

## **Title**

**Student learning during COVID-19: It was not as bad as we feared.**

## **Abstract**

While much is discussed of the challenges that educators and their institutions have been facing during COVID-19, there is little reported about how students have been coping with the challenges. In this short piece, we present preliminary data on university students' perceptions of online learning and teaching during the pandemic. Our findings from a student course satisfaction survey, conducted in two universities during the 2020 summer term (June through August), reveal that students have been more resilient than is often assumed. In light of these findings as well as the reflections of authors in a previous issue of *Distance Education*, we will discuss some important implications for distance education scholarship.

## **Keywords**

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## REFLECTION

### **Student learning during COVID-19: It was not as bad as we feared.**

A previous issue of *Distance Education* (41/4) shed some light on educational challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 crisis (see Naidu, 2020). A subsequent ODLAA-organised webinar (available online at <https://tinyurl.com/y3pe6jqb>) presented an engaging conversation on the implications of COVID-19 for the field of distance education. We, as researchers and practitioners at different universities, have also lived through the crisis. The three reflection articles included in the previous issue (Baggaley, 2020; Bonk, 2020; Veletsianos, 2020) provide us with an excellent overview that helps us to make sense of our lived experiences. Nevertheless, we feel that something important is missing, not only in the authors' accounts but in a broader societal debate about online learning during the pandemic: a positive acknowledgement of student resilience. In order to fully understand where we are heading in the post-pandemic world, it is vital to have a more balanced reflection on student experiences during the pandemic.

### **Prevailing pessimism about student experiences during the pandemic**

In recent media footage, university students have been frequently portrayed as powerless victims who have been deprived access to their learning space, complaining about tuition fees and mental health issues (Packham, 2020); or as reckless troublemakers, throwing drinking parties, breaching physical distancing rules, and spreading the virus (Meredith, 2020). Recent research reports have similarly focused on cognitive, mental, and social damages experienced by university students (Al-Tammemi et al., 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2020). Some have highlight students' negative perception of online learning and their lack of learning motivation and digital competences (Blizak et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). A growing number of articles have also discussed how to prevent cheating behaviors in online assessments, assuming students to be potential cheaters (J. Lee et al., 2020).

Despite a flood of concerns about (often against) the student population, we have not heard much about their actual experiences of learning at a distance during the pandemic. Educational critics have also selectively discussed particular challenges faced by disadvantaged groups of students: those with some form of disability (Paz, 2020) or without necessary access to technology (O'Malley, 2020). We acknowledge that it is an undeniably challenging time and understanding such challenges is undoubtedly important. We do not wish to dismiss such narratives. However, our own observations on how students have been coping with those challenges during the pandemic suggest somewhat different narratives – much more positive and optimistic ones.

### **Preliminary data on student experiences during the pandemic**

Our optimism is mainly established based on our own observation and interaction with students and teachers during the pandemic. It has been strengthened by reflecting on the student satisfaction survey data collected from two universities in which our educational practice is situated—one in China and the other in South Korea. The two countries were respectively the first and second nations to be affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, and accordingly, were the first to institute fully online teaching in Spring 2020. Students at both universities learned online throughout the Spring and Summer terms (early March through mid-June and late June through early August, respectively) without additional interruptions. The survey was conducted during the Summer 2020 term after an ethics approval obtained from Lancaster University. In total, 190 students across different programs responded.

The survey consisted of two parts: (a) five demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, educational level, student status, and study purpose) and (b) a parallel set of 11 questions measuring their perceived satisfaction with multiple aspects of online education (e.g., program organisation, instructional clarity, lecturer support, relationship with classmates, group projects, and learning outcomes). We asked each question twice, for example, “How satisfied were you with your university study overall *before* the COVID-19 pandemic?” and “How satisfied have you been with your university study overall *during* the COVID-19 pandemic?”, to elicit a comparative sense of student satisfaction with online learning against their satisfaction with face-to-face learning. We also asked if they would prefer to take some online courses after the pandemic is over. There were two open questions regarding positive and negative aspects of online learning.

The results suggest that student satisfaction with university study during COVID-19 ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.119$ ) decreased compared to a pre-pandemic baseline in retrospect ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = .844$ ). That is, a difference between student responses to the above questions was statistically significant ( $t = 5.312$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Nevertheless, the satisfaction score (of 3.38) during COVID-19 was much higher than what we had initially expected to receive from such a student evaluation. There was also a correlation between the perceived quality of university study before and during the pandemic (correlation = .359,  $p = .000$ ). Students previously more satisfied with their university, it seems, continued to feel more satisfied regardless of the instructional medium.

Interestingly, among the 11 survey items that we used to measure student satisfaction, student responses to the following two statements did not change significantly:

- "I have had a clear idea of what I was expected to do in my online courses" (*pre*- $M = 3.75$  to *post*- $M = 3.76$ )

- "I have received effective support and guidance from lecturers/professors for my online study" ( $pre-M = 3.89$  to  $post-M = 3.74$ ).

