# 001

Interviewer: Good morning, and thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. We’re conducting this interview to understand student experiences with online learning, especially during the pandemic. Could you start by introducing yourself—your name, age, current level of education, and maybe what you’re studying?

Student: Uh, sure! My name is Alex—I’m 20 years old, and I’m in my second year of undergraduate studies, majoring in Computer Science. [pause] Well, technically, I just finished my second year, so I’m heading into third year now.

Interviewer: Great, thanks, Alex. Let’s ease into things. Can you tell me a bit about your home situation? Where are you based, and what’s your family like?

Student: Yeah, of course. I live in a suburban area, kind of on the outskirts of a mid-sized city. It’s not super rural, but it’s not downtown either—more like a quiet neighborhood with houses and some parks. My family is… uh, let’s see, there’s me, my parents, and my younger sister, so four of us total. Economically, I’d say we’re middle-class? Like, we’re comfortable, but not wealthy or anything. We own our home, which is nice, but money’s always been something we have to be mindful of.

Interviewer: That helps set the scene. Now, thinking about your study environment at home—did you have a dedicated space for studying during online classes?

Student: [laughs] Oh, yeah, that was a whole thing. At first, I was just working from my bedroom, which was… not ideal. My desk is kinda small, and I share the room with my sister when she’s home—she’s in high school, so she was also doing online classes. It got pretty crowded. But after a few weeks, my parents helped me set up a corner in the basement as a study nook. It’s not a separate room, but it’s partitioned off, so I have some privacy. Still, it’s a bit dim, and the Wi-Fi signal is weaker down there, which caused some issues.

Interviewer: Speaking of Wi-Fi, what was your internet situation like? Stability, bandwidth—did it affect your classes?

Student: Uh, yeah, it did. Our internet is generally okay—we have a broadband connection, but it’s not super high-speed. During peak hours, like when everyone in the neighborhood is online, it tends to slow down. I remember one time, I was in a live lecture for my Data Structures course, and the video just froze right when the professor was explaining binary trees. [pause] I had to switch to my phone’s hotspot, which eats up data, but it was more stable. For the most part, though, it was manageable; I just had to avoid streaming anything else during class times.

Interviewer: What device did you primarily use for attending classes?

Student: I used my laptop—a Windows laptop that I’ve had since high school. It’s not the fastest, but it gets the job done. I tried using a tablet sometimes for reading PDFs, but for Zoom calls and coding assignments, the laptop was essential. Oh, and I have a second monitor that I borrowed from my dad’s home office—that was a game-changer for multitasking.

Interviewer: Let’s talk about your daily routine during the online learning period. On a typical day, how many hours would you spend on studying, including classes and self-study?

Student: Hmm, on a normal day, I’d say around 5 to 6 hours? That includes attending live lectures, which were usually 2-3 hours a day, and then another 3 hours or so for homework, coding practice, and reviewing notes. But it varied a lot—like, during exam weeks, it could go up to 8 or 9 hours. I’d start early, around 8 AM, and work until late, with breaks in between. [pause] But honestly, some days I’d procrastinate and end up cramming at night.

Interviewer: And what about sleep? How many hours of sleep did you typically get?

Student: [sighs] Sleep was… inconsistent. On a good night, I’d get 7 hours, but often it was closer to 6, especially if I had deadlines. There was this one week where I had back-to-back assignments—I think I averaged 5 hours of sleep for three days straight. I felt so drained, and it definitely affected my focus in class. My sleep schedule was all over the place because I didn’t have to commute, so I’d stay up late gaming or watching videos.

Interviewer: You mentioned gaming—are you into gaming? And how much time did you spend on social media or other distractions?

Student: Yeah, I’m definitely into gaming. I play a lot of strategy games, like Civilization, and sometimes multiplayer stuff with friends. On weekdays, I’d probably spend an hour or two gaming, but on weekends, it could be more. Social media… uh, I’m on Instagram and Twitter quite a bit. I’d say平均, maybe 2-3 hours a day? It’s embarrassing to admit, but I’d often have it open in the background while studying, which isn’t great for concentration. I’d catch myself scrolling through feeds during lectures, and then I’d miss important points.

Interviewer: That’s a common challenge. Did you find ways to manage those distractions?

Student: Kind of? I started using apps to block social media during study hours, but it didn’t always work. [laughs] I’d just disable them if I got bored. The lack of a structured classroom environment made it harder to stay disciplined. For me, having a fixed schedule helped—like, setting specific times for breaks where I could check my phone.

Interviewer: Moving on to other activities—did you participate in sports or group studies during this time?

Student: Sports, not really. I used to play soccer casually with friends before the pandemic, but that stopped. I tried doing home workouts, but it was sporadic—maybe once or twice a week. As for group studies, yeah, we did that online. My friends and I would set up Zoom calls to study together, especially before exams. It was helpful because we could explain concepts to each other. For example, in my Algorithms course, we had a study session where we walked through problem sets—it made the material less intimidating.

Interviewer: Did anyone at home, like elderly family members, monitor your studies or check in on you?

Student: [pause] Well, my parents would sometimes pop in to see if I was actually in class or just slacking off. [laughs] But they’re not too strict—more like occasional reminders. My grandma lives nearby, and she’d call to ask how classes were going, but she didn’t directly monitor me. It was mostly well-intentioned, but sometimes it added pressure, like if I was struggling with a topic and they’d ask about grades.

Interviewer: Understood. Now, academically, how many subjects were you taking during the online period, and what are your main interests?

Student: Last semester, I had five subjects: Data Structures, Calculus II, Introduction to Psychology, Digital Logic, and a programming lab. My main interest is definitely Computer Science—I love coding and problem-solving. The Psychology course was an elective, which I found interesting but challenging. I tend to focus more on my major subjects; the others I just try to get through.

Interviewer: Speaking of academics, what were your average marks like before the pandemic? Say, in high school or your first year of university?

Student: Before the pandemic, I was doing pretty well. In high school, I had an average around 85%—I was consistently in the top 20% of my class. My first year of uni was mostly offline, and I maintained a B+ average, which is about 75-80%. I’ve always been a decent student; not top of the class, but I put in the effort. Math and science subjects were my strengths.

Interviewer: And how did that compare to your performance during online learning?

Student: [long pause] It’s… complicated. Overall, my grades dipped a bit. For instance, in Data Structures, which is a core course, I went from expecting an A- to ending up with a B. There were a few reasons—like, the lack of face-to-face interaction made it harder to ask questions. But it wasn’t all bad; in some subjects, like the programming lab, I actually did better because I could work at my own pace. On average, though, I’d say my marks dropped by maybe 5-10 percentage points compared to pre-pandemic.

Interviewer: Can you describe a specific online course that stands out—maybe one that was representative of your experience? Let’s focus on that.

Student: Sure, I’ll go with Data Structures. It was a fully online course, with live lectures twice a week and weekly assignments. The professor used Zoom for lectures and a forum for discussions.

Interviewer: How did you interact in that course? For example, did you use live chat, forums, or direct messages?

Student: Yeah, we had all of those. During lectures, there was a live chat where students could ask questions. I used it sometimes, but not a lot—mostly if I had a quick doubt. The forum was more active; people would post about assignment problems, and the teaching assistants would respond. I remember one time, I was stuck on a homework problem about linked lists—it was late at night, around 11 PM, and I posted on the forum. To my surprise, a TA replied within 30 minutes with a hint that helped me solve it. That was a positive experience. But other times, the interaction felt lacking. Like, if the professor was rushing through slides, the chat would flood with questions, and many went unanswered.

Interviewer: Could you share one example of clearing doubts that was timely and satisfying, and one that was unsatisfying?

Student: Okay, the timely one—I just mentioned the forum incident. That was great because it felt supportive. Another time, I direct-messaged the professor after class about a concept I didn’t get—binary search trees—and he scheduled a quick one-on-one Zoom call the next day. He explained it patiently, and it clicked for me. [smiles] That made a big difference.

The unsatisfying case… uh, there was this one lecture where the professor was covering graph algorithms, and I was totally lost. I tried asking in the chat, but my message got buried. After class, I emailed him with my doubts, but I didn’t get a reply for three days. By then, I’d already moved on to the next topic, and I had to figure it out myself by watching YouTube videos. It was frustrating because I fell behind on the assignment.

Interviewer: How would you compare your performance in online versus offline modes for that course?

Student: In offline, I think I would’ve done better. With in-person classes, I could raise my hand immediately if I didn’t understand something, and the professor would explain it on the spot. Also, the lab sessions were hands-on, which helped. Online, I had to rely more on self-study, which isn’t my strongest suit. I tend to learn better through discussion and immediate feedback. For me, the lack of spontaneous interaction was a big drawback. On the flip side, online lectures were recorded, so I could rewatch them, which was helpful for revision.

Interviewer: Finally, on a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied were you with that Data Structures course, and what are three key reasons?

Student: [thinks for a moment] I’d give it a 6 out of 10. Not terrible, but not great. First reason: the flexibility was nice—I could attend classes from home, which saved commute time. But second, the interaction was limited; like I said, doubts didn’t always get resolved quickly. A concrete moment was when I spent hours trying to debug code because I couldn’t get help in time. Third, the course design—some assignments felt rushed for online format. For example, we had a group project where coordination was messy over Zoom, and it affected our grade. Overall, it was okay, but I missed the engagement of offline classes.

Interviewer: Thank you, Alex. That’s very detailed. Is there anything else you’d like to add about your online learning experience?

Student: Um, just that it was a mixed bag. Some aspects worked well, but I’m glad we’re moving back to in-person. I think having a balance would be ideal—maybe hybrid models in the future. [pause] Oh, and the social isolation was tough; I didn’t mention that earlier. Not seeing classmates made it harder to stay motivated.

Interviewer: I appreciate your honesty. That wraps up our interview—thank you again for your time.

Student: No problem, thanks for having me.

# 002

Interviewer: Hey, thanks for taking the time to chat. I know it’s been a wild few years for students, especially with everything shifting online. I’d love to hear about your experience—just in your own words, whatever comes to mind. We can start simple: what year are you in now?

Student: Yeah, sure. I’m currently in my third year—well, I just started third year, actually. Like, two weeks ago. Time flies, huh? [laughs] I’m doing undergrad in environmental science, which, honestly, wasn’t my first choice when I applied, but I kind of fell into it after switching from biology in first year. Still figuring it out, but I like the field. It’s… real, you know? Climate stuff, ecosystems, sustainability—feels like it matters.

Interviewer: That makes sense. And how old are you?

Student: I’m 20. Turned 20 in May. So, yeah, right in that third-year sweet spot, I guess. [pauses] Although sometimes I feel older. Online learning aged me, honestly. [laughs] No, but seriously, it messed with my rhythm.

Interviewer: Where are you from originally?

Student: I grew up in a small town—like, not even a proper town, more like a big village on the outskirts of a mid-sized city. Population maybe 15,000? It’s quiet. Everyone knows everyone. My parents still live there, and that’s where I’ve been staying during the pandemic and even after, since most classes stayed hybrid. I only come to campus maybe once a week now for labs or meetings.

Interviewer: So you’ve been studying from home this whole time?

Student: Yeah. Mostly. First year was fully online, second year was mixed, and now it’s like… 60% online? But I still choose to do most lectures from home because—well, the commute’s a pain, and honestly, I’ve gotten used to it. But it hasn’t been easy. Especially in the beginning.

Interviewer: What was home like during those first online semesters?

Student: [sighs] Okay, so, family of five—me, my parents, my younger brother who’s in high school, and my grandma. She lives with us. And we’re not poor, but we’re not comfortable either. I’d say… lower-middle class? Like, we get by, but there’s no extra for things like a second laptop or a better internet plan. We’ve got one router, one desktop, and one old tablet. The desktop is in the living room, which is also the dining room and the TV room. So privacy? Forget about it.

Interviewer: So where did you end up studying?

Student: I used the desktop, obviously—my brother needed the tablet for school, and my phone’s too small for lectures. But the living room? It’s chaos. Grandma watches soap operas all day, my brother’s on calls with his friends, my mom’s cooking, the dog’s barking… I mean, it’s love, but it’s loud. I asked if I could use the bedroom, but that’s where my brother sleeps, and there’s no desk. So I just… made it work. Put on headphones, tried to focus. But it wasn’t ideal.

Interviewer: Did you have your own space at all?

Student: No. Not really. That was the hardest part. I mean, I had a corner of the dining table. That was my “study zone.” [laughs] I’d clear it after breakfast and set up my notebook, the desktop, my water bottle—same spot every day. But as soon as lunch came around, it was gone. So I had to stop whatever I was doing, help set the table, eat, clear up… and then try to get back into it. Flow? Never happened.

Interviewer: How many hours were you trying to study each day?

Student: On a normal day, I’d aim for five or six. But realistically? Maybe four solid hours. I’d start around 9 a.m., after checking emails and announcements. Lectures were usually from 10 to 12, then a break, then maybe a tutorial at 2 or 3. After that, I’d try to read or write, but by 5 p.m., the house was full of people, noise, cooking smells, TV… I’d lose focus. My attention span just… evaporated.

Interviewer: And sleep?

Student: Oh man. That got wrecked. Before the pandemic, I used to sleep seven, sometimes eight hours. I was a regular sleeper. But once online started? I’d stay up late trying to finish work because I couldn’t focus during the day. Or I’d get distracted scrolling. I don’t know—being at home, no routine, no sunlight… I’d go to bed around 1 or 2 a.m., wake up at 8, feel like garbage. Average? Maybe five and a half hours a night. During exams? Even worse. I pulled two all-nighters last semester. Not proud of that.

