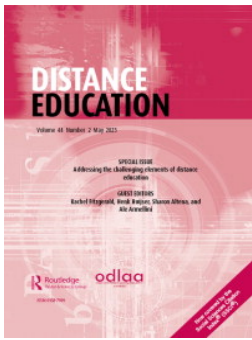


# It feels real: events management and online experiential learning in COVID-19.

GOLDIE, K., IRONSIDE, R. and PIRIE, E.

2023

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



## “It feels real”: Events management and online experiential learning in COVID-19

Katherine Goldie, Rachael Ironside & Elliot Pirie

To cite this article: Katherine Goldie, Rachael Ironside & Elliot Pirie (2023) “It feels real”: Events management and online experiential learning in COVID-19, *Distance Education*, 44:2, 230-245, DOI: [10.1080/01587919.2023.2198490](https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2023.2198490)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2023.2198490>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 30 Apr 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 788






View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## “It feels real”: Events management and online experiential learning in COVID-19

Katherine Goldie , Rachael Ironside , and Elliot Pirie 

School of Creative & Cultural Business, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experience of students transitioning between online and in-person live event projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon longitudinal qualitative data collected over a 3-year period, we explored how students perceived the challenges, their own development, and the pedagogical changes. Events management pedagogy relies on experiential learning and the hosting of student-led in-person events. The absence of in-person events and teaching had a significant negative impact on students, not caused by the adjustment to learning environment or assessment but by the act of change itself. Students ultimately recognized the value of experiential learning online and the benefits of developing digital skills, communication, resilience, adaptability, and confidence, leading to the embedding of online communications and virtual elements within 2022's live event projects. This paper considers the lessons learned from transitioning between in-person and digital event projects and evaluates the future of online tools for experiential learning in higher education.

### ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 31 August 2022  
Accepted 21 February 2023

### KEYWORDS

online experiential learning;  
collaborative online  
learning; events  
management; experiential  
learning; online learning;  
events management

## Introduction

The importance of experiential learning in the delivery of events management education is well established in academic scholarship (Christian et al., 2021). The practical application of events management skills and engagement with industry are considered critical alongside theoretical and critical thinking (Getz, 2002). Live projects that encourage experience-based learning are particularly prevalent in events management courses offering students the opportunity to develop personal and professional skills and overcome the perceived knowledge-practice gap of vocationally orientated degree courses (Lamb, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the diminished capacity for face-to-face delivery and the change to online and hybrid forms of teaching had a significant impact on the delivery of higher education (Hu, 2021), made worse for events management programs where the hosting of in-person events and experiential

CONTACT Rachael Ironside  [r.j.ironside@rgu.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.ironside@rgu.ac.uk)

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

learning projects is critical (Park & Jones, 2021). Furthermore, the events industry faced significant challenges between 2020 and 2022 with many events canceled, postponed, or shifting to a virtual capacity. The reduced number of events also had wider impacts for the supply chain, hospitality, and tourism industries; third-sector fundraising efforts; and employment, which fell by approximately 35% (Business Visits and Events Partnership, 2021). Events education draws heavily on industry partnerships and projects to provide experiential learning opportunities, including placements, industry experience, mentorship, and the design and management of live events. Furthermore, the ability to host student-led events is reliant on strong relationships with the wider hospitality, tourism, and cultural industries which were facing similar challenges. Despite these challenges, changes to the industry also presented new opportunities for event professionals and events education. Many organizations pivoted to virtual events leading to the development of new technology and changing consumer attitudes toward digital alternatives, an industry expected to grow annually by 23.2% from 2020 to 2027 (MacRae, 2021). For events management courses, this signaled a shift in mindset from prioritizing in-person events toward understanding that pedagogy needed to reflect a changing, virtual events industry.

This paper examines the experience of students transitioning between online and in-person student-led live event projects as part of two undergraduate modules, Live Festival Management and Live Client Event Project at Robert Gordon University (RGU), across the academic years 2019–2020, 2020–2021, and 2021–2022. By incorporating online teaching, virtual assessment, and online collaborative learning practices, both modules adapted to offer experiential learning opportunities, with virtual events replacing in-person events in 2020 and 2021, before a return to in-person events in 2022. Drawing upon longitudinal qualitative data collected from six student focus groups hosted over a 3-year period from 2020 to 2022, we explore how students perceived the challenges, pedagogical changes, and their own personal and professional development within these modules. Our findings reflect on the challenges and benefits of collaborative online learning (Altınay, 2017; Capdeferro & Romero, 2012; Connon & Pirie, 2022; Teo et al., 2021) and how the students' experience of tangibility impacted their motivation, participation, and value perception. By evaluating the student experience across 3 years, we consider the lessons learned from transitioning between in-person and digital event projects and consider the future of online tools for experiential learning in higher education. This paper will firstly address the conceptual framework that informs the study and outline the methodology; this is followed by a results and discussion section divided into three thematic areas and conclusions.

