The Online Response of Higher Education to the Pandemic: A Snapshot of International Students' Experiences in the UK

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Introduction

The strategy of moving teaching and learning provision to online environments during the pandemic has been the largest, quickest and longest transition to digital education on-campus universities have experienced to date. Arguably, it has also represented one of the biggest transformations to students' and staff's experiences – academic and otherwise. These experiences have inevitably been reshaped by the online solutions put in place, recasting, stretching and sometimes limiting the experience of being at as well as being part of the university. The change in study mode during the pandemic affected the livelihoods of different student groups in a range of ways. Such impact is particularly apparent among international students who have been regarded as a vulnerable group during the global health crisis, not least because of the dilemmas they have to face regarding decisions of returning home or staying on campus as well as coping with economic and/or emotional pressures, feelings that have been heightened by expectations of a seamless adaptation to an online academic experience (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021).

In this brief, we explore how the pandemic affected the experiences of international students enrolled in British on-campus universities. In normal circumstances, entering academia as international students often results in encounters with unfamiliar contexts (Matsunaga et al., 2018) as they often arrive with cultural knowledge of how universities work, which may not be completely translated into the norms of the host institution (Sheridian, 2011). This can instigate a process of self-formation through which international students negotiate the meaning they attribute to their new educational surroundings as hybrid selves (Marginson, 2014), enhancing, rather than replacing, the knowledge they bring with them through contact with new values and practices critical to understanding how higher education institutions (HEIs) operate.

With universities moved online as a response to COVID-19, the logic through which on-campus HEIs operate is changed, requiring of students a further adaptation to an additional new environment: the online university. While most students carry digital knowledge as a result of everyday practices (Martin and Rizvi, 2014), this raises issues as to how HEIs and students negotiate their understandings of the digital not only concerning teaching and learning provision, but also students' wider academic experience. This is an issue worth addressing for all university students, but it merits special attention in the case of international students. On the one hand, international students have made different digital journeys in their home countries (Chang et al., 2020) when compared to those of home students on which university digital strategies draw; on the other hand, the wider academic experience they have invested in carries the extra meaning, that of having chosen to leave the familiarity of their home countries to study abroad, with the purpose of being part of a different cultural and educational environment.

In this brief, we will examine how international students experienced academia during the pandemic and discuss the state of digital education in UK HE.

Methodology

This brief draws on knowledge developed through a qualitative, narrative inquiry study with 28 international students who started their university degrees in on-campus universities in the UK before the pandemic. This methodology was chosen for its capacity to engage participants in reflection and dialogue with both themselves and the researchers as a way to explore how participants re-construct and recount their lived experiences (Caine et al., 2018). The empirical work was conducted with recourse to digital methods as instruments of data collection, given the social distancing measures in place during the phase of our empirical work. This included solicited diary entries – written over a span of 3 months – as accounts of personal experiences and in-depth narrative interviews as an opportunity to explore additional aspects of students' academic learning as well as their wider university experiences during the pandemic.

Research findings

The research findings presented below are organised into two categories: 1) institutional practices and 2) students' struggles

1. Institutional practices

Normalisation of "emergency teaching" as digital education

At the start of the pandemic, HE teaching provision was quickly transferred online as an emergency response to the global public health crisis. Yet, what started as a preventative measure against a growing virus soon became the standard strategy of digital education on-campus universities provided to students when the pandemic did not abate.

- **Content delivery** became the basis of the educational offering institutions provided online. Throughout the pandemic, on-campus universities were reported to operate through conventional teaching approaches, without considering the particularities of the new learning environment, thus replicating the lecture and seminar format that is habitual on-campus.
- **Digital technologies were mostly employed for their broadcasting capacity.** This unidirectional flow of information was exemplified by access to pre-recorded lectures as a key feature of the learning and teaching approach offered during the pandemic. Such an approach limited both students' and staff's contributions and thus hindered the development of a more inclusive and dynamic teaching and learning relationship.
- **Online learning during the pandemic expressed a consumer orientation of education.** Students were imagined as consumers of information rather than co-producers of knowledge, with the online teaching and learning environment mediating such an approach.