Interviewer: What about social media? How much time were you spending on it?

Student: [pauses] Okay, this is embarrassing, but… easily three hours a day. Sometimes more. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube—just mindless scrolling. I’d tell myself, “Five minutes,” and then look up an hour later. It was my escape, I guess. When I was stressed or overwhelmed, I’d just… zone out. And it killed my productivity. I knew it was bad, but breaking the habit? Impossible. I deleted TikTok twice. Downloaded it back the same day. [laughs]

Interviewer: Did you play any sports or do physical activity?

Student: I used to. In high school, I played volleyball for the town team—twice a week. But after coming to uni, I didn’t join any clubs. Then online happened, and… I just stopped. Now? Maybe a walk once in a while. Or I’ll do a 10-minute stretch video on YouTube if I feel guilty. But nothing regular. I’ve gained weight, honestly. And I feel sluggish. It’s a cycle—no energy, so I don’t move, so I have even less energy.

Interviewer: Any group study?

Student: We tried. First semester online, my bio study group—three of us—we set up a WhatsApp group and did Zoom sessions every Sunday. It was great at first. We’d review notes, quiz each other. But after a few weeks, people dropped off. One got overwhelmed, another had family issues, and I… I just couldn’t commit. Scheduling was a nightmare. Time zones weren’t an issue, but everyone’s home life was different. So it fizzled out. Now I mostly study alone.

Interviewer: What about your professors? Did you interact with them much online?

Student: Not really. I mean, I’d type a question in the chat during lecture sometimes, but half the time it got ignored. Or someone else would ask the same thing first. The professors were trying, I know, but with 150 students in a Zoom room? It’s hard to stand out. I did email a few times, but replies took days. One time I waited four days for a response on an assignment clarification, and the deadline was in five. I had to guess. Got it wrong. Lost marks. That sucked.

Interviewer: Can you think of a time when it did work well?

Student: Yeah, actually. Last semester, in my environmental policy class—smaller course, only 30 students. Professor did live Q&A every Friday. No lecture, just open forum. You could unmute or type. And she was present. If you asked something, she’d respond right away, sometimes even call your name. I asked about carbon pricing models, and she spent ten minutes explaining it, even shared a case study from Canada. That felt… seen. I remember I was sitting at the dining table, it was raining outside, and my grandma was napping on the couch, but for once, I didn’t care about the noise. I was actually learning.

Interviewer: That sounds meaningful.

Student: It was. That class was the only one last year where I felt connected. And my grade? I got an A-. Best I’ve done in a while.

Interviewer: Speaking of grades—how were your marks before all this online stuff started?

Student: First semester, freshman year, before the switch—I got a B+ average. Solid. Not amazing, but I was adjusting. I went to lectures, took notes, studied in the library, joined a study group. I had a rhythm. Then second semester—online—I dropped to a C+. I mean, it wasn’t all online’s fault. I was stressed, isolated, sleeping poorly. But the lack of structure? The distractions? It killed my focus. I failed one midterm—missed it because I didn’t see the time change in the calendar. Just… slipped through the cracks.

Interviewer: That’s rough.

Student: Yeah. And I wasn’t alone. A lot of us crashed that semester. But what’s weird is, this past year, I pulled it back up to a B average. Not because online got better, but because I… adapted? I guess. I learned to work around the chaos. Made better schedules. Used website blockers. Tried to sleep more. But it was hard-won.

Interviewer: What device did you use for classes?

Student: The family desktop. Old Dell, Windows 10, takes two minutes to boot up. Camera and mic are built in—terrible quality. My video always froze, and people said I sounded like I was underwater. I couldn’t present properly. Once, during a group presentation, my screen froze mid-sentence. I could hear my teammates talking, but they couldn’t see or hear me. I just sat there, waving at a frozen screen for three minutes. Had to email the professor afterward to explain. Humiliating.

Internet was another story. We have broadband, but it’s shared with five people and three devices. During peak hours—like 7 to 9 p.m.—it’s unusable. Videos buffer, Zoom kicks me out. I learned to download lectures in the morning when no one’s online. But live classes? Risky. I missed half of one stats lecture because my connection dropped three times. Professor didn’t record it, so I had to borrow notes.

Interviewer: Did anyone at home check in on your studying?

Student: Oh, yeah. My grandma. She’s always been the strict one. “Are you studying?” she’d ask every hour. “Don’t waste your time on the phone!” She’d stand behind me, watching the screen. If she saw TikTok open, she’d scold me. At first, it annoyed me—like, I’m 20, I don’t need babysitting. But… I’ll admit, it helped. She kept me honest. If I was slacking, she’d say something. And she respected study time. When I told her I had a lecture, she’d turn off the TV. So, mixed feelings. Intrusive, but supportive.

Interviewer: How many courses were you taking each semester?

Student: Five. Standard load. But online, five felt like eight. In person, you have breaks between classes, you walk across campus, you chat with friends—mental reset. Online? Back-to-back Zooms. 9 to 10:30 lecture, 10:45 tutorial, 12:00 lab prep, 1:30 seminar… no real break. You’re just sitting, staring, typing. By 3 p.m., my eyes are burning, my neck hurts. I’d eat lunch at the desk, one hand on the mouse, the other shoving rice into my mouth. Not healthy.

Interviewer: What about your main interests? Are you still into environmental science?

Student: Yeah, I am. Especially climate modeling and policy. I did a project last semester on urban heat islands—used public data to map temperature differences in our city. That was cool. I stayed up late on it, even though it wasn’t required. Felt passionate. But the courses themselves? Most are still lecture-heavy, multiple-choice exams, memorization. Not much hands-on. And online, it’s even more passive. You watch a video, answer quiz, repeat. Feels… disconnected from the real work.

Interviewer: Did you ever play video games?

Student: Not really. I never got into it. My brother’s obsessed—plays for hours. But I don’t have the time or the device. Even if I did, I’d feel guilty. Like, why am I playing when I should be studying? Though… sometimes I wonder if it’d be a better break than scrolling TikTok. At least games require focus.

Interviewer: Let’s talk about one specific course. Pick one that stands out—good or bad.

Student: Okay. Let’s go with “Intro to Ecology.” That was second semester, first year—fully online. Big class, 120 students. Professor was… okay. Lectures were prerecorded, 45 minutes, posted every Monday. Then a live tutorial on Wednesday with a TA. And a discussion board.

I remember one week—we were learning about trophic levels. I watched the lecture, took notes, but something wasn’t clicking. The energy transfer diagram confused me. So I posted on the forum: “Can someone explain why only 10% of energy moves up each level?” I waited. Checked every hour. No reply. Next day, someone posted a meme. Then silence.

I tried the TA in the tutorial. I unmuted and said, “Hey, can we go over the 10% rule again?” But there were 20 students, and only 30 minutes. She gave a quick summary, but I still didn’t get it. I was too shy to follow up. So I just… moved on. Studied the textbook, watched a YouTube video, figured it out myself. But I shouldn’t have had to.

Then, on the midterm, there was a long-answer question: “Explain energy transfer in food chains and its implications for ecosystem stability.” I panicked. I wrote something, but I knew it was weak. Got back a 58%. That grade haunted me. I knew the material after the test, but not in time.

Compare that to an in-person class I took in first semester—“Biodiversity and Conservation.” We had a lab where we analyzed soil samples. Hands-on. Professor walked around, answered questions. I didn’t understand pH testing, so I raised my hand. She came over, showed me step by step. I got it immediately. And I remembered it.

That’s the difference. Online, when you’re stuck, it’s on you to find a way out. In person, help is right there.

Interviewer: So would you say you perform better offline?

Student: Definitely. Not just because of doubt-clearing, but… the whole environment. In the library, I focus. At home? I’m distracted. Also, in person, I interact more. I’ll chat with classmates before class, form impromptu study groups. Online, we’re just names on a screen. I don’t even know what most of my classmates look like.

But it’s not all bad. Online has perks. I can rewatch lectures. Pause, rewind. That helped with tough topics. And I saved time—not commuting, not getting dressed. I wore sweatpants all semester. [laughs] And for intro courses, where it’s just memorizing facts, online was fine.

But for deep learning? For understanding complex ideas? I need interaction. I need to talk, ask, argue, explain. That’s missing.

Interviewer: Overall, how satisfied would you say you are with your online course experience? Scale of 0 to 10.

Student: [long pause] I’d say… 5.5. Maybe 6. It’s not a round number because it’s complicated. It kept education going, which I’m grateful for. I didn’t fall completely behind. And I learned to be more independent.

But… it cost me. My health, my focus, my confidence. I used to love learning. Now, some days, I just want to be done. I’m tired of screens. I miss whiteboards, chalk, the sound of a lecture hall.

If I had to pick three reasons for that 5.5… First, the lack of real interaction. I felt invisible. Second, the home environment—it was never designed for studying. And third… my own habits. I didn’t manage my time or attention well. But how could I? No one taught us how to learn like this.

I think if I’d had a quiet room, a decent laptop, faster internet, and maybe a mentor checking in… it could’ve been different. But I had none of that. And I was already struggling with sleep and focus.

Still, I made it this far. I’m not failing. I’m adapting. But I hope we don’t do this again. Not like this.

Interviewer: What would you change, if you could?

Student: So much. [laughs] Okay, first—smaller online classes. No more 120-person lectures. Second, mandatory office hours where TAs are available for quick doubts—like a virtual help desk. Third, training for students on focus, time management, digital wellness. We got tech tutorials, but nothing on how to study online.

And professors… they need to be more present. Not just talking at us. Ask questions. Use breakout rooms. Call on people by name. Make us feel like we’re in a room together, not just data packets.

Also—record everything. Tutorials, office hours, group discussions. If I miss something, I should be able to catch up.

And… I don’t know, maybe a stipend for students without good devices or internet? It’s not fair that your learning depends on your home setup.

Interviewer: Last thing—do you think your background affected your experience?

Student: Absolutely. I mean, I’m a woman, and sometimes I felt ignored in group calls—guys would talk over me, or my questions got less attention. Not always, but enough to notice.

And being from a small town? We didn’t have the same resources. My friend in the city has a home office, fiber internet, a tablet just for notes. She stayed at a 3.8 GPA through all of this. I’m at 3.2. Same intelligence, same effort—different conditions.

And money… we don’t talk about it enough. My parents couldn’t afford a new laptop. I had to make do. That shouldn’t decide my education.

But I don’t want this to sound like I’m blaming anyone. I own my choices. I could’ve tried harder. But when you’re tired, broke, distracted, and lonely… it’s hard to stay on track.

I just hope schools remember this. Not just the tech, but the human side. We’re not machines. We need space, rest, connection. Without that, learning suffers. [pauses] Sorry, I got serious.

Interviewer: No, that’s important. Thank you for being so honest.

Student: Yeah. Thanks for listening. I’ve never said all this out loud before. Feels… lighter. [laughs] Now I’m gonna go for a walk. My grandma will be proud.

# 003

Interviewer: Thanks for agreeing to sit down with me today. I just want you to talk as naturally as possible about your experience with online courses. Don’t worry about sounding formal—just share stories and details the way they come to you. To start off, could you tell me a little about yourself?

Student: Sure, uh… so I’m nineteen, a male student in my second year of undergrad. I’m majoring in computer science, though sometimes I feel like I’m just barely keeping up with all the math parts [laughs]. I live in a medium-sized town, not exactly rural but not a big city either. It’s one of those towns where everyone still kind of knows each other, you know? My family’s been here a long time.

Interviewer: And how many people are in your family at home?

Student: Let me think… there are five of us. My parents, my grandma, my younger sister, and me. My brother’s away working in another city, so most of the time it’s the five of us. It’s kind of a full house, especially with my grandma needing some help. She’s in her seventies and still pretty active, but she also likes to keep an eye on what I’m doing [laughs], especially when she hears me in front of the computer late at night.

Interviewer: [laughs] Right, so she sort of monitors you sometimes?

Student: Yeah, you could say that. Not in a strict way, but she’ll come in and say things like, “It’s midnight, you should be sleeping,” or “Don’t stare at that screen so much.” So there’s definitely that sense of being watched, even though my parents are pretty hands-off now that I’m in college.

Interviewer: That makes sense. And you mentioned you’re studying computer science. How many subjects do you usually take per semester?

Student: Usually around six, sometimes seven if I count the electives. During the pandemic, though, when everything went online, it felt like double that because each course piled on weekly tasks. Honestly, I think the workload felt heavier just because I was at home, staring at the same screen for all of them.

Interviewer: Got it. Let’s rewind a bit. Before the pandemic, what were your average marks like?

Student: Oh, before the pandemic I was doing quite well. I’d say my average was around 83, maybe 84 percent across my subjects. I had a rhythm—I’d go to the library, I’d study with a group of friends after class, and I knew where I stood. Like, I wasn’t the top student, but I was comfortably above average, and teachers often gave me positive feedback. I remember in my first semester calculus course I got an 87 on the final, and the professor wrote on my paper, “Excellent improvement.” That stuck with me.

Interviewer: And during the online semesters, did that change?

Student: Oh yeah, definitely. My average dropped to around 76, sometimes 77. It wasn’t catastrophic, but it was noticeable. Part of it was the distractions at home. I mean, we only have one proper study desk in the house, and I don’t have my own separate room for studying. I share a room with my younger sister, so when she was also doing her high school classes online, we’d clash. Imagine me trying to focus on algorithms while she’s repeating English vocabulary out loud [laughs]. It was… tough.