## Literature review

### *Events management education pre-COVID*

The field of events management education has grown rapidly in recent years (Kashef, 2015). According to the UCAS website (2023), there are currently 421 United Kingdom university-level courses offering a degree specializing in, or with components of, events management. As Ryan (2016) identified, the study of events is multifaceted with courses offering teaching in a range of areas including event operations,

marketing, sponsorship and fundraising, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. To capture the complexity of events management education, models such as the Events Management Body of Knowledge have been used to conceptualize pedagogical requirements and “set the stage for development of practice standards that will lead to the legitimacy of event management as a true profession” (Rutherford Silvers et al., 2006, p. 195). Accordingly, many events courses have been developed using this framework to offer a range of theoretical and practical modules. However, the Events Management Body of Knowledge has been criticized for its vocational and holistic approach (Barron & Leask, 2012). Hands-on learning and industry-based projects are seen as critical to events management education (Ryan, 2016). However, Getz (2002) raised concerns about focusing too heavily on the practical aspects of events courses, arguing for the value of a balance with conceptual, higher-level thinking which can “in turn, lead to a more extensive knowledge base and greater accreditation of academic programs, and therefore a higher professional status for practitioners” (p. 22).

Despite some criticism, events management courses draw heavily upon forms of experiential learning (McDonald & McDonald, 2000) and engagement with industry practitioners, which helps student to engage with the collective impact of their work (Kania et al., 2014). This includes periods of work in industry, placements, and live event projects (Berridge, 2007). The value of experiential learning for events management education is critical for students and industry. Learning in real-life industry settings helps narrow the gap between education and industry need (Eade, 2010) and helps students connect with industry for learning and future graduate opportunities (Rohm et al., 2021). Within the context of this study, the two modules provided tangible opportunity in the planning, organization, and delivery of an event following an industry brief, facilitating the development of skills such as problem-solving, strategy and people management, and communication—all within the contextualization of wider conceptual and academic discourse.

### ***Teaching and learning practice during COVID-19***

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a global lockdown in March 2020 with many countries enforcing stay-at-home rules for working, study, and recreation (Teo et al., 2021). For higher education, the inability to host in-person classes, or enforced social distancing, led to a transition to online and blended modes of teaching and learning. As Vongkulluksn et al. (2018) have recognized, digital education differs significantly from conventional teaching methods. Although content may remain somewhat similar, teaching in a digital environment is not a simple transition and requires an understanding of how to implement online pedagogy (Almazova et al., 2020). Despite an acknowledgment by researchers (Keengwe et al., 2008) that staff professional development in online teaching is important, the rapid development of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns meant little time for development opportunities (Sia & Adamu, 2020). Academic staff were required to adapt to new modes of online teaching practice with little time for transitional training. As Karalis and Raikou (2020) reflected, although this change to teaching delivery meant a transition to distance education,

per se, many of these were emergency arrangements more akin to emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) than traditional distance education modes or models.

Likewise, students were required to adapt quickly to new ways of learning. Statistics from UNESCO suggest that 90% of learners had their delivery affected by the pandemic (Teo et al., 2021) with many students moving to fully online modes of learning without a period of transition or adjustment. Subsequent research suggests that the shift to online learning was met with a mixed response from students. Given the impact of COVID-19 on everyday life, online learning provided some optimism for students who were able to continue studies albeit through a different mode of learning (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). Similarly, the benefits of cost-saving and time-saving were observed as a key value for students who no longer needed to commute to campus (Maunder, 2018), as was the flexible access to content (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). However, the inability to socialize with classmates and to partake in the wider university experience was considered a significant and often debilitating challenge for many students (Potra et al., 2021). Furthermore, issues with technology, communication, and engagement were reported (Stevanović et al., 2021). In addition to the upheaval facing all students, the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Events Management students at RGU had their practical modules fundamentally reimagined with limited time to adapt and missing out on a pivotal rite of passage (Hensley, 2019) normally associated with a degree in their discipline. The move to online delivery in 2020 led to shift from planned in-person events, with only a 2-month period for this change in planning, organization, delivery, and wider issues affecting student engagement, communication, and motivation for these new changes.

### ***Collaborative online learning***

Scholars recognize the online environment provides an opportunity for collaborative learning (Sia & Adamu, 2020). The integration of collaborative projects into distance education is considered beneficial in promoting a sense of social presence, reducing loneliness, and improving motivation and satisfaction (Lei & Medwell, 2021). Since the early 2000s, academic research has focused on the role of computer-mediated communication including online forums, email, and conferencing systems. Research has extended to the wider use of tools such as social media (Kurni & Saritha, 2021) and mobile technology (Dwikoranto et al., 2020), and their effectiveness as a tool for collaboration among students. Although the importance of tools and systems used for online collaboration are acknowledged, the interaction between peers and academic staff is considered integral to constructing a positive learning experience (Chen & Tsai, 2009). As Altınay (2017) outlined, “supporting a collaborative learning environment through socially constructed knowledge and interaction among peers is a critical dimension for learning and growth” (p. 317). For students, collaborating in online environments may present challenges due to the perceived distance between student, peers, and teaching staff. Common group work issues, including an imbalance in individual contribution, unshared goals and problems with negotiation, and an inability to disconnect, may feel exaggerated in the online environment (Franconi & Naumowicz, 2021). Students may find it more challenging to work with people they do not know

well, leading to increased stress and frustration (Curtis & Lawson, 2001). As Chiu et al. (2021) have acknowledged, online environments also require a higher degree of self-regulation and motivation from students.

