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Students' perceptions and experiences of taking a Leave of Absence (LOA) during their degree

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Abstract

Although literature suggests that students may encounter a range of difficulties whilst studying at university, our understanding of the experiences of those who have to take time away from their studies during their course is limited. This study adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with sixteen students at one UK university who had taken a Leave of Absence (LOA) during their undergraduate degree. The interviews explored students' perceptions and experiences of Leave of Absence. Thematic Analysis led to the identification of three key themes including 'Difficulties navigating Leave of Absence procedures', 'Satisfaction with support received' and 'Feelings of preparing for the return'. Overall, the data suggested that students' experiences of Leave of Absence varied and whilst some students' experiences were positive, others were more negative, with a need for further support and information expressed. The findings also show that students' needs varied, and this highlights the need to avoid a 'one size fits all approach'. In view of this, recommendations for the future are also discussed.

Keywords
leave of absence, higher education, student support, pastoral support

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Background and rationale

During their degree, university students may encounter a range of pressures and personal challenges. In some cases, this may lead them to consider taking time away from their studies, sometimes referred to as taking a Leave of Absence (LOA). In the academic year 2018/19, the percentage of UK students who resumed studying at the same institution following time out after they began university was just 10.1% (HESA, 2022). This suggests there is a large number of students who may not return after time out. Gall et al. (2000) highlighted that transition to university can be considered an acute stressor, but, as time passes, improvements in most aspects of students' adjustment should be seen. However, for some, such transition can be more difficult and improvement in adjustment may not be seen without additional support.

Whilst there may be a range of reasons why students take a LOA it is noted that due to past Government's widening participation agenda, which aimed to encourage access to education for those from underrepresented groups, the student cohort has become increasingly diverse. The UK's Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011) proposed that due to this, rates of mental illness would increase (Macaskill, 2013). Macaskill (2013) also noted that age is an important factor when considering the mental health of students as most mental health problems emerge prior to the age of twenty-four alongside the challenges of becoming an adult (Hunt & Eisberg, 2010). Rates of mental illness were found to be equivalent to the general population, but rates of treatment were concerningly low, suggesting mental illness for students may become more problematic. With this in mind, it is reasonable to suggest that an increase in students needing to take time away from their studies for personal reasons may be evident. Similarly, Hamilton et al. (2021) explored experiences of students at UK Universities with chronic illness highlighting some participants' feelings of a sense of inequality, a lack of understanding and a feeling that their illness was not accommodated in terms of university regulations. As Adefila et al. (2020) stated, participation in higher education has increased exponentially in recent years, in part, due to support available allowing people to study regardless of their personal circumstances. However, whilst inclusive practices in UK universities have increased opportunities for disabled students, neurodivergent students and those with mental health difficulties, support can still be irregular with organisational structures not adopting a student-centred approach. In addition to disability, it is also recognised that some students will also have childcare or other caring responsibilities which could lead to them doubting the feasibilities of studying. Lister (2003) in particular, highlighted the challenges sometimes faced by mature female students including childcare, time and cost.

The above issues may in some cases lead to challenges attending university. Moores et al. (2019) reviewed factors determining university students' attendance. In terms of individual factors the university may have less control over, they highlighted illness and family, psychological factors (e.g. sense of belonging), demographics (e.g. gender or being a first generation student), finance, and employment.

There are also likely similarities between the reasons students withdraw from university and the reasons they take time away from their studies. In the early 1980s, it was rare for students not to complete a degree, whereas retention may be a key issue for universities nowadays (Assiter & Gibbs, 2007). Assiter and Gibbs (2007) conducted interviews with students at two UK universities to explore the experiences of those considered likely to

leave university. They found struggles with identity and self-worth, pressure to succeed, and uncertainty about whether higher education was right for them at that time. As well as wrong course choice and financial issues, from their large-scale survey, Davies and Elias (2003) noted personal problems as a key reason for withdrawing. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that these sorts of issues also lead to students needing to take time away from their studies. Whilst reasons for withdrawing are multiple and complex, effective support could address many of them, for example, being unprepared practically and emotionally, and welfare issues such as financial difficulties and family responsibilities (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). Although the option to take a LOA may be a good alternative, it could still be that not all students who take time away from university are able to return. As highlighted previously, figures suggest that only a small percentage of students resume studying at the same institution following time away from their course (HESA, 2022).

