

Article

“A Common Danger Unites”: Reflecting on Lecturers’ Higher Education Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic Using an Ethnographic Fictional Analysis

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Abstract: The sudden transition of Higher Education (HE) from predominately face-to-face to online delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns placed many lecturers in unfamiliar situations. This study aimed to explore and represent the experiences of lecturers working in HE during this time. We used a storytelling approach to represent an amalgamation of experiences collated from lecturers. Data were collected using (i) a focus group interview, (ii) reflections on our experiences, and (iii) experiences alluded to by academics via online blogs. The data were presented using an ethnographic fiction. Salient experiences detailed throughout the ethnographic fiction include (i) challenges building a community between colleagues, academics, and students; (ii) concerns regarding the capacity of institutions and staff to deliver online; (iii) a lack of synergy between the expectations of staff to fulfil duties and the reality of being able to do so in time; (iv) the challenges of engaging students; (v) concerns regarding the accessibility of online learning for a diverse body of students; and (vi) challenges with work–life balance. The ethnographic fiction provides a voice for HE lecturers who candidly shared their experiences of working during the pandemic. Stakeholders are encouraged to develop their own interpretations of the story and apply these to policy and practice.

**Citation:** Griggs, G.; Heavyside, H.J.

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Reflecting on Lecturers’ Higher Education Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic Using an Ethnographic Fictional Analysis.

Educ. Sci. **2023**, *13*, 1085. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13111085>

Academic Editors: Maria José Sá and Sandro Serpa

Received: 3 August 2023

Revised: 24 October 2023

Accepted: 26 October 2023

Published: 27 October 2023



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Keywords: higher education; COVID-19; creative non-fiction; digitalisation

1. Introduction

While it is estimated that the cost of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic to the United Kingdom (UK) will run into hundreds of billions of GBP [1], the implications of COVID-19 for society are immeasurable [2]. For many working in the UK, government strategies focused around national and localised lockdown, and for those working in education, including those working at universities, this meant enforced building closures [3]. In spite of this, the day-to-day business of learning, teaching, and assessment, for the most part, continued unabated, with many lecturers converting pre-prepared materials into online content at short notice [4,5]. For many, this was an unusual and often disorientating experience [2]; however the voices of those involved have not yet been appropriately captured and represented, and therefore the issues faced by these individuals are not widely acknowledged. Subsequently, to understand the challenges faced, this article aims to give a voice to these individuals by capturing and representing lecturers’ reflections on their experiences of working in Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A potential reason for lecturers not being heard is the fear and uncertainty generated by a lack of job security, with widespread redundancies continuing to sweep through the sector at an alarming rate as projected student numbers fall [6,7]. In such moments, alternative approaches to analysing and commenting must be taken to shine a light on important matters whilst protecting the anonymity of those involved. Consequently, this paper provides an ethnographic fictional analysis of lecturers’ reflections on their experiences working in Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before presenting this ethnographic fiction, the literature is reviewed with respect to (i) the move to virtual

delivery, focusing on digitalisation, competence, and challenges, and (ii) topical issues of student engagement, collegiality, and work–life balance. These topics were informed by an iterative approach consisting of reviewing the available literature on the initial topic of how academics adjusted during the pandemic and underpinning the experiences alluded to throughout the data collection and analysis procedures. Next, the broader methodological landscape of this paper is outlined before culminating in an ethnographic fiction account. Conclusions are drawn, inviting the reader to develop interpretations based on their unique vantage point.

1.1. A Move to Virtual Delivery—Digitalisation, Competence, and Challenge

The 21st century has seen the proliferation of digital technologies, illustrated by the widespread use of mobile devices, social media, and cloud computing [8]. The impact of digitalisation has affected Higher Education, leading to something akin to a digital transformation [9–12], with students having increased expectations that universities utilise digital technologies synonymous with their learning experience [13]. While there has been a deliberate move in this direction, the COVID-19 pandemic thrust Higher Education providers headlong into providing for their students exclusively via digital interfaces [5]. Responses and solutions were many and varied from both institutions and those delivering, and in understanding this complex picture, the dominant focus in the literature has been on both the process of digitalisation within the sector and the educators' digital competence [14]. This is significant to appreciate as competence has been seen to shape the direction and intensity of digitalisation [15,16].

The digital competence of educators is a regular topic of discussion in research and practice [17] and has been the focus of multiple studies [18–20]. Professional digital competence entails the ability to access and employ digital resources for pedagogical purposes [21]. In Higher Education, studies commonly find that lecturers demonstrate variable levels of enthusiasm and capabilities with respect to the use of digital technology and teaching online, which has an impact on the quality of delivery [22,23]. While this was reported to be the case during the COVID-19 pandemic [24], one of the positive consequences of moving to virtual delivery was that many lecturers significantly developed their digital competencies, even if it was out of necessity rather than by strategy or design [25]. While significant challenges were repeatedly noted, the willingness to embrace this change was strongly felt to ensure that students continued to learn under challenging circumstances (see [26–28]). The most notable exception here is a large UK-based study by Watermeyer et al. [2] in which university lecturers painted a less-than-positive experience of the rapid transition to virtual delivery. The UK educators reported higher levels of stress and seemed to have fewer positive experiences than those reported in the other surveys. Given the inconsistency in the findings in this area, further research is needed to enhance our understanding of academics' experiences of transitioning to a virtual platform. Developing our knowledge in this area will enable us to better support colleagues in developing their digital literacy skills in a climate in which Generation Z comprise the dominant generation entering the Higher Education system [29].

1.2. Student Engagement

Challenges in motivating and engaging students in virtual teaching sessions have been widely reported, see [27,30,31], with a majority of staff in agreement that collaboration and interaction with and between students is clearly greater with face-to-face delivery [26,32]. Such a finding is perhaps unsurprising given that academics have strongly entrenched notions of what constitutes effective teaching and learning in Higher Education, having established well-trodden pedagogical identities [33]. Such changes are not always welcome and can be hard to assimilate [30].

