



**DL837 BA in NEW MEDIA STUDIES**

**Submission Form**

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**MODULE: Journalism**

**ASSIGNMENT: CA 2**

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**Signed: Niamh Galligan (on date of submission of assignment)**

**Date: 31/3/22.**

# The healthcare students at the centre of the COVID-19 pandemic

How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Irish healthcare students and what improvements should be carried out to better support students in the future

*'I think it's forced us to age rapidly'*



Medb, a postgraduate physiotherapist in her uniform and face mask

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced a nationwide lockdown, marking the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. While the public were told to stay at home, within your 2 meter radius, healthcare students such as physiotherapists, optometrists, and nurses were left wondering what will happen to their third level degrees, placements and employment.

Healthcare students, as well as their supervisors, tutors and colleges had to adapt quickly to hybrid learning. The ordinary structure of third level healthcare degrees had to be re-evaluated as students had to keep their distance from patients.

Some hospitals and other care settings prioritised looking after COVID patients rather than training students. Hospitals and other care settings that did take on students did their best to cope in what were challenging circumstances.

Aoife, a postgraduate physiotherapist described how her placement experience in 2019 compared to her placement experience in 2021. 'It was definitely very different because we were on placement the last time before that was 2019. It was definitely a whole new world. It was just so much more stressful and just a lot going on.'<sup>1</sup>

She also detailed what her supervisor and co-workers were experiencing during this time stating that 'it was such a stressful time as well that I kind of feel like the students were nearly like an extra burden on them. In fairness to them they were there for us and they were accommodating, but I kind of feel like everyone was being pulled in 10 different directions.'<sup>2</sup>

Áine, a final year nursing student explained how she felt at the beginning of the pandemic stating that, 'so I was actually supposed to be on placement over COVID, but it was all cancelled. So they told us that if we worked at a nursing home or with an agency that some of it would count. So I worked with nurse on call, but I stayed on the same ward in Loughlinstown.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aoife Friars, Interview with Niamh Galligan (Wicklow, 23 February 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Friars, Interview

<sup>3</sup> Áine Cahill, Interview with Niamh Galligan (Wicklow, 18 February 2022)

She continued by saying ‘I was on a close contact ward for all of summer, the very first summer of it. When I started there at first, there was actually no masks at all. Then after the first week they brought in masks, but PPE was so limited at the time. I think we got like three masks a day.’<sup>4</sup>

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2020 the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) issued a press release in response to new universal facemask policy<sup>5</sup> across the health service. This policy was introduced just before the summer months of 2020. In response to this policy, ‘INMO General Secretary, Phil Ní Sheaghda said ‘this is welcome news [and] this should have been rolled out weeks ago. The next step must be ensuring sufficient supplies are available for all health workers, and continuous PPE training where needed.’<sup>6</sup> The INMO previously wrote a letter to Dr Colm Henry (Chief Clinical Officer) on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April calling for a facemask policy change.<sup>7</sup>

Áine went on to describe her specific experience working in agency care during the pandemic, saying that ‘when you're working agency you never really settle into that area and people don't really know who you are. But the pay with nurse on call is actually really good because I'm used to not getting paid as a student. That was a nice change getting some money.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cahill, Interview

<sup>5</sup> ‘HSE Face Covering Poster’ (2020) < [HSE Face Covering Poster.pdf \(hpsc.ie\)](#) > [accessed 9 March 2022]

<sup>6</sup> ‘INMO welcomes new universal facemask policy across health service’ (2020) < [INMO welcomes new universal facemask policy across health service](#) > [accessed 9 March 2022]

<sup>7</sup> ‘INMO welcomes new universal facemask policy across health service’ < [INMO welcomes new universal facemask policy across health service](#) >

<sup>8</sup> Cahill, Interview

There were issues with payments for student nurses and midwives on internships during the pandemic. Student nurses and midwives held a demonstration on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2020. The INMO called for a ‘full restoration of previous pay cuts for those in their internship year and improved conditions for those on clinical placement.’<sup>9</sup>

Medb, who is also a postgraduate physiotherapist explained how payment is dealt with during a third level physiotherapy degree, ‘so physio was unpaid and that's stated from the start there's no money involved at all. You're just expected to support yourself through college and placement.’<sup>10</sup> She went on to say that she was fortunate when it came to financing her degree. ‘Now let me say I was in a very lucky possession that I had a lot of savings put away and my parents supported me. I was in a very privileged position.’<sup>11</sup>

