STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE LEARNING IN UCL ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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This report summarises the evaluation carried out by the authors in January and February 2021. Based on an analysis and discussion of data from a survey of students and informal talks to a small number of Student Representatives, it provides five recommendations for the Faculty, Departments and Programmes.

Contents

1. Executive summary

This evaluation was a direct response to Student Representatives in UCL Arts and Humanities who expressed a wish to ensure that whatever good practice had been developed during the lockdown was carried over to on-campus teaching. This report is based on a Mentimeter survey, answered by a total of 100 students, and informal conversations with five Student Representatives.

The survey found that students' experiences are very diverse and often polarised, i.e. very positive or very negative. At times the same students expressed a mix of positive and negative experiences, which points to the complex and contradictory nature of some students' experiences.

The evaluation suggests five recommendations:

1. Ensure that, where both possible and reasonable, lectures are recorded and made available to all students on the module.
2. Seek to divide pre-recorded videos into shorter chunks dealing with one topic per video.
3. Faculty, Departments and programmes should further discuss consistency of student experience across modules and programmes.
4. Define the way in which academics will communicate with students on their module, and manage expectations around response times/methods.
5. The Faculty, Departments and programmes should consider ways to strengthen student-student communication and interaction as soon as possible in term 3, and think about how these can be put at the centre of the Faculty's strategy for the academic year 2021-2022.

To provide feedback in relation to this evaluation (ways forward, further evaluation/research, adding nuance and the like), you can respond using this Microsoft Form (click to follow link).

2. Background for evaluation

The background for this evaluation was a meeting with all Student Representatives from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, chaired by the Vice Dean Education, in autumn 2020. A range of ideas and views were raised and discussed, some positive and others negative, but one in particular was seen as important to the Student Representatives: how do we ensure that all the good experiences, innovations and practice that have been developed during lockdown are carried over when we return to campus? Despite all the difficulties and problems, how do we ensure that on-campus teaching and learning is informed by the positive and rewarding experiences had during lockdown?

This is the spirit that has guided this evaluation, data for which were collected in January/February and analysed in March 2021.

3. Ethics

Ethics Approval was based on The Arena Centre for Research-based Education's approval to conduct small-scale education research (project ID number: 12385/001).

All students who took part in Teams discussions were sent an information sheet and signed the consent form.

4. Data collection

4.1 Survey

Student Representatives were asked to share a link to the polling software Mentimeter with their fellow students. 100 students answered some or all parts of the survey, which consisted of eight questions of different types: multiple choice, single-word (word clouds) and free-text. Some of the questions are not relevant for this report and have therefore been excluded, but the raw, anonymised data can be shared upon request.

For the questions that are included, the authors have occasionally synthesised and altered some of the data to make it clearer to the reader. An example is in the word clouds (created in https://worditout.com/) where slightly different spellings or the use of synonyms can obscure what would otherwise be significant. In these cases we have synthesised several forms such as 'not_engaging', 'unengaging', 'un-engaging', 'not-engaging' into one form 'unengaging', or 'infrequent', 'very_little' and 'scarce' into one term 'scarce'. We have also corrected obvious typos when reporting data. We have done our utmost to ensure that this has not affected the quality or meaning of the data.

When analysing the word strings to judge whether students were mostly positive or negative, each string was coded by both authors independently. Results were compared and discussed before arriving at the final results. The independent coding showed only few discrepancies and there were no examples of strings being coded as positive by one author and negative by the other. There were some examples of one author coding a string as neutral and the other coding it as either positive or negative, but after discussion both authors were able to agree in all cases.

4.2 Discussions with Student Representatives

We had hoped to engage Student Representatives in a series of focus groups, but despite reminders and incentives (£25 vouchers), not many volunteered. We therefore decided to turn these into informal discussions that would contextualise the data collected in Mentimeter. We talked to five Student Representatives over Teams, and we used these conversations to discuss some of our findings, allowing the Student Representatives to add extra nuance and perspective.