Student voices: They throw us into a platform of recorded lectures

We are just doing online teaching… you go to the uni page …access the recordings so we do not need to watch it in real time (Zhunsie, China)

[Pre-recorded lectures] are different from face to face because we cannot ask questions… the lectures did not change much… the seminars we had [before] had lots of discussions, but…during the pandemic, a lot of modules I took …the seminars are more Q&As (Xiaochang, China)

I took about 3-4 hours to watch and take note of the recorded lectures and reading materials, and then went to the [live] seminar during my dinner time, [which] only lasted for 50 minutes. (Ming Jun, Malaysia)

Quality of resources versus quality of experience

Although students did not question the quality of teaching resources, they often wondered about the quality of the learning and university-wide experiences that had been interrupted, curtailed, or in some cases even suspended.

- **The lack of interactive learning experiences** failed to foster a sustained human presence; a vital social aspect of on-campus learning that was largely absent in online learning. Education was simplified as a transaction of information, with online environments often assumed as static and sterile of human interaction.
- **The wider student experience was neglected** as emphasis was placed on pursuing curricular objectives. As such, students were led to prioritise engagement with learning content made available online rather than engaging more widely in university life. The loss of the social aspect of learning was perceived by many international students as a key contributing factor for the lower quality of their learning experiences at UK universities during the pandemic.

Student voices: What about our university life beyond resources?

I think they are doing pretty well, but not for the quality of study [experience] (Vikram, India)

[it's] not the quality of staff, but the quality of training has suffered immensely online, and that comes with the platform, the way that it's been delivered online … I think the quality of training has dropped online because it's online. (Gabriela, Brazil)

As a student I think I lost the experience to be an international student in the UK, I think that's the most important, and I lost many chances of being part of the local community, to experience their life and to communicate with local people. (Aileen, China)

I am missing that opportunity to live in the country and have this interaction with people, also have the experience of different kinds of lives, and this communication with others, different people… is important. (Alev, Turkey)

Studying "anywhere, anytime" gone wrong: overlooking time zone adjustments in synchronous communication

As the pandemic forced universities to close or limit campus activity, students were invited to return "home", as a safety measure, from where they were expected to continue to study online. This was not a straightforward option for all students, particularly international students who found themselves geographically displaced from their countries of origin, with some students facing economic, emotional and/or moral distress of travelling during the pandemic, an aspect that universities in the UK overlooked at the beginning of the pandemic and later tried to tackle by keeping university accommodation partially open. In the process of transferring educational provision online, some practical issues were not paid due regards to, particularly the rearranging of timetables to suit different time zones.

- **Learning schedules** were not adapted to students' home countries time zones. Students often found themselves having to follow the same schedule they had on campus.
- **Dysfunctional study schedules impacted students' sense of belonging**. Out-of-hours schedules disrupted study routines and social engagements, including online assessments and activities organised by the student union. Students felt increasingly detached from their institutions and disadvantaged in their learning and wider university experience.
- **Time zone differences impacted on students' health**, physically and mentally, as their working days were lengthened by synchronous online lectures, with their biological clocks disrupted as a result. "Zoom fatigue" was commonly reported.

  Unchanged study timetables ostracised students from university life in that it created time barriers. This was conveyed via students' reports of frustration and feelings of being marginalised by their institutions, by the lack of consideration given to the circumstances under which they were studying.

Student voices: We are struggling to manage our time and learning

Attending lessons is like doing a part-time job because all the lessons take place in the afternoon and at night. … time difference makes it difficult to find time for everyone to discuss. (Xiaochang, China)

I think my days usually starts in the afternoon, which in the UK it was morning. So I have to adapt to their time zone … fitting into the time zone [Beijing time] that I'm currently in at the moment. (Ju, China)

Lectures… are often recorded and uploaded at the same time the lecture is supposed to be. I've often found myself having to start a lecture at about 11pm and go one until 1 or 2am. So your day is really stretched … your sleep cycle gets impacted because you're essentially running on the UK timeframe while sitting in India. (Vikram, India)

I had to study at home. …For a long time, my biological clock was in chaos. I always went to bed at 12 noon [and] I woke up at around 8pm. Start studying around 9pm to …12 noon the next day. The chaotic biological clock inspired me to overeat - I gained 9 pounds in a month. And I felt disconnected from the world; I feel like I'm outside of society. (Haohao, D1, China)

