Those graduating this year most likely endured the trials and tribulations of being a fresher in 2020, with a year in which students only had access to online teaching, with many not returning to Durham for Epiphany term. The lack of in-person teaching accompanied by social restrictions led to increased social anxiety amongst the entire cohort, impacting academic performance as a result. It was not uncommon to be hungover, sat in your flatmate's room as your lecture acted more as background noise than tuition which you are paying for. Those that found the energy to pay attention found it exceedingly difficult to communicate with both teachers and classmates due to isolation. Over 60% of Durham's international student community did not feel fully supported by the University and only 2.5% of students thought that the nine grand was worth their university experience. In short, both academically and socially, the 2020 fresher intake were scammed. Although the lockdown restrictions were lifted the following year, their isolation and disjointed first-year experience has had lasting effects.

October 2021 saw online learning move to mostly in-person education. The initial response from the Second Years was one of excitement. Packs of students roamed around campus trying to find the philosophy building, the school of education, or god forbid they had to climb up cardiac hill to the biology site. Students came face-to-face with others that they had only seen on their screens or in an awkward break-out room - where undoubtedly everyone sat in silence with their cameras off. As students walked into their seminar rooms and sat next to semi-familiar people, they expressed their relief at either a) finding the room or b) being on

time. The seminar begins and the professor is asking questions about a reading for the module. Silence. No one says a word. Everyone awkwardly waits until that one reliable person pipes up or until the professor is forced to answer their own question. This continues for the rest of the seminar. Excitement is gone. Anxiety sets in. Silence continues.

Why is this the case? Durham professors have said that last year was the hardest year in terms of teaching with one professor noting that students seemed disengaged and disinterested making it almost impossible to enjoy seminars. It cannot be that a whole cohort of students are less interested or bright than in previous years ... or at least one would hope! I believe that the long-term social anxiety from isolation in First Year is impacting current student engagement. I'm sure that the majority of people are interested and could contribute during seminars; however, the lack of engagement in First Year has set a bad precedent. This lack of involvement during lesson time, along with cancelled lectures and seminars as a cause of the Strikes has led to a pretty unsatisfactory year for both students and professors.

One can only hope that this year will be better. Somebody needs to help out those students who just blurt out anything as they cannot bear the awkward silence. Seminars should be comfortable, open spaces in which you can share your ideas with your professors and peers. We have to make use of our nine-thousand pounds in some way - and only ever showering at MC and taking free KitKats from the Stevo welfare office is not enough!

By Lucy Hannigan