For students struggling at university due to personal challenges, a range of support options may be available to them, though as Karabenick and Knapp (1988) acknowledged, students who may be most in need of help may be least likely to access it. Withey et al. (2014) explored experiences of undergraduates who withdraw and start again elsewhere. A key theme that emerged was that of relationships and support from staff, with students valuing closeness with academics and suggesting that discussions with a personal tutor would assist them in making informed decisions. Although there may be pressures on academic staff which could impact their ability to provide such support, this is something which could point to a role such as personal tutor as being key to retention.

Hoffman et al. (2002) emphasised the importance of considering sense of belonging in relation to student retention. They described sense of belonging as a subjective sense of affiliation and identification with a university reflecting their integration into the system. Factors which influenced students' sense of belonging included a sense of valued involvement, supportive relationships and a belief that they are viewed by their school as more than just another face in a crowd. As stressed by Ahn and Davis (2020), having a successful time at university is strongly related to sense of belonging. If students take time away from university it is possible that their sense of belonging may be negatively impacted, which again draws attention to the need to explore experiences whilst away and on return.

Wright (1973) compared 124 students in the USA who had returned from a voluntary LOA ('leavers') with 216 'stayers' who had never left college. In addition, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with those who had returned. Psychological stress and lack of social integration were identified as key 'push' factors. From the interviews it was concluded that leaving can be a positive step, giving students the opportunity to re-evaluate and make important decisions about their life. Thus, the decision to leave, temporarily or permanently, should not be seen as a failure of the individual or institution. However, while reasons for leaving were examined, the research failed to examine the leavers' thoughts, feelings and experiences while on LOA and when they returned. This is something the current research aims to address to provide key insights into the experience of these students which could be vital in improving systems and support. The US study is also very outdated and higher education is now very different to 40-50 years' ago.

As the US education system is different from the UK's system and there have been many changes to the student experience within higher education in recent years, notably the increased diversity of the student population, there is a clear need to gain greater insight into UK students' experiences of taking a LOA. This could also inform improved systems to better support them through this potentially difficult time. Considering these insights would reflect a constructive approach, and support systems which are based on direct lived experiences are likely to be more effective than those based on third-party assumptions. We acknowledge that some students will choose to leave permanently and that this can be a positive decision for them. However, there is a clear need for all students to be provided with the support they need to help them make the decision they feel is right for them.

Mezey (2021) stated that there are times when taking time away from their studies is in students' best interest particularly if continuing would compromise their welfare or affect their academic performance. They proposed that clear policies and procedures should be in place which minimise barriers to taking LOA, assist with treatment for mental health issues and offer guidance about returning to study. Mezey (2021) also highlighted the need for university support systems, mental health providers and those close to students to work together to produce an individualised plan to best support the needs of individual students. Similarly, Ward (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis to explore which factors impacted on student's decision to take a LOA at a university in the USA. Fifteen students were interviewed and asked about their reasons for taking LOA, their experience whilst away, their return to university and their perceptions of the university's involvement in the process. In particular, their findings suggested that low-income participants expressed contempt for the university's administrative provision and believed that support available both during leave and following return was unsatisfactory. The authors proposed that the study's findings pointed towards the need for a review of the university's current LOA policies.

Although taking leave from studies may not be uncommon, there is a lack literature which considers this and the views and experiences of students who have taken time out, particularly in the UK. Withey et al. (2014) conducted semi structured interviews with students in the UK who had left and returned to higher education highlighting the need for greater support for these students. It should however be noted that the study drew only on the experiences of five students who had left one institution and returned to another. The aim of the current study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students who took LOA during their undergraduate degree at one university in England. To do this we adopted a qualitative approach and the use of semi structured interviews with those who had recently returned to their studies at the same university. In particular, we recognised the need to explore experiences at the point of applying for LOA, students' experiences whilst on leave and also during their return to their course. We adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach through the use of one-to-one semi-structured interviews to gain a more in-depth understanding of students' experiences. The research questions were as follows: 'What are students' experiences of taking a Leave of Absence?', 'What factors helped and hindered their experience?', and 'What are their suggestions to improve Leave of Absence for other students?'.

