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International Student Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Exploring the Impact on Academic, Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment

This briefing presents key findings from a survey of 343 international students who undertook degree programmes at UK universities in the academic year 2020-21.

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Student Wellbeing

The pandemic adversely affected international students' sense of wellbeing and satisfaction with life. Students worried most about the health of loved ones, travel restrictions, their future job prospects and their academic performance. Many students were concerned about their own mental health. Loneliness and anxiety were common experiences during the pandemic and there was a clear association between students' sense of wellbeing and their academic and sociocultural experiences.

Academic and Social Life

International students reported a general lack of opportunities for socialising, difficulties in forming meaningful social ties and a feeling of having missed out on key aspects of the student experience. They rarely had social contact with British students or people in the local community, and many expressed a sense of dissatisfaction with their degree of contact with British people. Academic and sociocultural experiences were inextricably linked. Students who reported greater levels of sociocultural adjustment were more likely to report higher levels of academic adjustment.

Host University Support

Host university support during the pandemic was crucial in promoting international students' overall sense of wellbeing and satisfaction with life, and in supporting their academic adjustment. Particularly effective support measures included the provision of online social activities, guidance on adapting to remote learning, guidance on housing issues, and advice on how to deal with Covid-related discrimination.

Student Voices

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"I was unable to enjoy what university life is because of there was not much activity in the university."

(UG student, Nigeria)

"There is little sense of being a student…I just face to a cold laptop every day and every time. So lonely and so helpless."

(PGT student, China)

"It's already difficult being an international student in the UK, and the pandemic does not make it any easier."

(PGR student, China)

"It's frustrating, but I have managed to do my best, make friends, go out and have fun."

(PGT student, Colombia)

"I feel that due to the impact of the epidemic, the experience of studying abroad this time is not particularly meaningful and valuable."

(PGT student, China)

Background

The UK is among the most popular destination countries for international students globally (OECD, 2021), with 605,130 non-UK students studying at UK universities in 2020-21 (HESA, 2022). It is also among the countries worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2022). The impact of the pandemic on the higher education (HE) sector has been widely documented (e.g., Nicola et al., 2020), but the voices of international students have thus far remained largely absent from the literature (Lipura, 2021). Whilst there is a well-established body of research on the international student experience pre-pandemic (see Schartner and Young, 2020), we know relatively little about what 'being an international student' has been like in the context of a global public health crisis.

A burgeoning number of research studies and academic commentaries suggest that the pandemic has made international students especially vulnerable (Fischer, 2021), and that efforts to curb the spread of the virus have hit this group disproportionally hard. Campus shutdowns, a move to online learning, travel restrictions, and repeated national lockdowns have left international students isolated and with little access to support in situ (Chen et al., 2020; Wilczewski et al., 2021). Despite measures put in place by several national governments to mitigate the financial impact of COVID-19 (European Migration Network, 2020), many international students have been struggling to pay rent and meet their basic needs (Gallagher et al., 2020; Ngyuen and Balakrishnan, 2020), with hundreds turning to food banks (Burns, 2020) and some losing access to housing (Raghuram & Sondi, 2020). Students from Asian backgrounds have been reporting xenophobic discrimination, scapegoating, as well as physical and verbal assaults (Bilecen, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Rzymski & Nowicki, 2020). With mobility and social mixing curtailed, international students have also been denied valuable intercultural experiences inherent to study abroad such as experiencing local life and 'culture' through travel and extra-curricular activities.

Research conducted prior to the pandemic suggests that international students experience a range of complex academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment processes as they transition into the host country environment (see Schartner and Young, 2020; Ward et al., 2001). This can include language and communication issues (Young et al., 2013), lack of social support and difficulties in establishing social ties (Wright & Schartner, 2013; Young et al., 2013);

especially with host nationals (Schartner, 2015); feelings of loneliness and isolation (Sawir et al., 2008), as well as academic difficulties (Young & Schartner, 2014). It is likely that these adjustment challenges are further exacerbated by the 'high stress context' (Chang et al., 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the concerns and experiences of international students studying for degree programmes at UK universities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected their academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment?

3. What was the role of host university support in their academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment?

