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Reflections of a First Year Student from overseas in Dublin during Covid 19 lockdown 2020

Author: Hugo Fuller, University College Dublin

Note from the Editors

This short, reflective piece was invited by the editors to illustrate the lived experience of many international undergraduate students in their first year on campus during Covid 19 Level 5 restrictions.

While there is nothing particularly dramatic or sensational in the piece, it does raise important questions regarding all the thought and effort invested in 'the student experience' of university in normal times, as well as questions about the time and funding invested in collaborative and group-based learning, and about current ideas around the design of 'learning spaces' and e-learning platforms.

No doubt, when the pandemic crisis is over there will be much 'reflection' on the entire configuration of higher education from the perspective of international students!

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Travelling over to Ireland from the South of France just before Level 5 Covid restrictions were announced was surprisingly easy. COVID had ensured very few people were travelling so I pretty much had the 'plane to myself. My Mum was not impressed as she had paid for an extra seat for my guitar and I had several rows free beside me. My quarantine experience passed by and I acknowledge that I was lucky enough to have the comfort of my own apartment. It was uneventful and towards the end got boring. During this time, I was hopeful that I would be able to meet my classmates face-to-face and was hoping that lockdown restrictions might be lifted, but this was not to be. The uncertainty was annoying but gave me false hope, which helped me push through.

First day I arrived in UCD Residences, tighter lockdown restrictions were announced, so I knew face-to-face would not be possible for the foreseeable future. I had given up on Freshers' Week even before I left France. When I moved into the UCD residences I was alone for 2 days which was not great. Then 2 flatmates moved in which was a great relief. UCD Campus was surprisingly full of people walking their dogs, not sure how many of them were students, however. UCD Security were strict and no gatherings were allowed which was frustrating, but I guess they were just doing their job. Meeting new people face-to-face was impossible: out of the 300 people in my course, I met one of them. I had to resort to meeting online. Making friends online was very difficult.

The first academic semester was relatively easy and since I had no other distractions, I spent my time working. As I am fortunate enough to be bilingual, the transition to writing and studying in English was relatively seamless, but I missed the sunny skies of home.

Zoom calls became boring after a while and I struggled to focus. The best part was collaborating and chatting in the Breakout rooms. I was happy with my independence but due to the lockdown circumstances felt as free as a prisoner at times.

My hopes for next September are that I can return to UCD Residences, meet people face-to-face (even if in a socially distancing context) and enjoy some of the elements of a campus experience.

Online lectures are not the problem. What was the most frustrating was that there was very few social events on the campus. Since this was my first year, I did not have any reference point, I did not know what to expect. Currently, for me, a normal college life is where you spent 6 hours in a Zoom call and end up with bad back pains. However, as we are living through a pandemic I must adapt accordingly.

I learnt what it is like to be partially independent, which hopefully will next time round be easier. I won't travel to Dublin next time if the classes are all online and UCD is in lockdown as, in that case it is better to enjoy college from the comfort of home.

Je suis arrivé en Irlande, juste avant l'annonce d'un confinement niveau 5, ce qui était très chanceux. Mon voyage de Nice à Dublin fut sans incident. Il n'y avait presque personne à l'aéroport et dans l'avion, donc je n'étais pas inquiet d'attraper le virus. Ma mère n'était pas contente d'avoir payé pour un deuxième siège pour ma guitare, alors que j'avais plusieurs rangées de places libres près de moi. Mes quatorze jours de quarantaine sont passés rapidement dans le confort de mon propre appartement. Vers la fin de ces deux semaines je commençais à m'ennuyer, mais sinon, tout s'est bien passé. Durant cette période j'étais incertain si j'allais pouvoir rencontrer mes camarades en personne, mais je suis resté optimiste.

Le premier jour où je suis arrivé aux résidences d'UCD, les Nouvelles restrictions niveau 5 se sont appliquées, j'ai su à ce moment que tous mes cours étaient en visioconférence. J'étais déjà déçu qu'il n'y avait pas de "Freshers Week", mais cette nouvelle annonce à cessait toute possibilité de rencontrer mes camarades. Durant les deux premiers jours, j'étais seul dans mon appartement aux Résidences. Heureusement, au bout du troisième jour, deux colocataires sont arrivés, ce qui était un grand soulagement. Sur le campus, il y avait beaucoup de personnes qui promenait leurs chiens ou faisait du sport, mais peu d'élèves. La sécurité du campus n'autorisait aucun rassemblement, ce qui était frustrant mais compréhensible. J'étais alors obligé de rencontrer mes camarades en ligne. Sur les 300 élèves dans ma classe j'ai pu

rencontrer qu'une personne. J'ai trouvé mon premier semestre assez simple au niveau du travail, probablement car je n'étais pas distrait. M'adapter à la langue n'était pas un problème car je suis bilingue, donc ce n'était pas difficile de rendre des rapports écrits en Anglais.

Les cours sur Zoom deviennent très agaçants car je n'arrive pas à rester concentré, mais j'ai bien aimé les conversations dans les "Breakout Rooms". J'étais content de mon indépendance, mais le confinement l'a limitée radicalement.

J'espère retourner à UCD Septembre prochain et faire des rencontres en personne. Comme c'était ma première année d'études, je n'ai aucune référence sur la vie normale d'un étudiant. Tout ce que je connais est mon expérience personnelle, ce qui consiste à passer mes journées assis, sur des appels Zoom, ce qui douloureux pour mon dos. Je réalise, quand même, que nous sommes dans une période spéciale et qu'il fallait que je m'adapte.

J'ai l'intention de retourner à Dublin uniquement lorsque les cours redeviennent normaux, car c'est plus agréable de faire les cours sur Zoom à la maison.