The recent landscape has indicated that traditional modes of delivery in the 21st century may no longer be fit for purpose [34,35] and could have contributed to a lack of engagement in the wider lecturer–student relationship [36]. The findings of some studies

have concluded that lecturers may need to change the way in which they interact to make the most significant impact here [37]. The use of a wider array of tools such as quizzes and polls in virtual classrooms are examples that may contribute to addressing some of these challenges [38,39].

1.3. Collegiality

With the move to virtual delivery, concerns were raised that with staff being physically kept apart, they would behave in a less collegiate manner, focusing more on their own immediate needs reflecting their isolation and mental health [40,41]. Despite such concerns, moving to virtual delivery during the pandemic was reported to bring academic communities closer together [26,42]. Such findings build on pre-pandemic work in this area in which virtual environments have been shown to facilitate knowledge sharing amongst the academic community [43,44]. An interesting new finding reported in the current situation is that younger, less experienced members have gained value more rapidly as they generally have been more technologically adept and flexible than their older, more experienced counterparts [2].

1.4. Work–Life Balance

Work–life balance refers to how individuals experience and negotiate the intersection between professional and personal responsibilities [45]. It is a concept of increased importance for the 21st-century workforce [46–48], and “getting it right” has been shown to boost the quality of work [49], psychological well-being [50], and employee commitment [51].

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the workforce, including the education sector, were required to work from home [52,53], which impacted established work–life balance patterns [54]. Studies in this field have overwhelmingly reported a negative impact on Higher Education staff [2,34,55,56]. For example, Watermeyer et al. [2] indicated that the customary parameters which separate work from personal lives were eroded into a timelessness of being permanently on-call to large groups of students. Compulsive working practices continue to be reported, reflective of the “hyper-professionality” [57] that is typical in the sector. This additional time commitment, coupled with the realisation that online preparation is far more time-consuming [58], has significantly impacted those with parental responsibilities [59] and is exacerbated at moments by additional requirements such as enforced home schooling. Many in such circumstances reported their frustration and resentment at being unable to adequately cater to both their students and their own children [2].

2. Methodology and Methods

2.1. Guiding Philosophy

This research was guided by our constructionist epistemology. From this perspective, we assumed that knowledge is constructed by individuals interacting within the social world [60,61] and that the process of understanding involves a shared generation of knowledge between people in relationship [62]. We therefore recognise the active role that we played within this research and acknowledge that the findings presented below are the result of a co-construction of knowledge between ourselves, the participants, and other resources we engaged with throughout the research process [61]. In light of this, we are mindful that our findings represent only *one* interpretation of this topic. In relation to ontology, we assume that our understanding of the world is informed by our own unique experiences [63,64], and subsequently, see the value in capturing and representing experiences from multiple vantage points.

2.2. Research Approach

We used a storytelling approach [65] to represent the challenges academics working in Higher Education experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. We view this approach of data representation to be positioned within a broader narrative-inquiry framework in

which stories are valued for their ability to coherently capture, represent, and make sense of our own and other people's experiences of, and meanings ascribed to, life events [66–68]. This approach aligns with our constructionist epistemology because stories enable people to create and communicate meanings to make sense of their lived experiences [69]. An ethnographic fiction (also referred to as creative non-fiction), defined as “a type of creative analytic practice that tells a story which is grounded in research data and draws on literary conventions” [70] (p. 59), was chosen as the method of storytelling in this research. There are contradictory perspectives amongst academics regarding the term “fiction” when used within scholarly activity [71,72]. We adopted Sparkes [73,74] perspective on ethnographic fiction in that the story which we developed in our research is grounded in systematically collected data on real events and people.

2.3. *Gathering the Data*

The story presented in this manuscript consists of an amalgamation of experiences from academics based at different Higher Education institutions. These experiences were not captured using the traditional methods of recorded and transcribed interviews but were developed in the wake of a series of formal and informal conversations which the authors had with academics during the COVID-19 pandemic and upon the absorption of academics' blogs referring to their experiences with Higher Education during the pandemic. What follows is a description of the methods we used to gather these experiences.

2.3.1. Focus Group

Three academics were recruited via purposive criterion sampling [75] to participate in a focus group. To be eligible for this part of the study, the participants were required to (1) have been working in Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) have networks with others who were working in Higher Education during the pandemic. These criteria were necessary to recruit individuals who could co-construct knowledge relevant to the aims of the study. At the time of data collection, participant one was a 32-year-old female with ten years of experience working as a lecturer in Higher Education and was a mother to a toddler. Participant two was a 51-year-old male with three school-aged children and had worked as a lecturer and course leader in Higher Education for ten years. Participant three was 29 years old and had 5.5 years of experience working in Higher Education as a lecturer.

A focus group method was chosen because of the opportunity to discover novel insights [76] and gather rich, in-depth data about the group members' experiences and perceptions towards a particular phenomenon [77]. We used Krueger's [78] guidelines when deciding on the focus group size, and the participants' backgrounds, the complexity of the topic, and the moderators' levels of expertise were taken into consideration.

The focus group was conversational (i.e., unstructured) to evoke the participants' stories [72], enabling them to communicate their experiences through their own perspectives and on their own terms [79]. In accordance with this, the focus group began with a broad, open-ended question to the participants (i.e., “Tell me about the challenges you and other academics who you have interacted with over the last 12 months have experienced within your role as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic?”). The moderator's role was to encourage interaction between the participants and to guide the discussions [80]; subsequently, whilst they let the dialogue flow between the participants, when appropriate, they followed up on responses with further unstructured questions. The focus group was conducted online via Microsoft® Teams and lasted sixty minutes. It took place in March 2021 during the third national lockdown when Higher Education institutions were required to deliver all content virtually [81]. The focus group was not audio recorded, but both authors made detailed notes during and after, and these notes were included in the data analysis.

