

Poster Abstract Book (All Poster)

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Studying Abroad During a Pandemic

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Abstract: This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to better understand the lived experience of 15 university students who had to move to an online learning environment and Virtual Exchange because of the 2020 pandemic. By March 2020, the International Education community experienced the unprecedented occurrence of a global pandemic. Because of the rise of Covid cases worldwide, education was moved online for virtual learning, recreational events were halted and social distancing for the safety of oneself and others became the norm. Higher education institutions were forced to make decisions based on the safety of their international students abroad and at home. The pandemic limited study abroad in-person options but with limitations, new opportunities emerged: hybrid and Virtual Exchange online learning, which the researcher was keen to explore and this led to the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of university students taking part in international programs during the pandemic?

Poster Outline: This research project attempted to explore the lived experiences (Smith, 2017) of two sets of international students who attended university from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, during the height of the global Covid-19 pandemic. These students were required to transition (Christofi & Thompson, 2007) from an on-campus, in-person 'traditional' international education programme (Canfield, Low & Hovestadt, 2009) to a potentially less familiar hybrid and/or Virtual Exchange programme model. (Land & Bayne, 2011; Shen, Cho, Tsai & Marra, 2013)

Fifteen qualitative phenomenological semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 5-month period during the Spring and Summer of 2021, to document the lived experiences of these students. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to document the participants lived experiences of the process of studying abroad during the pandemic.

The participants constituted both undergraduate and postgraduate students from various countries who were studying an international exchange programme and were either:

- - Those attending an in-person; on-campus exchange programme during the 2019-20 academic year and or
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- Enrolled on an international exchange programme during the 2020-21 academic year.

The aim of this study was to contribute to the conversation concerning how higher education institutions can support international Virtual Exchange programme students in line with the notion that, Study Abroad is for everyone (Nguyen, 2012; Petzold & Petra. 2018). To understand the advent of virtual exchange as a response to the pandemic and experience of students in international mobility programmes, the following question was explored:

What are the lived experiences of university students taking part in international programmes during the pandemic?

Participants were recruited through a mixed-method approach of social media advertisements, personal networking efforts and snowballing, with the latter being the most successful approach to recruitment.

Initial examination of the data suggests that there is a perceived lack of infrastructure in Virtual Exchange and Hybrid international programming and that this affected participants connectivity to peers, with consequent knock-on effects and emotional and social wellbeing. This could indicate a level of fragility in universities ambition to produce global citizens (Gross, Gross, & Davies, 2015) if using exchange programmes as a means to progress this globalization of higher education institutions. The final analysis will be conducted by Fall 2021 which has the potential to clarify the understanding of this phenomenon.

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