Student Union sent emails to me (everyone) to call us to join them, while it seems difficult for both the organiser and the student who is taking remote lessons to hold activity or work together for time difference and low efficient communication method (email). (Bao, D1, China)

2. Students' struggles

Home from home: being on or off campus

Students were homogeneously imagined as being able to return home, something that placed different cohorts of students in difficult situations, including international students who are more likely to conceive of their university accommodation as "home" during their academic years. Studying abroad often means that students are geographically displaced from family and/or local networks and therefore are more reliant on institutional support when compared to traditional home students.

- **Bespoke support for students was strained and reduced** as students were expected to be able to return home and be supported by their family and friends.
- **A sense of loss** was often reported by students. Students' return to their homes weakened the maintenance of networks they had established on campus, undermined the development of new friendships, and stalled the development of new opportunities.
- **The return to home impacted students who stayed and those who left campus** as neither group of students was experiencing their university life as they had imagined. Both groups felt they were left to their own devices in different ways.

Loneliness

Feeling lonely was a common experience for international students during the pandemic. Students who stayed on campus, for the whole academic year or part of it, often reported about feeling isolated, being restricted to their accommodation, spending most of the time on their own, and lacking social connection with peers as well as academic and support staff.

- **Feeling lonesome on-campus**. Loneliness and resultant emotional struggles crept over international students when they were constrained to their dormitories. The feeling of loneliness was enhanced when those who stayed on campus were not engaged in western social media, linguistically as well as culturally, and consequently felt disconnected from their immediate peers. Consequently, the students found it difficult to identify themselves with a place where they felt they belonged.
- **Feeling disconnected off-campus**. Students who returned to their home countries and/or family homes also reported feeling distanced - physically and symbolically - from the wider university experience.

Student voices: All by ourselves…

During lockdown [you] stay alone. You feel you've just been abandoned by the world… you lock yourself in the room, everyday you face the screen… (Ling, China)

I left alone in my dormitory from the beginning of March 2020 because most of my friends chose to go back to home country after a long discussion with parents. … So there I spent one and a half month to learn a new skill that how to stay with loneliness without anger and depression. (Amanda, D2, China)

… we are in different places and also due to time difference issues, so hardly can we find an appropriate time to meet each other.. (Dora, D1, China)

This year, after the seminar finishes, I just close my laptop, and shut out everything. My thoughts are only ticking within my mind, meaning it has less likely to get developed in comparison to the last year. This isolation, academic isolation I would call, is affecting my productivity, motivations …(Taro, D5, Japan)

Now actually I'm just in my room all the time, and when I look out of my window I don't feel like it's very different from my own country anyway. So right now I don't feel like I'm in the UK. I can distinctly feel I'm not home, but I kind of feel like yeah where am I? I don't know… I kind of feel like it's kind of symbolic or metaphoric of my – of a lonely existence of humans or something like that. (Li Mei, China)

In their "own little bubble": feeling forgotten

Social distance restrictions led to different forms of separation: from campus life, peers, academics, support staff, and community. The physical disconnection had a bearing on their interpersonal connections.

- **The lack of interactions** between peers before, in-between and after classes led to deep experiences of solitude. Students felt that they were left to their own devices, which greatly affected their learning and attitudes towards classroom engagement.
- **University's communications with students were deemed inefficient and impersonal**, absent of any warm touch or care. Email communications, particularly, were received with little enthusiasm,

interpreted by students as fulfilling the bureaucratic need of the university in evidencing contact with students.

- **Friendships and networks were put on hold.** With students in different locations – often having access to different social media at different time for informal communication – the friendships and connections they started to foster on-campus came to a halt, leaving them with very little sense of the academic community they had aspired to be part of.