In this report, the main data source is therefore the Mentimeter survey, and it will be indicated clearly when data are drawn from the informal discussions.

5. Results

The following presents an analysis of data in relation to three areas: students' experiences of pre-recorded videos; students' communication with staff and with fellow students; and what students would like to see continued when they return to campus.

Larger versions of the word clouds can be found in the appendix (section 9).

5.1 Students' experiences with their modules' pre-recorded videos

This question asked students to provide up to three words that describe their experiences with pre-recorded videos. The analysis of the data took two forms: separating the words into two categories, positive and negative (neutral words were disregarded for this analysis), and determining whether

each respondent was mostly satisfied or dissatisfied with the videos. Students who chose words that presented a balance between the two were categorised as neutral (so this does not mean that they did not have an opinion, but rather that it was balanced and not predominantly satisfied or dissatisfied).

Satisfaction with pre-recorded videos

Dissatisfied 31%
Satisfied 53%
Neutral 16%
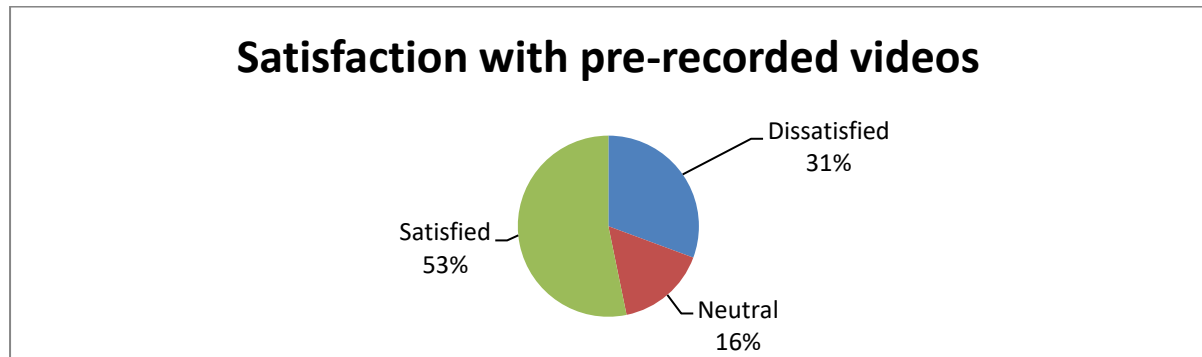
65 students answered this question but three answers were discounted as they did not indicate a level of satisfaction (N=62). Of the 19 who were tagged as dissatisfied, 13 indicated strong dissatisfaction, using words such as 'alienating', 'depressing' and 'dread'. Of the 33 who were tagged as satisfied, 16 indicated strong satisfaction, using words such as 'exciting', 'excellent' and 'efficient'. What is striking is therefore the extremely varied experiences of the students, and the relatively large number of students who occupy the extreme ends of the satisfaction scale (29 students, or 47%, were either very satisfied or very dissatisfied). This evaluation, however, cannot determine whether this is because students have experienced a great variety of pre-recorded videos or whether they are responding differently to the same types of videos.

From all the words that were tagged as negative and positive, two separate word clouds were created:

Negative

Positive

Even at a glance there are some clear trends. On the one hand, some students find the videos hard to engage with and lacking a personal touch (words such as 'unengaging', 'not-interactive' and 'boring', complaining further that they are 'impersonal' and (too) 'long'). On the other hand, some students enjoy that they can watch the videos when they want to and as many times as they want (words such as 'good', 'helpful', 'convenient', 'informative', 'flexible', 'clear' and 'accessible'). The negative experiences are thus mostly not about the content of the videos, but that students find

them hard to engage with. This was related directly to the idea of chunking videos in some of the informal conversations:

> If I want to look at the [topic], it's sectioned out, I can just go to it and look at the little section, 15 minutes long on it, to understand it better … Instead of having the whole video where I'm scrolling through, trying to find it, because that kills focus and energy and willpower (Participant 1)

