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Policy concern about university students' online professionalism in the post-pandemic era in UK context

Abstract

The extensive and intensive online teaching and learning during the pandemic has provided good opportunities for academic staff and students to experiment with learning and teaching using synchronous communication technology and learning platforms. This experience is highly valuable for helping higher education institutions move learning and teaching practices forward after the pandemic. Indeed, many universities are considering adopting blended learning in the new era. However, it is worth noting that a number of emerging issues related to student behaviour also appeared during online learning, such as teaching to blank screens, students' inappropriate use of social media icons, languages, and their inappropriate outfits. It appears that these issues have not yet been investigated properly, and are not addressed by the existing codes of conduct, since these have been written mainly for face-to-face teaching. This study offers some important insights into students' unprofessional online behaviour from tutors' perspective, and also the experiences of academic tutors in managing such behaviour in formal online learning and teaching environments. It used semi-structured interviews to collect data, and analysed the narratives of 20 academic staff working in UK universities. The findings report and describe students' unprofessional online behaviours witnessed by academic tutors in different academic disciplines. The findings also suggest that special attention needs to be paid to policymaking regarding online learning, in particular, in the area of students' online professionalism.

Keywords: higher education, online learning, online professionalism, UK universities, unprofessional online behaviour, Covid-19

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has enabled universities worldwide, including those in the UK, to experiment with online learning on a large scale, and for a prolonged period of time. Many UK universities have already considered adopting blended learning in the post pandemic era because of the benefits of online learning to students, such as flexibility, accessibility and self-paced learning (Bayne, and Gallagher, 2021; Verawardina et al., 2020). In the meanwhile, academic staff have started noticing some student behaviours that they perceived as unprofessional, such as inappropriate use of

emojis, disrespectful languages, and inappropriate outfits (Dendir and Maxwell, 2020; Getachew et al., 2020; Sharif, 2020). These behaviours seem to not only have an impact on these students' own involvement and engagement, but also disturb the learning environment and affect other students' learning (Noviyanti, 2021).

Even though there has been a large body of research on students' professionalism, the focus has been on face-to-face environments or the use of social media (Wright and Gunderman, 2021), students' online professionalism and unprofessional online behaviours have not yet been clearly defined. Existing literature has also paid less attention to policy development and formation relating to students' online professionalism at the institutional level.

It is necessary and important for university students to develop an understanding of online professionalism, and learn how to behave professionally in a formal online learning environment. This is partially because they may participate in synchronous online learning continuously in the post pandemic era (Bothwell, 2020), and also because online professionalism is increasingly viewed as a new key graduate employability attribute since remote working, for many businesses, has become a "new normal" (Castrillon, 2020). In addition, it is critical to explore and understand how academic staff have dealt with student unprofessional online behaviour during the pandemic, so that new policies and guidance can be developed based on the experiences gained and the lessons learnt.

This study aims to fill the gaps mentioned above and to address the following two questions:

1. What are the perceived views of academic tutors on unprofessional online behaviours of university students during the pandemic?
2. What are the experiences of academic staff managing student unprofessional online behaviours during the pandemic?

Online Professionalism

In the context of higher education, it appears that a significant body of research on online professionalism focuses upon health professional students' use of social media sites in private settings, and its impact on patients' trust, safety and the reputation of medical professions (Gormley et al., 2021; Rocha and de Castro, 2014; Cain and Romanelli, 2009). Online professionalism thus is defined as "the attitudes and behaviours reflecting traditional professionalism paradigms that are manifested through digital media" (Cain and Romanelli, 2009: 67). To date, the common unprofessional online behaviours identified in published studies have revolved predominately around blurring their professional and private life by posting and discussing private patient information publically on their personal social media sites through means of comments, videos, images and blog posts (Gormley et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021).