Research suggests, therefore, that successful implementation of online collaborative learning is reliant on several factors, including reliable and easy-to-use technology, a supportive and familiar group of peers, and consistent instructor support and feedback (Magen-Nagar & Shonfeld, 2018). A range of online tools were used by staff in the rapid transition to home-based learning, including social media platforms, virtual learning environment forums, and Zoom; however, Connon and Pirie (2022) identified Microsoft Teams as having the greatest effectiveness from both staff and student perspectives. Within the live events modules, the teaching team employed a variety: Zoom for online live lectures, Panopto for prerecorded content, and Microsoft Teams for group interactions and collaborative online working.

## Methodology

Despite the increasing number of studies focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 within higher education, there has been limited investigation, thus far, that captures the evolving nature of these over the duration of the pandemic. With primary data collected over three academic cycles, this study's longitudinal approach addresses this gap. Given the mutable nature of the pandemic and the various implications this brought at different stages of the study, an exploratory and flexible approach was required for the research design; although the research draws on key areas of the nascent literature to give structure, it also allows the data to lead to the creation of theory, rather than attempting to prove predetermined outcomes (Bryman et al., 2021). An interpretivist, inductive approach (Cresswell & Cresswell 2017) allowed us to explore the students' subjective, personal views, attitudes, and opinions (Turner & Pirie, 2015), building on literature to identify concepts and theory from the findings (Patton, 2002). Due to this research paradigm, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate, specifically the use of in-depth focus groups where we explored the respondents' views, opinions, and attitudes (Kvale, 1994) toward the impact of the pandemic on their experience of events management education, specifically in the delivery of live group projects.

Respondents were selected using a purposive nonprobability approach, that is, anyone who was able to purposively inform the research and is affected by the phenomena could be part of the sample (Silverman, 2013), accordingly students in the third and fourth years of studying Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Events Management at RGU were given the opportunity to take part in the research and voluntarily engaged with the process. This led to a total of 23 participants over the three cycles, with two focus groups being conducted each year. Across the 3 years, the cohorts available for sampling consisted of 32 fourth-year students and 24 third-year students in 2020; 21 third-year students in 2021; 18 fourth-year students in 2022. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 24. Informed consent was gained, and all data anonymized and handled in accordance with RGU's ethical protocol.

Although the conversations were kept open deliberately, key areas of discussion were identified and honed over the three cycles (2020: C1, 2021: C2, 2022: C3). These discussions differed in context due to the specific phase of the pandemic and the resultant impact this had had on the delivery of each participant's (P) studies at the time:

- 2020 (C1): Students at the time were 1 month away from delivering live in-person events as part of assessed projects which they then had to adapt to a digital event delivery.
- 2021 (C2): Students had not yet experienced practical or digital event delivery as part of their studies but had spent 1 year in the online teaching environment.
- 2022 (C3): Students were able to deliver live in-person events but had experienced digital delivery through online teaching methods for a 2-year period only.

The discussions covered a variety of themes, including perceptions, understanding, and engagement with change; communication in online and physical environments; group work and staff supervision in online and physical environments; teaching methods in online and physical formats; skills and knowledge development around all practices; the learning and assessment experience for students. The focus groups (FG) were all conducted on Microsoft Teams, after which, thematic coding from the verbatim transcriptions allowed for a structured evaluation of the qualitative data.

## Results and discussion

### *Response to change*

From 2020 to 2022, students on the course faced several changes to the live event modules. In 2020, the delivery and event projects shifted to a fully online format half-way through the semester. This required students to transition their event concepts, due to be delivered in person, to a virtual model in under 4 weeks. In 2021, online delivery continued; however, the students had primarily received events education in the context of in-person delivery. This required them to change their thinking to deliver live events in the new virtual format. In 2022, students had previously delivered an online festival in third year, the shift back to in-person events in fourth year required a change in mindset to transition previous virtual learning to a physical environment. Over this 3-year period, it was apparent that students' (frequently negative) experience of these changes was often not caused by the change in learning environment or assessment itself, but rather the emotional response to the act of change, with students identifying the "new" as a cause of anxiety and disappointment, leading to a negative impact on their mental well-being:

It was just like oh this is going to be a really good opportunity to like get a bit of practice in with in-person events so for me it was just like the disappointment of another opportunity lost. (C2FG1P1)