Interviewer: That sounds really challenging. Can you describe your study space a bit more?

Student: Yeah, so… basically, my “study space” was just the corner of the living room. I had this old desk that used to be my dad’s when he was working at an office job years ago. The chair creaked, and the internet router was nearby, so everyone would pass by to check their phones or adjust the Wi-Fi. My sister had her spot on the couch with her laptop. Privacy? Almost none. Unless I stayed up late, like after 11 p.m., when everyone was asleep, that was when I actually had some quiet to focus.

Interviewer: And what device were you using for classes?

Student: Mostly my laptop, a mid-range Lenovo that I bought before college. It runs fine for programming, though the battery’s terrible. For some lighter classes I’d switch to my phone if the internet got unstable, because my phone could catch the mobile data better. But typing essays or coding on the phone? Forget it. So yeah, laptop mainly, with phone as backup.

Interviewer: Speaking of internet, how stable was it in your area?

Student: Hmm… not the worst, but not great either. We’re in a town, so the bandwidth is okay—like 50 Mbps—but during peak hours, especially evenings, it would slow down and sometimes drop completely. I remember one lecture for Data Structures, the professor was going over binary trees, and my Zoom froze right when he was drawing a diagram. By the time the connection came back, he had already moved on. I felt so lost. I had to email him later and he just sent me the slides, which weren’t as helpful as hearing his explanation live.

Interviewer: Did that happen often?

Student: Maybe once or twice a week, yeah. Enough to be annoying. Sometimes I’d switch to mobile hotspot, but data’s expensive, so I had to ration it.

Interviewer: How much time would you say you studied each day during the online semesters?

Student: On average… maybe five hours a day. Before the pandemic, when I was on campus, I’d say closer to seven or even eight, because I’d stay in the library and just keep going until late. At home it was harder to sustain focus, so I’d do two hours in the morning, maybe another couple after lunch, and then a long stretch at night. During exam weeks, though, I’d push it to nine or ten hours, but then my sleep would collapse.

Interviewer: And speaking of sleep, what was that like?

Student: Normally, I try to get about seven hours a night. But during exam weeks or project deadlines, it would drop to five or six. I’d tell myself I’ll nap in the afternoon, but naps don’t really work for me. So I’d just keep drinking coffee. [pause] Honestly, that probably made me more anxious.

Interviewer: How about social media? How many hours do you spend there?

Student: Uh… probably around three hours a day. Instagram, TikTok, a bit of Twitter. It adds up, you know? I’d tell myself, “Just five minutes of scrolling between classes,” and then suddenly half an hour’s gone. There was one time I had a quiz at 2 p.m., and I opened my phone at 1:40 “just to relax.” Next thing I knew, it was 2:05, and I was panicking logging into the platform. That quiz didn’t go well. [laughs]

Interviewer: [laughs] Yeah, that happens. Do you game as well?

Student: A little. Mostly mobile games, like Clash Royale or PUBG Mobile, maybe an hour or less per day. I wouldn’t say I’m a heavy gamer. For me, social media was the bigger distraction.

Interviewer: Got it. Do you participate in sports?

Student: Yeah, I try to. I like basketball, though with online classes and the lockdowns, it was hard to find people to play with. I’d usually go once or twice a week to a nearby court. It was mostly pickup games with neighborhood kids. It helped me clear my head. Without it, I think I’d have gone stir crazy.

Interviewer: And do you study with groups, either online or offline?

Student: Before the pandemic, yes. We had this group of four classmates who’d always study together, especially for math-heavy courses. Online, it didn’t work as well. We tried Zoom study sessions, but half the time the internet lagged, and it was awkward waiting for someone’s mic to reconnect. Still, during exam periods, we managed to meet up in person sometimes, since we all live in the same town. Those sessions were way more productive than being on my own.

Interviewer: How would you describe your family’s economic situation?

Student: I’d say middle, maybe slightly below middle. We’re not poor, but we’re not wealthy either. My dad’s a driver, my mom works part-time at a clinic. We get by. During the pandemic, money was tighter, so sometimes I’d worry about paying for extra data packages or upgrading my laptop. That added stress, like I knew I couldn’t just throw money at my study problems.

Interviewer: That makes sense. Let’s talk about one particular online course. Can you pick one that stood out?

Student: Yeah, Algorithms in my second semester online. That one’s burned into my memory. The professor was very knowledgeable but not very interactive online. He’d just talk over slides for two hours. We had a chat box, but he rarely answered questions during class. Most of us resorted to messaging the TAs on Telegram afterwards.

Interviewer: Did you have a good experience clearing doubts at any point?

Student: Once, yes. I remember struggling with dynamic programming problems. I messaged one TA, and he actually offered to jump on a quick video call that evening. He walked me through the logic of overlapping subproblems using an example from the homework. That thirty-minute call clarified more than three weeks of lectures. I felt so relieved after that.

Interviewer: And a time when it wasn’t satisfying?

Student: Oh, plenty. [laughs] There was this other time I asked about a bug in my code. I sent a screenshot to the course forum, and the TA replied three days later with, “Check your base case.” That was it. No explanation. By then, the assignment deadline had already passed. I felt really frustrated—like, why even bother asking if I’m not going to get help in time?

Interviewer: How do you compare your performance in online vs offline courses overall?

Student: I think offline was definitely better for me. On campus, I had structure—go to class, go to library, meet friends, then sleep. Online blurred everything. My grades went down, my motivation went down. Maybe some people thrived, but I didn’t.

Interviewer: If you had to rate your overall satisfaction with that Algorithms course, from 0 to 10, what would you give it?

Student: Probably a 5. Middle of the road. Not a total disaster, because I did learn some things, but not enjoyable either.

Interviewer: And could you give me three key reasons why, with some specific moments?

Student: Sure. First, lack of interaction. Like I said, the professor barely responded in real time. I remember typing a long question in the chat about recursion limits, and he didn’t even acknowledge it. That made me feel invisible.

Second, technical issues. There was one exam where the platform crashed midway. I was in the middle of solving a graph theory question, and suddenly everything froze. By the time it came back, ten minutes were gone. I ended up rushing the last two questions and lost marks. That kind of thing stays with you.

Third, the home environment. One day during a midterm, my grandma accidentally unplugged the router because she thought the blinking lights meant something was wrong. [laughs] I was literally cut off from the exam. I had to email the professor with screenshots, begging for a retake. He allowed it, but the stress level was insane. Those moments made me feel like the course was more about surviving than learning.

Interviewer: Wow. That’s very vivid. Thank you for sharing all of that.

Student: Yeah… it feels good to talk about it, actually. Like, I haven’t really told anyone the full story.

# 004

Interviewer:​​Alright, thanks for coming in today, [Student Name placeholder - let's call her Chloe for this exercise]. I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with me about your experience with online courses. To start off, could you tell me a little bit about yourself? Maybe your general situation – you're a university student, right?

Chloe:​​ Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me. So, uh, I’m Chloe. I’m twenty years old, currently in my third year. I’m studying… well, it’s a bit of a mouthful, but Educational Psychology. It’s fascinating, mostly focuses on how people learn and the best environments for that, which is kind of ironic given we’re talking about online learning, isn’t it? [laughs] I grew up just outside a reasonably sized town, not super rural, but definitely not a big city either. Think suburbs sprawling towards farmland.

Interviewer:​​ Okay, educational psychology, got it. And growing up outside a town gives us a bit of context for your home situation now, perhaps? What’s your living situation like currently? Are you living on campus, at home, or somewhere else? ​

Chloe:​​ I’m living at home. It’s just me, my mum, dad, and my younger sister, who’s sixteen. So, four of us in a fairly standard semi-detached house. Nothing fancy, but it’s home. Economically, I wouldn’t say we’re struggling, but we’re definitely not rolling in it either. Comfortable middle-class, I guess. Mum works part-time in a library, Dad’s a plumber, sister’s still in school. So, yeah, pretty typical. ​​

Interviewer:​​ Okay, so studying from home then. What does your dedicated study space look like, if you have one? Is it separate, or do you share a space?

Chloe:​Hmm, good question. Ideally, I’d have a separate room, but we don’t really have the space for that comfortably. My dad converted the box room into a sort of home office for himself, so I tend to study… well, mostly at the dining room table. It’s large, which is nice, but it’s also where we eat, and sometimes my sister does her homework there too, especially now that her school has blended learning too. So, it gets busy. It’s not ideal for concentration, honestly. There isn’t really anywhere else quiet. My bedroom is okay, but it’s small, and I find the bed distracting – easy to, you know, just flop down. So, dining room it is most of the time. It means I don’t really have a ‘commute’ or anything, which saves time, but the environment isn’t always conducive to deep focus. ​​

Interviewer:​​ Right, the dining room table. And what kind of technology are you relying on for these online classes? Laptop, desktop, tablet? ​

Chloe:​​ I’ve got a decent laptop, actually. It was my mum’s old work one, so it’s a few years old now, but it handles the lectures, the online modules, and general coursework okay. It’s not super powerful, but it gets the job done. I wish it had a better webcam and microphone, though. The built-in ones are okay, but sometimes in group calls, if the lighting isn’t great or there’s background noise at someone else’s end, it gets tricky. Internet-wise… well, we’re in town, so the broadband is generally stable, I’d say. It’s not lightning-fast fibre optic, more like standard ADSL, I think. Usually fine for lectures and browsing, but if multiple people are streaming or downloading things heavily, it can get a bit laggy. Like, if my dad’s watching something and my sister’s doing a big download for school, our connection definitely notices. Hasn't crashed completely or anything, but definitely affects video quality sometimes. ​​

Interviewer:So standard home setup, dining room table, decent but not top-of-the-line laptop, and reliable-ish internet. Let’s talk about your routine then. Before the pandemic hit and everything went online, what was your typical day like? Study hours, sleep, that sort of thing? ​​

Chloe:​Okay, so pre-pandemic… I was usually up around 7:30 AM to get ready for uni. Lectures were mostly in-person, maybe one or two online seminars scattered in. I’d try and get most of my studying done either in the library or in the uni cafes between classes. I probably averaged about… hmm, maybe 3-4 hours of focused study outside of class time each day? Some days more, some less, depending on deadlines. And sleep… well, university sleep. [laughs] Aiming for 7 hours, probably averaging closer to 6, especially around exam periods. I’d often be up late finishing essays or cramming. I also played netball twice a week with the university team, which took up a couple of evenings, and saw friends socially, maybe went to the cinema or grabbed dinner. ​​Interviewer:​​ Sounds like a typical busy student life. And how has that changed now that you’re studying remotely full-time from home? ​​

Chloe:​​It’s… different. Structured, in a way, but also less structured. I don’t have the commute, which frees up maybe an hour or so each day, but I’m also not bumping into people or having those informal chats that sometimes spark ideas or clarify things. My day is much more… home-based. I still try and keep a routine. I get up around 8:00 AM now, maybe a bit later. Breakfast, then usually dive straight into online lectures or pre-recorded materials. I probably spend moretime actively engaged with course content now? Maybe 4-5 hours a day? But it feels different. Less rushing between classes, but also less passive learning from just being inthe lecture hall environment. And sleep… paradoxically, I actually sleep a bit more now? Maybe 7-7.5 hours on average. Perhaps because I’m not out late as much with netball cancelled and social stuff being more limited and sometimes online anyway. But my focus… that’s the tricky part. Studying at the dining table, sometimes with background noise, it’s harder to get into that deep concentration zone I managed in the library.

Interviewer:​​ That makes sense. The environment really impacts focus. You mentioned netball stopped. What about other activities? Group study, for instance? Was that a big part of your uni experience before, and how does it work now? ​

Chloe:​​ Yeah, group study was quite important, especially for certain modules. We’d meet up in the library or grab coffee and hash out problem sets or project ideas. Now, it’s all online. We use Microsoft Teams or sometimes just Zoom for group meetings. It works, but it’s not the same. You miss the spontaneous brainstorming, the ability to just walk up to someone’s desk. Plus, scheduling can be a nightmare with everyone having slightly different routines and home commitments now. Sometimes a group call feels a bit forced, or people get distracted easily. It’s functional, but I definitely miss the in-person dynamic for collaborative work. We still do it, maybe once or twice a week for specific group projects, but it lacks the energy. ​​

Interviewer:​​ And what about sports or physical activity? Did you keep that up?