Student voices: …left in our own little bubble

Face-to-face instruction is not only face-to-face during class time, but also includes a lot of greetings before the class and discussions after the class. I found that the lack of these experiences affected my learning. I can only organise my learning according to my own schedule. (Xiaochang, D3, China)

[An] obstacle which prevents me from texting my friends [in the UK] is that I do not know how to text in English, or English-cultured way. In Japan, we use social media called LINE. LINE has a lot of cute stamps, GIFS, voice messages and free group video calls and one-on-one calls. I've also been using it since I was 15, so it's really emotionally easier for me to "annoy" my friends [in Japan] in a flirty way. Messenger and Facebook, in Japan… we only use this for business purposes. …Until I settled in this country, I've never used Facebook and messenger for a private purpose. That's why, I feel, I am quite emotionally reluctant to drop a message because I am not saying anything important to them! …International students struggle. (Taro, D3, Japan).

The University halls was empty, from 800 people that normally live there. Only 80 of us were left. There was no Facebook support group, and the university seemed very disorganised about the situation. A lot of questions were left unanswered, and the uncertainty of when we would be allowed back in was very discouraging. (Gabriela, D1, Brazil)

The med school is thoroughly unsupportive as one might expect from the med school, sometimes I wonder where the sense of empathy is, a lot of my friends have had issues with finishing blocks due to isolation and the med school is basically like, "oh we are sorry, but we can't do much". (Maitri, D5, Singapore)

I think they regularly let us know, they send newsletters and then they [offered] online meetings, and send lots of information … or the things like you need for wellbeing. … So the information is, I think, quite given, but for the one-to-one talk or the other things I think [not much has been done yet]. … I think it wasn't that helpful, [an] approach made by the university to help students. (Alev, Turkey)

I lost connection with them [friends] and sometimes we chat on the Microsoft Teams ... But it's hard for us to pick up a time because of time difference, and also, they are also very busy in the UK and sometimes I am busy here. So [the meeting between us] hardly happened. (Aileen, China)

Marginalisation in online pedagogical spaces

Students were regarded as proficient online users, expected to participate in class discussions without any constraints. However, this was not the case, especially when students had not been socialised into modes of online learning that gives them unexpected exposure and as a result can enact a sense of "otherness".

- **A sense of marginalisation** was magnified when international students were expected to speak English directly into the "ears" of their lecturers and peers in the online classrooms without due scaffolding or socialisation into the norms of online participation for learning purposes.
- **The "delivery model" hampered international students' opportunities to practise English** and impacted on their confidence to contribute to discussions. International students often reported about home students dominating group discussions.
- **Participation anxiety was confused with disengagement** by the learning community. International students' confidence to participate in live sessions was also affected by the lack of visual cues in online environments, exemplified by students keeping their cameras off during synchronous learning. This was a practice advocated by educational practitioners in the early stages of the pandemic (see Moses, 2020), reasoned as a form of inclusion when logging in from domestic environments. For international students, however, this approach had the opposite effect, that of exclusion, in that it formed an impersonal learning atmosphere, thus leaving students hesitant of partaking in live discussions.
- **The building of social rapport was diminished** through the limited opportunities for international students' engagement in learning sessions. This has left them bereft of social interaction with peers and academics, a key experience that helps international students develop their confidence to participate in class.
- **The absence of expert facilitation of interactions** in online pedagogical spaces was seen to generate misunderstandings that restricted international students' participation in learning, thus catering for attitudes of passivity instead of encouraging student agency.

Student voices: We do not know if it is a safe learning space…

This kind of social opportunities is different from offline ones. I can only talk to everyone rather than talk to one of them, which is a little awkward. (Xiaochang, D3, China)

I felt marginalised again, and it felt very similar to being marginalised during face-to-face classes. Some British students can talk freely without completing the pre-class tasks. I think that if you want to discuss the content of the task without completing the task, you should listen carefully and ask humbly. (Xiaochang, D2, China)

I think it's strange to turn on the microphone online and talk to the teacher, because it feels like I'm talking to everyone's ears which makes me feel embarrassed, so I avoid answering questions. (Aileen, D2, China)

I was the only one who looked at the issue differently, and I felt a sense of being minoritised. I felt very uneasy and set my camera off all the time. … People [domestic students] who are comfortable talking keep verbalising their thoughts, people [international students] who are uncomfortable remain silent. Race, I recognise, is definitely one thing. (Taro, D5, Japan)