2.3.2. Online Blogs

We also drew on experiences disclosed by academics via online blogs. The use of online blogs to access individual narratives has been advocated by academics conducting research in a variety of fields including health, e.g., [82], sport, e.g., [83], and education, e.g., [84]. We obtained relevant blogs using web links provided by the academics who participated in the study's focus groups and by searching Google. We used search phrases including, "lecturers and COVID-19 and blog", "Higher Education and COVID-19 and blog", and "academics and COVID-19 and blog", to locate blogs which were relevant to the aims of this research. The following exclusion criteria were used to eliminate blogs which lacked relevance for the focus of our research: (i) blogs which were not reflective of the study aims and (ii) blogs written by individuals who were not working within Higher Education institutions. When retrieved, blogs which met the inclusion criteria were saved on the second named author's laptop. The blogs included in this research were unsolicited in that we did not request that these blogs were developed for our research because doing this can result in response bias [82]. The blogs were available in the public domain; however, the names of the individuals who wrote the blogs were not included in the story presented below because this story was a composite and included fictional characters. A total of twenty-eight online blogs were included in the sample. We ceased collecting data from the online blogs at the point at which we felt we had gathered enough data to address the aims of our research and develop a complete story representing academics' experiences of working in Higher Education during the pandemic. This approach to data cessation aligns with suggestions from Saunders and colleagues [85]. Data collection for this stage of the project took place from March to September 2021. At this point, the UK was coming out of a national lockdown, with restrictions regarding the number of people at gatherings in place, and only practical sessions were allowed to be delivered face-to-face at University; subsequently, the majority of teaching remained online [81].

2.3.3. Reflections

We also reflected on our own experiences of working in Higher Education during the pandemic. This approach is supported by Selbie and Clough [86], who embedded Selbie's personal and professional experiences within their ethnographic fiction on the educational ideas of Comenius and Isaacs. As part of this, we drew on our recollections of informal conversations that we had with other academics (based at various Higher Education institutions) about their experiences of working during the pandemic. This approach is compatible with our constructionist epistemology and aligns with the characteristics of a narrative inquiry in that humans are assumed to be relational beings, and so the narratives which describe and meanings which we ascribe to our life experiences are achieved via social exchanges and relationships that we have with others [87,88]. We made notes of our reflections, and these notes were used within the data analysis. We engaged in this process from March to September 2021.

2.4. Situating the Authors

Within qualitative research, a researcher's background can influence each stage of the research process [89]. Our biographies and positioning are of particular interest in this paper because we both worked within Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore have first-hand experience of the issues explored within this manuscript. Subsequently, we are situated as "insiders" within the research [90]. Our embodied experiences of working in Higher Education during the pandemic informed the research aims, methodology, methods, and ethnographic fiction, and consequently, we acknowledge that our personal interpretations were omnipresent during each stage of the research [89,91]. We maintained a reflexive stance, making regular reflexive notes [89] and engaging in reflexive discussions, to acknowledge how our subjectivity contributed to the co-construction of knowledge in this paper [72]. What follows is a transparent overview of our biographies

so that you, as readers, can understand the positioning from which we approached the knowledge presented within this manuscript.

The first named author has twenty years of experience in teaching and managing in Higher Education across multiple institutions. He is a father to a teenager who had spells of both being in school and having to manage home learning. He was required to manage an academic team to deliver the provision of Higher Education during the global pandemic.

The second named author has over ten years of experience teaching in Higher Education. She is a mother to a toddler and a school aged-child and was on parental leave with her firstborn at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic was first announced. She returned to work in July 2020. When returning to work, she was faced with the challenge of being a working mother and delivering Higher Education during a global pandemic.

2.5. *Crafting the Story*

To reduce the risk of formulaic, straightforward, and predictable research being “robotically” developed, Smith and colleagues [68,70] advised academics to avoid a facsimile approach when creating ethnographic fictions. Consequently, there are no prescriptive guidelines for creating ethnographic fictions [92]. Instead, it is recommended that academics clearly outline the steps that they take when developing their stories [93]. While developing our ethnographic fiction, we adopted positions of both story analyst and storyteller. Given the complexity surrounding the dichotomy of these terms, researchers can move between perspectives when creating ethnographic fictions [70], and this is a common approach used [94,95].

2.5.1. Stage 1: Inductive Thematic Analysis

We adopted Braun and Clarke’s [96–99] reflexive approach to thematic analysis to organically and recursively explore meaning, and analyse patterns, across our data set. We applied inductive reasoning during this analysis, encouraging us to construct new creative knowledge [72]. First, we compiled the data (i.e., the online blogs and the notes taken during the focus groups and from our own reflections). Then, we recursively conducted Braun and Clarke’s [96,98] six stages of reflexive thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating inductive codes, (3) grouping codes into coherent themes, (4) reviewing and refining the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) producing the manuscript. We conducted the analysis at a latent level, exploring the underlying meanings of the data when developing the codes. During the sixth stage of the analysis, we used the themes to construct an ethnographic fiction. The codes and themes can be viewed within Appendix A.

2.5.2. Stage 2: Ethnographic Fiction

A multi-stage iterative process was used to develop the ethnographic fiction. This involved the first named author drafting, editing, and redrafting the story multiple times, engaging in reflection throughout the process. The codes and themes developed during the thematic analysis were used to craft the story, with literary techniques being used to weave the themes into the story.