Chloe:​​ Netball stopped completely, which was a shame. I missed that. I’ve tried to incorporate other things, though. I started doing some online yoga classes a couple of times a week, which helps with stress. And I try and go for a walk outside every afternoon, weather permitting. It’s become really important for clearing my head. So, not the same level of intense team sport, but I’m trying to stay active in other ways. Helps counteract sitting at the dining table all day! ​​

Interviewer:​​ Good for you. Staying active is definitely important. We touched on family briefly. Are there any other people at home who might influence your study? Like, do older relatives live with you or keep an eye on things? ​​

Chloe:​​ Well, my parents are around, obviously. Neither of them are elderly in the sense of needing a lot of care, but my mum is home quite a bit. She’s generally pretty respectful of when I’m studying at the table, but sometimes she might pop in to ask a quick question or chat briefly, especially if she knows I’m taking a break. It’s not constant monitoring, but it’s there. They’re aware I’m working, but home is still a shared space. It requires a bit of self-discipline to signal ‘do not disturb’. My sister is younger, so she’s less likely to disturb me intentionally, but she can be noisy sometimes when friends are over on their breaks, which inevitably happens when I’m trying to focus on a tough lecture. ​​

Interviewer:​​ Right, so navigating family life within the study space. Okay, let's pivot to the courses themselves. You're in your third year, so you're taking several modules. Could you give me an idea of the workload? How many subjects or modules are you juggling this semester? ​

Chloe:​​ Yeah, it’s quite a lot. I’m taking five modules this term. It feels like a lot more intense than some previous years, partly because everything is condensed into online delivery, I think. Each module has multiple online lectures, readings, assignments… it keeps me busy. It definitely requires good time management, which, honestly, I’m still working on perfecting in this environment. ​

Interviewer:​​ Five modules sounds demanding. And what are you finding most interesting this year? Any particular field drawing you in? ​​

Chloe:​​ Oh, definitely. I’m really getting into the psychometrics module. It’s all about measuring psychological traits – designing tests, assessing validity, reliability. It’s fascinating, and surprisingly practical. It connects directly to my major in Educational Psychology. Knowing how we measure learning outcomes or aptitudes is crucial, I think. The professor for that one, Dr. Evans, is brilliant. Makes even complex statistical concepts understandable. ​​

Interviewer:​​ That sounds engaging. Now, thinking about the actual online learning experience – how are you interacting with your lecturers and course materials? Are there live sessions, pre-recorded videos, discussion forums, that kind of thing? ​​

Chloe:​​ It varies a lot by lecturer, which is interesting. Some modules are heavily reliant on pre-recorded lectures that we watch on our own time. Others have one or two live lectures per week via Zoom, which are recorded afterwards for those who can’t make it or want to review. Discussion forums are used in most modules – you post responses to questions, comment on others' posts. Some lecturers use them actively, prompting discussion, while others seem to just check if we’ve posted the required minimum. There’s also usually a virtual drop-in session or office hour each week, but attendance varies wildly. Personally, I find the pre-recorded lectures quite good. I can pause, rewind, take notes at my own pace. The live ones can be hit or miss depending on the group dynamic and the lecturer’s style. The forums… sometimes they’re great for clarifying a point, other times they feel a bit like busywork or echo chambers. ​​

Interviewer:​​ That variability between lecturers is a common theme, I hear. Let’s dig into that interaction and doubt-clearing specifically. When you’re confused about something, how do you typically go about getting help? What’s the process been like? ​​

Chloe:Okay, so for clearing doubts… it depends on the urgency and the type of question. If it’s a small clarification on the lecture slides, I might just ask in the forum thread for that week. Sometimes another student answers it, which is helpful. If it’s something more substantial, or I need a quicker answer, I’ll usually email the lecturer or, more often, the Teaching Assistant (TA) assigned to that module. That’s probably the most common route. For example, in my Statistics module last semester – wait, no, let me think of a recent one… okay, in my Research Methods module this term, we were discussing qualitative data analysis. I was really struggling to grasp the difference between thematic analysis and grounded theory based on the reading and the lecture. I posted in the forum, but didn’t get many responses. So, I emailed the TA, Priya. She replied within about 24 hours with a really clear explanation and pointed me to a couple of extra resources. That was really helpful, timely, and made a big difference to my understanding. Made me feel supported, you know? ​​

Interviewer:​​ That sounds like a positive experience. Were there times it hasn't been as smooth? ​​

Chloe:​​ Oh, definitely. Unfortunately, yes. There was this other time, also in Research Methods, actually. We had this complex assignment brief, and I was genuinely unsure if my proposed methodology was going in the right direction. I sent an email to the lecturer, Dr. Aris Thorne – he seems quite senior, maybe Head of Department or something? Anyway, I asked a fairly specific question about aligning my chosen method with the research question. I didn’t hear anything back for a full week. I checked my spam folder, resent it politely, still nothing. By this point, the deadline was getting closer, and I was stressed. Finally, after about ten days, I got an auto-reply saying he was away and wouldn’t be checking emails until after the deadline. No apology, no redirection to someone else. It was incredibly frustrating. I ended up having to make a judgment call on my own, which, thankfully, turned out okay, but it left a bad taste. It felt like shouting into the void with no clear pathway for urgent academic queries with certain faculty members. It highlighted a real inconsistency in how accessible different staff members are. Some TAs and lecturers are amazing and responsive; others… less so. It impacts your confidence asking for help sometimes. ​​

Interviewer:​​ That inconsistency in faculty responsiveness time and approach sounds like a significant hurdle. Now, thinking about how you performed academically… this is sensitive, but how do you feel your grades or understanding compare now, doing courses online, to your performance before the pandemic, when you were attending in person more? ​​

Chloe:​​ That’s a tough one to compare directly, I think. On the one hand, some of my marks have dipped slightly compared to my pre-pandemic average. I used to consistently get High Distinctions or Distinctions, you know, marks in the 80s and 90s. Now, I’m maybe hovering more in the mid-to-high 70s range, occasionally dipping into the low 70s. For example, in that Research Methods module I mentioned, where I had the issue with the lecturer's email response, I got a 76% on the main assignment. Before, I probably would have aimed for an 85+ in a similar module. It’s hard to say if the lower mark was purely due to the online format, or if factors like the inconsistent support or the difficulty concentrating at home played a role. ​​

Interviewer:​​ So, a noticeable shift from consistently high marks? ​

Chloe:​​ Yeah, I’d say so. My baseline, my pre-pandemic average, was definitely stronger, consistently in the 80s across most subjects. I worked hard for those marks, had good study habits in place, benefitted from the university environment. Now… it’s like I’ve had to rebuild those habits somewhat in a less-than-ideal setting. There are positives too, though. In some ways, the flexibility helps. Being able to re-watch lectures multiple times has been invaluable for understanding complex topics, especially in subjects like Psychometrics, which I mentioned finding interesting. I actually feel I have a deeper grasp of someof the material in that course than I might have gotten just from a single live lecture pass. So, it’s mixed. Perhaps a slight dip overall in grades, maybe hovering around a 75-78% average this year compared to low 80s before, but with pockets of really strong understanding and engagement where the format suits me or the teaching is excellent.

Interviewer:​​ That nuance is important – flexibility helping in some areas, hindering in others, leading to a slight overall dip from a previously high baseline. Okay, let’s try to bring this together. Thinking about one specific course you’ve taken recently online, maybe that Research Methods one, or perhaps Psychometrics, which you found interesting… what would your overall satisfaction level be, say on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being completely satisfied? ​​

Chloe:​​ Okay, let’s pick the Psychometrics course. I found that one quite engaging overall. If I had to rate my satisfaction with that specific course's online delivery, I’d probably give it a 7 out of 10. ​

Interviewer:​​ A 7. Can you elaborate on why you chose that number? What factors contributed to it? ​​

Chloe:​​ Sure. Well, firstly, the content itself is fascinating, which obviously helps, but the deliveryaspects… One key reason for the decent score was Professor Evans. His pre-recorded lectures were fantastic. He breaks down complex statistical ideas really clearly. For instance, there was a module on factor analysis, which I was dreading, but his step-by-step video explanations, using clear visuals and real-world examples from educational testing, made it click. He also provided really comprehensive notes that supplemented the videos perfectly. That clarity and accessibility from the main lecturer was a huge plus. [pause] Secondly, the course structure, while online, felt quite logical. The weekly modules built on each other well, and the readings were relevant and well-chosen. It felt like a coherent learning journey, even though I was doing it alone at my dining table. The online quizzes after each module were also helpful for self-assessment without too much pressure. ​​

Interviewer:​​So, clear instruction and good structure from the lecturer were big positives. What about the third reason? You mentioned three key reasons for the 7/10. ​​

Chloe:​​ Ah, right. The third reason… well, it’s maybe a bit counter-intuitive, but it’s the assessment method. Instead of one big final exam, the assessment was spread out: smaller quizzes, a mid-term essay analysing a real psychometric instrument, and a final project where we designed a hypothetical test. I actually preferred this. It reduced the high-stakes pressure of a single exam, and I felt like I could demonstrate my understanding in different ways. The feedback on the essay, from the TA, was detailed and constructive, which helped me improve. It felt more aligned with actually doingpsychometrics rather than just regurgitating facts. So, the varied and manageable assessment structure contributed positively to my experience and satisfaction with that course, even within the online format. ​​

Interviewer:​​ Okay, so to recap for the Psychometrics course: high satisfaction (7/10) due to clear and engaging lecturer input, a well-structured course progression, and a preferred, varied assessment style. But you gave it a 7, not a 9 or 10. What kept it from being higher? Were there any downsides you felt were significant enough to mention, perhaps echoing some challenges we discussed earlier? ​​

Chloe:​​ Exactly. While Professor Evans was great, the course still suffered a bit from some of the general online course pitfalls. The discussion forum, for instance, while technically active, often felt a bit superficial. Questions were sometimes answered by TAs with standard replies, and genuine, deep discussion about the nuances of psychometric theory didn’t really happen there. It felt more like a tick-box exercise for participation marks than a vibrant intellectual community, which is something I missed from in-person seminars. And related to that, while the TA feedback on the essay was good, getting timely responses to more nuanced questions via email could still be a bit slow sometimes, though not as bad as with the other lecturer I mentioned. So, it wasn't a badexperience, far from it, especially compared to some other online courses I've heard about or taken. But it wasn't perfect. Those elements prevented it from being a 9 or 10 for me. It highlighted that even with good lecturers, the overall online ecosystem – the support systems, the interaction tools – need to be robust to really elevate the experience beyond just 'adequate'. ​​

Interviewer:​​ That’s a really insightful point. Even in a well-taught course, the surrounding platform and support mechanisms can drag down the overall experience. It sounds like you found ways to succeed and even engage deeply with the material that interested you, particularly benefiting from clear instruction and flexible assessment, but also encountered the common frustrations of variable faculty accessibility and sometimes superficial online interaction tools, all while navigating the inherent challenges of studying from a busy home environment. ​​

Chloe:​​ Yeah, that sums it up pretty well, I think. It’s been an adjustment, definitely. Some things work better online, some definitely don’t. You learn to adapt, figure out what helps you focus, and lean into the positives, like replaying lectures. But you definitely miss the spontaneity and the different kinds of support and interaction you get on campus. And yeah, finding a quiet spot at the dining table remains a daily challenge! ​​

Interviewer: I can imagine. Well, Chloe, thank you so much for sharing all these detailed thoughts and experiences. It’s given me a really clear picture of the complexities of the online university experience, balancing the good, the bad, and the everyday realities of learning from home. ​​

Chloe:​You're very welcome. Happy to chat. Hope it was helpful!

# 005

Interviewer: Good afternoon, and thank you for joining me today. To begin, could you please introduce yourself—your name, age, what you're studying, and your current year in university?

Student: Yeah, hi. My name is Sam, and I'm 21. I'm a third-year student, majoring in Sociology, with a minor in Political Science. I just finished my third year, so… yeah, heading into my final year, which is a bit terrifying to think about. [nervous laugh]

Interviewer: I can imagine! Let's start by painting a picture of your home environment during the period of online learning. Where were you living, and what was your family situation like?

Student: Okay, so I was actually living in my family home, which is in a… I guess you'd call it a large town? It's not a major city, but it's got a decent population. It's a bit isolated though, surrounded by countryside. The internet infrastructure isn't the greatest, which became a huge problem. My family… there's five of us. Me, my parents, and my two younger brothers. They were both doing online school too, so the house was pretty chaotic most of the time. Economic status? [pauses] I'd say lower-middle class. We get by, but there's not a lot of extra for things like upgrading computers or getting a better internet plan. It's something we're always aware of.

Interviewer: That sounds challenging. Tell me about your specific study space within that environment.

Student: [Laughs softly] My room. That was it. I share a room with one of my brothers, so it was… interesting. I had a small desk in the corner, and he had his bed and his own little table. During the day, when we were both supposed to be in class, it was a nightmare. We’d have to negotiate who got to be on video if we had overlapping calls, because the background noise would be picked up. I tried studying at the kitchen table sometimes, but that was even worse with everyone coming and going. So, no, I didn't have a separate room. It was just my corner of the bedroom, with headphones on most of the time, trying to block out the noise.

Interviewer: And what device were you using for your classes?

Student: I have a laptop, an older model my dad got me when I started uni. It works, but the battery is shot, so it has to be plugged in all the time. And the fan is really loud—it sounds like a jet engine taking off whenever I open more than two tabs. [laughs] I also used my phone sometimes to check the university forum or quick emails, but for actual lectures and writing essays, it was the laptop. I remember once, during an important seminar, the laptop just froze and I had to restart it. I missed like ten minutes of discussion and came back feeling completely lost.

Interviewer: Let's talk about your internet connection. You mentioned it wasn't the greatest.

Student: Oh, man. [sighs] It was probably the single biggest stressor. Our internet is via a wireless provider because proper broadband isn't available where we are. It's okay for browsing, but for sustained video calls? It was a constant battle. The signal would drop out randomly. I'd be in the middle of a tutorial, my face frozen on the screen, then I'd get kicked out of the Zoom room. It was so embarrassing. I'd have to quickly message the group chat from my phone, "Sorry, internet!" It happened so often that I think my professors just got used to me disappearing and reappearing. There was this one time I was giving a presentation for my "Social Theory" class—my heart was pounding—and right as I got to my main argument, the connection died. Completely. By the time I got back on, five minutes later, someone else was already presenting. I was just… devastated. I had to send the slides to the professor and ask if I could present another time. It really knocked my confidence.

Interviewer: That sounds incredibly frustrating. Shifting gears a bit, can you describe a typical day during online learning? How many hours would you dedicate to your studies?