Therefore, existing codes of conduct in higher education tend to address unprofessional online behaviours in relation to the use of social media, rather than in formal online learning environments (Wright and Gunderman, 2021). In addition, much less is known about students (e.g., undergraduates and postgraduates) in other academic disciplines in the context of online teaching and learning. This has not been a major issue until the emergency switch to online learning during the pandemic, when academic tutors and students have had to rely on learning technologies, tools and platforms solely and intensively for learning and teaching activities.

For the reasons given above, this study defines online professionalism as the way that students studying at different levels, and of different subject areas engage themselves in a formal online learning environment relating to their profession as students, including their attitudes and behaviours to a relevant university code of conduct. Based on this definition, unprofessional online behaviours of students, as with in face-to-face environments, include repeated and one-off behaviours that disrupt and break down learning and teaching processes in online environments. A summary of commonly seen unprofessional behaviours in face-to-face teaching is provided in the section below.

Unprofessional behaviours: 4I's framework

The 4I's framework is the theoretical foundation for the study and was proposed by Mak-van der Vossen and her colleagues (2017). The framework was developed upon a systematic literature review of medical students' unprofessional behaviours. These behaviours were either reported by academic staff, or admitted by students themselves. The 4I's framework is felt appropriate for the study because it categorizes and describes unprofessional behaviours that appear to be common across all disciplines and different types of students in an in-person learning environment. As shown in the figure (fig.1) below, the framework consists of 4 categories, and 30 descriptors of unprofessional behaviours. The four categories are involvement, integrity, interaction and introspection.

<fig.1 goes here>

Involvement is related to the level of students' engagement in learning activities inside and outside the classroom. Unprofessional behaviours in this category are described as failure to engage. In other words, students lack the ability and motivation to handle their learning tasks sufficiently. Some examples of common unprofessional behaviours identified include a lack of participation in class activities, missing deadlines, and using the minimum effort. Integrity is concerned with students' academic honesty. Unprofessional behaviours in this category are referred to as dishonest behaviours. They are linked closely with plagiarism and rule breaking, and include behaviours such as cheating in exams, lying to tutors, and acting without required consent.

Interaction broadly describes how individuals connect and communicate with others verbally and non-verbally. Unprofessional behaviours in this category predominately refer to any disrespectful behaviours that have a negative effect on others. Examples include inappropriate clothing, bullying, and inappropriate use of social media. Introspection is the final category and is associated with students' self-awareness. Unprofessional behaviours in this category are associated with their inappropriate handling of feedback, advice and constructive criticism towards their academic performance, and include avoiding feedback, blaming external factors and not accepting feedback.

Although the 4I's framework was developed for medical sciences, many of these unprofessional behaviours identified, such as plagiarism, disruptive behaviours in teaching, and absent or late for assigned activities, were witnessed and reported in other subject disciplines, including social sciences, arts and business studies (Bašić et al., 2019; Ali and Gracey, 2013).

Managing unprofessional online behaviours

Existing research (McGurgan et al., 2021; Barnhoorn et al., 2020; Mak-van der Vossen et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2018) has provided various recommendations for managing students' unprofessional behaviours with different emphases. Some seem to emphasize developing students' awareness of professionalism through integrated training programmes (Tricco et al., 2018). Some put priority on understanding the factors and contexts that influence students' professionalism (McGurgan et al., 2021; Yuan and Che, 2012). A number of studies have proposed a framework or roadmap to address students' unprofessional behaviours (Barnhoorn et al., 2020; Mak-van der Vossen et al., 2020). The multi-level professionalism framework (Barnhoorn et al., 2020), in particular was developed to help students understand the impact of unprofessional behaviours through self-reflection.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned strategies appear to be designed mainly for face-to-face learning environments, and at teachers' individual level. Research to date has not yet paid much attention to online learning environments, and also institutional level plans and policies. Even though several studies exploring online professionalism have suggested embedding training into academic curriculum, and updating departmental or institutional level code of contact to reinforce the development of students' online professionalism, the main attention, as discussed already, has been paid to the use of social media in medical education (Rocha and de Castro, 2014; Cain and Romanelli, 2009).