I guess a bit like kind of gutted maybe because like in first year and stuff when we were really we were kind of almost building up to be able to do the physical event in 3rd year and then obviously COVID and then we're little might not be able to do that and then obviously it ended up being virtual. (C3FG1P2)



The initial change was experienced most profoundly in 2020: with the move from planned live events to virtual events, students reported a range of negative emotions when they heard about the change and reflected on how this impacted their ability to engage with change in a constructive manner. The disappointment at no longer being able to run their planned events and the overall uncertainty at the time in turn had a negative impact on their peer support and interactions, damaging the perceived worth of the virtual event substitutes, despite their own inherent experiential learning value:

I felt a little bit like almost unmotivated but because everything had been put in place so far was going to have to change. And it was kind of difficult to get out head round the new format of it and em it was just a big change to start with. (C1FG2P2)

I think what my biggest stress was actually encouraging and reassuring others in the team that our event and the sort of content of our event would work in a digital format. So, eh that took a lot of time to just deal with that sort of group negativity. (C1FG1P1)

Although the change in 2020 had a negative emotional effect, this was understood in terms of the COVID-19 environment. COVID-19 has had a proven impact on the subjective learning environments of students (Hu, 2021), adding exacerbated life stresses: “It was like in the middle of things and just had no time to get used to coronavirus and everything that is going on” (C1FG2P2). Students across all 3 years felt worry about the uncertainty of their industry (Business Visits and Events Partnership, 2021): “I had never really heard of digital events or seen any happen” (C1FG1P5). Although new assessments provided an opportunity for relative industry exposure and the continuation of experiential learning, this may not have provided them with the perceived rite of passage required as a student to provide them with a transformation of learner to industry professional (Hensley, 2019). This fear of “value learning” was mirrored across all years: “to change all aspects online stressed everyone out” (C1FG2P1). Equally, the learning environment was not perceived to be a conducive space: “I don’t like working at my home environment, there is too many other things to distract” (C2FG2P3).

An accumulation of these perceptions to change, manifested in student group identity creating resistance and a collective impact, particularly in 2020 and 2021 (Kania et al., 2014). Students recognized this as a barrier to engaging with change: “Most people were feeling the same emotions ... disappointment ... it took a while before we could get past that” (C2FG2P2). Acceptance and engagement with the new format of delivery and assessment required individual growth and a collective positive mindset coupled with leadership (Chen & Tsai, 2009). Once students began to engage with the new process, they were able to understand its value and start to enjoy the experience reflecting on how “it got better as we went on” (C2FG1P1).

I was shocked at how much I learnt as well and like there is stuff learning like how to use like social media tools to market properly. And em I also think that with this digital event like it was literally all down to us. So, it felt really rewarding. (C1FG1P4)

In 2022 where students were transitioning into a more known environment, it was noteworthy that they still went through these changes in emotion, with the fear of change again coming to the fore:

It put a spanner in the works to everything. I think it was a confusing time to do an event and not knowing the future. Obviously, you plan ahead and everything but you never know what could happen. (C3FG2P3)

I think because I hadn't really run a physical event myself before. I think I was maybe a little bit worried kind of transferring some of the skills. (C3FG1P2)

As such, despite the change being met with "excitement" (C3FG1P1), that is, moving back to in-person events, change in and of itself required an adaptation of the students' mindset and approach to learning.

Ultimately, students recognized that their response to change was influenced by a range of internal and external factors. Engaging with change required self-motivation and this was often challenged in a collaborative online environment where peer networks sometimes had a negative effect on individual motivation, as one student reflected, "[It] took a lot of time to deal with the group negativity and find that reassurance to understand the information from yourselves" (C1FG1P1). However, engaging with change was also facilitated by online collaborative tools and networks. Students reflected on the positive support offered by lecturers through platforms such as Microsoft Teams, which enabled them to access advice and support from the teaching team quickly, in addition to online workshops and content delivery:

I think the lecturers were really supportive, like I would normally get really worked up about things and messages, and I'd probably get a message within 5 minutes of either of the lecturers. (C2FG1P3)

Furthermore, students were able to seek help from peers, which facilitated the transition to a digital format: "[It] has been really helpful to kind of get, the knowledge and skills of other people in the group. And the wider teams as well, and to learn from them" (C2FG1P2).