Eleanor, a postgraduate optometrist detailed how her experience differed to nursing and physiotherapy. ‘It's all unpaid. We do placement on campus first, second, third year where we invite the public into the clinic. That's part of the college structured learning you're being signed off, you get taught lessons in between, and then we practice.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Student demo about future of Irish healthcare’ (2020) < [Student demo about future of Irish healthcare \(inmo.ie\)](#) > [accessed 9 March 2020]

<sup>10</sup> Medb O’Keane, Interview with Niamh Galligan (Wicklow, 5 February 2022)

<sup>11</sup> O’Keane, Interview

<sup>12</sup> Eleanor Dunne, Interview with Niamh Galligan (Wicklow, 5 February 2022)



Eleanor dressed in PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic

All four interviewees expected that a lack of pay was simply the reality of being a healthcare student. Áine did state that more could be done to better facilitate students in the work environment. ‘Even something small like having lunch subsidized or having parking places, like we don't get parking spots in the hospitals and we have to pay full amounts for lunches. Considering we're not getting paid anyway it would be nice to have like small tokens like that, I suppose.’<sup>13</sup>

Medb also stated that not being able to park in the hospital car park did make coming and going from work difficult. ‘We weren't allowed to drive in cause there's no parking spaces for students. So I was cycling in cause you can't go on public transport with the risk of COVID as well.’<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cahill, Interview

<sup>14</sup> O'Keane, Interview

A lack of mental health support featured prominently in each interview as both Eleanor and Medb described how they felt during the early months of the pandemic. Eleanor described how ‘it was definitely probably the roughest six months. I think there was no support as well in place. You know, usually we get our supervisors come and visit us on placement.’<sup>15</sup> Medb also echoed the absence of support, stating that ‘I think the pandemic just highlighted that there isn't a lot of mental health support services or counselling services, or just somewhere to vent I guess.’<sup>16</sup>

University College Cork (UCC) carried out a survey in February 2020 regarding the ‘perceived stress experienced by undergraduate healthcare professional students throughout their degree’.<sup>17</sup> The results of the survey concluded that ‘the majority of students experienced moderate stress with approximately 1-in-6 experiencing high stress. The mean PSS [perceived stress scale] score for female students is 21.5 and for male students is 20.1.’<sup>18</sup>

The survey also revealed that ‘the course reporting the highest mean PSS was Dentistry (24.1), followed by Nursing (22.8) [and] Public Health (22.4)’.<sup>19</sup> This survey illustrates the

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<sup>15</sup> Dunne, Interview

<sup>16</sup> O’Keane, Interview

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Casey, Julia O’Doherty, Kevin D. Murphy, Laura J. Sahm, ‘Perceived stress experienced by undergraduate healthcare professional students throughout their degree’ (2020) < [Perceived stress experienced by undergraduate healthcare professional students throughout their degree \(ucc.ie\)](#) > [accessed 26 March 2022]

<sup>18</sup> Rachel Casey et al., ‘Perceived stress experienced by undergraduate healthcare professional students throughout their degree’ < [PerceivedStressPoster.pdf \(ucc.ie\)](#) > [accessed 26 March 2022]

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Casey et al., ‘Perceived stress experienced by undergraduate healthcare professional students throughout their degree’ < [PerceivedStressPoster.pdf \(ucc.ie\)](#) >

need for more mental health support for healthcare students and to better prioritise student welfare by helping students to manage their stress and to deduce the risk of burnout.

Eleanor and Medb also highlighted more training is needed in dealing with patient interaction. Medb stated that ‘I feel like if you're going into a healthcare course, you should have placement from first year so you know what you're getting into. They need more modules about how to help people who are having that meltdown in front of you.’<sup>20</sup>

Eleanor agreed saying that ‘so when you're just about to graduate and someone has a big meltdown, you've actually seen it before. When someone tells you their husband died and you're just like, ‘what do you say?’’. Genuine training on how to deal as a person with that.’<sup>21</sup>

Judith Johnson et al. carried out research in November 2020, posing the question ‘can we prepare healthcare professionals and students for involvement in stressful healthcare events?’.<sup>22</sup> Their studies concluded that ‘the qualitative findings identified the ‘importance of experience and reference points for learning, peer learning and engagement [and]

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<sup>20</sup> O’Keane, Interview

<sup>21</sup> Dunne, Interview

<sup>22</sup> Judith Johnson, Ruth Simms-Ellis, Gillian Janes, Thomas Mills, Luke Budworth, Lauren Atkinson and Reema Harrison, ‘Can we prepare healthcare professionals and students for involvement in stressful healthcare events? A mixed-methods evaluation of a resilience training intervention’, BMC Health Services Research, 20, 1094 (2020) 1-14 < [Can we prepare healthcare professionals and students for involvement in stressful healthcare events? A mixed-methods evaluation of a resilience training intervention | BMC Health Services Research | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05111-1) > [accessed 26 March 2022]

opportunities to tailor learning'.<sup>23</sup> The key theme throughout the report was the need to listen to and support healthcare students and professionals.