> One thing that one of my lecturers have done that I know has got a bit of praise is [name of lecturer] cut one of her lectures up into videos … where the video separates the lecture by topic and content as well as being the whole thing. So it's three videos make one lecture, which is pretty good. (Participant 2)

This is not a new discussion in higher education or in the Faculty, but with more research showing how important it is to package information into smaller chunks (recent research with first-year university students suggests, for instance, that students have 'a significant preference for chunk-style lecture materials between 3 and 17 min duration as opposed to the single traditional long-view didactic lecture materials.' (Humphries and Clark, 2021, p. 6)) and a clear indication that our own students also find shorter videos easier to engage with (the one student who mentioned a concrete time-interval in our informal talks suggested 15-20 minutes, adding that 'your brain dies after half an hour of concentration' (participant 1)), this is a clear recommendation from this evaluation: Staff should seek to divide videos into shorter chunks dealing with one topic per video.

Finally, it is interesting that several students express a mix of positive and negative experiences, and it is often striking how contradictory the sets of words are:

tiring	strange	interesting
decent	acceptable	suboptimal
random	incomplete	useful
informative	useful	understimulating

Around 11 (18%) of the contributions show this type of pattern, and it indicates that the students' experiences are complex and sometimes contradictory, which we suggest, tentatively, might characterise their general experiences of the lockdown and learning online.

Based on this we suggest that staff pay particular attention to the complex and sensitive nature of students' experiences when discussing the (near) future of education in departments and the faculty. Furthermore, we suggest that Faculty, Departments and programmes explore further the (lack of) consistency of student experiences across modules and programmes.

5.2 Communication with academics and fellow students

This part of the evaluation sought to understand how well students had been able to communicate with academic staff and students. It treats the two separately, beginning with staff.

5.2.1 Communication with academic staff

Students were asked to provide up to three words that describe their communication with academic staff. As in section four of this report, words were tagged as positive and negative, and each respondent was tagged as positive, negative or neutral.

Communication with academics

Bad 42%
Neutral 8%
Good 50%
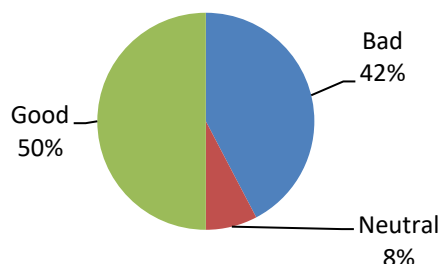
52 students answered this question (N=52). As can be seen from the pie chart, there was a marked split between students experiencing communication with staff as good and bad. When looking at those that expressed very negative experiences (n=12) and very positive experiences (n=11), the picture is somewhat similar to that presented in section four: almost half the students' (n=23 equalling 44%) experiences are either very good or very bad, further evidencing the polarised way they appear to have experienced remote learning during the lockdown.

From all the words that were tagged as negative and positive, two separate word clouds were created:
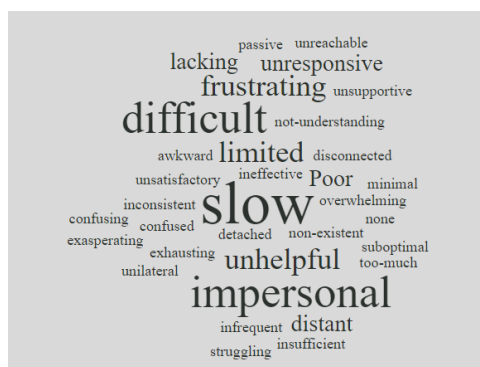
Negative

Positive

From the negative cloud several words relating to the speed and quality of communication stand out ('slow', 'difficult', 'impersonal', 'unhelpful', 'unresponsive', 'limited', 'frustrating'). It is clear that some students have struggled to communicate satisfactorily with staff, and it would be interesting to explore this further to understand what lies behind these data: what exactly does 'slow' mean? What would make communication less 'impersonal'? We recommend that these questions be considered in future evaluations.