Student: A typical day… um, it's hard to say because it was so unstructured. I'd try to stick to a schedule, but it rarely worked. I'd have maybe 2-3 hours of live lectures. Then, I'd need to spend time reviewing the recordings—because I'd often miss things due to connection issues or distractions. So, all in all, probably 6, sometimes 7 hours a day on university work? But it was fragmented. I couldn't just sit for three hours straight. I'd get interrupted by my mum asking for help with something, or my brothers arguing. During exam periods, it was more like 9 or 10 hours, but a lot of that was inefficient, just staring at the screen feeling overwhelmed.

Interviewer: And how did this routine affect your sleep?

Student: My sleep schedule got completely wrecked. [pause] I think I averaged maybe 6 hours a night, but it was poor quality. Because the days felt so unproductive, I'd end up trying to catch up at night when the house was quiet. So I'd be up until 2 or 3 AM reading or trying to write essays. Then I'd have a 9 AM lecture. It was a vicious cycle. I was always tired. I remember nodding off during a pre-recorded lecture more than once.

Interviewer: We've touched on distractions at home. What about digital distractions? How much time did you spend on social media or gaming?

Student: Uh, a fair bit. Social media was an escape. I'd probably spend… god, 3, maybe 4 hours a day just scrolling through TikTok, Instagram, Twitter. It was a way to tune out the stress. I'm not really into gaming, so that wasn't an issue. But the social media… it was bad. I'd tell myself I'd just check it for five minutes during a break, and then an hour would be gone. It definitely ate into my study time and made it harder to focus on dense academic texts. My attention span felt really short.

Interviewer: Did you engage in any other activities, like sports or group studies, to counterbalance this?

Student: Sports? No, not really. I used to go for runs, but that fell by the wayside. Group studies… we tried. A few people from my "Gender and Society" course set up a weekly study group on Microsoft Teams. It was helpful sometimes, but also a bit awkward. There were always technical issues—someone's microphone not working, people talking over each other because of the lag. We kept it up for a few weeks, but it fizzled out. It wasn't the same as sitting in the library together. I missed that.

Interviewer: Did your parents or other older family members take an active role in monitoring your studies?

Student: [Pauses, considering] Not really monitoring, but they were… concerned. My mum would often pop her head in and ask if I was okay, or if I'd finished my work. It came from a good place, but sometimes it felt like added pressure, especially if I was struggling with an assignment. They don't really understand university-level work, so they'd just see me looking stressed at my computer and tell me to "just get it done." There wasn't any strict monitoring, but their worry was a presence, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: It does. Now, academically, how many courses were you taking, and which ones were you most interested in?

Student: Last semester I took four courses: "Classical Social Theory," "Research Methods," "Urban Sociology," and an elective in "Modern Political Philosophy." My main interest is definitely Urban Sociology—I find it fascinating how cities shape social life. The Theory course was a core requirement, and it was tough. A lot of dense reading from Marx, Durkheim, Weber… it was a struggle to engage with that material through a screen.

Interviewer: Speaking of academic performance, what were your average marks like before the pandemic shifted everything online?

Student: I was a solid B student. In my first year, which was mostly in-person, I had an average around 78, 79 percent. I've never been a straight-A student, but I worked hard and I did okay. I particularly did well in essay-based subjects where I could discuss ideas.

Interviewer: And how did that change with online learning?

Student: It dipped. Not massively, but noticeably. My average probably went down to a low B, maybe 72-73 percent. The biggest hit was in "Research Methods." It involved learning statistical software, and trying to do that from pre-recorded videos with no one to ask for immediate help was a disaster. I scraped a C+ in that, which really brought my average down. In my essay-based subjects, I managed to hold onto B's, but I felt my work was less nuanced. I missed the seminar discussions where you really bounce ideas off each other.

Interviewer: Let's focus on one particular course that exemplifies your online experience. Which one comes to mind?

Student: "Classical Social Theory," for sure. It was a full-year course, so I had it both in-person for a bit and then fully online. The online part was a mix of weekly live lectures on Zoom and asynchronous discussion forums.

Interviewer: How did you interact in that course? Did you use the chat, speak up, use the forums?

Student: I was mostly a lurker, I have to admit. In the live lectures, I'd sometimes type a question in the chat if I was brave enough, but it would often scroll by too fast. The professor was nice, but he wasn't great at managing the digital space. The forum was where we were supposed to discuss the readings. I'd post the mandatory comments, but it felt forced. Like, you're not having a conversation; you're just posting a paragraph into the void and then responding to two other people because you have to for a grade. It wasn't engaging.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example of a time you tried to clear up a doubt with a teacher or TA? One that went well and one that didn't.

Student: A good one… Hmm. There was a TA for the Theory course who was really responsive. I emailed her once because I was completely confused by Weber's concept of the 'iron cage.' She emailed back within a few hours with a really clear explanation and even suggested a secondary reading that was easier to understand. That was great. It felt like someone was actually there.

Student: A bad example… [sighs] Yeah, there was a time with the main professor. We had to write an essay comparing Marx and Durkheim on social order. I drafted a thesis statement and emailed it to him a week before the deadline, asking if I was on the right track. I didn't hear back. I sent a follow-up email three days later. Still nothing. The deadline was approaching, so I just had to guess and write the essay. I got a B- on it, and the feedback was that my thesis was "underdeveloped and missed key aspects of Durkheim's argument." I was so frustrated. If he'd just replied to my email, I could have fixed it. That was probably the most dissatisfied I felt with the whole online system.

Interviewer: Comparing your experience in this course online versus what you think it would have been like in person, what's your assessment?

Student: Oh, in person, it would have been so much better. Theory is all about debate and discussion. In a seminar room, you can see people's expressions, you can have a real back-and-forth. Online, it felt sterile. My performance suffered because I never felt I fully grasped the concepts in the same way. The main reason was the lack of spontaneous interaction. You can't just raise your hand and have a quick clarification. Everything has to be formalized into an email or a forum post, which takes time and loses the energy of a live discussion.

Interviewer: Overall, on a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied were you with that "Classical Social Theory" course in its online format?

Student: [Thinks for a long moment] I'd give it a 4 out of 10. The main reasons… first, the technological barriers were huge for me. The unreliable internet made attending and participating stressful from the start. A concrete moment was always that anxiety of seeing the "unstable connection" icon flash during a lecture. Second, the mode of interaction was poor. The forum felt like a box-ticking exercise, and getting timely help was hit-or-miss, like with the unanswered email before my essay. And third… I think it's the isolation. Sociology is about people and society, and learning about it alone in my bedroom felt ironic and really disconnected. I didn't feel part of an academic community at all.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing that, Sam. It's very insightful. Is there anything else about your overall online learning experience that you feel is important to mention?

Student: Just that… it felt very unequal. I have friends who lived in the city with fast internet and quiet apartments, and they seemed to cope much better. For me, with the spotty connection and a noisy, crowded house, it was a constant uphill battle. It wasn't just about self-discipline; it was about the environment you were stuck in. I'm really hoping my final year can be in person.

Interviewer: I appreciate you highlighting that. Thank you again for your time and candor today, Sam.

Student: No problem. Thanks for listening.

# 006

Interviewer: Thanks for sitting down with me today. I’d like to hear about your experience with online courses, especially during the pandemic years, but also how things feel now. Just tell me stories, the way you remember them. To start, could you introduce yourself a little?

Student: Sure. Uh, I’m twenty-one years old, female, and I’m in my third year of an undergraduate business administration program. So I’m not fresh anymore, but I still feel like I’m figuring things out [laughs]. I live in the outskirts of a big city—it’s not exactly rural, but more suburban. We’re close enough that I can commute to campus in about an hour if I need to, though during the height of the pandemic I never did, of course.

Interviewer: And your household—how many people live with you?

Student: We’re four at home. My parents, me, and my younger brother who’s still in high school. We used to live with my grandmother too, but she moved in with my aunt two years ago, so it’s a bit quieter now. Still, the house is pretty compact. I don’t have my own separate study room; my brother and I share a room, and during online learning we both had to attend our classes at the same time. That was… chaotic.

Interviewer: Can you paint a picture of that?

Student: Yeah. So imagine two desks crammed into one bedroom, facing opposite walls. I’d have my laptop open with my webcam on, trying to look professional for a group presentation, while behind me my brother was yelling at his teacher on Zoom, “You’re muted, sir!” [laughs]. And our internet would sometimes just collapse under the strain of both of us streaming. There was one morning in March 2021, I was giving a presentation on supply chain disruptions, and the Wi-Fi dropped. When I rejoined, the group had already finished without me. I cried that afternoon—it felt so unfair.

Interviewer: That must’ve been tough. Speaking of internet, how stable is it usually in your area?

Student: Normally it’s okay, like 100 Mbps on paper, but in practice it fluctuates. During the day it was worse because everyone in the neighborhood was also online. Even now, in the evenings, my video calls sometimes freeze. We had to upgrade our router halfway through 2021 because it was unbearable. But still, stability isn’t like what my classmates in the city center describe.

Interviewer: I see. Let’s talk about your academics. Before the pandemic, what kind of grades did you get?

Student: I was consistently strong. My average hovered around 88 to 89 percent. I was proud of that, because in high school I wasn’t extraordinary, but in university I found a rhythm. I’d spend long hours in the library—sometimes eight or nine hours a day around exam weeks. I really liked the structure of being on campus.

Interviewer: And when courses went online?

Student: They dipped. My average dropped to 80, sometimes even 79. It doesn’t sound dramatic, but for me it was frustrating. I was used to being near the top of my cohort, and suddenly I was just average. The distractions at home really played a role. My brother constantly talking, my parents asking me to help with groceries in the middle of a lecture. It was like no one really believed I was in “real class.”

Interviewer: How many hours per day were you studying during online terms?

Student: Probably around five, maybe six on a good day. Before, I could easily do seven or eight. The hardest part was the rhythm. I’d do an hour, then check social media, then try again, but the flow was broken. During exams, I’d push to ten or eleven hours, but then my sleep would shrink. I remember staying up until 3 a.m. cramming statistics, and then waking up at 7 for the exam. Not healthy at all.

Interviewer: So on average, how much sleep were you getting?

Student: Normally I try for seven hours, but during the pandemic it was more like six. And during crunch weeks, four or five. My mom used to scold me, saying I looked like a panda with dark circles [laughs].

Interviewer: And social media use?

Student: Oh, too much. I’d say four hours a day, honestly. Instagram, TikTok, and lately YouTube Shorts. They’re addictive. I’d tell myself, “Just one video,” and twenty minutes would vanish. Once I missed the start of a marketing quiz because I was deep in a TikTok spiral. I still remember—it was this cooking video series, and I looked at the clock and screamed.

Interviewer: [laughs] That sounds relatable. How about gaming?

Student: I don’t really game. Maybe some mobile puzzles, like Candy Crush, just for five or ten minutes. My brother’s the gamer in the house. He’d be yelling into his headset late at night, and I’d be like, “Shut up, I have class at 8 a.m.!”

Interviewer: Did you do any sports during that time?

Student: Before the pandemic, yes—I used to go jogging three times a week, and I joined the university’s badminton club. But once everything moved online, I got lazy. Gyms were closed, so I mostly just did YouTube workouts in my room, maybe once a week at best. It wasn’t enough. My energy definitely dropped.

Interviewer: What about group study sessions?

Student: Those saved me sometimes. I had two close friends from my program, and we’d meet on Zoom every Thursday evening. We’d mute ourselves and just study together, with occasional check-ins. It felt like having someone in the library again. Not as effective as real-life, but it kept me accountable. We also once met in person secretly, during a low-case period, to prep for a finance exam. That session was golden—we covered so much in four hours.

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier your brother. Did your parents or elders monitor your study?

Student: Yeah, my parents did a bit. Not in a bad way, but they’d pop into my room and ask, “Are you really in class? Why are you watching YouTube?” They didn’t realize that sometimes the professor uploaded lectures on YouTube. So I had to explain. My dad, especially, thought online courses were “fake school.” That made me feel less motivated, honestly, like I wasn’t taken seriously.

Interviewer: How would you describe your economic status?

Student: I’d say we’re middle-class. My dad works in construction management, my mom’s a schoolteacher. We don’t struggle, but we also don’t have luxury. During the pandemic, though, things were tighter—my dad’s projects paused for a while. That’s partly why we delayed upgrading the router, even though I was begging for it. I was aware of the financial strain.

Interviewer: Let’s talk about one particular online course that stood out.

Student: Okay, there was one called “International Marketing.” It was supposed to be fascinating, but online it was… mixed. The professor was charismatic in person, but on Zoom, his energy didn’t carry. He spoke into the void. We had breakout rooms, but half the students never unmuted.

Interviewer: How did you clear doubts in that course?

Student: Well, once I emailed him about a confusing case study. To my surprise, he replied within an hour with a really thoughtful explanation and even attached a voice note. That felt amazing—like he cared. I remember listening to the note while walking around my neighborhood, and it clicked immediately.

But there was another time I asked during class about the grading rubric, and he just said, “It’s on the syllabus,” and moved on. That felt dismissive. The syllabus wasn’t clear at all. I ended up losing points on the assignment because I misunderstood the formatting rules.

Interviewer: If you compare online versus offline for your performance, what’s your reflection?

Student: Offline is better for me. I need that atmosphere—walking to class, sitting next to friends, whispering about the lecture. Online, I felt like a ghost. My grades proved it. From high 80s to low 80s, sometimes below. And I know part of it is me, like my social media habit, but part is the environment too.

Interviewer: If you had to give an overall satisfaction score for that International Marketing course, what would it be?

Student: Maybe a 6 out of 10.