Method

Participants

Sixteen undergraduate students, across different schools at a UK university, who had taken LOA for a range of different reasons at various points during their course were recruited. The sample consisted of five males and 10 females. Semi-structured interviews took place between August 2018 and February 2019, with participants being recruited via advertisements via email and social media. With assistance from the university Student Services Team, current students who had taken a LOA during their course were sent the study advertisement via email. Students who were considered by the Team as being particularly vulnerable were not contacted. Once transcription was completed, we anonymised the participants' identity by giving them pseudonyms.

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was created consisting of six questions (as outlined below), focusing on students' experiences and perceptions of LOA and their suggestions for how the process could be improved. Prompts were used to encourage participants to think practically and to specify who further support should be provided by if suggested. In developing the schedule, we recognised the importance of establishing the participants' views of their needs as a student considering or taking a LOA and of the support provided. In particular, we recognised the need to ask participants to reflect on both positive and negative aspects of the process, as well as asking them to consider how the process might be improved to allow us to produce recommendations to aid the university in developing their processes. With the aim of producing recommendations, for each question we asked the participants to focus on particular time points which consisted of: the time when deciding to take LOA, the time whilst away from the university, the return from LOA, and lastly the time following the return.

Interview questions

- What do you think of the support here for students taking LOA from their studies?
- We would like to know more about the needs of LOA students, what did you need?
- Can you reflect on how the support was positive or negative and/or how it didn't quite meet your needs?
- Now can we consider how the support provided could be improved; I'd like us to consider now whether the needs of students are the same, we want to know your thoughts on how these things would work if applied to all students.
  - Are there any difficulties providing this support to all students?
  - Are there any ways the support could be more individualised?
- Now can we consider how we can put these ideas into practice. How exactly can this support be provided?

Procedure

Following approval from the university Ethics Committee, participants were recruited via advertisements sent by email by the university Student Services Team or displayed on university social media. Once participants had agreed to participate, they were provided with an information sheet and consent form and assured they only needed to answer questions they felt comfortable answering and could withdraw at any point during the interview or up to one month following their interview. Participants were interviewed by a member of the research team over telephone or Skype, or face-to-face on the university

campus with interviews on average lasting around 10-20 minutes. At the end of the questions, the participants were fully debriefed. Due to the nature of the questions regarding the need to take a LOA, participants were provided with the contact details of the Samaritans alongside those of Student Services. As a thank you for taking part, students also received a £10 gift voucher.

Data analysis procedure

After the recordings had been transcribed verbatim, the transcripts were analysed by the research team using thematic analysis using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, the transcripts were read through a several times and notes were made around the parts that initially seemed of interest. The next step involved relevant words and phrases being highlighted, drawn out and treated as initial codes. These initial codes were then interpreted further with similar phrases being brought together to assist with the search for reoccurring themes. After the themes had been identified they were then reviewed. Thought was given to whether themes needed to be separated into subthemes and whether all themes were supported by adequate data. Subsequently, appropriate names for the themes and subthemes were chosen. Whilst there was no opportunity to share our initial analysis with participants, peers were used for credibility checks. In the analysis section quotes are used to illustrate the data and during the analysis procedure, and care was taken to ensure that the final themes represented the majority of the data.

Analysis

The LOA process

At the time of data collection, the process for taking a LOA firstly consisted of a meeting with the university Student Services Team to discuss the implications of taking a LOA followed by the requirement to complete relevant paperwork and submit appropriate evidence detailing the nature of the need to take time away to initiate the LOA. Some students prior to this point would have chosen to discuss their situation with the member of staff allocated as their personal tutor, but this was dependent on individual student choice. Prior to returning, students would be required to complete a relevant administrative process and if applicable, also provide evidence of them being well enough to study from a medical professional.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) led to the identification of three main themes, which were 'Difficulties navigating LOA procedures', 'Satisfaction with support received', and 'Feelings of preparing for return'.

Difficulties navigating LOA procedures

This theme highlights that for many of the participants, they wanted to talk about the difficulties navigating the processes involved in taking a LOA. Notably, in some cases participants highlighted not understanding the processes. For example, "so like with regards- it was on [a university electronic system], and I didn't feel like it was made abundantly clear about where I needed to go for that" (Mike). This seems to suggest that not all students find the processes related to LOA easy to navigate or may benefit from more guidance in relation to this. In some cases, trouble with processes actually led to difficulties such as delays when returning to university:

> When I came back like I tried to get my modules and stuff like that and they were like no you can't because you're not re-registered. Like you

> can't do anything so like when I came back and got my evidence and everything, they were still like oh it's gonna take a couple days to do this and that and then on top of that like because I wasn't re-registered with the uni I couldn't get my student finance and cause I couldn't get my student finance I couldn't pay my rent. (Balan)

It seems here that the participant had not been made aware of the process they would have to undertake to re-register on their return, which, in this case, had a significant impact on them personally. Another participant also mentioned there being a delay in being able to return due to the steps they had to follow suggesting a possible lack of clarity.