The story was assembled as a conversational dialogue with three composite characters engaging in a discussion with each other. We chose to develop three characters which aligns with existing research that used similar representation methods to those adopted in our study [100]. The use of three perspectives enabled us to be appropriately critical and triangulate in equal measure (please note that these characters were not direct representations of the three individuals who participated in the focus group interviews or of ourselves but include an amalgamation of characteristics from an array of individuals working within Higher Education with whom we interacted during the pandemic). The characters were developed to represent voices that reflected aspects such as teaching experiences, family circumstances, IT confidence and competencies, and general perspectives on their situations. The characters were designed to demonstrate polyphony through a dialogical narrative, enabling distinctive perspectives and experiences to be represented simultaneously through

the interaction of different character voices within one all-encompassing story [67,101]. Adopting this approach is believed to enhance a story's resonance for its readers and enable researchers to present differing narrative resources that represent multiple ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving [67,101,102]. In line with this, the story was crafted to include three distinct characters interacting with one another around a shared topic, with the various experiences and perceptions of working in Higher Education during the pandemic being entwined throughout the characters' conversational dialogue. While designing the three characters within our story, we carefully considered the backgrounds and experiences of the academics who we interacted with during the pandemic. We chose to keep the biological characteristics of the characters neutral (e.g., gender, ethnicity) with the aim of increasing the audience's ability to relate to them.

The story's plot and the metaphors employed throughout the story were underpinned by the themes developed within the thematic analysis. When crafting the dialogue between the characters, we considered how humans interact with one another when in conversation. Although the story is based on real-life experiences encountered, viewed, or communicated to the authors, some of the content within our story was deliberately accentuated to help showcase the themes developed during the thematic analysis. This closely aligns with the approach adopted by Jones [103], Nelson and Groom [104], and Roberts [100] in their ethnographic fictions.

The story was shared with the second named author, who acted as a critical friend and confirmed that it was cohesive, concise, enlightening, and aligned with the themes developed during the thematic analysis, thus checking for the representation of the research findings within the story [105,106]. Feedback during this process resulted in the first named author making further edits to the story. Once both authors were happy with the story, it was shared with the three focus group participants [106]. Critical discussions were held with these individuals to gain their initial reactions to, and reflections on, the story [107]. The story was also shared with four critical friends who, after reading it, engaged in a reflexive discussion with the second named author [107]. These critical friends were academics who taught within Higher Education during the pandemic, thus enabling us to capture the critical thoughts and reactions from individuals who may be able to use the story to inform their practice.

3. A Fictional Narrative—Reflecting on Lecturers' Higher Education Experiences

Alex, Kelly, and Morgan are all lecturers at different Universities in the UK. Prior to the first COVID-19 lockdown, their predominant mode of delivery at their respective institutions was face-to-face. Morgan also had the experience of delivering an online module as part of a distance learning course. They have known each other professionally for a few years as part of subject community and have agreed to meet on Zoom one morning following a recent national subject webinar. The purpose of their meeting is to scope out the hosting of a special interest group day.

[Morgan is hosting the call and Kelly is the first to join]

Morgan—Hi Kelly. How's it going?

Kelly—Hiya. All good thanks. Just dropped the kids off.

Morgan—Is the sun shining where you are? It's a lovely morning here.

Kelly—Not yet. It's supposed to be a nice day but we've still got cloud at the moment.

[Alex joins the call.]

Alex—Morning both. Sorry I'm late. I couldn't get the link to open. Got there in the end. Did you enjoy the webinar yesterday?

Kelly—It was ok. Not much new really. I'm not sure I'll go to the next one.

Morgan—I quite enjoyed hearing Hilary speak. I've not heard her before.

Alex—Yes she's always good value. I first met her at a research seminar about 25 years ago and you could tell back then she'd be a name in the field. I am friends with her former PhD supervisor.

Kelly—Is that Derek?

Alex—It is. We go back a while.

[Everyone on the screen smiles in acknowledgment of Alex and Derek's relationship, and attention then turns to the focus of the meeting.]

Kelly—Well, thanks both for your time this morning, and thanks Morgan for sorting the link out for us. I've been having a think after the webinar and I think we should be able to put enough people together for the special interest group day. What do you think Alex?

[Alex appears to be talking as displayed on the camera, but there is no noise coming from the speaker.]

Morgan—You're on mute Alex.

Alex—Sorry, I'll try again...I'm just not sure if I'm honest. Is it really worth it? I was wondering if it was worth waiting a year and doing it face-to-face. I mean, I don't know about you when you're delivering a lecture, but it's just such hard work. The lack of feedback is deafening. I'm not sure doing a research session online would be that different from some of the student sessions I've done. You can't read the room or adjust your points, which I just feel seems a bit empty. I feel like you end up putting far more into developing, designing, and delivering these sessions than you get out of them.

Morgan—I think we've been very lucky with some of the students we have to be honest. You've definitely gotta be innovative in how you engage students. I do feel I'm working two and half to three times harder per class though. I've found it completely depends on the module you are teaching as to whether or not it is more challenging to engage the students. For some modules I've actually found I've had more engagement from students than I have historically in a classroom.

Kelly—I hear what you are saying Alex. If we try and do it the same way we would have done it before COVID it would be a bit dry. But there is some good stuff going on out there. For me it's about trying to simulate, rather than emulate. Don't try and do what you can do in a face-to-face session, but try and simulate it to get the same outcomes. This is something we should really strive for, I'm not sure we have actually had enough time to make that change because of the amount of content we've had to develop for virtual delivery in so little time, but starting to implement it in this session could be a starting point.

Alex—Some of that is about technological competence of each of us though. I'm sure some of the stuff young Morgan is doing, I've probably never even heard of.

[Everyone smiles at Alex's self-deprecating comment.]

Alex—What's one that the younger ones use at our place? Prezi I think it's called. Have you tried that one Morgan?

Morgan—Yes I use it sometimes. It's alright, depends on what I need to get my point across I suppose.

Alex—How did you learn to use all this technology in your teaching? PowerPoint is about as much as I can do.

Morgan—I just try stuff out and see what works. There's some good online tutorials out there on it if you fancy learning how to use it Alex.

Alex—OK then, I'm sure I can throw something together for the day with what I already know. I'll muddle through.

[Everyone smiles at Morgan and Alex's comments, seemingly acknowledging that Alex is not likely to take that advice. Kelly steers the conversation back to its main purpose.]