The positive cloud is in some ways a mirror image of the negative one. It is equally clear here that some students have found communication with staff both fast and meaningful ('helpful', 'good', 'friendly', 'fast'). As with the negative words, it is difficult, based on this evaluation, to explain why some students were so satisfied with the communication, and it would be interesting to understand that in greater detail, too.

In our informal conversations, videos introducing the modules were brought up as a nice way to establish some connection between lecturer and students:

> They also did course introduction videos, that was pretty helpful to everyone, and offered some semblance of reality, and I do think a lot of the first years do enjoy having that tiny bit more interaction. Because I guess that is the closest they can get to walking past their lecturers in the corridor. (Participant 2)

There are some examples of contradictory answers, but they are less prominent than in section four. There are seven examples (13%) altogether and they show how different experiences co-exist, also with regards to communication with staff:

brief	friendly	exasperating
slow	frustrating	helpful
confusing	helpful	kind

What the analysis of this question shows is that students have experienced the same situation in radically different ways. They have all been in lockdown and they have all had to communicate electronically with staff, but for some this has made communication easier and more straightforward while others have found it frustrating and lacking.

The key recommendation of this evaluation is to discuss and clarify the ways in which academics will communicate with students on their modules, and manage expectations around response times/methods.

5.2.2 Communication with fellow students

Data were collected and analysed as in 5.2.1 above with students being asked to provide up to three words that describe their communication with other students.

Communication with other students

Good 40%
Bad 52%
Neutral 8%
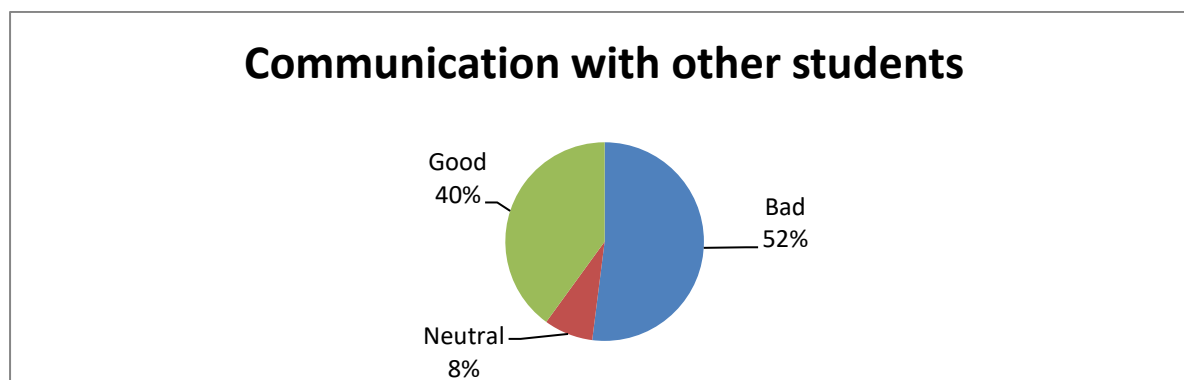
50 students answered this question (N=50). It is interesting that this pie chart is almost an inversion of the one presented in the previous section. Where more students were positive than negative about their communication with staff, there are significantly more students who have had negative experiences when it comes to communicating with other students. When looking at those who express very bad and very good experiences, this becomes even clearer: 10 responses (20%) can be seen as representing very bad experiences whereas only 3 (6%) are very good. A look at the word clouds suggests a number of reasons for these experiences:
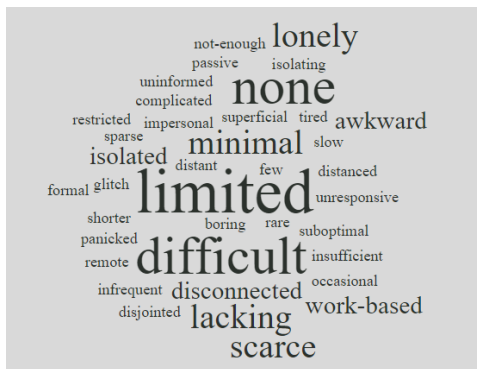
Negative	Positive

