

## Who are the international students in online higher education?



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*In the current higher education context, where there is a growing economic imperative for universities to diversify and globalise their income streams, offering online programmes is increasingly positioned as an effective strategy for recruiting international students. However, supporting online international students studying at a distance is not a simple task for either universities or tutors. The problem, in part, stems from a lack of scholarly understanding of how online international students experience—and engage with—online learning. This presentation addresses that gap in understanding by systematically, yet critically, reviewing relevant narratives from published scholarship about who online international students are (or are perceived to be). A total number of 39 articles, which have i) a focus on higher education; ii) a focus on pedagogical practice (rather than administrative matters, including recruitment); and iii) a focus on international students resident in a country different from the institution offering their online course, were reviewed in this project. We took a grounded theory approach to analysing the selected papers, which were treated as an empirical data set for our project, following the three steps of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The presentation will discuss four types of narrative in the published academic literature, which describes online international students primarily as: i) unspecified others of rapidly increasing numbers; ii) specific others, with particular deficits; iii) specific others, to be drawn on as pedagogical resources; and iv) active participants in international learning communities. Specific examples of each type of narrative will be provided during our presentation and then, we shall discuss both the merits and the drawbacks of each type of narrative for online educators seeking pedagogical suggestions about supporting online international students in their real-life teaching contexts.*

**Keywords:** online international student; online higher education; critical literature review

## Introduction

This article reports the results of a critical literature review of scholarly narratives about international students in online higher education (HE) settings. There has been a growing emphasis on effective internationalisation strategies, which are seen as crucial for the success (or even survival) of HE institutions (Bourn, 2011; Warwick & Moogan, 2013). Offering online programmes has been explored as an innovative mechanism posited to underpin effective internationalisation strategies—enabling international students to earn a foreign degree without leaving their home countries (HM Government, 2013; OLTf, 2011). Yet, despite the proliferation of online programmes, and of international students being recruited to those programmes, little is known about the characteristics of those international students and their experiences of participating (Fenton-O’Creevy & van Mourik, 2016). Therefore, the present article contributes towards developing a more holistic understanding of online international students. The underlying aim of our work was to collect the different academic narratives presented in currently published literature. This paper examines each of those narratives and poses a set of questions in relation to each: “what has been stated and what has not been stated about online international students in the selected literature?” and “to what extent are those statements effectively supported by evidence?”

The review project followed a systematic scoping process when searching for literature and selecting articles for critical review (cf. Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). The evidence base was collected by searching peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters in Scopus, the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature ([www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com)). The search was conducted based on the title, abstract, and keywords of papers, using the following compound search terms:

- “internationalisation” OR “globalisation” OR
- “international student/learner” OR “overseas student/learner” OR  
“Asian/African/American/Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Taiwanese... student/learner”  
**AND**
- “online/distance/virtual/open education/learning/course/program\*/universit\*”

The above search, when conducted in January 2019, returned 418 items. By using several filtering criteria—i) a focus on higher education; ii) a focus on pedagogical practice (rather than administrative matters, including recruitment); and iii) a focus on international students resident in a country different from the institution offering their online course, we finally selected 39 items for inclusion in the critical analysis.

We took a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to analysing the selected papers, which were treated as an empirical data set for our project. The initial coding was done by the first author, following the guidelines suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2015), who propose three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Firstly, each article was broken down into a series of meaning units of analysis (i.e., sentences or paragraphs defining and describing international students in online HE), with those units carefully coded. Our two dimensions for the initial coding schemes consisted of: claims (or statements) about international students in online HE, and the evidence presented to support the claims. The second round of reading (i.e.,

axial coding) was also undertaken by the first author, with the codes are more carefully examined and compared with/against each other at this stage. An attempt was made to identify and categorise claims and evidence that appeared more commonly, or which was ascribed more weight within the source material. Finally, both authors collaboratively conducted the process of selective coding and four—more substantial—themes were generated as a result. Those four themes (i.e., narratives about online international students) will be presented in the following section of this paper, with the exposition highlighting questions like “how are international students conceptualised by the theme?” and “how are characteristics of international students discussed by the theme?”