Kelly—So do you not feel others would be up for it Alex? I was thinking maybe Paul, or Gemma, or Michael G might do sessions.

Alex—I'm not sure you'd get Paul. He was struggling a bit the last time I spoke to him.

Kelly—Oh no. Is he ok?

Alex—Yeah, I think so, but you know what it's like switching to virtual delivery. Like Morgan said, everything takes twice as long to do, and he's got two little ones at home he's been entertaining.

Morgan—Wow. I can imagine it's really hard having to balance children at home whilst working. I've found it challenging to segregate work and life myself, it all just seems to merge into one, there's no separation between them, and I don't even have kids on top of work to contend with.

Kelly—Yeah, I don't envy him. My three have been bad enough, but at least they're older. It did get really hard when I was having to home school them though, the school provided some material, but I really had to make sure they were engaging in it—balancing my work with their schoolwork was really tough.

Alex—I guess that's where I'm quite lucky in a way, with living on my own. I have fewer distractions, and when I'm finished for the day I can just shut the office door, and I'm then on my own time, with having the added bonus of no travel. Weirdly I seem to have more time than before. I guess that's just down to the lack of commute. That said, I've always been pretty good at the work-life balance.

Morgan—Yeah, that's true enough, being stuck at home all the time makes you feel like you have all the time in the world; really though with the added workload because of the shift to online teaching, I feel we have no time. . . . Going back to your question though Kelly, I think Gemma would be up for it. I'd be happy to ask her. I've known her a while.

Alex—That sounds like a good idea and I'm happy to approach Michael, so that's two at least to start us off. Is there anyone else at your place Kelly that could. . .

[Alex stops mid-speech as there is a noise in the background coming from Kelly's mic, and a dog starts to bark.]

Kelly—*[Talking over the barking dog.]* I am so sorry, that must be the post, if you could just give me a second, I better run and get it because if not the dog will only keep barking.

[Kelly mutes the mic and disappears from the screen.]

Morgan—Wow, sounds a bit chaotic there. To be fair, I'm surprised my dog hasn't started barking yet too.

Alex—Yes, it happens quite often in our weekly academic team meetings. My biggest trouble with noise here is that the neighbours are doing DIY at the minute and they start drilling or hammering as soon as I start a meeting. We have got lucky today though, all is quiet at the minute.

Morgan—That must be a bit frustrating. It's brilliant how understanding everyone is though isn't it? I guess we all have different but similar challenges.

[Looking flustered, Kelly returns to the screen and turns the mic back on.]

Kelly—I am really sorry about that. At least it wasn't the kids this time, that's the usual. What was it you were saying Alex?

Alex—No problem, I was just saying that I would approach Michael which gives us two, but is there anyone at your place who could do a turn?

Kelly—I'm not sure to be honest. At one level there's lots of goodwill around and I could probably ask, but just like Paul, there's a lot who I don't think have much capacity in their work—life situation. We've had a couple of new people join who have good CVs, but I obviously haven't had a chance to meet them yet. Well on Teams I have, but you know what I mean.

Morgan—I hear you, but if we don't try and include them in opportunities like this, how can we actually get to know them? Personally, I think it would be a great chance to liaise with the new colleagues.

Kelly—That's a fair point. I think I've definitely interacted less with some colleagues since the shift to online, simply 'cos I don't see them in passing or in the office, and I've not needed to have that interaction as part of the job. You just get on with it I suppose, don't you?

Morgan—For sure. I feel oddly distant from some people compared to before because of that lack of face-to-face interaction in the office, yet at the same time somehow part of tighter, broader group. More virtual meetings within modules teams and WhatsApp groups have really helped here in some instances. That said, I've definitely thrived on neglecting working within some groups.

Alex—Nothing like feeling unappreciated to bind us together, eh Morgan? A common danger unites and all that. . .

Kelly—Any excuse to get some Aristotle in there Alex. *[All grin knowingly.]*

Alex—Well I'm consistent at least. Anyway, are you guys still ok to host it Kelly? I keep seeing your place getting the bad publicity on the TV, but I assume that's not your campus.

Kelly—Yeah, we'll be good Alex. I can't complain really, to be honest, with the challenges currently faced in the sector I am really appreciative that I've still got a job and all that [*Kelly smiles awkwardly.*]. There's a funding pot for this anyway. All the noise is happening on main site with student halls and unions etcetera but nothing much here.

Alex—That's good then. Any thoughts as to when might be best? It would be nice to get a date in the diary. Give people something to look forward to.

Kelly—My best guess was between Easter and early summer. How does that sound?

Morgan—I can't see that will work I'm afraid. The rhythm of a normal year is one thing, but the rhythm of a COVID year is quite another. Our non-detriment policy, and I'm sure it's the same elsewhere, means the students have such flexibility that they can hand in weeks late and we still have to mark it by the original deadline. The worry of not being able to meet the deadlines though—it completely goes against who I am as a person and how I work. It makes it quite challenging. I can't see there being capacity until into the summer or even into the start of the next term to be honest. ...but we should try and find a date. I do agree with Alex that it would be nice to have something to look forward to.

Alex—Listening to me is now your idea of something to look forward to? [*Everyone laughs.*] Oh how times have changed.

Morgan—Well it's a change from Groundhog Day (Groundhog day refers to a film where a weatherman finds himself reliving the same day (i.e., Groundhog day) on a continual loop. In the story presented in our research this phrase signifies a situation where the same monotonous experiences are repeatedly) isn't it.

Kelly—Would it change anything if we delivered it virtually Morgan, rather than face-to-face?

Morgan—I don't think so. Marking is marking, so people's time, or lack of it, is what it is.

Kelly—Before term starts then. Yes?

Alex—Agreed.

Morgan—Works for me.

Kelly—And virtual?

Morgan—Yup.