Despite the suddenly imposed physical distance, academics seemed to be successful in terms of communicating with their students and providing adequate support to their students during the pandemic. These findings clearly suggest that academics' genuine efforts to ensure student success in challenging situations have strongly and positively affected students' overall satisfaction with online study. On the other hand, student responses to the two statements below showed a much starker change in their perceived satisfaction:

- "I have developed and maintained good relationships with my classmates" ( $pre-M = 3.95$  to  $post-M = 3.34$ ,  $t = 6.719$ ,  $p = .000$ ).
- "I enjoyed group projects and social learning activities" ( $pre-M = 3.74$  to  $post-M = 3.34$ ,  $t = 4.350$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

While teacher-student interaction was perceived as remaining effective during the period of pandemic teaching, the quality of student-student relationships and interactions seemed to suffer. These results demonstrate that, although there was some level of social interaction encouraged and made available online, the lack of face-to-face contact came to significantly and negatively affect students' sense of community and overall satisfaction. Furthermore, students came to view group work as a significantly less satisfactory component of their online learning. Thus, teachers, despite their success in supporting students' individual learning, could not effectively facilitate students' collaborative learning during the pandemic.

Finally, international students ( $n = 31$ ) tended to be more satisfied with their university study as compared to domestic students ( $n = 159$ ). Although the satisfaction rates of both groups were consistently lower during COVID-19, rates of satisfaction among international students remained relatively high ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.046$ , compared to  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.117$  among domestic students). This result was contrary to our expectations, which were built on the common narratives about difficulties imposed on international students during COVID-19 (e.g., immigration status, travel restrictions, racism, and time zone differences; Beckstein, 2020). Although our data do not reveal to what degree the international students faced those specific challenges, the higher satisfaction among international students demonstrates their ability to cope with new situations.

Furthermore, the average mean of the student response to the statement "After the pandemic is over, if given the option, I would prefer to take some online courses" was 3.23 ( $SD = 1.305$ ). Out of 190 responses, 34 strongly agreed and 57 agreed (38.6%). Such positive responses were far more frequent

than the negative ones (29 strongly disagreed and 23 disagreed—22.0%). The results indicate that more students have seen value in online learning despite the challenging circumstances. Such students are also willing to continue learning online under normal circumstances, which supports the optimism in our narratives.

### **Reflections on student resilience during the pandemic**

Our survey data is limited; thus, we do not seek to generalize the results. It nonetheless provides a good foundation for our proposition. It may be useful to unpack the survey results a little bit more by looking at students' written responses regarding the positive and negative aspects of their learning experiences during COVID-19. This section also brings our own observations on online learning during the pandemic alongside student voices – as they, together, demonstrate that students were more resilient than we had thought.

The suddenness of the online move initially hit students at both universities: many received notification of new teaching arrangements only a week before the term started. Students reported the challenges associated with independent learning, time management, and motivation retention. Students were enrolled in multiple courses and found their workload dramatically increased as each course presented multiple activities to compensate for the absence of face-to-face meetings. Despite those challenges, however, many successfully completed the courses and reported that they learned “new systems,” “a new way of education,” and “time management skills” during the pandemic.

Early in the term, students asked for support regarding technology-related difficulties. However, once they received initial access and adaptation to the online learning environments (i.e., Moodle and Microsoft Teams), technology-related queries rapidly decreased. In fact, a majority of students reported accessibility as a positive aspect of their online learning, with comments such as the following: “Efficiency, able to work at home or anywhere where there is network connection”; “It was very convenient that I could adjust my learning time”; and “I really prefer the online class, I can watch the lecture and videos many times if I want.”

We were also pleasantly surprised by students proactively reaching out to their teachers, using one-on-one communication channels (e.g., the Chat and Video Call on Microsoft Teams). Students seemed to feel more comfortable with initiating quick chats or calls online compared to more traditional forms of communication, such as sending formal emails or visiting professors' office in person. In fact, many academics actually reported that despite the positive feeling of getting to know their students, the increased online contact hours became an additional source of burden and workload (K. Lee, 2020b). Although not all academics made themselves approachable to the same degree, students generally

perceived that they received “clear instruction” and “lecturer support”. There were many appreciative comments such as “[Tutor A] really did well” and “[Tutor B] was very approachable and always available” in the survey data. These caring tutors seemed to strongly influence overall student satisfaction with university study during the pandemic.

One negative aspect of online learning frequently mentioned was a lack of peer-to-peer interaction. Students reported that it was hard to “communicate with other students” and “make new friends”. Fortunately, many of them had already established personal relationships with their peers before the COVID-19 outbreak. Such friendships had, in many cases, already been nurtured using communication tools and social media platforms. Thus, peer-to-peer support of an informal and intimate nature continued at a distance during the initial stages of the pandemic. Some shared feelings such as “we were all in the same boat” with clear exception among first-year students. As one of them vividly put it, “I’m already shy of strangers, but to make matters worse, there is absolutely no time for me to build rapport with my friends.”