…we have many online communicative spaces such as on Moodle or on Teams. … it's voluntary to post something and we don't know if it's a safe or trustworthy or reliable space, because no facilitator is there. So just a space, but no social relationships. That's the issue, I think. (Dora, D1, China)

"Emergency pedagogy" left unquestioned

Digital education as delivery of content was perceived as *the* possible solution to an impossible situation. The subscription to the conventional format of teaching and learning suggests an inability to imagine online education in more dynamic ways, which limited pedagogical practices and restricted students' experiences

- **The disconnect between digital practices** outside formal education and within it, as well as the divide between expectations of international students' digital knowledge and practices and realities, were voiced through the silence participants conveyed on this matter. HE is yet to go through a genuine crisis of significance where its digital pedagogical approaches are concerned. The global health crisis did not seem to yield fresh pedagogical meanings in relation to digital education.
- **Students trusted the university to lead digital pedagogical innovation**. Despite the public imagination that young people are leading digital transformations, students maintained a very conservative approach to their learning and academic experience. They relied on institutional guidance to provide them with the best educational solutions possible.
- **Students did not link their digital practices to their academic experiences**. Students were mostly silent about the knowledge and experiences they have of digital spaces, often overlooking how their digital experiences can be adapted to learning environments, even in its formal format. As such, students might be struggling behind the screen, but little support was given nor was feedback encouraged to inform digital pedagogical practices that could improve students' academic experiences. There is a clear loss of sense of agency from both institutional support and the students themselves.

Student voices: We are living through a pandemic: what can we do?

Some teachers they just talk, talk, talk and one of my courses... students should turn their cameras [on], but [they don't] so most times it's only the lecturer with the camera on and we just listen (Xiaohong, China)

…the online tutorials obviously didn't work very well. … it really became more difficult to understand each other when we weren't sitting in the same physical space. I didn't think I always understood what they were really saying. The supervisors [were] also clearly more impatient. Their facial expressions and the way they spoke clearly told me that. To be honest, I've actually been scared to ask them questions since tutorials became online. (Haohao, D2, China)

… due to the current situation, what I only did is to sit in front of the screen for a whole fucking day with huge amount of anxiety, and just panicking in front of my downloaded must-read papers. (Taro, D6, Japan)

[The university was like] "okay we're going to give them an online training for this term", they thought. Yes, [they are] young people and they will know how to use those types of platforms. But it wasn't easy for everyone. I have a friend for example that every time he struggled with finding the links…(Gabriela, D1, Brazil)

Because even though the uni carries research surveys, that's what it's called, surveys with the students on "how is your course going? How is this module?" They don't care about those surveys about student life and social activities all that much. (Gabriela, Brazil)

Points of discussion

- During the pandemic, HEIs as well as their students have developed and experienced digital education, respectively, through a logic of content delivery as a key form of teaching and learning. This approach should not be conflated or justified with the sense of urgency that propelled HE provision into the digital in the first place. Rather, it shows a failure to understand the logic of practice that emerges and derives from digital environments. This points to the essentiality of relevant pedagogical approaches that can not only accommodate but also foster online learning as a participatory, dynamic and far more inclusive activity.

- So far, the educational community has resisted the establishment of an explicit critical digital pedagogy that could provide practitioners with a tangible framework for digital education. The reason for this is understandable in that online learning has often borrowed from a wide range of influences: from more functionalist interpretations of online education to more interactive and critical approaches, with the latter drawing inspiration from social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), critical pedagogy (Freire; 1970; hooks, 1994; etc.), practice and citizenship-based education (Dewey, 1916) and/or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Yet, the formation of a concrete digital pedagogy – with its own explicit logic of practice and curricular principles – is missing.

- The pandemic has shown that digital education continues, to a large extent to be misconstrued as a traditional form of distance education where the delivery of content is interpreted as key means through which the purpose of teaching and learning can be fulfilled. In so being, it deprives students and educators of one of the key elements that brings knowledge to life: discussion and dialogue. It also positions students as knowledge consumers and staff as mere knowledge providers, arguably characterising student learning with a trait of passivity that ironically contradicts the imperatives of a (digital) knowledge economy for which universities claim to be equipping their students. The lack of dialogic or interactive pedagogical spaces results in additional challenges or marginalisation to international students who are often perceived as deficit others (Lomer, 2017; Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019).