Alex—Probably safest. If we deliver it virtually, we may get more attendees. I don't know about you, but I'm still a bit anxious about socialising too much—the idea of teaching face-to-face really scares me because we're going to be inside, and we won't know what other people have been doing or who they've been around. So, it does scare me.

Morgan—I can see why you might feel that way, I'm the opposite, I'm really excited at getting back into the face-to-face teaching again, I've really missed it.

Kelly—Yeah, same...And what about advertising? Just mailing lists or something more?

Morgan—How about using Eventbrite? I've set a few things with that now and it seems to work fine.

Kelly—I'm happy with that. Alex?

Alex—Let's use both I would say. They seem like good ideas which are likely to attract people, but I'm still a bit worried about getting people to attend the day. It's like we were saying earlier about the students, isn't it? It can be so challenging cracking attendance and engagement in a classroom, how on earth do we do it online? It's difficult to tell if they are engaging with the online lectures as it is, never mind with the other resources we have to offer. What's to say this will be any different for this day?

Morgan—It'll be a challenge for sure, but I've been to a few really good online networking events. Some event formats I've seen could work well. Something that might add a bit more of a community feel. [*Kelly appears agitated on screen*]

Kelly—That sounds good Morgan. Sorry to be rude but I'm just a bit conscious of time and I've got another meeting in five and if I don't get up now and make a brew then I'm not likely to either drink or move for another couple of hours. So can you hold that thought and perhaps explain some of those ideas next time Morgan?

Morgan—Sure.

Kelly—Can we pop another date in to meet before the end of the month? [Both nod]. Is this day and time good for you both in say two weeks time? [All check their Outlook calendars at the same time].

Morgan—Works for me.

Alex—Yes, I can do that.

Kelly—Great. I'll send you an invite shortly.

Morgan—Would either of you mind if I planned to attend the next meeting on the move? I just find that when we were delivering face-to-face I'm usually stood up moving around for several hours in the lectures and seminars, and now I just sit on my bottom for the duration, and it makes me feel less good. I've been trying to do what our well-being team suggest and move around every so often, but I'm not always that great at it because I feel like I am losing progress on my work. It would be great if I could try and do some of my meetings on the move, like on a walk or even just stood up, I think it will really lift my mood, but I will only do it if you are both ok with it?

Alex—Sounds like a great idea to me, no problem with it at all.

Kelly—Sounds wonderful—I may even have to join you with that idea. Right, nice one, thanks again for taking the time to meet today. I really appreciate it. I'll see you soon.

Morgan—Bye. Take care.

Alex—Bye everyone. Speak soon.

[Kelly leaves the call, followed by Morgan and then Alex.]

4. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to extend our understanding of Higher Education experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We addressed this by capturing academics' experiences and perceptions of working in Higher Education during the pandemic. We chose to represent these experiences using an ethnographic fiction for numerous reasons. First, ethnographic fictions can provide a rich insight into the complexity and ambiguity of lived experiences from a unique perspective [66,108]. Using a conversational dialogue in our story, we were able to simultaneously showcase different perceptions and experiences of working from home during the pandemic. Second, the accessible, colloquial language used within ethnographic fictions enables information to be presented in an understandable and engaging way for wider audiences [66,92,109,110]. Third, due to the fear and uncertainty associated with the lack of job security for academics working within the Higher Education sector [6], we felt it was important to provide a means through which individuals would feel safe to voice their experiences. Stories protect the anonymity of those who share their experiences [111]. The ability of the story to achieve this was demonstrated by one of the participants who, after reading it, stated, "I was trying to work out which character best reflected me, but the good thing about it was I couldn't spot it, it was interlaced really well. It kept us anonymous whilst capturing the key points. Whilst there were areas where I was nodding and going, 'yes that's how I feel, there was no way I could spot myself in it.'" This was unanimously supported by all of the participants who suggested that they could see their "reality" within the story but, at the same time, could not identify themselves.

Finally, stories promote a deeper level of intellectual engagement by encouraging audiences to think with the findings as opposed to thinking about them [112,113]. In accordance with this, we adopted a *storyteller perspective* when discussing our ethnographic fiction because we view our story as being inherently analytical and theoretical by itself [114,115]. As such, we do not offer a traditional discussion where our story is interpreted in light of the existing literature. Instead, we chose to "show" rather than "tell" our story by presenting it on its own as it is [115]. As Lewis [116] (p. 831) suggested, "stories are brought to life through the storyteller; however, the story itself has a life that is given to the teller and the listener through the telling." Corresponding with Frank's [67] perspective, we wanted to let our story breathe.

We therefore encourage you, as readers, to think and feel with our story by contributing your own questions, answers, and experiences to it as you read it [105,109]. In doing

this, we are relinquishing control to you, enabling you to construct your own meanings, interpretations, and evaluations of the story in accordance with your unique vantage point [106,115]. Indeed, when taking this approach, it is likely that you will each make different interpretations of the stories based on your life experiences and background [105]. In light of this, we encourage you to reflect on the ethnographic fiction presented above and apply it to your own life as you see appropriate.

In adopting this approach, we are encouraging you to think with our story, rather than telling you about it. According to Frank [117], thinking with a story prompts readers to engage in reflection on that story. Numerous academics, e.g., the authors of [70,108,111], have acknowledged the benefits of using stories to disseminate evidence-based information because by prompting reflection, they can facilitate dialogue, and teach, remind, and reinvigorate people. Subsequently, if you, as readers, embrace the above invitation, the story presented in our research has the potential to stimulate reflection and provide a platform to instigate open conversations and discussions regarding the experiences of academics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To offer some initial support for this possibility, we now draw on the critical thoughts and reflections of the focus group participants and our critical friends with whom we engaged in reflective discussions following their consumption of our story. Their responses to the story were unanimously positive and encouraging. To provide more detail, the critical friends and participants indicated that the story instigated reflection within them, provoking thoughts and stimulating questions about their applied practice. For example, one individual stated, “The story made me question my own practice, am I doing enough to enhance my digital literacy, am I watching videos and teaching myself to make my sessions more engaging?” Furthermore, another individual commented:

“The story made me feel reflective, I was able to contextualise it to my own lived experiences and link it to my own frame of reference. So, for example, I’ve been asked to support with some staff training in a few weeks, and we need to do an activity to bring all the staff together, and there were elements of the story which really got me thinking about and reflecting on how I will do that.”