Methodology

Participants

Participants of this study were selected using a convenience sampling method. This was because both authors were academic tutors working in a university in the UK, and the recruitment emails were sent to academic colleagues in UK universities, with whom the authors have contact (e.g., current and former work colleagues, or research collaborators). Twenty academic staff from six UK universities responded to the invitation. The subject disciplines they work within include Business Studies, Engineering, Computer Science, Sports Science and Education. Further details about the participants are provided in the table blow. All participants gave their consent to be interviewed for this study, and they were notified clearly about their rights. Ethical approval for this study was granted at both universities where the authors were working.

<table one goes here>

Instrument and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, because this type of interview is considered particularly useful in not only "exploring the views of a person towards something", but also in providing the opportunity for the researcher to gain a profound understanding of these views (Van Teijlingen, 2014:20)

All interviews were conducted by one author, and took place online using Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Each lasted approximately 60 min. Within each informed consent forms, agreement was requested to record the interviews. At the start of the interviews, permission was asked again and granted to allow the author to record the interview. Participants were also provided with a brief explanation of the research, and their rights and responsibilities as research participants. The principal interview questions were derived from the literature and were also based on the 4I's framework (Appendix 1).

Data transcription and analysis were then carried out by the other author. The raw data were comprised of the audio recordings of the interviews. There were in total 20-hour audio recordings. The first cycle coding started immediately after the data transcription was completed, and its purpose was to reduce the size of the data without losing

quality. During this process, the author annotated all transcripts. This included highlighting the key and important areas or factors that had emerged and assigning some initial codes. Once the first cycle was completed, the second cycle coding started. During this process, data were condensed further with the use of NVivo. The software enabled the author to create nodes (categories) and sub nodes (sub-categories) based on the annotations made at the first cycle coding. By doing so, the author was getting much more familiar with the data, which subsequently helped group and cluster the nodes into themes and were used to answer the research questions of the study.

Findings

Themes of unprofessional online behaviours

Almost all participants said that they witnessed a degree of students' unprofessional online behaviours during the pandemic, which seemed to disrupt the learning and teaching process. These behaviours are grouped into four themes: involvement, integrity, interaction and introspection. A detailed list of the behaviours is provided below.

<table 2 goes here>

Involvement

In this category, the main unprofessional online behaviours reported are absence or lateness for assigned activities, and poor teamwork. For instance, 85% of participants commented that they experienced what Stephensen (2019) describes as "ghosts" or "no-show" students. Even though they appeared to have joined their timetabled sessions on time, these students did not actually take part in learning activities. They kept silence by keeping their camera and microphone off simultaneously, and also by avoiding inputting any contributions using the chat function.

> *When the COVID-19 pandemic first started... there were a lot of: "turn on your mic, turn on your camera". But students didn't want to. As lecturer I got really frustrated at some point because I felt like they (the students) were not getting what they paid for.*

> *In face-to-face teaching, I could walk around [the classroom] and check on students when they are working on their group activities. But in online teaching, some students just keep silence, and don't participate.*

"Teaching to blank screens" was a common issue identified by all participants, and they said that they became increasingly "frustrated" with the situation. Since they were unable to see students' facial expressions, body movements and eye contact, the participants commented that compared with face-to-face teaching, it became much harder for them to interact with their students, and monitor student engagement and learning progress in online environments. This consequently broke down the teaching process, and had an impact on some tutors' motivation.

> *For me, one of the biggest activities of an educator is to build and maintain relationships with students, so that their learning journey is less about them being an empty vessel and us giving them knowledge. However, it becomes particularly difficult [to build and maintain such relationship] when you can't see and hear them.*

Whether students should turn their camera and/or microphone off during online learning has triggered a heated debate in academic communities worldwide (Castelli and Sarvary, 2021; Nicandro et al., 2020), and the literature does not yet have a clear answer. Whilst not participating class activates is clearly considered as unprofessional behaviours, as discussed below (e.g., in the discussions section), there may be good reasons for students to keep their camera and/or mic off (Nicandro et al., 2020). Academic tutors should investigate the reasons behind and encourage student to participate positively.