Sometimes processes could be impacted by certain members of staff not being available:

> I suppose the only thing I can say is that when I was struggling and trying to get in touch and trying to sort all this out while dealing with the illness and recent death of my mother it was just that I couldn't get in touch with anybody because they were all on holiday. Understandably because they're all coming back to work aren't they so they're having that last couple of weeks off before the grind starts again, I can understand that! But just nothing in place, nothing there. You just can't get any answers, and you start to get a bit frantic thinking well what if no one answers me, you get in touch with X who's in charge- the administrator type thing but everyone's away. (Jane)

Here, the participant is having to play quite a significant role in putting things in place to enable them to take time away during a period which is clearly very difficult; this does not seem in line with the purpose of LOA. Perhaps it should not be the case that only specific people can help with needs related to LOA. Similarly, another participant stated, "I thought it would be a smooth process but it really wasn't [...] it just made life really frustrating. And caused a whole load of stress" (Balen). Concerns about aspects of the process of taking LOA was undoubtedly something which caused worry for some students, which was not in line with the expectations they had.

Highlighting individual experiences, it is noted that some students did show satisfaction with elements of the LOA processes:

> I spoke to a lady and she mentioned like a leave of absence was quite a good thing to do in my situation and she just explained me through it and told me what to do, and then I did it and that was fine, so that was quite good. (Nicholas)

Along with some others, this participant seemed to have a smoother experience of taking LOA. They did not show dissatisfaction with the processes and referred to guidance provided. Whilst this is very positive, consideration of why there are inconsistent experiences across the university is important.

One participant highlighted that staff were not always made aware a student was away from the university. They stated:

> I was still getting emails from members of staff chasing me up on essays and stuff and that was a little bit annoying. So maybe once a student has

> taken a leave of absence, an email goes round to all the staff. Or maybe the student numbers that such a such student has taken a leave of absence so you're not getting these random emails chasing you up on work and stuff. So that was another negative. (Sarah)

A need for better communication between departments seems to be needed as trouble with communication was also mentioned by other students. This caused frustration for the above student and could also potentially lead to administrative errors when work is not submitted by students on leave.

Something which some students highlighted is the fact that taking a LOA is a big decision. In relation to this it was suggested by one student that more of a process is needed to help students to make informed decisions:

> I didn't really have a meeting with someone where I could discuss my options. As far as I was aware it was just you could just take a leave of absence whereas I think it would be more beneficial for students to understand if there is a short term leave of absence period is it two weeks, four weeks, six weeks. And then the long term leave of absence. And then based on your own situation you can decide which one is best for you, rather than this is what you have to do kind of thing. (Sarah)

It seems like the opportunity to discuss what would work best for them would have been beneficial for this student as it may not be that one approach is appropriate for all students. The student did not feel well informed about the options which were available to them.

Some students reflected further on how LOA processes might be improved. For example:

> You almost want, I dunno, Student Support to sit down with you and it to almost be a standard thing if you take a leave of absence we'll have like a 20 minute chat and we'll explain the process or a written thing. Because of course if you've got something written you can read over it again. For instance if you've taken a full year off, you can sit down near when you're coming back and either look at a leaflet or an email and kind of see okay so here's step 1, step 2, step 3. (Ronelle)

Not only does this participant recognise the need for a standardised process, they highlight that they did not have access to documentation which explained the processes and allowed them to refer back when needed.

Satisfaction with support received

Related to the previous theme, there were numerous responses about the one-to-one student-centred support provided, and experiences here were both negative and positive. It is acknowledged that students needing to contemplate LOA are those who may be experiencing distress, "Like I know it is ultimately up to you and your decision when to take it so they can't be too much intervening on it, but my head was totally gone back then" (Serena). This suggests that based on their state of mind these students may find it hard to decide what is best for them and may be in particular need of support.