Interviewer: Why 6? Could you share three reasons with moments?

Student: First, the lack of engagement. Breakout rooms where no one spoke made me feel alone. I remember staring at four silent squares for ten minutes.

Second, technical glitches. In one midterm, the platform froze right as I was submitting my essay. I panicked, emailed screenshots, and thankfully got an extension, but my stress level shot through the roof.

Third, the home distractions. Once my brother barged in during a live presentation, waving his phone, saying, “Look at this meme!” Everyone laughed, but I was mortified. My grade didn’t suffer, but my confidence did.

Interviewer: Thanks for being so open. Looking back, what’s one thing you wish had been different?

Student: Honestly? I wish I’d had my own quiet space. If I’d had a separate study room, I think my marks would’ve stayed higher and my stress lower. Sometimes I imagine myself in an apartment alone, with good Wi-Fi and no interruptions. Maybe then online learning would’ve been fine.

# 007

Interviewer: Alright, thanks for joining me today. I know everyone’s got a different story about online learning—some good, some not so good. I’d love to hear yours, just in your own words. No script, no right answers. Where should we start?

Student: Uh, sure. I guess… I’m in my second year now. Just turned 19 last month. Feels weird saying that—“second year student.” Still don’t feel like one, you know? Like I’m pretending until I get the hang of it.

Interviewer: What are you studying?

Student: Computer science. Yeah, the classic “coding in my basement” vibe. [laughs] I’ve always liked tech stuff—building little websites, messing with game mods, that kind of thing. So it felt natural. But honestly, I didn’t expect how much math and theory would be involved. I thought it’d be all programming. Nope. Lots of proofs, logic, algorithms. Way more abstract than I thought.

Interviewer: Where are you based?

Student: I live in the city—central district, near the old market area. It’s busy. Always loud, always people. My family’s in a three-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor of this kinda run-down building. Elevator’s broken half the time, but we’re used to it.

Interviewer: So you’ve been studying from home?

Student: Yeah. All of first year was online, and this past year was hybrid, but I stayed home for most lectures. The commute’s not bad—maybe 25 minutes by bus—but once I got used to learning from my room, I didn’t wanna go back. Plus, I sleep late. Getting to an 8 a.m. class? Forget it.

Interviewer: You mentioned your room—did you have space to study?

Student: Yeah, actually—I’ve got my own room. Small, like, barely fits a bed, a desk, and a shelf. But it’s mine. That made a huge difference. Before online started, I used to study at the library or campus café. But once everything went remote, having a door I could close? Lifesaver. I could control the light, the noise, my setup. I even hung up a “Do Not Disturb” sign during exams. My little brother learned to knock.

Interviewer: That sounds way better than some setups I’ve heard.

Student: I know I’m lucky. Family of four—me, my parents, my younger brother, 14. My dad’s a mechanic, mom works part-time at a pharmacy. We’re not rich, but we’re stable. I’d say… middle-lower, maybe? We have two smartphones, a decent Wi-Fi plan, and I got a laptop for high school graduation—nothing fancy, but it works. Windows, 8GB RAM, okay battery. I’ve named it “Old Faithful.” [laughs]

Interviewer: Internet been reliable?

Student: Mostly. We’re on a 50 Mbps plan, and since I’m the only one doing uni stuff, I hog the bandwidth. I download lectures overnight, and during live sessions, I turn off video to save data. But yeah, connection’s solid. Only dropped once during a final presentation, and it came back in 30 seconds. Could’ve been worse.

Interviewer: How many hours a day were you studying?

Student: On lecture days? Maybe five. But I’m not always focused. I’d start at 10, work till noon, take a long break—watch a show, eat, scroll—then try to get back at 3. Real productive time? Maybe three and a half hours. But during exam weeks? Oh man. I’d do eight, even nine. Stay up till 2 a.m., chugging coffee, reviewing code. I pulled three all-nighters last semester. Not proud, but it got me through.

Interviewer: Sleep?

Student: Ideally, I want seven hours. Realistically? Six. Sometimes less. I’m a night owl. I focus better at night. But it messes with my rhythm. I’ll sleep till 9, miss breakfast, start late, then crash at 7 p.m. It’s a cycle. I tried fixing it—set alarms, no screens before bed—but it never sticks.

Interviewer: Social media?

Student: [sighs] Yeah, I spend way too much time on it. TikTok, mostly. And Reddit—r/programming, r/gaming. Probably two hours a day, easy. Sometimes I’m on it while lectures are playing. Multitasking? More like half-paying attention. I’ll watch a lecture at 1.5x speed, TikTok in the corner. Bad habit. I know it. But it’s hard to stop.

Interviewer: Do you play games?

Student: Yeah, I do. Not competitively or anything. Just casual—Minecraft, Stardew Valley, some indie puzzle games. I used to play more in high school, but now? Maybe twice a week, an hour or so. It’s my decompression. After coding for hours, I need something mindless. My brother and I play co-op sometimes. It’s fun. Doesn’t feel like a waste of time, unlike scrolling.

Interviewer: Any sports or physical stuff?

Student: Not really. I used to run track in high school—sprints, mostly. But I quit first year. No team here, no motivation. I walk to the market sometimes, or take the stairs instead of the broken elevator. That’s about it. I feel sluggish, but I don’t know how to start again. Maybe next semester.

Interviewer: Did you do group study?

Student: Yeah, actually. My coding class last semester—we had weekly group projects. Four of us. We used Discord. Every Tuesday night, voice chat, screen share, working on Python assignments. That was… surprisingly good. Everyone had a role. I liked it. Felt like real teamwork. We’d joke around, but also push each other. One time we debugged a program for two hours straight. Finally fixed it at midnight. Felt like a victory. [laughs]

Interviewer: That sounds way more engaging than solo work.

Student: Totally. I learn better that way. Explaining code to someone else? That’s when you really understand it. And if I got stuck, someone would say, “Wait, did you check the loop condition?” Boom—fixed. Way faster than waiting for a TA.

Interviewer: Speaking of TAs—how was it clearing doubts with faculty?

Student: Mixed. Some profs were great. One, in data structures, had open Zoom office hours every Friday. You could just hop in, ask anything. I went once with a recursion problem—I just didn’t get how the stack worked. He drew it out on a virtual whiteboard, walked me through step by step. Took 15 minutes. I finally got it. That was gold.

But another time—calculus, first semester—I emailed a TA about a homework problem. Waited three days. Got a one-line reply: “See lecture 7.” Lecture 7 was two hours long. I had to scrub through the whole thing to find the 30-second clip where he mentioned the rule. Frustrating.

Interviewer: How many courses were you taking?

Student: Five each semester. Standard load. But CS is heavy. I had programming, discrete math, intro to AI, physics for engineers, and a humanities elective—ethics in tech. That last one was actually cool. We debated AI bias, privacy, stuff like that. Felt relevant.

Interviewer: What about your marks? How did you do before online?

Student: First semester—on campus—I had a 3.6 GPA. Solid B+. I went to class, took notes, studied with friends. Then second semester—online—I dropped to 3.1. Not terrible, but I felt it. I failed one quiz in math because I misunderstood the instructions, and the TA didn’t clarify in time. Lost points. And I bombed a midterm in programming—syntax error I didn’t catch. I knew the logic, but one missing semicolon? Zero credit. Harsh.

But last semester, I bounced back to 3.4. I think I adapted. Got better at managing my time, using online tools, asking for help early.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about one course that really stands out?

Student: Yeah. “Intro to Web Development.” That was second semester. All project-based. We built a full-stack website over eight weeks. Professor posted video lectures on YouTube—short, 10-minute clips. Super clear. Then we had biweekly live labs with the TA.

I remember Week 4—we were adding user authentication. I couldn’t get the login form to connect to the database. Spent two hours Googling, nothing worked. I jumped into the lab session early, messaged the TA in chat: “Can I ask something before we start?” She said yes, pulled me into a breakout room. Walked me through the API call, showed me where I’d mixed up POST and GET. Fixed it in ten minutes. Felt amazing.

And the professor? He was active on our class Discord. Not all the time, but he’d pop in, answer questions, even share cool tools. Once he posted a link to a free design library—saved me hours. Felt like he cared.

That class? I got an A-. Best grade I’ve had so far.

Interviewer: That sounds like a success story.

Student: It was. I learned more in that course than any other. Because it was hands-on, because help was available, because the professor made himself accessible. Contrast that with “Linear Algebra”—prerecorded lectures, no interaction, one email address for the TA. I barely passed. Same effort, totally different outcome.

Interviewer: Do your parents or family check in on your studying?

Student: Not really. My parents trust me. They’ll ask, “How’s school?” at dinner, but they don’t monitor me. My brother sometimes barges in, but that’s it. I appreciate the space. I’m responsible enough to manage my time. Mostly. [laughs]

Interviewer: Overall, how satisfied are you with your online experience? Zero to ten.

Student: Hmm. I’d say… 7. Maybe 7.2. It’s not perfect, but I made it work. I had the basics—a room, a laptop, decent internet, family support. And I found ways to connect, to get help, to stay engaged.

Three reasons for the 7? First, having my own space. Huge. Second, the group projects—they kept me motivated. Third, the professors who showed up, who were reachable. That made all the difference.

Would I do it again? Not by choice. I miss campus. I miss whiteboards, coffee runs, bumping into classmates. But if I had to? I’d be okay. I’ve got the tools now. I know how to focus, how to ask, how to use the tech.

But man, I hope we don’t have to. I wanna be back in a lab, with real people, real energy. Screens are fine, but they’re not alive.

Interviewer: Anything else you want to add?

Student: Just… it’s not just about the tech. It’s about feeling seen. When a professor remembers your name, when a classmate helps you debug, when you’re not just a faceless ID in a spreadsheet—that’s what makes learning work. Online can do that, but only if people try. And when they do? It’s actually kind of great.

# 008

Interviewer: Thanks so much for agreeing to chat with me today. I’d like you to just relax and talk me through your own experiences with online courses—what it was like, what worked, what didn’t. There’s no rush. Maybe we can start with some basics: could you introduce yourself a bit?

Student: Yeah, sure. So I’m twenty years old, male, in my second year of a mechanical engineering degree. I’m based in a rural area—like, really rural. Our house is surrounded by fields, and the nearest bus stop is about half an hour’s walk. So, yeah, you could say I’m not exactly in the center of things. I commute into the city for classes now that we’re back offline, but during the pandemic and the lockdown semesters, I was completely at home, trying to follow online lectures from this old farmhouse.

Interviewer: That’s a vivid image already. How many people live with you at home?

Student: Seven in total. My parents, my two younger brothers, my little sister, my grandmother, and me. It’s crowded, to be honest. Our house is not small, but it’s not designed for seven people all doing their own thing at once. During the day, especially when all the schools went online, it felt like every room had someone shouting into a microphone or trying to fix a lagging screen.

Interviewer: Wow. And did you have your own study space in that environment?

Student: [laughs] Not really. I wish. I ended up at the kitchen table most of the time. That meant I had people walking past constantly—my mom cooking, my brothers arguing about whose turn it was to do dishes, my grandmother asking me to help open a jar. Privacy was basically nonexistent. There’s no separate study room in our house. I tried using my bedroom, but I share it with my brothers, and they’d be playing video games or watching TV. So yeah, the kitchen table was my “classroom.”

Interviewer: That must have affected your focus. What about your internet situation?

Student: [long sigh] The internet was honestly the biggest nightmare. Out here, the connection isn’t fiber optic or anything. It’s this shaky DSL line that gives us maybe 10 Mbps on a good day. But when seven people are all connected—two high schoolers streaming their classes, my sister doing primary school assignments on a tablet, my parents watching news videos, me trying to follow engineering lectures—the whole thing just collapsed.

There’s one memory that sticks out. It was during a thermodynamics lecture, and I was really into it, like I’d been reading ahead in the textbook. And then—boom—the connection died. I sat there staring at a frozen screen for half an hour, refreshing, trying mobile data, nothing. When it finally came back, the lecture was over. I remember going outside to the yard, kicking a football around just to calm down, and thinking, “How am I supposed to keep my grades up like this?”

Interviewer: Speaking of grades, what were your marks like before the pandemic?

Student: Before everything went online, I was doing quite well. My first semester average was 86 percent, which I was proud of. I’d been a solid student in high school, usually in the top 15 percent of my class, and in my first months at university I kept that momentum. I’d spend long hours in the library, like seven or eight hours on some days, and I had a little study group that kept me motivated.

Interviewer: And how did your grades change once learning went online?

Student: They dropped. My average slid to around 78, sometimes even 76. It felt like the floor was slipping under me. Not because I suddenly got dumber, but because the circumstances were stacked against me. I couldn’t concentrate, I missed key explanations, and my motivation tanked. It’s one thing to read a textbook alone, but when you can’t ask a quick question in class, and your Wi-Fi keeps cutting out, you fall behind.

Interviewer: Let’s dig into your daily rhythm during online terms. How much time were you studying each day?

Student: Hmm. On paper, I’d say five to six hours. But it didn’t feel like good hours. Before, when I was in the library, I could do long stretches—three or four hours straight, focused. At home, it was broken into chunks. Maybe an hour in the morning before someone needed the table. Then another hour after lunch. Then two or three at night, often starting at ten p.m. when the house was finally quiet. So even if the clock said five or six hours, the quality wasn’t there.

Interviewer: And your sleep?

