

# 304 Audio diary: Embracing the complexity of student's experience through 'hearing' their voices

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## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

The burgeoning internationalisation of higher education and the growing number of international students have become visible components and characteristics in research and practice, at the same time, posing certain methodological challenges when approaching, understanding and ultimately supporting international students. Yet, most of the existing literature focuses on using 'traditional' research methods and tends to take a narrow view of their experiences, mostly identifying challenges and barriers, it is necessary and timely to think critically and creatively about the suitable methodological approaches to research and understand international students. This paper reflects on employing the audio diary method to explore international students' complex and dynamic experiences in UK master's programmes. Through detailing the methodological and practical issues, this paper intends to highlight this researcher/researched-friendly method to better inform and enhance future research practices given its flexibility, operability and 'restrained freedom' to generate rich descriptions with international students in HE settings.

## Full paper

### Introduction

The burgeoning internationalisation of higher education (HE) and the growth in international students have become visible components and characteristics in research and practice, and inevitably posing certain methodological challenges for researchers when approaching and investigating international students, i.e., the key players in the HE sphere (Green, 2019). Yet, most of the existing literature focuses on using 'traditional' research methods, e.g., interviews and surveys with a snapshot of their experiences. It is necessary and timely to think critically and creatively about suitable methodological approaches to research and understand diverse student cohorts in HE. Considering their multifaceted experiences in HE, e.g., on campus and out of campus, as well as their regional and global mobility, there is a call for suitable and flexible research tools for accessing and facilitating research practice in HE (Kahu, 2013).

### Literature Review

Diary method, i.e., participants record detailed perceptions and reflections on their experiences, has been adopted by researchers from various disciplines in different forms given its ability to capture detailed accounts of processes, routines and experiences (Cao & Henderson, 2021; Cucu-Oancea, 2013). Rather than writing down participants' reflections via traditional paper-pencil diary methods, an audio diary (hereafter AD) allows participants to use an audio recording facility to record their thoughts following reflection on personal aspects of life and stories (Crozier & Cassell, 2016; Hislop et al., 2005). Literature on the AD method remains scarce (Dangeni et al., 2021), with most of the studies has been found in the field of Medicine and Psychology. ADs are found capable and suitable to capture experiences of participants with their accessibility, flexibility and convenience. The ease of recording counteracts the inconvenience typically posed by diary writing that may easily discourage both researchers and participants (especially those who have difficulties with sitting down and writing) from implementing a diary method.

### The study

The study was a qualitative, multi-method study of Master's programmes at two Scottish universities, and it included perspectives from different stakeholders: (i) document analysis, classroom observation and debriefing with programme organisers; (ii) the monthly ADs of 22 Chinese international students to capture their experiences; (iii) a visually-guided interview with Chinese international students and (iv) semi-structured interviews with staff members. This paper focuses on the 10-month audio diary collection and aims to explore what audio diary method brings to HE research, and in particular, research with international students. The study received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow.

## Findings

1) Motivations and appreciations for AD method: The accessibility and flexibility of AD method stand out in the participants' reflections, particularly in their very first entries about who they are, why they are willing to take part in the study, and what they expect from such research participation. While the participants' familiarity with WeChat is not surprising, the novelty of using this chat app as a data collection tool motivated them to explore this method with the researcher. This ease of sharing everyday experiences out loud was also seen as helpful and valuable regarding their expectations and development as international students in this Master's programme. Additionally, as participants became familiar with this monthly reflection, rather than seeing it as a separate research activity that they were involved in, the enthusiasm to continue recording and sharing reflections was evident in the AD entries.

2) Embracing the complexity of student's experience through 'hearing' their voices: The AD method was found to be appropriate, flexible and valued for its ability to encourage participants to think, talk and reflect on their multidimensional experiences, particularly the strong emotions associated with everyday learning. For many of the participants who, in their initial entries, talked about the challenges they faced in everyday learning, e.g., academic writing and communication skills that were new to them, their voices and laughter indicated that they had managed to improve the skills that they had found very challenging at the beginning of their studies.

## Conclusion

The AD method is considered appropriate for HE context as its flexibility encourages participants to think, talk and reflect on their experiences. The 'revelatory and creative' nature of this research technique (Hyers & Walmer, 2021) makes it suitable and recommended for similar HE settings where the aim is to promote learning, insight and innovation in an increasingly diverse context. Furthermore, AD method enables researchers and participants to overcome barriers with the rigour and trustworthiness of diary studies, while being able to stimulate reflection and deep thought while maintaining social (i.e. physical) distance, and arguably supporting participants' psychological wellbeing as their voices are heard (Elliot et al., 2020).

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