In relation to the administrative support provided and perceived lack of informed staff, one student stated: "I got to the point where I was actually considering filing a complaint

about them" (Mike). This seems to represent that in some cases there was there was a high level of dissatisfaction with support available. For some it was recognised that the process felt very admin based:

> Like not very personal. Do you know what I mean? It was very sort of administrative and I know it has to in some senses, but in a lot of other senses that kind of makes you want to go on a leave of absence a little bit more, like oh like there was no sort of directed at me why I wanted to go on a leave of absence and how I can get support and stuff like that. (Molly)

Here it seems the participant is highlighting that the lack of an individualised process actually seemed to convince them further that they should take time away from the university. It could be interpreted here that the lack of focus on the participant and their individual circumstances actually felt like a lack of care. The following student noted a similar experience:

> Either being more informative or find out like why I'm taking it? Like even though I had to explain why I was taking it there should have been like oh is there anything we can do to help you like not take it cause obviously then you're putting yourself in more debt and stuff like that. (Balan)

A discussion revolving around alternative options when considering LOA is clearly beneficial as students may worry about the longer-term consequences of a year being added to their time as an undergraduate.

For one student, being assigned a member of staff they did not feel comfortable with was problematic:

> In my school, so how they do it is anyone that takes a leave of absence or a year out for any reason has meetings with their year lead about once a month and I didn't particularly get on with my year lead so […] that was quite a bit of an issue. (Ronelle)

If regular contact with a school is required during LOA it seems that students themselves are not able to suggest who they would feel comfortable communicating with and may not feel able to raise these sorts of issues.

As well as discussion of less supportive staff, in some cases participants talked more positively about experiences, for example with their personal tutor or another key tutor:

> I can't fault my personal tutor whatsoever I mean he's from the moment I started uni up until now he's been amazing and always been responsive. And Student Support I've just had dealings with the one lady from there, she's kind of like specific to me and again she's been brilliant and always been available via email and arranged meetings, and been very, quite easy to arrange. (Laura)

Here the participant seemed to have a very positive experience of support and building relationships with specific members of staff. Having someone to act as a contact point was particularly beneficial for students. Having supportive tutors was mentioned on

various occasions across the data set and personal tutoring seemed to be viewed positively.

Lastly, support following return to university was helped in one case by a particular scheme: "And like they made sure that I had someone to buddy up with which I thought was really helpful" (Mike). This student's school appeared to have taken steps in advance of their return to ensure they had peer support which seemed to work well in terms of settling back in. If this is put in place by some schools perhaps approaches across the university should be consistent.

For a number of students, whilst taking LOA, no support or contact was received: "So for me it was a full year without hearing anything from anyone, so maybe just to send an email just so you know they are still aware that you exist" (Megan). Here it could be suggested that the lack of contact made the student feel they had been forgotten about and that for some on LOA, contact from the university would be welcomed. For some students however, contact may not necessarily be appreciated: "I don't really know to be honest. I think if there had been contact I don't know if it would have flustered me and put a little bit of pressure on me" (Laura). The participant seems to be clearly emphasising here that a break is needed and thinking about university could have a negative impact on their wellbeing, the approach of the university would therefore be considered appropriate here. Furthermore, one student acknowledged that some students may have support from other avenues: "I had some amazing friends, so I think for me I didn't need anything from the uni at that point in time" (Zara). This highlights that support needs may vary greatly from student to student. Whilst some may be fully supported, there may be others who do not have a support network around them. It also shows that everyone is different; perhaps a discussion with each student before they go on LOA is needed to find out whether they want support or not, and if so, how much.

In terms of perceptions of what LOA means, one participant stated: "I think the whole point of a leave of absence is that you don't really get much support" (Nicholas). Whilst this may be an accurate perception because the interruption to studies means not paying fees, this does seem excessively punitive for potentially vulnerable students, particularly if students may be used to accessing support from university staff. In relation to this, discussion occurred surrounding access to support services whilst away from the university:

> I thought it was a little bit negative as I mentioned that I didn't know that the Student Services were still available, or counselling was still available to students, or that the library was still available. So they really need to convey that message a little bit clearer to students. (Sarah)

This seems to suggest that if they had they had known they could access these services they would have found it beneficial to do so. It also suggests that in some cases this information is not being routinely communicated to students considering LOA, either by materials provided or key people involved. Another student explained:

> And I was still able to access counselling with the university counselling. So I don't know if that's directly part of students- well of the leave of absence process but that the boat I was in and I continued to get support there. (Peter)

Here it seems positive that the student continued to be able to access counselling during their LOA. This does however demonstrate a discrepancy with some students being aware of some services which are available to them during their time away. Perhaps this also highlights a lack of standardised explanation of the nature of support available during LOA.