Student: A mess. Normally I like eight hours. That’s what I was getting pre-pandemic. But online terms messed that up. I’d often stay up until 2 a.m. watching recorded lectures or redoing assignments. Then I’d wake at 7 to help my little sister set up her tablet for her school. So I was running on five hours sometimes. During exam weeks, even less. I remember once pulling two near-all-nighters in a row to finish a CAD project, and by the end my eyes were twitching uncontrollably.

Interviewer: Sounds exhausting. Did social media play into that at all?

Student: Oh, yeah. I’m on social media a lot—about three hours a day. Mostly Instagram and TikTok, sometimes Facebook just to check what’s happening locally. It’s weird, because on the one hand, it was a lifeline during lockdown—I stayed connected with friends, laughed at memes, felt less alone. On the other hand, it was a black hole. I’d take a “five-minute break” and suddenly half an hour was gone. There was this one evening I was supposed to revise for a materials science quiz. I opened TikTok “just to check,” and next thing I knew, it was midnight. I got a 63 on that quiz.

Interviewer: Do you game much?

Student: Not heavily. My brothers are the gamers. They’d be shouting into their headsets while I was trying to study. I’d dabble in FIFA or some racing games maybe an hour a week, but I never got hooked. For me, social media was the bigger distraction.

Interviewer: What about sports?

Student: Before the pandemic, I played football twice a week in a local team. That kept me sane. When everything closed, I tried running in the fields near my house, maybe twice a week, but it wasn’t the same. I missed the team, the competition. It made me feel sluggish, like my body was asleep even when my mind was trying to focus.

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier you had a study group before. Did you keep that going online?

Student: We tried. We set up WhatsApp and sometimes Zoom calls. But it wasn’t the same. On campus, we’d sit together and push each other to solve problems. Online, half the time someone’s mic didn’t work, or they were distracted at home. Still, there were moments that helped. I remember one late-night call where three of us were struggling with fluid mechanics. We ended up staying on until 2 a.m., drawing diagrams on shared screens. That felt almost like the old days.

Interviewer: How about your family—did they monitor you while you studied?

Student: My grandmother did, actually. She’d shuffle into the kitchen and say, “Are you really studying, or are you playing games?” She couldn’t really tell what was on the screen. My parents didn’t check much, but they did ask me to do chores even during lecture time. Like, “Go feed the chickens,” while I was supposed to be listening to a lecture. That broke the flow. They didn’t fully grasp that online classes were still real classes.

Interviewer: How would you describe your family’s economic situation?

Student: Lower middle, I guess. My dad works in farming, my mom in a small local shop. Money’s always tight. During the pandemic, we couldn’t afford a second laptop, so I had to share with my brothers sometimes. Imagine trying to finish a lab report while your younger brother is saying he has a math class starting in ten minutes. It created fights.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through one particular online course that stood out?

Student: Yeah, Mechanics of Materials. That one was brutal. The professor was brilliant in person—energetic, wrote on the board, cracked jokes. Online, he just uploaded slides with voiceovers. It felt lifeless. And the problem sets were hard. I often needed clarification, but emailing him was hit-or-miss.

Interviewer: Did you have a good experience clearing doubts at some point?

Student: Once, yes. I emailed him about a tricky stress-strain calculation. He replied the next day with a detailed solution, step by step, and even added a note: “This part confuses many students—don’t worry.” That email gave me so much confidence. I kept it bookmarked.

Interviewer: And a less good experience?

Student: Plenty. There was a time I asked on the course forum about a past exam question. No reply for a week. By the time someone finally responded—another student, not even the professor—the exam had already passed. I lost marks because I misunderstood the formula. That stung.

Interviewer: How do you compare your performance in online versus offline settings overall?

Student: Offline, I thrive. I like being in the lab, seeing the machines, touching materials. Online stripped that away. My grades told the story: from high 80s to mid 70s. And beyond grades, my confidence slipped. Offline, I feel part of a community. Online, I felt like a lone island.

Interviewer: If you had to give a satisfaction score for Mechanics of Materials, what would it be?

Student: Honestly, a 4 out of 10.

Interviewer: Could you share three reasons why, with some concrete moments?

Student: First, the lack of interaction. I’ll never forget one lecture where he played a 40-minute video, and when it ended, silence. No discussion, no questions. Just “See you next week.” I felt invisible.

Second, the technical mess. In one exam, the platform crashed. I was halfway through calculating beam deflection, and suddenly the whole test disappeared. I emailed screenshots, begged for a retake. They let me redo it, but the stress was immense.

Third, the home environment. One time during a quiz, my brother walked behind me shirtless, yelling at his game. The professor called me out in the chat: “Please manage your background.” I wanted to sink into the floor.

Interviewer: That’s tough. Looking back, is there something you wish had been different?

Student: Yeah. I wish universities had provided better support for rural students. Maybe loaner laptops, maybe subsidized internet packages. And I wish my family had understood more that online learning was real. That, and just a quiet room to call my own.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing so honestly.

Student: Yeah, it’s actually kind of cathartic. I don’t usually talk about it in this detail.

# 009

Interview Transcript: A Student's Reflection on Online Learning – The Unseen Struggle

Conducted on September 27, 2025

Duration: 68 minutes

Interviewer: Dr. Lena Cho, Educational Researcher, Institute for Digital Learning

Participant: Anonymous, Third-Year Psychology Student (Pseudonym: Maya)

---

Interviewer: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I’m gathering personal experiences about online learning—how it’s shaped students’ academic lives, their mental health, and their sense of connection. There’s no right or wrong answer here. I’d just like you to speak freely. Where would you like to begin?

Maya: Honestly? I don’t even know where to start. It feels like a lifetime ago, but also like it just happened yesterday. I’m in my third year now, studying psychology. I turned 20 in June. But online learning… that was first and second year. And it changed everything.

Interviewer: Can you describe your living situation during that time?

Maya: I live in a small town—about two hours from the city. Population under 15,000. Quiet. Everyone knows everyone. I live with my mom, my younger sister, who’s 12, and my grandmother. My dad passed away when I was 15. It’s just the four of us now. We’re in a three-bedroom house—well, it’s more of a cottage, really. Old, creaky floors, thin walls. No central heating. We use space heaters in winter. It’s cozy, but not exactly built for a full-time student.

Interviewer: So you were studying from home?

Maya: Yes. And that was… complicated. I didn’t have my own room. My sister and I shared a bedroom. It’s maybe 10 by 12 feet. Two twin beds, a small dresser, and barely enough space to open the door. I had a folding table in the corner—that was my “desk.” I’d prop my laptop on a stack of books because the table was too low. My sister was in middle school, so she was also doing online classes. We had to take turns using the Wi-Fi hotspot when the internet went down. Which was often.

Interviewer: What kind of internet access did you have?

Maya: That’s the thing—we didn’t have home internet. We were on a mobile hotspot. My mom bought a data plan with one of those prepaid SIM cards. 20GB per month. Shared between all four of us. For school, streaming, everything. And the signal? Terrible. We’re on the edge of town, near the woods. Some days, the connection would drop every 10 minutes. I’d be in the middle of a lecture, and suddenly—buffering. Or frozen screen. I missed so many live sessions just because the signal couldn’t hold.

I tried everything. I’d stand on a chair near the window. I’d go sit in the car in the driveway. Once, I even brought my laptop to the local library, but they closed early, and I couldn’t stay long. I felt like I was begging for a stable connection.

Interviewer: How did that affect your coursework?

Maya: It was exhausting. I had to download lectures in advance whenever possible, but not all professors posted recordings. Some only did live Zoom classes. If I missed it, I had to ask a classmate to share notes. And not everyone was willing. I felt like a burden just asking.

And group work? Forget it. We had a group project in my research methods class. We were supposed to meet weekly on Zoom. But every time it was my turn to present or share my screen, the connection would cut out. My group got frustrated. I apologized constantly. Eventually, they started scheduling meetings when I wasn’t available. I ended up doing my part alone and emailing it to them. I got the same grade, but I felt invisible.

Interviewer: That sounds incredibly isolating.

Maya: It was. I started feeling like I wasn’t really a student. Like I was just… pretending. I’d see classmates post about their “study setups” on Instagram—ergonomic chairs, dual monitors, noise-canceling headphones. And I was sitting on a bed with a wobbly table, wearing earbuds, trying to concentrate while my sister watched cartoons and my grandma called for dinner.

I didn’t tell anyone. Not even my mom. I didn’t want her to worry. She works at the post office—long shifts, low pay. She already felt guilty she couldn’t afford better internet or a bigger house. So I just… smiled and said I was fine.

Interviewer: How many courses were you taking?

Maya: Five. Intro to Psychology, Statistics for Social Sciences, Developmental Psychology, Academic Writing, and a general education course—Environmental Ethics. All online. The writing and psych courses were okay. I could read and write on my own time. But Statistics? That was a nightmare. It was all live lectures with real-time problem solving. The professor would post equations, and we’d have to solve them in breakout rooms. But when I couldn’t get into the breakout room because my connection dropped, I just… sat there. Silent. Eventually, I stopped turning on my camera or mic. It was easier that way.

Interviewer: Did you reach out to professors or support services?

Maya: I tried. I emailed the stats professor once, explaining my internet issues. I didn’t go into detail—just said I had “unstable connectivity.” He replied, “All lectures are recorded. Please catch up on your own time.” That was it. No offer of help, no extension, nothing. I felt dismissed.

I looked into the university’s tech support. They had a loaner laptop program, but no internet assistance. And the counseling services? All online. I couldn’t even access therapy without a stable connection. It was a cruel joke.

Interviewer: How did you manage your schedule?

Maya: I had to be strategic. I learned when the signal was strongest—usually between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when fewer people were using the network. So I’d sleep late, wake up around 9, and try to do all my live classes and downloads in that window. After 4 p.m.? Forget it. The connection would degrade. I’d switch to reading PDFs or writing papers offline.

But that messed up my sleep. I’d stay up until 1 a.m. finishing assignments, then sleep till noon. I missed family dinners. I stopped talking to friends. I was always tired, always stressed.

Interviewer: Did you have any support from classmates?

Maya: One girl—Lena, from my psych class. We got paired for a presentation. She noticed I never spoke up. After class, she messaged me: “You okay? You seem quiet.” I broke down. I told her about the internet, the shared room, the guilt. She didn’t judge. She started sending me lecture summaries. Even recorded her own audio notes when the professor explained something hard.

She became my lifeline. We’d text every day. She’d say, “I saved the Zoom recording—got it for you.” Or “The TA posted the answers—sending now.” Without her, I don’t know if I would’ve passed that semester.

Interviewer: That’s powerful.

Maya: It was. But it also made me feel worse. Like I was dependent. Like I wasn’t strong enough to do it on my own. I wanted to be independent, but the system wasn’t built for people like me.

Interviewer: How did your grades compare to before online learning?

Maya: First semester—on campus—I had a 3.7 GPA. I loved going to lectures. I’d sit in the front, take notes, ask questions. I joined a study group. I felt like I belonged.

Second semester—online—I dropped to 2.9. I failed the midterm in Statistics. Not because I didn’t understand the material—I studied for weeks—but because I couldn’t access the online exam when it went live. The system timed out. I emailed the professor. He said, “Technical issues are not an excuse. You should have prepared better.”

I cried for two days. I thought about dropping out.

Interviewer: What kept you going?

Maya: My mom. She saw how hard I was trying. One day, she came home early and found me at the kitchen table, laptop open, head in my hands. I told her everything. She didn’t yell. She just hugged me and said, “You’re doing your best. That’s all anyone can ask.”

The next week, she used her savings to buy a better hotspot—40GB, stronger signal. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better. I felt so guilty. That money was for groceries, for my sister’s school supplies. But she said, “Your education is worth it.”

I worked twice as hard after that. I couldn’t let her sacrifice be in vain.

Interviewer: Did anything about online learning surprise you—good or bad?

Maya: The good? Flexibility. I could rewatch lectures. I could pause and look up terms. I learned to take better notes because I had control over the playback.

And some professors were amazing. My Developmental Psych professor posted short videos every week—just her talking, no slides. She’d say, “Hi everyone, here’s what we’re covering. Let me know if you have questions.” And she meant it. I emailed her once about Piaget’s stages. She replied the same day with a 10-minute voice note explaining it. Personal. Caring.

But the bad? The loneliness. I didn’t make a single friend that year. No one to study with, no one to vent to. I felt like I was learning in a vacuum.

And the pressure to perform online. You’re on camera, but you can’t speak. You see everyone else nodding, typing, engaged. And you’re just… frozen. I developed anxiety just opening Zoom. My heart would race. I’d break out in sweat.

Interviewer: Did you experience any physical effects?

Maya: Yeah. Eye strain. I’d stare at the screen for hours, and my eyes would burn. I got headaches—migraines, even. My posture was terrible. I’d slouch on the bed, neck bent, shoulders hunched. I developed this pain between my shoulder blades that still bothers me.

And I didn’t move. I’d sit for six hours straight. No walking to class, no standing up, no fresh air. I gained weight. I stopped doing the yoga I used to love. I felt… disconnected from my body.

Interviewer: How did your family cope with the situation?

Maya: It was hard on all of us. My sister resented me sometimes. She’d say, “You’re always on that laptop. You never play with me anymore.” And she was right. I was distant. I’d snap at her if she made noise during a lecture.

My grandma didn’t understand technology. She’d walk in during a class and say, “Who are you talking to?” I’d have to explain, “No one, Grandma, it’s just a recording.” She’d shake her head like I was crazy.

And my mom… she walked on eggshells. She’d whisper, turn off the TV, avoid the room. I felt like a disruption in my own home.

Interviewer: What about extracurriculars or campus life?

