

351 When Life and Learning Are Separated: The Experience of International Students Taking Online Master Courses

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The number of international students who take online degree courses provided by UK Higher Education Institutions is increasing, and universities are currently developing and shaping the related policies and provisions. As students' voices are important for universities to develop their policies and provisions, this paper unpacks the learning experience of 23 international students who took postgraduate taught courses online. It was found that the students tended to separate their learning from their daily life, they did not successfully build global connections, and their learning was restricted by the technologies to a certain extent. It is recommended that universities should better understand the needs of their students, provide opportunities for students to extend their learning to their daily life, create space for students to have deeper communication with each other and build connections beyond their studies, and carefully choose the use of technology to minimise students' difficulties and barriers.

Full paper

As UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are now providing various online degree programme, the number of international students who study with UK universities but stay in their own country is increasing. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023), about 140,000 international students enrolled in UK HEIs were based overseas and took distance, flexible or distributed learning in 2021/22, a rise from 120,000 students in 2018/19. Such phenomenon can be discussed using the concept of Internationalisation at a Distance (IaD), which includes forms of education across borders where students are separated from the educational institutions geographically (Ramanau, 2016; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). As internationalisation is one of the key practices in higher education, IaD, as a category of internationalisation, should be understood and developed further in UK universities.

Universities that offer such online courses believe, or at least promote, that their online courses could provide students with flexible learning opportunities, convenience to combine study with other live commitments, global connections and networks, and access to digital resources (e.g. University of Cambridge, 2023; The University of Manchester, 2023). As online education demonstrated various issues during the COVID-19 pandemic (de Wit & Altbach, 2022), this brings the questions: To what extent do such practices achieve the aims? How can universities further develop their online provisions and better support their online students? To answer these, this paper unpacks the learning experiences of these international students at a distance and informs related provisions and practices.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 online international students who studied at a UK university about their learning experiences in 2022/23. All my participants took Education-related Postgraduate Taught (PGT) courses: 11 of them took full-time online degree courses, 5 of them took part-time online degree courses, and 7 of them took full-time online degree courses for one semester and changed their form of study to in-person. Thematic analysis was used to analyse participants' views.

As these participants stayed at home while taking the online courses, they tended to separate their learning and life. Participants perceived learning through online courses as an extra task that does not involve anyone else around them, and the boundary between their learning and daily life was clear: the learning only happened when they purposefully got online and accessed certain materials. Particularly for the students who took a theory-intensive course, they found it was hard to relate their learning to their other life activities. Participants who experienced both online and onsite learning confirmed that after they changed their learning mode, their learning and life were well integrated, that learning was a natural part of life, rather than something they needed to purposefully do with extra effort.

Although the university and course designers believed that students could gain global connections and networks (e.g. The University of Manchester, 2023), my participants disagreed with this benefit. Instead, they argued that the connections they gained online were different from their other connections, they only talked about their assignments and university-related tasks with each other, and they did not recognise their colleagues in the online courses as part of their social circle. Compared to the connections they had in their previous in-person studies, the participants believed that it would be hard to maintain the connections after their courses were completed.

Another important finding was that, although technology supported students' learning, there might be challenges caused by technologies. For example, students in China had limited or restricted access to Zoom, Google and YouTube, which were heavily used in their courses. Also, for students who took the courses on the other side of the world, the time difference between their country and the UK made it hard for them to get timely support when they needed technological help.

The implications of these findings provide helpful suggestions for supporting rising trends towards internationalisation at a distance. Firstly, universities could design their courses more practically, integrating some tasks that require the students to actively do in their daily life, so that students can expand their learning from only online to 'learning with living'. Secondly, the universities could organise more events, particularly face-to-face events, for the students to connect better with their colleagues, and further achieve the goal of 'gain global connections'. Thirdly, universities could think more about the possible technological challenges the students have and try to avoid using software that is not accessible in certain countries, or less developed and likely to require university's support.

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