### ***Experiencing (in)tangibility***

A loss of tangibility, with a move to remote delivery and lack of face-to-face engagement on campus, was felt by students across the globe (Hu, 2021). In 2020 and 2021, the absence of tangible, real events to work toward had a profound effect on events management students. For some, this generated a sense of loss at the inability to host in-person events recognizing that, "on the physical side of things ... there is a lot more weight to it" (C2FG2P1). In addition, students found it challenging (in 2020) to conceptualize the change to a digital format from their original physical event plans:

Eh yeah, like when we like you guys said oh yeah it's a digital event we thought what and our group kinda freaked out a little because ours was a gin tasting. How can that be digital? (C1FG2P2)

Obviously, our original event idea was an afternoon tea so were just like uh we are going to have to come up with a new idea and we were stressed as a group. (C1FG2P4)

For students, working in an uncertain environment and using unfamiliar online tools to run digital events made the project more challenging. Accordingly, the reality of planning for events in this new environment resulted in some feeling underprepared: "[It was] quite daunting to be honest ... once we figured out how much we had to do" (C2FG2P4). The increased need for resilience, student-directed learning, and a less structured approach to teaching led to a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning: "I had to figure out how to do this" (C2FG2P2), that is, students increasingly

felt that they had to discover aspects of the process independently. Furthermore, the lack of literature on virtual events, crisis management, and virtual event pedagogy led to a degree of self-reliance: “There is not a lot of literature of textbooks or anything ... so well it was like we had to set own standards” (C2FG1P3). Only through self-directed learning using a variety of self-scaffolding tools were the students able to advance (Teo et al., 2021). The online environment in this sense was particularly challenging for students in understanding how to source the digital learning they needed to create an online event. However, despite a perceived lack of tangibility students also reflected on how real their projects felt in the latter stages:

We were very very shocked by the amount of people who participated in the event ... and how much there was to do ... surprised at how rewarding it felt. (C1FG1P4)

For students in 2022 who had hosted both virtual and in-person events, the difference of experience was noticeable:

Like it didn't feel like a real event. It just felt like we're just doing this whereas the physical it was real. It was like this is actually happening. (C3FG1P1)

I think the virtual, it was a lot more difficult to kind of get excited about your event and almost didn't really feel real and you kind of go into like autopilot ... where as, in the in-person, you're a lot more engaged. It feels real. It it's happening. (C3FG1P2)

With the return to physical events, students reflected on how the greater levels of tangibility created a different form of engagement and learning for them: “For the physical you're a lot more responsible early on for a lot more people” (C3FG2P2). It was apparent in 2022 that the physical environment felt more real, and this was perceived as leading to more obvious skill development: “With a physical event you're actually in front of people, whereas with virtual ... you weren't actually seeing them ... so with the physical I definitely could improve my confidence” (C3FG2P2).

In addition to experiencing differences organizing virtual and live events, students also reported challenges related to the intangibility of group work in an online environment. Although the teaching team provided access to class and private communication channels via Microsoft Teams, students developed a variety of their own methods to manage communication, which worked to their individual and collective needs. Many found the online environment provided a space for collaborative learning (Sia & Adamu, 2020) and particularly for the 2020 students gave a sense of social presence to ease loneliness (Lei & Medwell, 2021). However, others found the lack of physical meetings challenging, leading to miscommunication and misinterpretation among group members (Rohm et al., 2021).

I definitely for one felt it was more challenging because something you write in a message may not and sometimes does not mean what you would say in a verbal situation ... so it's just sometimes I do just think you need that face to face. (C2FG1P1)

I think it just gave more a level of feel of professionalism as well if we were talking face to face rather than online ... for me I find it difficult to get what I am trying to say across in message. (C2FG1P4)

Students reported that the lack of structure and time constraints evident in face-to-face meetings led to issues with the increased quantity of communications (Dwikoranto et al., 2020): “There was continued use of social media chat ... was really

stressful as it never stopped, always thinking about the event” (C1FG2P4). For some, this engagement was beneficial; however, it also created challenges for managing time: “We would communicate until it was 1am ... it felt hard to switch off and just get on because we knew we could be at home and communicate ... hard to say no” (C2FG1P2). Remote learning and the absence of physical meetings in class resulted in a loss of boundaries between study, work, and social life and an inability to disconnect (Franconi & Naumowicz, 2021). The use of multiple platforms for communication, particularly social media, also led to confusion (Yustina et al., 2020) and a requirement for students to learn how to self-regulate and develop structure and boundaries within their groups.

The online environment was, however, perceived by students to have increased benefits when engaging with supervision and lecturer support. Despite the perceived distance between student and teacher, platforms such as Microsoft Teams that enabled the tagging of staff and provided a messenger-type function reassured students: “The Microsoft Teams chat was really helpful as not like as much stress as sending the email. It is like texting ... you guys reply super quick ... it was reassuring” (C1FG2P5). In some ways, students perhaps took advantage of this change, expecting speedier responses with the lines of education and home blurring, aligning to Connon and Pirie (2022). Students evidently needed this support to address their anxiety about the project; however, this did cause issues with supervisors unable to disconnect from students, as they became more reliant on this mode of communication (Franconi & Naumowicz, 2021). Arguably, the engagement of online tools especially in the first year of adapting to virtual events was crucial in providing a sense of connectivity and with this a growth mindset to engage with changes: “gave us so much clarity about how to actually do a digital event” (C1FG1P5).