Feelings of preparing for the return

During their interviews the participants discussed their feelings and experiences of returning back to university following their LOA. It seemed that for some students the process did not run smoothly. For example, as one participant explained:

> Then when I came back because they'd swapped the course, they now offer one of my dual honours courses as a single honours, so they had more modules. So they had one that goes semester 1, semester 2 of second year, but I'd left after semester 1 of second year, and I was automatically put into the one that goes over semester 1, semester 2 but I hadn't done semester 1. And it took them ages to fix that. (Megan)

The student also added: "that was quite stressful to me" (Megan). In this case, alterations to the course which were not identified prior to the student's return proved problematic and difficult to solve as well as causing distress for the student. This seems to highlight that administrative issues like this, which can lead to challenging returns, are not always identified and perhaps LOA students are not given consideration when changes are made.

It was noted for some that returning was similar to feeling new again. One participant explained: "Not at all no […] I just felt like a new student again. It was just as if it didn't happen, just got straight back into learning (Sean)". By stating they felt new again, it could be suggested that students may benefit from some form of induction or further support as they would be provided with when first joining the university. Considering this, it was also noted that in some cases additional support was not provided:

> I expected there to be maybe some information about the like, I dunno, offering some help for the next year that I would actually be at the university which would be my- going into my second year, and restarting my second year again. But I didn't actually receive anything along those lines. (Molly)

Here it seems the student had expectations about what would be available on their return which were not met. This could suggest that managing expectations is an important factor in ensuring students do not feel dissatisfied on let down by the university on their return. One participant noted that during their time away that they had doubts about being able to return: "I was really scared that I wasn't going to get back into uni" (Stephanie). Based on this uncertainty expressed by the participant, it seems vital that a return process should be supportive and clear.

For some students it may be that they will not want to talk about their LOA once they return. This student explained that "when I came back it was sort of just like a blank slate. I didn't really hear much more about it and to be fair I didn't really want to personally" (Peter). It seems like the student is keen for the chance to move on and not dwell on having to take a break from their studies so here their experience of returning was consistent with their wishes. Whilst it may be that their time away from university was a

difficult time, it could also be that the student perceives LOA as something which might be perceived negatively by others.

For other students it is worth noting that an aspect of returning is being out of cohort and no longer learning with others they may have built relationships with. As this participant states: "not having your friends there to support you in your classes doesn't really help" (Molly). For this participant it seems that having support from people they knew around them when attending classes was very important and when this was no longer the case it may have made their return harder. Similarly, they stated: "when they come back obviously some people are behind you and some people are ahead of you and it makes you feel like a bit alone and a bit sort of left out maybe" (Molly). The social element of university is clearly a significant part of the experience and feeling left out or isolated on their return may have led to further issues for them.

The participants noted that a difficult aspect of LOA could be the time taken away from studies. For example, one participant explained: "I think if you do absolutely nothing for however long your leave of absence is, come September and you've got three, four assignments it's gonna be a little bit overwhelming" (Sarah). It is clear here that after the break it might be hard for some to get back into work on their return and it may be a while since students have covered certain content.

Firstly, in terms of adjusting back to writing it was considered whether there could be the opportunity to complete a small amount of work whilst away from the university:

> So maybe something like, I don't know, like a mini 250 word essay or a mini 500 word essay which is not graded, but if you do it you can get, I don't know, verbal feedback or written feedback which will keep you in the loop of work. (Sarah)

As well as being able to do a short piece of work to remain engaged it seems important here that the participant notes that continuing to gain feedback without the pressure of being graded is something they would value. The view of another participant differed in relation to this: "You need to keep a bit updated but I suppose some people are very ill so they're not going to be wanting to be getting equations through the post or- just to keep you in hand" (Jane). Here it is highlighted that for some students on LOA having any kind of work to complete would not be appropriate and could in fact be detrimental to their time away. This again supports the need for a personal and individualised approach.