The same individual suggested that the story could act as “... a catalyst for reflection, which people can use to help reflect and hopefully make sense of their experiences.” Such quotes demonstrate that the story presented in this research has the potential to stimulate intellectual responses from the audience and therefore has the potential to be impactful for key stakeholders [109]. Indeed, the potential impact of this story for key stakeholders was demonstrated by one critical friend who stated, “Reading the story normalised my experiences. It made me feel comforted because it was nice to see that other people have also been thinking and feeling this way and that it’s not just me. Not many people will discuss this sort of thing because you just don’t get the opportunity to. So, I really think the story could create a sense of community and help people realise that it’s not just them feeling this way, it certainly did that for me”. In addition, the potential impact of the story beyond the Higher Education sector was suggested by one of the participants, who stated:

“I read through it and it reminded me “oh yeah, that was a moment of promise.” Then I thought about how the rush back to normal has meant that a lot of the lessons which we could have learnt as a sector has been pushed to the wayside because we want to go back to how it was, because how it was had to be better; and it was in a lot of ways, but it also wasn’t. I think that rush back, not just in Higher Education, but in loads of things from sport attendance to political power shows, has meant lots of lessons we could have learnt have been put aside. For me in particular, I think a good lesson to take from the story is that it shines a light on different expectations placed on different staff with different private life situations. So I think one of the things that people could take for future applied practice would be to provide compassionate timetabling taking staffs input in the timetabling and doing it with more empathy. This could ensure that people who

have other responsibilities, such as children, are scheduled to work in a way that helps them perform the best in their role.”

Moreover, cumulatively, the critical friends indicated that they could resonate with the story. For example, one individual commented

“There was a lot of elements of it that resonated with me, both in terms of the experience that the participants described, but also the way that they were discussing that experience. I think if there was one thing that particularly stood out was the concept of a ‘them and us’, and the online world potentially creating a barrier and taking away that ability to collaboratively learn in the classroom. That particularly resonated with me because of my teaching approach and I felt that that was absolutely grounded in reality”.

Another individual stated, “I thought that it was reflective of wider conversations I’ve had within Higher Education about working through COVID and the impact it’s had on HE experiences which I’ve gone through and colleagues have gone through. It just spoke to a lot of like shared truths I think”. Comments such as this suggest that our story has the potential to offer evocative representations of data that are meaningful to key stakeholders and thus suggest some degree of resonance within our story.

The story also appeared to evoke emotional responses amongst our critical friends and participants. For example, one individual stated: “I was smiling when I was reading it cause it just felt like people I know having a conversation that I feel familiar with. I felt like ‘yeah, I agree with these people, I understand these people and we’ve got the same opinion.’ They also felt like real people which was crucial as well.” Such responses support suggestions that creative non-fiction methods of data representation can be used as a means of eliciting readers’ emotional reactions [70,92].

Overall, using a storytelling approach, this research has enabled us to represent the experiences of practitioners working in Higher Education during the pandemic. Feedback from the key stakeholders and participants would suggest that the story presented in this research (1) is reflective of real-life experiences, (2) has the potential to stimulate emotional and intellectual responses from an audience, (3) has the potential to be impactful both within and beyond the Higher Education sector, and (4) offers an opportunity for silenced voices to be heard. In presenting our findings using storytelling methods, we hope that readers of this research can consider the transferable nature of this story with respect to their own lives and that it will stimulate conversations amongst academics, having positive implications for those who currently work in Higher Education or plan to work in Higher Education in the future to enhance their practice. Whilst we encourage you as readers to engage in this process, it is important to be mindful at this juncture that the findings presented within our story are only able to offer a small window into the complex and multifaceted picture of what happened during the pandemic, what was left behind after the pandemic, and what continues to persist as a result of the pandemic.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, G.G. and H.J.H.; methodology, G.G. and H.J.H.; validation, H.J.H.; formal analysis, G.G. and H.J.H.; investigation, G.G. and H.J.H.; data curation, G.G. and H.J.H.; writing—original draft preparation, G.G. and H.J.H.; writing—review and editing, G.G. and H.J.H.; visualisation, G.G.; project administration, G.G. and H.J.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with Buckinghamshire New University Research Ethics Policy and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of UCFB (protocol code: HH040821AT).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical reasons.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the participants for their time and sharing their experiences relating to working in Higher Education during the pandemic and providing feedback on the fictional narrative. We would also like to thank our critical friends who read and provided feedback on the fictional narrative. Consent was given by all who are acknowledged here.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Codes and themes developed within the thematic analysis.