The negative comments centre on the lack of communication ('limited', 'none', 'lacking', 'minimal', 'scarce') and the nature of the communication ('difficult', 'awkward', 'disconnected'). A couple of the words with medium frequency suggest that the outcome of this is loneliness ('lonely') and isolation ('isolated'). Looking at the low-frequency words paints a similarly bleak picture ('passive', 'impersonal', 'restricted', 'superficial' and probably the strongest word of them all 'panicked'), so while students have chosen different words to describe their experiences, the message is clear from this group: they do not feel they have been able to create meaningful connections with other students, and they feel lonely and isolated.

Even the positive word cloud is not showing great enthusiasm for the student-student connections. Relatively neutral words are used such as 'okay', 'nice' and 'alright'. Even 'friendly', the most frequent word, cannot be said to be more than just positive. Among the less frequent words there are examples of positive experiences, though, such as 'enjoyable', 'lovely', 'engaging' and 'fun'.

The overall impression of student-student communication is that it has been problematic, and based on that the recommendation is to find ways to strengthen that aspect as soon as possible in term 3, and think about how this can be put at the centre of the Faculty's strategy for the academic year 2021-2022.

5.3 What aspects of remote learning would students like to see continued in the future

This question asked for free-text comments about what aspects of the students' online learning experiences they would like to see continued when returning to on-campus teaching. 46 students (N=46) responded to it, and the answers present a clear picture: 61% of the comments (n=28) mention recordings in some way (19 mention wanting lectures recorded, 6 mention pre-recorded lectures, and in 3 cases it is unclear what type of recording they are referring to). Many of the comments emphasise how useful recordings are for students:

> Recorded lectures should definitely stay. Being able to go back to them is very convenient for revision and note-taking.

> Recording lectures helps a lot with revising and learning.

> No more online teaching if possible, we are all a bit sick of it, but recorded lectures would definitely be a plus to help with studying content.

And the same ideas were also voiced in the informal discussions:

> [Recording lectures] has been a point of contention for years upon years in [name of department]. If nothing else, people are very happy that now, even if you miss the live lecture, it is recorded and they don't delete it either, it's there forever, and people are very, very happy about that. (Participant 2)

And while smaller in number (n=6), there are clearly students who found the pre-recorded lectures engaging and would like them to continue:

> PRE-RECORDED LECTURES ARE AMAZING! 10/10 GOLD STAR, PLS CONTINUE.

> Well-recorded asynchronous material, especially lectures, is easier to follow and practical.

One student even mentions how pre-recorded materials can free up face-to-face time for interaction:

> pre-recorded lectures so face-to-face time can be used for more valuable discussion.

The only other area mentioned by several students is using Moodle for online materials, quizzes, fun activities and revision. This is mentioned in various ways by 6 students (13%).

The recommendation here is clear: if at all possible, students would like lectures to be recorded and made available to them online.

6. Summary and recommendations

This report has presented an analysis of data obtained from a survey of students in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. These findings have at times been contextualised with reference to informal talks with five Student Representatives from the Faculty.

The data paint a picture of complex and sometimes contradictory student experiences, and this should be seen as one of the important findings of this evaluation.