Integrity

It appears that cheating in exams, lying and plagiarism were the main unprofessional behaviours identified by participants in this category. A possible explanation for this, as the data indicate, was that universities had to reduce or remove face-to-face exams and replaced them with online fixed time assessments. For instance, those (55 % of respondents) who used exams as an assessment method reported that they had to convert close book exams into open book exams for online teaching at the beginning of the pandemic. The majority of these participants (91%) commented that they found it much harder to detect students' cheating behaviours since they were physically apart from students when the exam took place. Some also commented on the difficulty in investigating suspected plagiarism relating to student essays, as it appeared to be easier for their students to tell lies in an online environment.

We had an open book exam in the first semester for a 2nd year module. Students were told explicitly that they were strictly forbidden to contact each other [during the exam]. However, some still did.

The student was willing to answer questions [relating to his essay] but refused to turn his camera on. The excuse was the Internet connection was poor. It was important for us to identify the person we were speaking with was our student. We suggested him to try to use an Internet Café, which should give him a better Internet connection. But he never turned up again.

In addition, 65% of participants said that they witnessed a rapid increase in contract cheating, that is, students who buy or employ others to write essays or site in exams for them (Harper et al., 2021).

Academic conduct cases have increased dramatically during the pandemic. We found out that some students either copied their colleagues' coursework or purchased coursework from essay mills. It has become increasingly hard to tell whether students did their coursework by themselves or not.

Existing research and also the data collected in this study indicate that there has been a large increase in dishonest behaviours in this category since the emergency switch to online learning during the pandemic. However, none of the participants said that they used any proctoring systems for online exams. "My university did not provide such tool" appeared to be the main reason for this (60% of participants). Some (20% of participants) also commented "I have never head of this type of software".

Interaction

 85% of participants believed that they were not treated respectfully by their students during online teaching, because they encountered many, what they described as disrespectful behaviours. These behaviours seem to fall into the following areas: poor verbal and non-vocal communication, inappropriate clothing, inappropriate use of social media, disruptive behaviour, and privacy and confidentiality violations. As discussed above, ghost students were a major concern among the participants, as such behaviour not only hindered student engagement, but also prevented tutors from proving support and guidance. Inappropriate use of social media includes "sending inappropriate emojis" to their peers in group chats, and also to their tutors.

I was really shocked when I saw the comments on Aula, because a number of students used some highly inappropriate emojis, such as bomb and poo. These students should be trained to understand what they can do and can't do in an online learning environment.

Disruptive behaviours include "playing music in the background", and "drinking alcohol during class". Some students also tended to "jump the queue" and interrupted their tutor or peers in class. Privacy and confidentiality violations involved behaviours such as recording the teaching sessions without their tutor's permission.

> *Once I saw one student was actually lying in bed when attending the class. I honestly can't believe it! [I think] he might have turned his camera on by accident!*

> *A couple of students in one module often interrupted my teaching suddenly and asking questions without any indications. I don't mind questions, but it would be nice to be forewarned.*

As with integrity, a large number of unprofessional behaviours were reported relating to online interaction. In online environments, there seems to be a close connection between involvement and interaction. For example, when students are absent or late for assigned activates, they often exhibit poor verbal or nonverbal communication.

Introspection

Unprofessional behaviours identified in this category appear to be in two areas mainly: not sensitive to other person's need, and not aware of limitations. 60% of participants reported that their university provided students with additional learning support through extra online communication channels, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and learning management system messaging function. This way, their students were enabled and supported by the university to communicate with their tutors anytime, and anywhere. However, these participants said that the multi-communication channels not only created additional workload for them, but also caused stress. This is because their students, as they explained, expected instant responses regardless of time. They were lacking basic manners when approaching their tutors for support. The participants then called for a clearer guidance for tutor-student online communication. They also suggested that universities should revisit and update the existing code of conduct accordingly to point students to the correct and expected professional behaviour in this area.