One student had considered what might have helped them on return to university:

> I think the only thing I really would have benefitted from would to be a pre-arranged meeting with a teaching fellow, now looking back at it that come in and have like a booster to catch up on where I was and stuff because it was about five weeks in total, four weeks-Four five weeks that I missed in the semester. So I think that would have been a huge help because I had to virtually as soon as I come back I had to apply for an extension on a deadline and explain (Laura)

It seems like something as simple as the offer of a one-to-one catch up meeting from their tutor on return would make a significant difference in terms of the ability and confidence to pick up their studies.

Lastly, it may be that students do not often come across others who have taken a LOA:

> When I was on a leave of absence, I didn't know anyone else taking a
> leave of absence so I kind of felt like I was the only one and when you
> come back to do another year all of your friends have gone ahead so
> you feel like you're starting again. So I would have benefitted from
> knowing if there was one or two other people in my boat. Even if they
> weren't from my course if they were from a different school it would still
> be quite helpful knowing that yeah we can get through this together
> kind of thing. (Sarah)

This participant seems to suggest that the process of returning may have been helped by having contact with someone else who has also been on LOA and shared a common experience. Feeling like they were not the only one who required this option seems important here.

Discussion

Needing to take time away whilst studying in higher education is not uncommon and this paper aimed to explore student perceptions of LOA at one UK university. Although LOA has been considered previously, for example by Ward (2020) and Mezey (2021), these papers were focused on the USA. Students' experiences of taking time away from their studies were also explored in terms of the process of applying, their time away and their subsequent return to university. Analysis of the data identified three key themes, 'Difficulties navigating LOA processes', 'Satisfaction with support received', and 'Feelings of preparing to return'. It seems there are inconsistencies in students' experiences and that improvements may be needed which could also be relevant across higher education institutions.

One aspect of LOA where inconsistencies were clear was surrounding the administrative processes involved in taking a LOA. In general, it seemed students were not always clear on processes and issues with communication across the university arose in some cases. These findings are supportive of previous research (see Mezey, 2021; Ward, 2020) which suggested the need for clear procedures and dissatisfaction with administrative support related to LOA. It was evident that navigating these processes had the potential to lead to increased stress and a more negative view of the university for students. In terms of student satisfaction, it is important that all university staff including those in administrative roles make the process as easy as possible (Low, 2000, as cited in Banwet & Datta, 2003). In terms of the future, it therefore seems essential that university systems and processes surrounding LOA and options available to students should be as clear and accessible as possible. During the interviews, for example, it was suggested that having simple written guidance and an outline of options would be useful for students to refer back to, as opposed to needing to retain information during a potentially stressful time. However, it was clear that not all participants recalled negative experiences, with some being satisfied and raising no concerns.

In terms of recommendations, it was apparent that the decision to take a LOA was very significant for students and may have been taken reluctantly in many cases. Extending their studies for many students may lead to concerns around finance or the feasibility of them completing their degree. Mazhari and Atherton (2021), for example, explored students' financial concerns in higher education and noted concerns around high living

costs and anxiety around student finance. It was suggested that for some, the opportunity to discuss their options and the implications related to these would have been beneficial. A more supportive process for some also meant being made specifically aware of the university support which would still be available to them. Along with still having access to services like the library, students are also still entitled to access the university Counselling Service. As highlighted by Connell et al. (2008), student counselling in the UK can be effective in terms of improving student mental health.

Something which was talked about by a number of participants was the need for one-to-one support; for example, the benefits of having a particular tutor, often their personal tutor who was supportive and could act as a point of contact. It can be suggested that having a good relationship at university with tutors or a particular member of staff is vital to the student experience. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) stated that teacher-student relationships clearly impact on student satisfaction and achievement and also affect retention. Similarly, Stephen et al. (2008) found that students believed a good relationship with a personal tutor was important in terms of providing a mix of both academic and personal support. In terms of support required during LOA it is acknowledged that students' needs will vary greatly based on the support networks they have outside of university. In particular, some students will be estranged from their families who can often be considered a cornerstone of student support (Costa et al. 2020).