Adjustment was viewed in this study as three interrelated processes (Figure 1):

- **Academic adjustment**: processes involved in transitioning into a new HE system (e.g., getting used to new learning and teaching practices)

- **Psychological adjustment:** psychological response to a stressful life event (e.g., subjective wellbeing, satisfaction with life)

- **Sociocultural adjustment**: acquisition of cultural knowledge and social skills necessary to function effectively in the host environment

Figure 1 Conceptualisation of International Student Adjustment (Schartner & Young, 2020)
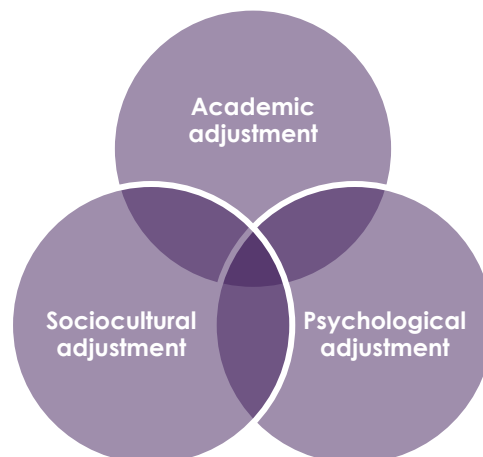
The Survey

An online survey was distributed to international students undertaking degree programmes at universities across the UK in the academic year 2020-21. It was 'live' for one month (mid-April to mid-May 2021) and yielded a total of 343 valid responses. The survey included a range of questions on:

- Subjective wellbeing and satisfaction with life
- Social ties and levels of loneliness
- Host university support offered
- Satisfaction with host university Covid-response
- Academic adjustment
- Sociocultural adjustment

Students were also invited to elaborate on any aspect of their experiences in an open response box (see examples in Student Voices section).

Participants

A majority of survey respondents (68%) identified as female, and most were either 18-24 years (54%) or 25-34 years (37%) of age. A large majority (70%) were physically located in the UK and around one third came from the People's Republic of China (33%). The vast majority (86%) were second language speakers of English, and the sample was linguistically diverse with more than 50 first languages reported by respondents. Respondents came from a range of disciplines across different levels of study, with 41 percent undertaking postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes (e.g., MA, MSc), 27 percent undertaking postgraduate research (PGR) programmes (e.g., PhD, MPhil), and 30 percent undertaking undergraduate (UG) programmes (e.g., BA, BSc)[1]. Living arrangements varied, with 30 percent of participants living with other students, 26 percent living alone, 23 percent living with parents, and 20 percent living with a spouse/partner and/or children. A minority (13%) reported having caring responsibilities for either children or other adults.

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[1] The remaining 2% were undertaking other programmes e.g. foundational English language courses.

Key Findings

Wellbeing and Mental Health

The pandemic had a significant impact on students' overall sense of wellbeing, with 41% of respondents expressing concern about their mental health, and more than half reporting that they had experienced anxiety (57%) and changes to their normal sleep pattern (51%). One in four students reported feeling 'very worried' about the COVID-19 pandemic overall, and a majority (71%) had experienced worries about loved ones. One in four students reported having experienced Covid-related discrimination and nearly a quarter (22%) reported having experienced problems with housing/accommodation during the pandemic. More than half of respondents reported feeling either 'extremely' or 'very' worried about travel restrictions (60%), finding work after graduation (55%) and their academic performance (52%). A large number of students were also concerned about the economic impact of the pandemic, both on them personally (48%) and on a more global level (47%).

There were some noteworthy group differences regarding student adjustment:

- Students who reported experiencing anxiety, Covid-related discrimination or housing problems reported lower academic adjustment than those without these experiences.
- Students who reported experiencing anxiety, changes to their usual sleep patterns or problems with housing reported lower subjective wellbeing and satisfaction with life.

Student Voices
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"The hardest aspect of the pandemic for me was the flight restrictions. I like to travel back home more often and not being able to do that as frequently as I would like to put me under a lot of mental pressure when I needed a break."

(PGR student, Turkey)

"As an international student of Asian descent, I am afraid of prejudice and discrimination I might face due to racism."

(PGR student, USA)

"It was really scary experience and unsettling, being away from home and the feeling that life is about to end made very stressful especially at the beginning of the pandemic."

(PGR student, Saudi Arabia)

"Increasingly becoming unpleasant because I feel less safe and more targeted for racial remarks and inappropriate behaviours in the street."

(UG student, Indonesia)

Student Voices
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"It's been hell. I've been away from my family for longer than ever before in my life."

(UG student, Pakistan)

"It's very difficult to make friends and I often feel lonely. Also, the inability to see my family and boyfriend outside the UK contributes to my poor mental health."

(PGT student, Poland)

"I was promised field trips, work in labs, working with hardware and practical materials and instead I was locked in a room without access to anyone or anything, feeling scared and lonely."