In the results section of this report, five recommendations were presented:

1. Ensure that, where both possible and reasonable, lectures are recorded and made available to all students on the module.
2. Seek to divide pre-recorded videos into shorter chunks dealing with one topic per video.
3. Faculty, Departments and programmes should further discuss consistency of student experience across modules and programmes.
4. Define the way in which academics will communicate with students on their module, and manage expectations around response times/methods.
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7. Further evaluation

This evaluation is part of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities' ongoing collaboration with Digital Education and the Arena Centre for Research-based Education. It has been conceptualised as part of a continuous dialogue with students rather than a finished piece of work. The authors expect to build on this evaluation in the academic year 2021-2022 by inviting comments from students when they are back on campus: are there aspects of the online learning experience that they miss or see in a different light, and what can we learn from reflecting on both online and on-campus experiences?
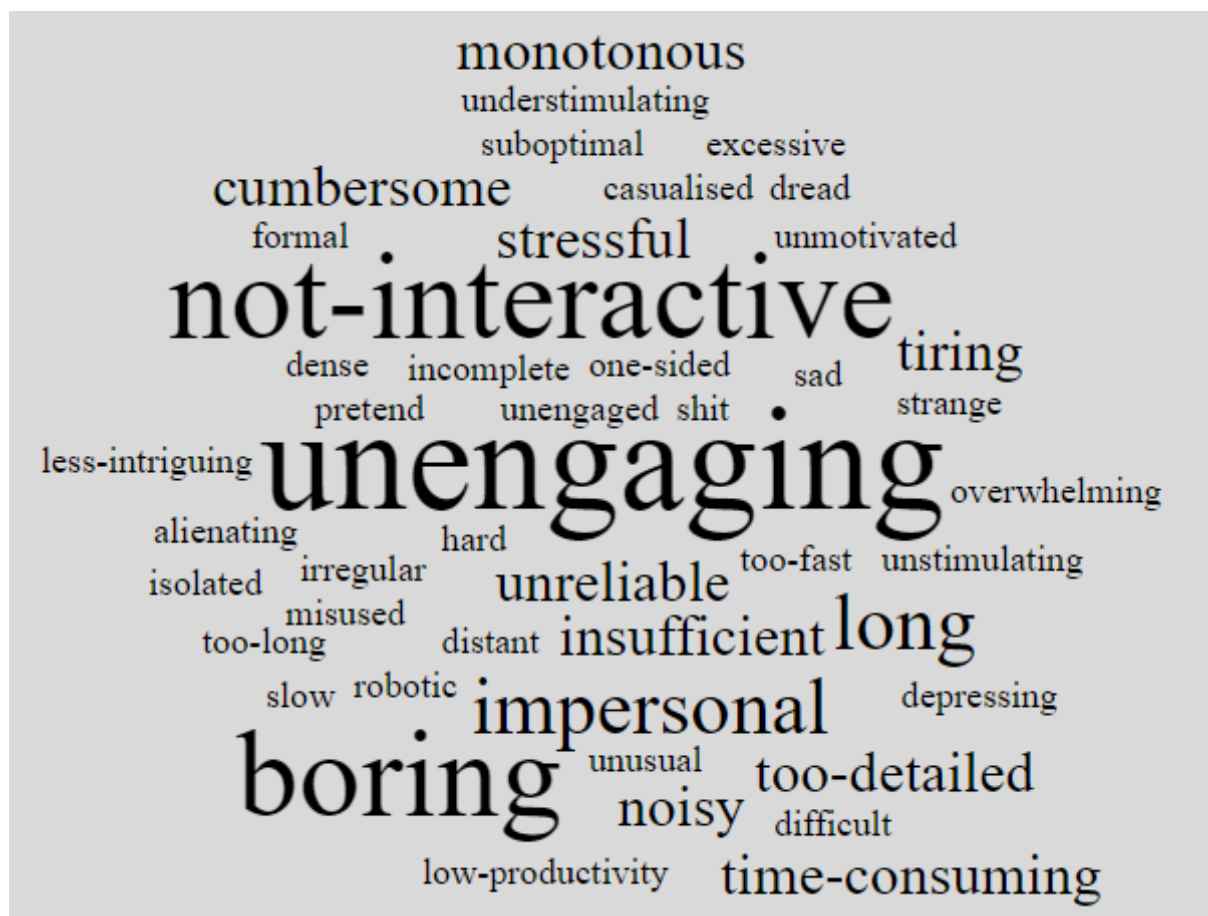
8. References

Humphries, B. and Clark, D. (2021). 'An examination of student preference for traditional didactic or chunking teaching strategies in an online learning environment'. Research in Learning Technology, 29, 1-12.