In 2022, students experienced in-person group and supervision sessions and were still required to use the Microsoft Teams platform for collaborative online project work. Students reported that the usefulness of these formats changed as the project progressed. In-person meetings helped to establish a group work dynamic and creative setting for holistic project management and conceptualization, while the online environment worked better for structured progress and regular catch-up meetings to stay on track (Sherwin, 2020). It is evident that students wanted to be able to control communications with an optional multifaceted and self-guided approach. Whereas the physical environment provided a stronger sense of tangibility and structure, this did lose the spontaneity that the online setting provided with ease of access to peers and staff (Connon & Pirie 2022).

### ***Personal and professional development***

Practical event projects are considered a contingent element of events management education, providing experiential learning opportunities and the development of professional skills (Park & Jones, 2021). Despite an initial hesitation from students to embrace online event projects in 2020 and 2021, findings suggest that the perceived value of the learning experience was recognized as the modules progressed, aligning with the study of Altinay (2017). Students increasingly understood how participating

in online forms of experiential learning, in this case learning how to run digital events, helped toward narrowing the knowledge-practice gap (Lamb, 2015) of their degree course, particularly in an evolving event environment. For many students, the opportunity to host a digital event helped them to develop skills that they felt would be relevant in the future events industry and in wider professional contexts:

Just because digital events aren't happening now that doesn't say that ten years, it wouldn't become the normal to just host digital events. So, this is giving us the skills already that some people will only be learning in the next few years. We have already got ahead of it and we already have an understanding of it, so we will be able to teach other people how to properly do it. (C1FG1P1)

I think for me the only thing I have learnt that is different is how to communicate with people virtually ... [at] some point in your working career you are going to have to interact with people who are just an office down the road from you or you know wherever that may be and I think that is a really important skill. (C1FG1P3)

Importantly, students also reflected on the wider skills they had developed. Learning how to be adaptable was depicted as a key pillar throughout all years: "Learning just to adapt to different environments because it's something I am going to need as an events planner in the future" (C1FG2P1) as well as the capacity to develop "self-resilience" (C1FG1P1) and being "open to learning new things" (C1FG2P4). Communication was also recognized as an important skill developed both practically in relation to the use of multiple online platforms, and in building team relationships through effective communication. As one student recognized, the scope of hard and soft skills developed because of adapting to the changing event environment, offered real opportunities after graduation:

Like if you went to a job interview and you said you did this sort of thing and you were resilient, you learnt communication, you have digital skills like there is so much we developed. (C2FG2P3)

By the end of the online event projects, students recognized the value of experiential learning in a digital capacity and suggested that this form of learning should form a core part of the events management degree course:

I just want to say, I feel like this should be part of the live festival module as of now ... I think it would be good for other students in the future as well to like have that aspect of platform. Even in like third year and do a live event in fourth year, because then it means like you are getting the best of both worlds and event platforms. (C1FG1P4)

This was further supported by students in 2022. For them, despite the initial disappointment of hosting a virtual event in third year, they were able to recognize the value of the experience and the transferrable skills developed for hosting an in-person event in fourth year:

Virtual event good for learning skills like time management ... personal discipline ... then physical event transcended that into hard like stakeholder management and actual live event delivery. (C3FG2P2)

Overall, while the students' response to changing learning and assessment formats across the 3-year period was met with some resistance, and students encountered challenges with navigating changes in the tangibility of their learning experience, on

reflection they were able to recognize the value of online experiential learning as a temporary substitute for live events during COVID-19. Furthermore, these skills were considered valuable beyond their substitutional merit with students recognizing that the changing professional environment required a broader range of digital and meta skills.

## Conclusions

For academic staff and students, the transition between the “normal” delivery of live event projects to a “new” form of online experiential learning was not planned or intended in the context of this study, more akin to what Hodges et al. (2020) described as emergency remote teaching. Arguably, the findings of this study are too contextualized to the COVID-19 environment; however, its longitudinal nature presents interesting findings in respect to how students respond to changes in experiential learning practice, particularly in the context of online collaborative projects. Students encountered a range of challenges akin to previous studies, including issues with communication, self-motivation, and time management (Capdeferro & Romero, 2012; Chiu et al., 2021). They also reported difficulties adapting to change and motivating themselves and others to participate in the context of new and evolving environments. These challenges were often exacerbated by a multidimensional loss of tangibility which extended to the absence of physical events and the lack of physical connectivity with staff and peers. This impacted the perceived value of online experiential learning as a substitute for in-person event delivery. However, this study suggests that these perceptions were often embedded in an initial emotional response to change and altered as collaborative online projects progressed. Across all year groups, students were able to articulate by the end of the project the range of personal and professional skills they had developed. By understanding how these skills related to their future careers and the events industry, students were able to understand the value of experiential learning in an online environment recognizing the benefits of developing digital skills, communication, and confidence in a new setting. Further, meta skills such as resilience, adaptability, and openness to change were all considered valuable learning experiences.