(PGT student, Czech Republic)

"I came to UK because I wanted to improve my English and sadly didn't get much chance to interact with anyone to improve communication skills."

(PGT student, Sri Lanka)

"I feel like I am missing out on having real relationships with other students."

(PGT student, Norway)

Loneliness and Social Ties

More than half of respondents (58%) reported having experienced loneliness during the pandemic. Students residing in their home country at the time of data collection reported lower levels of loneliness compared to peers who were physically located in the UK, possibly due to access to familiar support networks.

Noteworthy associations were found between degree of loneliness and student adjustment. Students reporting greater levels of loneliness reported lower subjective wellbeing and satisfaction with life as well as lower academic and sociocultural adjustment.

Around a third of students (33%) were 'extremely' or 'very' worried about forming social ties with British people and more than half (59%) reported never or rarely having social contact with people in the local community. More than a quarter (27%) reported being 'not at all satisfied' with their degree of social contact with British people.

A sense of loneliness was also evident in the open response comments. Restrictions on social mixing in the UK compounded by separation from loved ones in the countries of origin resulted in a feeling of isolation for some students. Students also reported difficulties in forming meaningful social ties and a feeling of having missed out on key aspects of the student experience.

Host University Support

Students were supported by their host universities in multiple ways, with the most frequently reported support measures being access to online social activities, guidance on adapting to remote learning, information on Covid-related restrictions, and wellbeing support (Table 1).

Table 1 Host university support types available to students

75% Access to online social activities/events
67% Guidance on adapting to remote learning
57% Guidance on Covid-related restrictions
51% Wellbeing support (e.g., counselling)
39% Guidance on accessing medical care
29% Guidance on visa/immigration issues
27% Guidance on housing/accommodation
25% Financial assistance from the university
18% Guidance on dealing with Covid-related discrimination
15% Guidance on reporting Covid-related discrimination

Some types of support had a direct impact on student adjustment:

- Students with access to online social activities, guidance on housing, and guidance on reporting Covid-related discrimination reported higher subjective wellbeing.

- Students who had received guidance on adapting to remote learning and advice on housing reported higher satisfaction with life.

- Students who had received guidance on adapting to remote learning, information on Covid-related restrictions, and advice on housing reported higher academic adjustment.

Student Voices
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"My supervisors have been extremely helpful and accommodating."

(PGR student, Greece)

"The lateral flow tests that are offered for free are really good for students like me who need to access campus regularly, as this gives me peace of mind regarding my health."

(PGR student, Malaysia)

"I am grateful for the consideration of my tutors on the course and the admin staff have been very kind and supportive, making the experience more bearable."

(PGT student, St Vincent and the Grenadines)

"The lecturers are very supportive and always try to find ways to help me deal with my problems, ranging from studies to housing advice."

(PGT student, Vietnam)

"The professors and staff are very approachable when students are in need and they always deal with the problems efficiently."

(PGT student, Taiwan)

Student Voices

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"As an international student, the university should give us some refunds as we barely use the university's facilities."

(PGR student, Thailand)

"I feel scammed because I have to pay for the accommodation and utilities even if I have nothing in the apartment and I have not lived there at all this year."

(UG student, Romania)

"Sometimes wish I had deferred the offer because I feel like missed out on a lot and the experience I've had so far wasn't worth all the money I invested in."

(PGT student, India)

"I feel like to uni did almost nothing and simply leave all students learning online (plus still collecting 100% full tuition fee)."

(PGT student, Hong Kong)

"It sometimes feels like the cost of visas and housing were not worth it to only study online this year."

(PGT student, USA)

By and large, students were satisfied with the support offered to them by their host universities with one third (33%) reporting feeling 'very satisfied'. In the open survey responses students highlighted several positive aspects of their host university's COVID-19 response, including (1) regular and clear communication, often in the form of weekly e-mail updates, (2) introduction of safety measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus, such as access to hand sanitiser and testing facilities, (3) practical support such as grocery vouchers and Christmas food parcels, as well as (4) academic concessions (e.g. assignment extensions). Comments about the availability and approachability of academic and administrative staff were also common.

Although only a minority (13%) of survey respondents reported feeling 'not at all satisfied' with the host university support offered to them, a degree of dissatisfaction was evident in the open responses. This included especially a sense that the international student experience during the pandemic was not value for money.

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For information on forthcoming publications resulting from this project, please contact the lead author: alina.schartner@ncl.ac.uk