It seems there is some variation in terms of what students consider or need LOA to be. A number of students discussed whether or not they had received contact from the university whilst on leave. Some seemed to express disappointment that contact had not been received and suggested that it would have been beneficial, perhaps in terms of making them feel that someone cared. It may be that being on LOA impacts students' feelings of belonging to the university. As expressed by Ahn and Davis (2020), belonging is related to several aspects of student experience at university including caring and support, with sense of belonging being strongly associated with a successful time at university. On the other hand, some students expressed that the purpose of LOA should be time away without the pressure of thinking about university. Cazan and Năstasă (2015), for example, suggested burnout can be caused by long term involvement in situations which are emotionally demanding. Students with difficulties in their personal lives may therefore benefit from the temporary removal of additional pressure whilst they recover or work through their difficulties. These students did not perceive that contact would be beneficial. In terms of future recommendations, it is proposed that to address these differences in students' expectations or preferences they should be asked at the point of taking leave whether they wish to receive regular contact from someone at the university until they return.

Returning to university following their break from studying was undoubtedly something that some participants perceived to be challenging. In their paper exploring causes of learning shock, described as feelings of confusion, anxiety and frustration when experiencing unfamiliar teaching methods and expectations, Griffiths et al. (200 5) specifically highlighted the challenge of a return to an academic environment following time away. Similarly, in terms of perception of LOA it is acknowledged that it could be viewed negatively by some, with one student specifically referring to wanting to move on and forget their time away. Research, for example Choi (2020), has drawn attention to fear of failure in higher education students. It is therefore possible that some students would view the need to take a break from their course as being a failure as a student and so

they may wish to just get back to studying without this being emphasised. One participant reflected on how it might have been helpful to have met other students who had also taken LOA, perhaps suggesting a sense of isolation in feeling like the only one who has 'failed'.

Briggs et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of successful transition and induction to higher education and also drew attention to the need for a more sustained induction. If students perceive their return to university as feeling like starting again or feeling new this may suggest the need for more of an induction process back to university following LOA. One student referred to a particular Buddy Scheme which had helped them to have a smooth return. As stated by Crisp et al. (2020), peer support programmes can be useful for increasing wellbeing in university students. Specifically, encouraging students returning from LOA to participate in peer support schemes may be worthwhile for their adjustment back to university. One participant proposed that the option of completing formative work to gain feedback during their time away would be valuable. Research including Poulus and Mahony (2008) draws attention to the importance of effective feedback in higher education and it may be that maintaining an element of this whilst on leave would be favourable for some. It is however acknowledged that completing work would not be an appropriate option for all students needing to take LOA.

It is noted that returning to university out of cohort and no longer learning with their friends was upsetting for some participants. As found by Buote et al. (2007), students' academic adjustment to university was related to the quality of the friendships they formed. Thus, thought is needed as to how these students can build the social networks on their course. Again, this requires individualised support from tutors to enable these conversations to take place.

Whilst this study is important in recognising the potential challenges of taking a LOA, we acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, whilst it highlights the potential challenges of LOA at one UK institution, it is acknowledged that processes and support available at other institutions could be very different (better or worse); thus, the recommendations proposed may therefore not apply across the board. Discussions with a colleague at another institution however indicated that students' experiences did not seem dissimilar there. We also acknowledge that there may be differences across the UK itself, for example undergraduate degrees in Scotland are typically four years in length which could lead to differing impacts of LOA.

In addition to this, although literature suggests that widening participation (see Macaskill, 2013) could explain increases in students with mental health difficulties and problems with retention, in this study we did not consider the participants' backgrounds, demographic information beyond gender, or their reasons for needing to take LOA. Future research in the UK could therefore take this into consideration. Similarly, in terms of recruitment, targeted recruitment via email overseen by the university Student Services Team avoided targeting students considered to be the most vulnerable. It is also acknowledged that those who volunteered to participate may have been those with particularly strong feelings surrounding their experience of LOA which may have resulted in a sample including those with more negative perceptions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident from the data that students' experiences and perceptions of LOA can be varied in some part due to inconsistencies in input from the university. Whilst some students' experiences were more positive it is clear that in many cases improvements can be made. A number of key recommendations can therefore be made based on the data. Firstly, that the options available to students and the consequences related to these should be clear and accessible and that any student considering taking time away from their studies should have a knowledgeable and supportive individual available to discuss these options with. The processes involved in applying for LOA and returning to university should be clear and accessible with support available throughout the year. Lastly, students should be given the option of receiving or not receiving contact from a named individual during their time away and the option of additional support on their return. It may be that LOA is an essential option for some students allowing them to cope and complete their studies to the best of their abilities on their return, for others, it gives them space to consider other options. Universities have a duty of care to support students through this process, irrespective of the outcomes. It is therefore important to ensure that it is given considerations across higher education institutions.

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