

# 301 Sharing experiences in flux: Using audio diaries to access international scholars' lived experiences during the pandemic

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## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

The unforeseen arrival of the COVID-19 virus has transformed the way people around the world live and work since 2020. In the higher educational settings, it radically shifted how scholars research, teach, learn and socialise. The transition online was deemed the best alternative enabling pursuit of various modes of engagement. Equally, it has served to foster and strengthen new routines, particularly among international scholars who were forced to stay in host countries during the lockdown. This study sought an in-depth understanding of international scholars' nuanced experiences in flux, e.g., successes, challenges and continuous endeavour to 'survive' during the initial phase of lockdown. Using an autoethnographic approach comprising six-week audio diaries and written reflections, this paper aims to discuss the suitability and effectiveness of the diary method to understand international scholars' lived experiences and hearing the less known impact of the pandemic on them within and beyond academia.

## Full paper

### Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak at the end of 2019 disrupted the lives and regular routines of people globally. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide were required to convert academic and social activities to online delivery modes (Sahu, 2020). As a precaution in the UK, social distancing became mandatory, with routine working in offices converted to the 'Work From Home' (WFH) mode ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)) and for which HEI students and staff heavily relied on online spaces. Consequently, the foreseen grave implications of the pandemic and/or lockdown for the physical and mental health and psychological well-being of both researchers and participants took its toll and also caused serious implications for the types of research studies that were deemed 'safe' to undertake. This paper aims to discuss the ways in which diary method, in particular, audio diary, enabled and facilitated research practices, and was a therapeutic, sensitive research tool to researchers'/participants' circumstances and supportive of their psychological well-being.

### Literature Review

The diary method remains underutilised among HE professionals and students, in particular with international cohorts (Byrom et al., 2020; Elliot, 2021). Discussions around in what ways it could be used in flux, such as the pandemic, are still needed. Methodological discussions around the flexibility and sensitivity of the diary method, particularly the audio diary (AD) method, could shed light on further research in HE settings (Dangeni et al., 2021; Hyers, 2018).

This study aims to provide insights, through AD data, into how a group of international scholars made sense of their learning and living experiences abroad, while coping with the multiple threats of COVID-19. While the term 'scholar' refers to students and/or staff in academic contexts, being 'international' highlights living, learning and working outside of one's home country and culture. Very little has been published on how this pandemic has affected international professionals and students in particular (Elliot & Makara, 2021), which means that a more nuanced exploration of their experiences is still warranted, particularly in terms of methodological discussions.

## Methods

This two-stage study adopted an autoethnographic research design within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, which employed 1) ADs during the early phase of the initial UK lockdown in 2020 and 2) a follow-up written retrospective reflection in 2023. Participants were six international scholars: one academic staff member and five international doctoral researchers at a Russell Group University. Participants were asked to describe their experiences during the early period of social confinement, highlighting any crucial incidents they dealt with that week. Based on the recording instructions and using the built-in recording phone app, each participant recorded one ten-minute AD for each of the six consecutive weeks (13th April to 22nd May, 2020). All data were securely stored on the University OneDrive, to which all researchers (who were also participants) had access. This paper focuses on the AD element.

## Findings

1. A safe and therapeutic tool: The AD method is considered a pandemic-friendly research tool that all participants were comfortable with. It was identified suitable for those with different circumstances, e.g., shielding due to a pre-existing medical condition or with caring responsibilities. By maintaining physical distance, the AD method was safe and sensitive to the researcher's/participant's circumstances. The ADs also appeared to serve a therapeutic practice for the participants, providing time and space to disclose their lived experiences. As one participant shared: "Reflecting on my experience last week actually brought more positive feelings. I must say that I find reflection therapeutic".

2. Capable of stimulating reflection: Participants were stimulated to reflect in depth on the lesser-known successes and challenges in the midst of a global pandemic in those AD entries. They shared their vulnerability, and how they stimulated a strong urge to reach out to others. This then created a heightened sense of connectedness and had multiple effects.

## Conclusion

With the multiple challenges that other researchers may face in undertaking small projects like this, we argue that the key considerations, i.e. use of creative, sensitive and therapeutic diary method, in this study, AD method, enabled our group to realise our intention to undertake another collaborative research project in the midst of the pandemic are crucial in the light of these challenging circumstances. Taking them into consideration not only opens possibilities for empirical research, but equally importantly, they contribute to enriching the quality of the data by eliciting in-depth and reflective insights and making research process as friendly as it could possibly be.

## References

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