9. Appendix

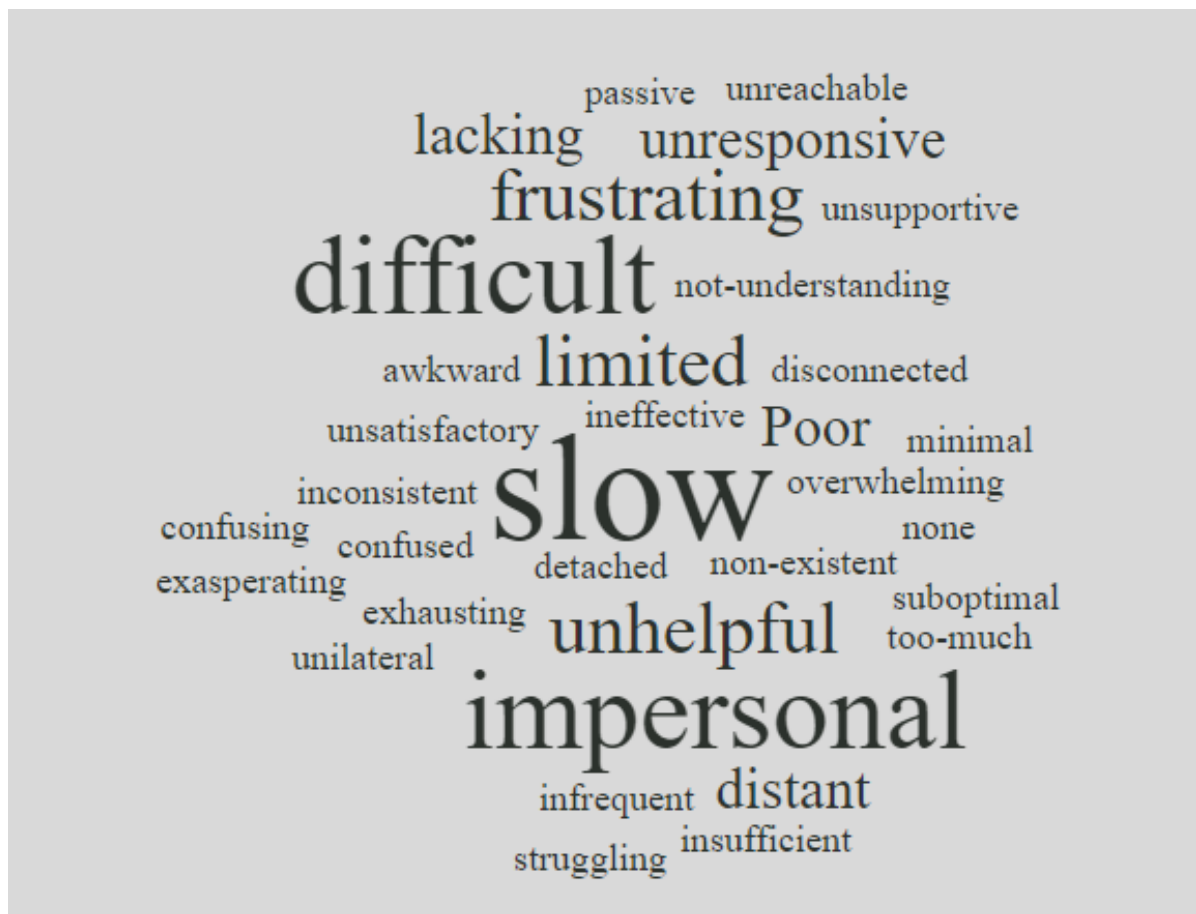The following consists of larger versions of all word clouds from this evaluation.