On reflection of these findings, the teaching team recognize lessons learned for the delivery of future online experiential learning in a collaborative environment. Firstly, although students found adapting to change challenging this was aided by access to teaching staff and peer group support. As such, in support of previous studies (Altınay, 2017; Chen & Tsai, 2009; Connon & Pirie, 2022) fostering a supportive online community to share knowledge and best practice and ask questions was integral to developing connectivity and confidence in students. Secondly, structured online platforms that encourage social as well as professional communication can aid in balancing the desire for flexibility with the need for professional boundaries during online group work activities. Initially, students found it challenging to transition to Microsoft Teams, preferring social media networks. However, once they understood how to use the platform, this became a valuable tool for online discussion, file sharing and accessing peer and academic staff support, an approach now embedded as part of live-event

modules. Finally, the perceived value of online experiential learning was only realized when students could align their skill development with professional practice. Communicating the inherent value of online experiential projects for personal and professional development, inclusive of industry-relevant and meta skills, can help to foster collective motivation and participation.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all of the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Events Management students at Robert Gordon University who took part in this study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was declared by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Katherine Goldie* is a lecturer at Robert Gordon University, Scotland. Her teaching lays within the discipline of events management and marketing and co-delivers the practical and academic development projects for the undergraduate events students across all stages.

*Rachael Ironside* is a senior lecturer and course leader of the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Events Management course at Robert Gordon University, Scotland. Her research focuses primarily on the role of supernatural folklore and how it impacts our experience and understanding of place and cultural heritage.

*Elliot Pirie* is an academic strategic lead and researcher at Robert Gordon University, Scotland. His research interests focus on e-retail, specifically within the musical instrument trade, and more broadly in consumer psychology and online pedagogy.

## ORCID

Katherine Goldie  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-5213-8568>

Rachael Ironside  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2513-0998>

Elliot Pirie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5849-0119>

## References

- Almazova, N., Krylova, E., Rubtsova, A., & Odinkaya, M. (2020). Challenges and opportunities for Russian higher education amid COVID-19: Teachers' perspective. *Education Sciences*, 10(12), Article 10120368. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10120368>
- Altınay, Z. (2017). Evaluating peer learning and assessment in online collaborative learning environments. *Behaviour and Information Technology*, 36(3), 312–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2016.1232752>
- Barron, P., & Leask, A. (2012). Events management education. In S. J. Page & J. Connell (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of events* (pp. 473–488). Routledge.
- Berridge, G. (2007). *Events design and experience*. Routledge.
- Bryman, A., Clark, T., Foster, L., & Sloan, L. (2021). *Bryman's social research methods* (6th ed). Oxford University.
- Business Visits and Events Partnership. (2021). *The shape of events: A report by the Business Visits & Events Partnership*. <https://bit.ly/3muyzSO>



- Capdeferro, N., & Romero, M. (2012). Are online learners frustrated with collaborative learning experiences? *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(2), 26–44. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i2.1127>
- Chen, Y. C., & Tsai, C. C. (2009). An educational research course facilitated by online peer assessment. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(1), 105–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290802646297>
- Chiu, T. K., Lin, T. J., & Lonka, K. (2021). Motivating online learning: The challenges of COVID-19 and beyond. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 30(3), 187–190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00566-w>
- Christian, D., McCarty, D. L., & Brown, C. L. (2021). Experiential education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A reflective process. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 34(3), 264–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2020.1813666>
- Connon, N., & Pirie, E. (2022). Home-based learning (HBL) in higher education post-COVID: An analysis from staff and student perspectives. *Journal of Innovation in Polytechnic Education*, 4(1), 45–50. <https://jipe.ca/index.php/jipe/article/view/107/51>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Curtis, D., & Lawson, M. (2001). Exploring collaborative online learning. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(1), 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v5i1.1885>
- Dwikoranto, D., Setiani, R., Prahani, B. K., & Mubarak, H. (2020). Mobile learning to improve student collaborative skills: An alternative to online learning in the era of COVID-19 pandemic. *Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengkajian Ilmu Pendidikan: e-Saintika*, 4(3), 259–271. <https://doi.org/10.36312/e-saintika.v4i3.314>
- Eade, L. (2010). *Labour market review of the events industry*. People 1st. <https://bit.ly/3mHAh3C>
- Franconi, A., & Naumowicz, K. (2021). Praca zdalna podczas pandemii COVID-19 i prawo do bycia offline – konsekwencje dla udziału kobiet w cyfrowym świecie pracy [Remote work during COVID-19 pandemic and the right to disconnect – Implications for women’s incorporation in the digital world of work]. *Z Problematyki Prawa Pracy/Polityki Socjalnej*, 19(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.31261/zpppips.2021.19.09>
- Getz, D. (2002). Event studies and event management: On becoming an academic discipline. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 9(1), 12–24.
- Hensley, N. (2019). Passages and pivot points: Experience and education as rites of passage. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 34(4), 27–37. <https://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/718/hensley.pdf>
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2022, March 27). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause REVIEW*. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Hu, Y. H. (2021). Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the online learning behaviors of university students in Taiwan. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27(1), 469–491. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10677-y>
- Kania, J., Hanleybrown, F., & Splansky Juster, J. (2014). Essential mindset shifts for collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 12(4), A2–A5. <https://doi.org/10.48558/VV1R-C414>
- Karalis, T., & Raikou, N. (2020). Teaching at the times of COVID-19: Inferences and implications for higher education pedagogy. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(5), 479–493. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i5/7219>
- Kashef, T. E. (2015). What is the value of event management education? The views of six industry practitioners. *Event Management*, 19(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599515X14229071392828>
- Keengwe, J., Onchwari, G., & Wachira, P. (2008). Computer technology integration and student learning: Barriers and promise. *Science Education and Technology*, 17(6), 560–565. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-008-9123-5>
- Kurni, M., & Saritha, K. (2021). Applying collaborative learning for enhancing the teaching-learning process in online learning through social media. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 16(16), 251–259. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v16i16.23207>