> *I have downloaded Microsoft Teams app on my phone and I normally do not switch the phone off in the evening. There are a number of cases that I received students' calls or messages*

through Teams in the middle of night. It is very depressing and stressful to wake up by students. What are they expecting me to do during my sleep? (Participant described the situation with very angry tone)

There are no clear rules [on online communication]….I think the university really needs to provide some clarifications to staff and students, rather than leave us to deal with all issues on our own.

Tutor action towards student unprofessional online behaviour

It appears that all participants agreed that it was important and necessary to manage student unprofessional online behaviour so that they could provide an orderly, equal and learner friendly learning environment for their students. The data indicate that the participants took either positive (70% of participants) or non-positive actions in dealing with student unprofessional behaviour

Positive actions

Positive actions can be divided further into three subcategories: raising awareness, proving training and support, and seeking extra helping hands. For example, some participants (around 55%) said they believed that their students might not intend to behave inappropriately, and probably were not fully aware that their behaviours were unprofessional and disruptive. Therefore, they focused on educating students about the importance of online professionalism and creating classroom rules explicitly.

At the beginning of the 2nd semester, I set up clear ground rules with my students for my online classes. For example, students should attend class on time as they normally do in a face-to-face environment .. they should also turn off their Mic when someone is talking; in addition, they were expected to actively participate in group discussions.

In addition, some participants (6 out of 14) reported that they emphasized training students on how to act professionally in online environments. One participant said that she was responsible for students' CPD training in her university and described her action toward addressing unprofessional communication:

As soon as I noticed poor online communication behaviours such as writing emails without subject; writing unpleasant comments or feedback on their colleagues' work online, I discussed with CPD tutors and created additional CPD work on the topic of "online communication" and "social media presence".

Other participants reported that they sought extra help and referred misbehaved students to existing students' supporting mechanisms such as "progress coach",

"Academic tutor", "Course director", and "students' Rep" to get further guidance of expected online academic behaviour.

Less-positive actions

In contrast, 30% of participants (7 out of 20) appeared to manage students' online unprofessional behaviours in a less positive manner. Among them, some (4 out of 7) reported that they took a tough stance against unprofessional behaviours. For instance, they tried to make camera on mandatory, regardless of students' personal situations. Some (2 out of 7) adopted peer observation as a means of observing and reporting unprofessional behaviours. Furthermore, one participant in particular chose to take little action towards students' unprofessional behaviours.

> *For me, it is very important to see their faces when I teach....I made it clear to my students [at the beginning of each class] that I needed them to turn their camera on if they want to attend my classes.*

> *I repeat rules and my expectations at the start of each class. However, it is up to my students to decide how they want to behave in class, because they are all adults, and should be able to make the right decision themselves. My job is to teach them, but not to discipline them in the classroom.*

However, it appears that these less positive actions did not achieve the effect, and some participants (3 out of 7) remarked that they received negative feedback and comments online. This, as the result, affected their module and motivations.

> *They (the students) got really annoyed with me [after I forced them to turn their cameras on]. Some even complained to the Head of School about me. I am feeling quite upset about this. I had to back off....now I only ask them to put a photograph of themselves instead.*

> *It is upsetting to read these [negative comments]....I was really trying my best to help them learn. But I simply removed these comments. I try not to react and take them personally, because I think students are just angry about online teaching.*

Discussion

This study adopts the 4I's framework to explore the views and perceptions of academic tutors regarding students' unprofessional behaviours during online learning. It is important and necessary to help university students develop online professionalism. This is not only because of the high probability of post-Covid blended learning adoption in higher education (Wright and Gunderman, 2021), but also because online professionalism is considered a key employability skill for graduates (Castrillon, 2020). To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is among one of the first investigating

university student online professionalism in formal online learning and teaching environments.