9.1 Satisfaction with pre-recorded videos (negative)

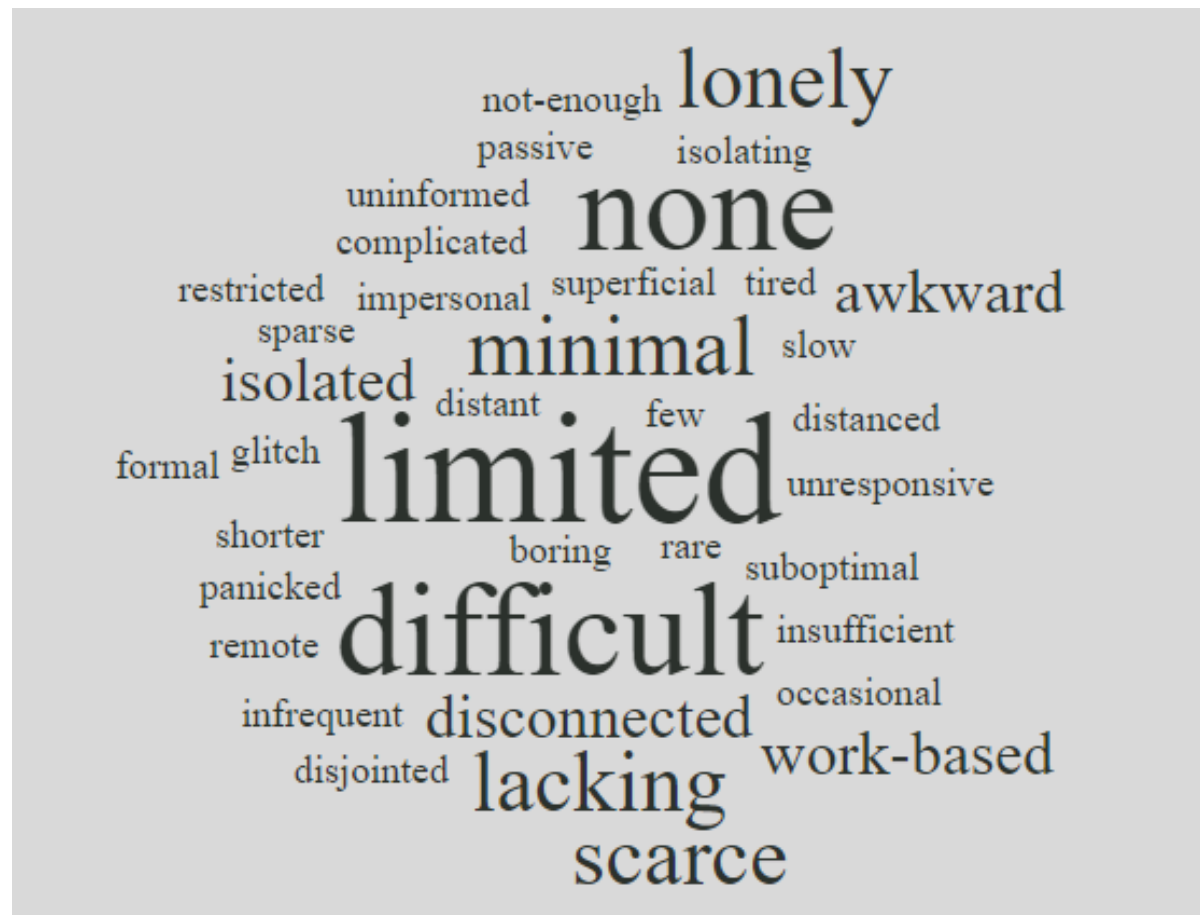## 9.2 Satisfaction with pre-recorded videos (positive)

9.3 Communication with academics (negative)

9.4 Communication with academics (positive)

9.5 Communication with fellow students (negative)

9.6 Communication with fellow students (positive)