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
A lack of synergy between additional time given to students to submit work within no-detriment policies and the length of time academics are provided to provide feedback and grades.	A battle of conflict: expectations versus reality	Challenges experienced at institutional and national levels
A misalignment between the flexibility provided to students for attendance and assignments and the delivery requirements for academics (e.g., feedback deadlines, delivery deadlines).		
An overreliance of academics being over-workers, over-thinkers, over-committers, and over-learners.		
Preconceptions that academics can transition to online delivery with little training, which conflicts with the reality that this is not necessarily the case for all academics.		
An imbalance between the time expected to put together content for online learning and the time it actually takes to prepare for online sessions.		
From the outside, it may have appeared as if infrastructure guided the process of delivery, but in reality, the frontline staff, the academics, the library staff, and the academic support staff made the sudden shift to online delivery work.		
Concerns regarding a lack of capacity at institutions to be able to deliver online learning.	The capacity to perform: challenges associated with the capacity to be able to deliver online teaching	
A lack of auto-captioning software resulted in a disparity in the ability to offer online sessions with subtitles to students.		
Variations across institutions with respect to what students have access to and when—is this due to differences in the capacity to deliver online across different institutions?		
Academics are faced with the challenges of not being able to conduct field trips or deliver practical sessions.		
Online learning results in an inability to capture attendance and engagement like in the classroom.		
Uncertainty regarding whether additional work is being recognised.		
A perceived lack of acknowledgement for meeting high expectations.	“You’re welcome”: the absence of recognition for hard work	
A perceived lack of appreciation from individuals in superior positions.		
A lack of acceptance and appreciation for the changes that needed to be made.		
A lack of training to prepare academics for online delivery.		
Uncertainty regarding the transition back to face-to-face delivery.		
A loss of identity for experienced colleagues due to uncertainties about how to deliver content online.		
Variations in technological competencies across academics.	“Sink or swim”: support available for staff during the transition from face-to-face to online delivery	
Many academics trying to emulate (i.e., imitating face-to-face delivery online) rather than simulate.		
A lack of time and support for the online transition resulted in academics simply copying what the strategies they employed when teaching face-to-face when delivering online		
A lack of knowledge makes engaging in innovative, accessible, and original teaching in online environments challenging.		
Some academics find online delivery difficult because of a lack of training.		
Variations in lecturers’ ability to deliver online teaching, with some staff lacking confidence and skills.		
The usual rhythm of an academic year changed, making it naturally destabilising for someone who was very used to that rhythm.	Navigating an unstable environment: when there is conflict between policy, the ability to meet deadlines, and staff self-identity	
The addition of a non-detriment policy made it impossible for deadlines to be met, and not meeting deadlines conflicted with some academics’ identities.		
Belief that despite the challenges, academics currently working should be grateful for this due to the redundancies being made in the wider sector.	Safety in an academic storm	
The lack of funding in academia.		

Table A1. Cont.

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
Despite the lack of face-to-face connections, the academic team have become a stronger unit working together collectively.	A shift in subcultures: subcultures across colleagues have changed since the transition to virtual working	Working alongside colleagues in a virtual environment
Collegiality between colleagues is visible at a difficult time.		
Changes in the colleagues with whom academics are interacting and how often these interactions occur due to subcultures being developed across the team.		
The use of impression management with colleagues.		
Some interactions between colleagues are lost due to an inability to see these individuals in passing.		
Challenges with bringing in new staff members and embedding them into a team when working virtually.		
Challenges with building a sense of community among staff.	“Alone we can achieve little, together we can achieve lots”: the challenges of building a community amongst colleagues in a virtual environment	Engaging students in a virtual environment
Virtual activities are offered to try and increase a sense of community among colleagues, but the activities are not everyone’s “cup of tea”.		
In the classroom, students and lecturers become a unit, but it is difficult to establish this online.		
It is difficult to build a rapport with students online.		
Challenges associated with building a sense of community between academics and students.		
Reciprocal care between academics and students regarding the challenges of the pandemic (i.e., students are aware of the challenges academics face with delivering virtually and balancing childcare, and academics are aware of the challenges students face with learning virtually).		
The perception that academics are teaching to a blank screen and are therefore unable to connect with and know their students.	The challenges of becoming an “us”: trying to establish a community between students and academics and students and students in a virtual environment	Engaging students in a virtual environment
Recreating informal and social spaces when teaching online is challenging, and therefore, a sense of community amongst students is lacking.		
The lack of synergy between educators and students is perceived to be challenging to manage.		
Encouraging students to communicate within online sessions is more challenging than when delivering face-to-face.		
A lack of feedback from students during sessions makes it challenging for academics to know whether they are understanding content, making it difficult to adapt sessions to the students’ needs.		
Delivering to a blank screen makes it difficult to see if students are engaging with the content.		
The perception that academics are putting more time in and receiving less due to limited interactions with students.	Teaching in the dark: the challenges of knowing whether students are engaging and understanding the content	Work-life challenges experienced when delivering from home
Uncertainty as to whether students are even watching the session (i.e., logging in to receive an attendance mark but not watching).		
Academics are concerned that students may be missing out on content due to a historical lack of engagement with the institutions’ virtual learning environments when being taught face-to-face.		
Uncertainty in how to engage students online and whether they are engaged when being taught online.		
Uncertainty as to whether students are understanding content and able to apply the knowledge being taught.		
Concerns regarding equality for students based on their ability to access content, which could be determined by their background, cultural and social capital, ability to use IT, and virtual study spaces.		
Concerns regarding the challenges of accessibility for disabled students and staff (in particular, those with hearing loss).	An uneven playing field: concerns regarding the accessibility of online learning for students with varying needs	Work-life challenges experienced when delivering from home
Poor work–life balance.		
The perception that working from home has made it difficult to separate the balance between work and life.		
A lack of separation between work and life.		
The transition period between home and work has gone.		
Feeling like you have all the time in the world, but at the same time, no time at all.		
No holidays to aim towards when working, making it harder to feel motivated to meet deadlines.	When there is little to look forward to: the implications of a lack of personal pleasures on motivation within work	Work-life challenges experienced when delivering from home
An inability to go places on the weekend makes it hard to look forward to during the working week, resulting in lower motivation.		
A shift in perception such that instead of looking forwards to engaging in fun activities on the weekend, you look forward to having something to do at work due to the inability to enjoy pleasures that you normally would on a weekend.		
It is difficult to have focus and look forward to time off when there are restrictions on which activities you can engage in during your time off.		
Less movement during the working day results in fewer positive feelings regarding oneself and one’s quality of delivery.		
A lack of movement during teaching results in teaching experiences being less positive.		
Balancing work and personal stressors (i.e., partners, children) results in teaching experiences being less positive.	Barriers to achievement: the perceived impact of teaching at home on the quality of delivery	

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