Despite the obvious drawback of a lack of face-to-face contact, students (and tutors) did well and completed the term safely. Several students clearly noted that online learning “stopped the spread of the virus.” Even those students who were strongly negative about the future choice of online learning mentioned, “I hate COVID-19, but I can adjust to this situation” and “appreciate the effort of the school to manage with the drastic changes to the system.” These comments suggest that students made an accurate and thoughtful assessment of the risk of face-to-face classes and the effort of their universities during the pandemic. It is, therefore, too simplistic to see students as powerlessly suffering from an educational distance, created by COVID-19. On the contrary, students actively reduced the distance and found their own ways of learning and being connected, creating meaningful learning experiences.

### **Implications for the field of distance education**

The onset of the pandemic has brought dramatic changes to the field of distance education. We faced life-altering crises that necessitated a renewal of our scholarship (Veletsianos, 2020). We, at the same time, achieved a long-awaited change that opened up new possibilities for pedagogical innovation (Bonk, 2020). We also encountered a bitter failure in atheoretical distance teaching (Baggaley, 2020). There is some vital truth in Baggaley’s reflection that it was challenging for everyone. The required changes were massive, and the time permitted was strikingly short. Distance education literature, despite its high relevance to the challenging circumstances, has remained mostly unvisited. Veletsianos (2020) argued that distance education literature may not be accessible to educational practitioners due to the closed nature of scholarly publications.

While we share the bitterness of our unconsulted scholarship and the mandate for open-access publications, we argue that online learning during the pandemic was not as bad as we feared. We need to recognize that students were not just powerless or reckless in these challenging situations, but much more resilient and thoughtful than we had expected. This recognition offers a meaningful opportunity to critically reexamine some of the limited assumptions that underpin our scholarly efforts. Our scholarship has been bifurcated, oscillating between the macro level of institutional issues and the micro level of instructional strategies (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). Throughout those movements, we have positioned ourselves as an *all-too-prominent provider* and students as vulnerable beneficiaries in need of our support (K. Lee, 2020a).

Admittedly, however, there are limits to how much we can institutionalise and instruct student experiences at a distance (K. Lee, 2018a). The entrepreneurial attitudes of students who actively create unique learning experiences by navigating and utilizing their own surroundings and resources are as important as the pre-designed aspect of distance education. We need to embrace more student-centered approaches to better understand our students, particularly those in the present scenario. They may be younger, more technology-savvy, more generous with their time, thirstier for socialization opportunities, and subsequently, more resilient and adventurous in their learning. As hinted in our data, this new generation of distance learners seems to have greater abilities to cope with challenging situations than we would normally expect from adult students with multiple social responsibilities (K. Lee et al., 2019).

Such assertions need to be investigated more thoroughly in subsequent work. Nevertheless, in the meantime, they effectively question a *problem-solver attitude* in our years of scholarly efforts. The field has historically engaged with a range of pedagogical problems associated with distance learning and learners—a lack of learning motivation and engagement and a high rate of dropouts (Sweet, 1986; Yasmin, 2013). We argue that this problem-oriented approach has subsequently led to our current lack of genuine understanding and trust for student resilience and abilities. In fact, the higher satisfaction among international students in our data demonstrates the limitation of the deficit-oriented narratives about international students that exclusively highlight what they may lack (e.g., communication skills, cultural understandings). As argued elsewhere (K. Lee & Bligh, 2019), such problem-solver attitudes toward particular student groups do not help us build an accurate understanding of their experiences. Thus, the field can benefit more from student-centered exploratory research approaches—for example, phenomenological and ethnographical studies on distance learners' lived experiences.

Finally, we need to learn how to develop trusting and respectful working relationships with those who may benefit from our scholarship. Such trusting relationships can be beneficial whether the



practitioners we wish to address are teachers, technologists, or institutional managers. In our view, Veletsianos' (2020) call to be more cautious about technology determinism and technology solutionism among ourselves is particularly relevant to this point. Such a technology-oriented attitude in us is likely to be rejected and resisted by teachers with pressing demands. Beyond that, we would add that setting up a unidirectional relationship between us as expert (knowledge providers) and teachers as novices (knowledge receivers) is not necessarily helpful (K. Lee, 2018b). Our observations clearly demonstrate that many teachers have put an incredible amount of work into effectively communicating with, and supporting, their students during the pandemic. To a surprising degree, students have recognized and positively responded to such efforts of their teachers, which also deserves more appreciation from the field of distance education.

### **A closing remark**

At the time of writing this reflection (2020, November), unfortunately, the pandemic is still ongoing. The United Kingdom, for example, is currently under the second national lockdown (BBC, 2020), and the Korean government has just tightened social distancing measures (McCurry, 2020). Although a sense of fatigue among all involved in online learning and teaching continues to grow, a positive acknowledgment of resilience and exertions of many students and teachers has been consistently absent. Given the ongoing nature of the challenges and the limitations of our data, it may be too hasty to come to any conclusions on the topic. Nevertheless, we follow Bonk's (2020) effort to capture some positive vibe among educators who have enjoyed new pedagogical possibilities opened up by adopting synchronous tools. This is not to suggest that the warnings given by previous authors were unnecessary or too pessimistic; however, we hope our reflections here can add a new, more optimistic perspective to the ongoing conversation in the field so that we can work with our students and teachers with respect, care, and sensitivity.

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