The 4I's framework was designed initially to identify unprofessional behaviours of medical students in mainly face-to-face environments, and has not yet been applied to other subject disciplines. It includes four categories, namely involvement, integrity, interaction and introspection, and 30 descriptors in total.

The findings of the study show that the 4I's framework is also appropriate for examining and documenting unprofessional behaviours of students studying other subject disciplines and in online environments. The data collected did not suggest new descriptors, and the problematic behaviours that participants reported fall within the existing four categories. However, it is worthwhile noting that the study focused on the perceived views and opinions of a small group of academic tutors. Thus, their views need to be explored and confirmed further. Students' views and perceptions should also be investigated in future research.

Even though it is not stated explicitly, the four categories of the framework seem to carry equal weight. However, the findings of the study indicate that, in the context of online learning, it appears that academic tutors witnessed more unprofessional behaviours relating to the categories of *integrity* and *interaction*. For example, data show that there has been a noticeable increase in essay and exam plagiarism during the pandemic. It also became more challenging and difficult for tutors to detect and investigate cheating behaviours online.

Participants also reported a variety of unprofessional behaviours that were related specifically to online interaction. Keeping camera and mic off and not participating in online activities were one of the main issues reported. It appears that students also exhibited various disruptive behaviours, such as playing music in the background, and eating and drinking while attending classes. Using inappropriate emojis when communicating with peers and tutors was another main problematic behaviour reported.

There seems to be a number of reasons that could help explain why more unprofessional behaviours falling into intersection and integrity categories during the

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pandemic. Firstly, students were probably not keen and/or motived to study online, since many of them felt that they were not fully prepared and were not ready for the emergency move to online learning. This could be due to a combination of online learning specific contexts and individual factors, such as skill issues (e.g., technology competence of students), technology issues (e.g., students' lack of access to technology and equipment and limited weak Wi-Fi connection), and psychological issues (e.g., stress and anxiety) (Al-Kumaim et al 2021). Secondly, it could be that online learning takes away the physical proximity and the non-verbal cues, which are considered essential for effective communications (Burgoon et al, 2021). And finally, students might have considered online learning environment as a more informal environment compared with face-to-face learning, since they did not need to attend class in person, and could easily remain invisible if they wished to.

The findings mentioned above seem to support what has already been identified in the literature. A recent study conducted by Lancaster and Cotarlan (2021) reported "an alarming increase" in STEM students in the UK purchasing essays online from essay mills during the pandemic. Hill and colleagues (2021) expressed a similar concern over contract cheating and focused on illegal services university students in Australia have used during the pandemic such as exam takers for hire, and live chat assistance during exams. Furthermore, new legislation is introduced formally in the UK to ban essay mills (GOV.UK, 2021).

In addition, research carried out by Harsch and colleagues (2021) revealed the difficulty in enabling active and engaging online interactions between students and tutors on online language courses. Also in relation to online interaction, Crombie (2021) reinforced the importance of setting up shared and common ground rules and avoiding issues of ambiguity when using emojis for communications between students and students, and students and tutors. For example, what emojis are appropriate to use in a formal learning environment, and also the meanings of the emojis students choose to use.

Apart from confirming that the 4I's framework is appropriate for tutors exploring and documenting students' unprofessional behaviours in online environments, the findings

of the study also raise the concern that there does not seem to be any dedicated policies, guidance and codes of conduct at the departmental and institutional level, and participants had to address students' unprofessional online behaviours individually at module level. As discussed above, some adopted what they believed to be more positive actions, whilst others adopted less positive actions, and the results of their actions varied.

Nevertheless, data show that the majority of participants were actually struggling with managing some of the emerging unprofessional online behaviours, and were unsure about the most appropriate action towards them. The findings are consistent with the results reported by Gibbs (2020), Nicandro et al., (2020) and Terada (2021). The lack of consistency seems to have made it much more challenging for academic tutors to manage online classes, and have also sent mixed messages to students, which, as the result, did not help them develop and practice online professionalism. Future research therefore needs to be conducted to explore the effectiveness of tutors' action in further detail.