- Seen through the prism of pandemic conditions, the approaches taken by universities, and accounted for by international students in how they constructed their experiences, could be interpreted as a quick response to an unexpected problem. However, as the pandemic progressed and continued to impinge on the running of HEIs, it is perceptible that what was first understood as an emergency solution, soon became universities' (main) answer to the global health crisis.

- This lack of pedagogical adaptation to digital environments has affected all students who were deprived of the academic experience they had anticipated and invested in, an experience supposed to be a memorable time in their lives: their "university days". For international students this sense of loss is heightened through unfulfilled efforts of studying abroad, the feeling of a wasted opportunity to "live a culturally different life" that ended up being reduced to access to specialised content.

- The approach to digital education deployed during the pandemic will undoubtedly have consequences to the future, especially regarding how online education is interpreted and valued in relation to on-campus education. According to the findings presented and discussed in this report, there is a real danger that digital education becomes even more understated than it has been already, with on-campus education achieving a renewed form of distinction.

Policy recommendations

In light of the findings presented above, we offer the following policy recommendations

1. Define the digital pedagogical principles that underpin institutional teaching and learning strategies

Defining the digital pedagogical principles that underpin an institution's teaching and learning strategy will help set the values and ethos that characterise the digital education approach practised by that institution.

HEIs would benefit from establishing the pedagogical principles that guide their digital curricular offering. A conceptualisation of digital pedagogical principles should contemplate issues concerning the nature of digital practices and draw on understandings of digital cultural knowledge, i.e., how digital environments work and what type of experiences digital environments at the service of education can enable.

Digital pedagogical principles developed to support the process of curriculum design should be interpreted as promoting the *localisation* of teaching and learning online, rather than its translation from approaches practised in other settings (e.g., on-campus classrooms). Central to such an approach is the contextualisation of teaching and learning practices in the environment supporting such experiences rather than the direct transfer of practices that are associated with one context to another. Such differentiation should enable institutions and educators to establish a digital logic of teaching and learning practices as a new pedagogy genre that is distinctive from the one practised on-campus, thus making explicit the rules of engagement as well as the positioning of the different actors involved in such experiences.

2. Offer staff development on digital education that includes cultural understandings of digital practices

Staff development pertaining to digital education usually has a strong focus on the technical skills necessary to employing a certain technology or using different technological tools (e.g., zoom). A pedagogical understanding of digital education should also be put in place, not relying solely on pedagogical knowledge meant for classroom teaching and learning, despite the relevance of some of the philosophical stances, especially those more focused on a student-centred pedagogy. It is equally important that educators develop practical and conceptual knowledge of digital cultural practices and its relevance to not only teaching and learning but also what it means to *be* an online learner for different cohorts of students.

3. Teach students critical digital literacies

University students have a longstanding experience of learning through different education systems that have marked their educational careers. Despite the push for more student-centred approaches to education worldwide, test-based and score-focused education systems have encouraged students to be strategic in how they choose to succeed in education. This often perpetuates tried and tested study practices that leave little

room to consider other ways of learning and teaching. Additionally, little effort has been given to equipping students with digital literacies of a critical kind that allows them to be proficient knowledge workers in digital spaces.

4. Realign the development of educational technologies with digital practices and curriculum design

Digital technologies used in educational contexts are often designed with a traditional view of teaching and learning in mind, where access to content prevails as its main feature. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in use in UK universities serve this purpose, having become a minimal requirement of online provision. The pandemic brought the use of synchronous communication platforms to a level of use never seen before. These real time communication platforms, to a great extent, reflect the power dynamics imagined in classrooms, where the relationship between the speaker and the listeners is established in a rather hierarchical way. This however is a misrepresentation of a classroom experience where students can establish contacts with peers and educators before, during and after each session. Additionally, these interactive platforms show a lack of curricular imagination regarding what other opportunities digital technologies can enable when it comes to rethinking teaching and learning practices as well as spaces. There is therefore a pressing need as well as an exciting opportunity for EdTech companies to collaborate with digital pedagogy experts in devising technological solutions that are informed by curriculum design principles sympathetic to digital practices.

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