- Kvale, S. (1994). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications.
- Lamb, D. (2015). Learning about events through involvement and participation: The use of experiential and authentic learning experiences. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 6(1), 73–91. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEFM-12-2013-0043>
- Lei, M., & Medwell, J. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student teachers: How the shift to online collaborative learning affects student teachers' learning and future teaching in a Chinese context. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 22(2), 169–179. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-021-09686-w>
- MacRae, D. (2021, June 6). Virtual events set to grow in popularity post-pandemic. *MarketingTech*. <https://bit.ly/3l0qu88>
- Magen-Nagar, N., & Shonfeld, M. (2018). The impact of an online collaborative learning program on students' attitude towards technology. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 26(5), 621–637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2017.1376336>
- Maunder, R. (2018). Students' peer relationships and their contribution to university adjustment: The need to belong in the university community. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(6), 756–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1311996>
- McDonald, D., & McDonald, T. (2000). Festival and event management: An experiential approach to curriculum design. *Event Management*, 6(1), 5–13.
- Park, M., & Jones, T. (2021). Going virtual: The impact of COVID-19 on internships in tourism, events, and hospitality education. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education*, 33(3), 176–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10963758.2021.1907198>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Sage Publications.
- Potra, S., Pugna, A., Pop, M-D., Negrea, R., & Dungan, L. (2021). Facing COVID-19 challenges: 1st year students' experience with the Romanian hybrid higher educational system. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(6), Article 3058. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18063058>
- Rohm, A. J., Stefl, A., & Ward, N. (2021). Future proof and real-world ready: The role of live project-based learning in students' skills development. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 43(2), 204–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02734753211001409>
- Rutherford Silvers, J., Bowdin, G. A., O'Toole, W., & Beard Nelson, K. (2006). Towards an international event management body of knowledge (EMBOK). *Event Management*, 9(4), 185–198. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599506776771571>
- Ryan, W. G. (2016). How do you “do” event management education (EME)? A case study of event management higher education awards. *Event Management*, 20(1), 69–80. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599516X14538326025116>
- Sherwin, H. (2020) Student attitudes towards learning online using Moodle and Zoom. In A. Makkos, P. Kecskés, & G. V. Kövecsesné (Eds.), „Kizökkent világ” Szokatlan és különleges élethelyzetek: a nem-konvencionális, nem “normális”, nem kiszámítható jelenségek korszaka? (pp. 237–245). István Széchenyi University. [https://lib.sze.hu/images/Apaczai/kiadv%C3%A1ny/2020/06\\_01.pdf](https://lib.sze.hu/images/Apaczai/kiadv%C3%A1ny/2020/06_01.pdf)
- Sia, J. K. M., & Adamu, A. A. (2020). Facing the unknown: Pandemic and higher education in Malaysia. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 10(2), 263–275. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-05-2020-0114>
- Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. Sage.
- Stevanović, A., Božić, R., & Radović, S. (2021). Higher education students' experiences and opinion about distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 37(6), 1682–1693. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12613>
- Teo, C. L., Tan, S. C., & Chan, C. K. (2021). Pedagogical transformation and teacher learning for knowledge building: Turning COVID-19 challenges into opportunities. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 47(4), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.21432/cjlt28057>
- Turner, D., & Pirie, E. (2015). Involvement and detachment in critical events research. In I. R. Lamond & L. Platt (Eds.), *Critical event studies: Approaches to research* (pp. 17–36). Palgrave Macmillan.

- UCAS. (2023). *Courses, apprenticeships, information guides and more*. Retrieved March 2, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/3L5h4mn>
- Vongkulluksn, V. W., Xie, K., & Bowman, M. A. (2018). The role of value on teachers' internalization of external barriers and externalization of personal beliefs for classroom technology integration. *Computers & Education, 118*, 70–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2017.11.009>
- Yustina, Y., Syafii, W., & Vebrianto, R. (2020). The effects of blended learning and project-based learning on pre-service biology teachers' creative thinking through online learning in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Jurnal Pendidikan IPA Indonesia, 9*(3), 408–420. <https://doi.org/10.15294/jpii.v9i3.24706>