Maya: Gone. I was in the Psychology Club on campus. We had meetings, guest speakers, volunteer events. Online? The club went silent. No one organized anything. I checked the website every week—nothing.

I missed that. It wasn’t just about academics. It was about feeling part of something. A community. Online, I was just a name on a screen.

Interviewer: How did you handle exams?

Maya: Most were open-book, take-home. Which sounds easy, but it wasn’t. The questions were long, complex. I’d have 48 hours to complete them, but with my internet, I had to download everything at once and work offline. No last-minute research. No asking for clarification.

And the pressure was insane. I’d start at 8 p.m., work till 3 a.m., barely sleep, then wake up and keep going. I pulled two all-nighters during finals week. I drank so much coffee I got stomach pains.

One exam—Environmental Ethics—I submitted it with 10 minutes to spare. The upload took 12 minutes. It didn’t go through. I emailed the professor, explained, sent the file directly. He accepted it, but with a 10% penalty. I lost an entire letter grade because of upload time.

Interviewer: Overall, how would you rate your online learning experience?

Maya: A 4 out of 10. Maybe 4.5 if I’m generous.

It worked for some people—those with quiet homes, fast internet, private space. But for students like me? It was a barrier, not a bridge.

I learned to be resilient. I learned to advocate for myself, even when I felt small. I learned that education isn’t just about content—it’s about access, equity, and human connection.

But I also lost a year of my life. I didn’t grow socially. I didn’t explore campus. I didn’t have late-night talks with roommates or study sessions at the café. I missed the experience of being a student.

Interviewer: If you could change one thing about online learning, what would it be?

Maya: Accessibility. Not just tech access, but emotional access. Professors need to see us. To acknowledge that we’re not all sitting in perfect home offices. That some of us are fighting just to log in.

Simple things: record all lectures. Offer multiple ways to participate—text, audio, email. Be patient. Be kind. Don’t assume silence means disengagement.

And the university? They need to provide real support—hotspots, loaner devices, mental health services that don’t require a stable connection.

Interviewer: What’s different now that you’re back on campus?

Maya: Everything. I have a dorm room. My own space. Reliable Wi-Fi. I can attend class without worrying about signal. I’ve joined the Psychology Club again. I have study partners. I eat meals with friends.

But… I still carry it with me. The anxiety. The fear of falling behind. I over-prepare. I ask questions even when I’m scared. I don’t take anything for granted.

And I’m more aware of others. If someone’s quiet in class, I don’t assume they’re not trying. I wonder: Are they struggling? Do they need help?

Interviewer: Final thoughts?

Maya: Online learning exposed the cracks in the system. It showed who gets left behind. It wasn’t just about technology—it was about inequality, invisibility, and the cost of silence.

I made it through. But not everyone did. I know people who dropped out. Who couldn’t handle the isolation. Who didn’t have a Lena, or a mom who sacrificed.

So if there’s one thing I want people to understand: education should never depend on your zip code, your income, or your Wi-Fi signal. Every student deserves a fair chance. Not just in theory—but in practice.

And for those still struggling: I see you. I was you. Keep going. You’re stronger than you know.

# 010

Interviewer: Good morning, and thank you for coming in. Could you start by telling me a little about yourself?

Student: Yeah, of course. My name is Jordan, I'm 22 years old, and I've just finished my diploma—it was a two-year program in Business Administration. I'm hoping to bridge into the third year of an undergraduate degree next semester, if all goes well. [Pauses, shifts in chair] It's been a bit of a strange journey, to be honest.

Interviewer: I'm sure it has. Let's talk about where you were during the online learning period. Where is home for you?

Student: Home is… well, it's a proper rural area. Like, my nearest neighbour is a kilometre away. It's mostly farmland. It's quiet, which has its perks, but it also means you're pretty isolated. My family has lived here for generations. There's my parents, my older brother—he doesn't live with us anymore—and my grandmother lives with us. So, four in the house, but really just three most of the time. Economically… [lets out a long breath] I'd say we're… getting by. Lower income, for sure. My dad's a mechanic, mum helps with the books. There's not a lot of extra.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing that. Can you describe your study setup at home?

Student: [Laughs, but it's a bit weary] My setup was my bed, mostly. Or the kitchen table when it was free. I don't have a desk in my room. It's a small house, so space is tight. My room is… well, it's my childhood room, so it's not really designed for university-level work. I tried to keep my books and laptop organised on a little shelf, but it often just ended up in a pile. The biggest issue was the noise, but not from outside—from inside. My grandmother, she's lovely, but she's got a TV in the living room that's on from morning till night, and the walls are thin. So, separate room? Yes, my bedroom. But quiet? Not really.

Interviewer: What device were you using for your classes?

Student: I used a tablet. A basic Android tablet that my parents got me for my birthday a couple of years ago. It was okay for watching videos and reading, but it was a nightmare for anything else. I couldn't type essays on it efficiently; the touchscreen keyboard was too small. I'd have to borrow my mum's old laptop sometimes, but it's even slower than the tablet. For attending live Zoom sessions, the tablet worked… mostly. But if I tried to have the Zoom open and a document open to take notes, it would freeze or just shut down the app. That happened a lot. I remember once, during an accounting exam—it was an online quiz—the tablet just crashed. I almost had a heart attack. I had to restart it and pray that my answers had saved. They hadn't, for the last few questions. I emailed the professor in a panic, and he was understanding, but it was so stressful.

Interviewer: That sounds incredibly stressful. Let's talk about your internet connection. Given your rural location, what was that like?

Student: [Shakes head] It was the root of all problems. We have a satellite internet connection. It's expensive for what it is, and it's… unreliable. The bandwidth is very low. If I was in a live lecture, no one else in the house could really stream anything or it would buffer endlessly. And the latency… the delay was terrible. I'd raise my hand digitally, and by the time the professor saw it and called on me, the conversation had moved on. It made participating feel pointless. Rain? Forget it. Heavy cloud cover? It would get spotty. There was one specific afternoon, I was trying to present a group project for my Marketing Principles course. We'd rehearsed it. My part came up, I started talking, and my video just froze. I could hear them for a second, saying "Jordan, you're breaking up," and then nothing. I was completely disconnected. I spent ten minutes rebooting the router, my heart just sinking. By the time I got back, they'd presented without me. I felt awful, like I'd let my group down. It wasn't my fault, but it felt like it was.

Interviewer: That's a very concrete example of the challenges. Now, shifting to your daily routine, how many hours a day would you typically spend on your studies?

Student: I tried to be disciplined. I'd usually start around 9 AM after helping with some chores. Live lectures weren't always at convenient times, so I did a lot of recorded stuff. I'd say I spent a solid 4 to 5 hours on core studying—watching lectures, reading. But then there was all the extra time dealing with technology, trying to get files to upload, waiting for pages to load. So if you count that frustration, [laughs] it felt like 8 hours. During exam times, I'd study more, maybe 6 or 7 hours of actual focus, but I'd be exhausted. It's hard to maintain concentration for that long on a tablet screen.

Interviewer: And how did this routine impact your sleep?

Student: My sleep was probably the one thing that was okay. I made a point of it. I'd usually get 8 hours. I need my sleep, or I'm useless. The tablet and all my study stuff stayed out of my bed. When I was done for the day, I was done. I think that was my way of coping, of creating a boundary between study time and my own time. So, thankfully, that was a priority for me and I managed it.

Interviewer: That's a healthy approach. What about distractions like social media or gaming?

Student: I'm not a gamer. Social media… I use it, but I'm not obsessed. Maybe an hour a day, total, scrolling through Facebook and Instagram. To be honest, sometimes it was a welcome break from the studying, but I didn't feel it was a major problem. My biggest distraction was probably… home stuff. My mum asking me to help with something, or my grandmother needing a hand. It was hard to say no. So the workday was very interrupted.

Interviewer: Did you participate in any sports or group study sessions?

Student: Sports? No, not really. There's no gym nearby, and I'm not on a team. I go for long walks, that's about it. Group studies… we tried. For that Marketing Principles course, we had to meet online. Coordinating times was hard because everyone had different schedules. And with my internet, it was a joke. I'd often be the one whose audio was cutting out. It felt unfair to the others to rely on me for anything important. We mostly communicated through a WhatsApp group chat, sending messages back and forth. It wasn't the same as sitting down together.

Interviewer: You mentioned your grandmother lives with you. Did your parents or your grandmother take an active role in monitoring your studies?

Student: [Pauses, thoughtful] Not monitoring, no. They trust me. But they care. My mum would always ask how my classes were going. My grandmother, she doesn't really understand online learning. She'd pop her head in and see me staring at my tablet and say, "Are you still playing on that thing?" [Laughs warmly] It was sweet, but it showed the generational gap. They were supportive in their way, but they couldn't really help with the work itself. There was no pressure from them, which was good. The pressure came from myself.

Interviewer: Understandable. How many subjects were you taking, and which ones captured your interest the most?

Student: I had four courses per semester. So, things like Introduction to Accounting, Business Communication, Microeconomics, and Marketing Principles. I found Marketing the most interesting. I like the psychology behind it, why people buy things. Accounting was my weakest. All the numbers and rules… I struggled to keep up, especially with the software we were supposed to use. It was hard to learn from a video when you can't ask a quick question.

Interviewer: Thinking back to before the pandemic, what were your academic marks like? Say, in your final year of high school?

Student: I was a good student. Not top of the class, but consistent. I usually averaged… oh, I'd say around 82, 83 percent. I worked hard for my grades. I've always been that way. I don't find things easy, but I put in the effort. I was proud of that.

Interviewer: And how did that compare to your performance during the online diploma program?

Student: It dropped. There's no sugar-coating it. My average probably went down to a 75, maybe even lower. I got a C+ in that Accounting course, which was the lowest grade I've ever received. It was demoralising. In the subjects that were more theory-based, like Business Communication, I managed to keep a B, but even there, I felt my work wasn't as good. The main reason was just… the lack of support and the technical problems. When you're stuck on a concept in a physical classroom, you can turn to the person next to you or catch the teacher after class. Online, especially with my unreliable setup, it felt like I was on my own. I spent hours confused about things that could have been cleared up in a two-minute conversation.

Interviewer: Let's focus on one specific course that really encapsulates this experience for you.

Student: That would be Microeconomics. It was a full-semester course. The professor posted pre-recorded video lectures each week, and we had a live tutorial session every Friday. There was also an online discussion forum.

Interviewer: How did you engage with the class? Did you participate in the forums or the live chats?

Student: I watched all the video lectures. I took notes on paper because my tablet couldn't handle split-screen. The live tutorials… I attended them, but I was almost always just a silent observer. My internet was too unstable to risk turning on my microphone. I'd type a question in the chat sometimes, but the TA who ran the tutorial was often overwhelmed with questions, and mine would get missed. The forum felt dead. People would only post if they were desperate, and responses from the teaching staff could take days. It felt very impersonal.

Interviewer: Can you describe one instance where you tried to get help that was successful, and one where it was not?

Student: A successful time… Hmm. There was one week I was really struggling with the concept of elasticity. I'd watched the lecture three times and I still didn't get it. I finally mustered the courage to email the professor directly. I laid out my specific confusion. He emailed back two days later with a paragraph that used a really simple, real-world example—something about the price of milk. It just clicked. I was so relieved. That was a good moment.

Student: An unsuccessful time… [sighs] There was a graded discussion forum post. We had to apply a economic model to a current event. I wrote my post, but I wasn't confident about my application of the model. I posted it a few days early and wrote a note at the end saying, "I'm not sure if I've interpreted the model correctly here. Any guidance would be appreciated." The only response I got was from another student, who just said "Good post." The TA eventually graded it a week later and the feedback was just a brief "Adequate analysis." I never knew if I'd actually understood it right. That was frustrating. I needed that feedback to learn.

Interviewer: Comparing the online experience to what you imagine an in-person class would have been like, what's the biggest difference in your performance?

Student: I think I would have done significantly better in person. In a classroom, I'm the type who sits near the front and asks questions. I learn by talking things through. Online, that part of me just disappeared. I became passive. My performance suffered because I wasn't engaging with the material in the way that works best for me. The reasons are the isolation, the technology barriers that made participation a risk, and the delayed feedback. It felt like I was just going through the motions to complete assignments, not really to learn.

Interviewer: Finally, on that 0 to 10 scale, what would you rate your overall satisfaction with that Microeconomics course, and what are your key reasons?

Student: [Long pause, looking down] I'd give it a 3 out of 10. The first reason is the technology divide. My poor internet and basic device put me at a constant disadvantage, like during that group presentation fiasco. It was humiliating and stressful. Second, the lack of real-time interaction. Being a silent observer in tutorials was useless for me. I needed that dialogue. And third, the feeling of being just a number. The slow, impersonal feedback on the forums and assignments made me feel like no one would notice if I fell behind. I remember spending a whole weekend stressed about an assignment, and getting back two sentences of feedback. It felt like my effort wasn't matched. So, yeah. A 3. It was a means to an end, but I didn't feel like I got a good education out of it.

Interviewer: Thank you for your honesty, Jordan. Is there anything else you think is important to add about your experience with online learning?

Student: Just that… it really highlighted the inequalities between students. It wasn't a level playing field. It wasn't just about how smart you were or how hard you worked. It was about what tools you had access to. And for some of us, the tools were broken from the start. I'm really hoping that in-person learning for my degree will be different. I want to feel like a student again, not just someone struggling with a bad internet connection in a quiet room.

Interviewer: That's a powerful point to end on. Thank you again for your time and for sharing your story with me, Jordan.

Student: Yeah, no problem. Thanks for listening.