Eleanor went on to say that 'everyone's had a cry in the bathroom or rants to parents.

Students definitely need both training on what to expect with the burden and also support when it does happen.'<sup>24</sup>

When discussing whether there was a hierarchy within a hospital setting during the COVID pandemic Aoife stating that 'I remember when we were there in January, that was when the vaccines came out. The students were just completely neglected in the hospital. I was in a big university hospital and we were told we weren't allowed get vaccines at that point because we weren't permanent staff.'<sup>25</sup>

She went on to say that 'we were basically told you're going to have to wait to get your vaccine until later. I think I ended up getting my vaccine in March, but even though you were completely on the front line, we were told we couldn't get the vaccine, which was really frustrating.'<sup>26</sup>

The Central Statistics Office compiled data from the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2020 to the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2021, illustrating that there was a 92% vaccine uptake among employees over 18

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Johnson et al., 'Can we prepare healthcare professionals and students for involvement in stressful healthcare events? A mixed-methods evaluation of a resilience training intervention' < [Can we prepare healthcare professionals and students for involvement in stressful healthcare events? A mixed-methods evaluation of a resilience training intervention \(biomedcentral.com\)](https://www.biomedcentral.com/10.1186/s12913-021-07000-0) >

<sup>24</sup> Dunne, Interview

<sup>25</sup> Friars, Interview

<sup>26</sup> Friars, Interview

years of age in ‘human health and social work activities.’<sup>27</sup> This data specially focused on those who were born before the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2003. This data conveys there was a high vaccine uptake and an eagerness to be vaccinated among over 18s working within healthcare settings during the pandemic.

In terms of improvements that should be carried out to better facilitate healthcare students, Eleanor highlighted the issues surrounding needing to be signed off on specific skills in order to graduate. She said that ‘there's a big list. You have to get signed off on them all but our professional body said with COVID you're not allowed to do this skill because you don't want you to be knee deep in someone's tears. So I think they're going to have to re-evaluate how lenient they can be.’<sup>28</sup>

Aoife stated that improvements should be carried out on the grading system stating that ‘it would be [fairer] if it was a pass fail kind of situation, because it does put a lot of pressure on students. I think during COVID some of the placements ended up being pass fail, because again, there was just no resources to have people to properly grade.’<sup>29</sup>

The Health Service Executive published a report detailing their framework for improving quality in the health service. Part 1 of this framework lays out a list of 6 components under the heading ‘staff engagement’, such as ‘listening, hearing and valuing staff feedback and acknowledging their unique contribution to fulfilling the vision of the organisation [as well as] promoting the health and wellbeing of staff and creating a healthy workplace

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<sup>27</sup> ‘COVID-19 Vaccination Statistics’ (2021) < [COVID-19 Vaccination Statistics - CSO - Central Statistics Office](#) >

[accessed 26 March 2022]

<sup>28</sup> Dunne, Interview

<sup>29</sup> Friars, Interview

environment'.<sup>30</sup> This report was published in April 2016 though these issues still persist within the healthcare system.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many issues within the healthcare system such as the lack of mental health support services, lack of pay and overstretched healthcare professionals being assigned to train students. All four interviewees acknowledged that they were working through a time of chaos within the Irish healthcare system and so they understood the fact that their supervisors, colleges and co-workers were all simply trying their best to cope at the beginning of the pandemic.

Eleanor reflected on the experience by stating that 'I think we are going to be an excellent batch of young professionals hygiene wise. They're so hyper aware. We're so clean and so meticulous. I think it's forced us to age rapidly, like it really has pulled ourselves up.'<sup>31</sup>

Every healthcare student who graduated and entered the healthcare system during the pandemic had to be adaptable and resilient. Under these circumstances they took care of people and remain dedicated to their work. Now it's up to the Irish healthcare system to repay them for their work by providing greater support and ensuring that their framework for improving quality in the health service is fully implemented and regularly revised.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Framework for Improving Quality in our Health Service, Part 1: Introducing the Framework' (2016) 1-28 < [framework-for-improving-quality-2016.pdf \(hse.ie\)](#) > [accessed 26 March 2022]

<sup>31</sup> Dunne, Interview

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