Lessons learnt

The present study shows emerging evidence about students' unprofessional online behaviours from the tutor perspective and the challenges tutors face in managing such behaviour at the micro level. Moving forward, in order to design and develop appropriate polices and guidelines, the authors feel the need to analyse and discuss the following lessons learnt from the study.

Firstly, the study finds that the traditional classroom management strategies for face to face learning environments are not entirely suitable for online learning environments. This is mainly due to some essential differences between these two different types of learning environments in the areas such as interpersonal interactions, tutors' control of class activities, and physical proximity. Managing students' online unprofessional behaviour thus became a new challenge for academic tutors when they had to move teaching online. Even though adjusting to fully teaching online was a new experience, and a steep learning curve to academic staff, it seems that they were largely neglected by their institutions and little training and support was provided to them in this area.

And secondly, the findings demonstrate examples of the meso and micro level problems and challenges in dealing with students' unprofessional behaviours, and exemplify that there is a cause-effect relationship between these two levels. For instance, a lack of policy consistency at the institutional level made it much more difficult for academic staff to manage these behaviours in their own classroom appropriately and effectively. This, as the result, affected their teaching quality and mental health, as well as students' learning effectiveness.

Conclusion

The findings of this study shed lights on developing a nuanced understanding of university student unprofessional online behaviour in the context of online learning, and raised policy concerns relating to student online professionalism in higher education in the post-pandemic era. This study suggests that the 4I's framework (Mak-van Der Vossen et al., 2017; 2020) is appropriate for identifying student unprofessional behaviours in other subject disciplines, and in formal online learning environments. The findings also show that more unprofessional online behaviours fell into the categories of intersection and integrity, due to a combination of online learning specific contexts and students' personal reasons.

In addition, the evidence from the study highlights the disconnection between the micro and meso levels in defining and managing students' unprofessional online behaviour. At the meso level (institutional level), there appeared to be a lack of clear university-wide guidance. At the micro level (individual, module level), the participants felt that they were left alone to deal with the situation, and had to adopt some "ad-hoc" strategies without appropriate institutional support. However, none of these actions seems to have solved the issues and/or have prevented student unprofessional online behaviour successfully. Some possible reasons for the disconnection could be that the universities might not be fully aware of the difficulties and challenges academic staff were facing or did not have the capacity and resources to deal with such issues because of the unexpected sudden digital disruption. Meanwhile, it could also be because teaching remotely made it much harder for academic staff to keep the lines of communication open with the University.

Consequently, this study specifies the importance of designing and producing appropriate guidance and polices such as codes of conduct to help students understand how they are expected to behave professionally in online learning, and the associated methods/actions in dealing with unprofessional online behaviours. The policies, for example should state explicitly how students should act professionally in an online learning across the four areas as shown in the 4I's framework, namely involvement, integrity, interaction and introspection. Examples of unprofessional behaviours in each category, as well as step-by-step disciplinary procedure should also be provided.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this study.

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Appendix: A selection of principal interview questions

1. How long have you worked in the Higher Education in the UK?
2. What is your current position?
3. What is your overall experience of online teaching?
4. Have you experienced any student unprofessional behaviour during online teaching?
    a. If the answer is yes, can you please provide some examples?
    b. How often do you experience these behaviours?
5. Did you encounter these behaviours in face to face teaching before the pandemic?
6. Whether and how did these unprofessional behaviours affect your teaching?
7. How did you manage these unprofessional behaviours?
    a. What was the result?
    b. Were you satisfied with the result?
8. Did you seek any support in dealing with student unprofessional behaviour?
    a. If the answer is yes, what kind of support did you use?
    b. If the answer is no, can you explain why?
9. In your opinion, what should your university do to help develop student online professionalism?