### ***Narrative 1: Unspecified others with a rapid increase in their numbers (N=27)***

The first type of narrative about online international students is built around the affirmation of an increasing demand for HE access worldwide; the advancement of information and communication technology and increases in its educational use; and the economic and educational necessity of providing online HE to globally dispersed students. When expounding the narrative, most authors proceed by stating one or more of the following claims: i) that a growing need for HE access worldwide prompts a rising demand from international students, with online education an effective solution to meet it; ii) that there is a growing number of international students accessing HE institutions in Western (or English-speaking) countries via the means of online education; and iii) that internationalisation is fundamentally beneficial to both universities and students, including domestic students, living in a global society.

Making such claims does not usually involve providing specific information about who is being referred to as international students. Online international students are often portrayed as if an imaginary group existing somewhere far from the authors’ (or their institutions’) countries—in exotic lands given only generic descriptors: developing countries, non-Western countries, or Asian countries. One thing, however, is made clear about this unspecifiable mass—that they want to access HE provided by universities geographically located in developed countries or Western countries, to which they cannot physically attend. Those exotic others, therefore, have chosen to attend Western universities by registering for online programmes in great numbers, with even more of them expected to do so in the near future.

Such narratives have stark limitations when considered from the perspective of online educators. The narrative carries a strong imperative flavour but is not, most of the time, based on considerations of actual students and specific pedagogical strategies. In essence, the narratives in this category, as found in the 27 papers, are largely rhetorical and frequently invoked within initial statements—used within the texts to emphasise the importance of the authors’ articles and/or the initiatives presented in the papers. The assumptions in those narratives tend to be simply taken-for-granted by the authors, rather than being substantially discussed or articulated. The evidence or data provided to support these narratives typically includes descriptive statistics, such as student numbers and the annual growth in those numbers. In addition, most articles providing such imperative narratives refer to particular national policies and related discussions.

The relation of these narratives to online HE is, perhaps, to exhort educators to accept the urgency of doing “something” better for those unspecified “others”. As online educators, it is likely that such narratives might prompt questions, in turn, about who this unknown mass really

are, how they are to be supported, how online tutors are to support their particular international students, and how those online tutors are supposed to know what has been effective or appropriate. The importance of “having” strategies is emphasised within this narrative, but the strategies themselves are not forthcoming from within it. In other words, this way of talking about online international students does not offer much in the way of meaningful pedagogical suggestions that might be recognised or enacted by those online educators seeking more effective ways to support their students.

### *Narrative 2: Specific others with deficits (N=20)*

The second type of narrative we identify shifts the focus to international students themselves—and immediately serves to highlight how international students may be different from their domestic counterparts. The narratives of this type, furthermore, conceptualise one or more deficits with which those international students are perceived to be associated, particularly those from non-Western countries. Online international students are often stigmatised as “being at risk” of being unsuccessful or unsatisfactory in their learning. A deficit of language proficiency among online international students is the mostly frequently mentioned factor, with that deficiency recognised as likely to cause various challenges and difficulties throughout the learning process (see Cong and Earl, 2011; Kwon et al., 2010). It is also commonly suggested that online international students suffer from another deficiency: one related to the cultural understanding of (or familiarity with) what is expected in Western educational contexts. Specific groups of students are positioned as being passive, conformist, uncritical and silent (see Liu, et al., 2010; Ramanau, 2016).

Overall, what is positive about these deficit narratives is that—by contrast to the imperative narratives discussed above—they highlight actual problems that have been experienced by particular student groups (e.g., Chinese, Russian, Korean, Asian, or African students) in particular online HE settings. Also, many of the relevant articles that do use these narratives as a basis for offering pedagogical solutions to identified problems: often, more or less specific strategies to support those international students with whom their narrative has been concerned. For example, Zhang and Kenny (2010) suggest three ways in which universities can improve the quality of international student learning experiences in their online programmes.

Nevertheless, there are two interrelated assumptions that render these narratives problematic. Firstly, the formulation of deficits is commonly used to imply that there are definite divergences between domestic and international students in online HE; very often, that turns out to be a projected distinction between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ students, a fact that is unproblematised by the authors and which is therefore, in our view, somewhat arbitrary. Secondly, homogenous assumptions about cultural and social background are frequently made on a *national* basis: it is assumed that there are distinctive characteristics shared among students from the same countries. For example, Zhang (2013) examines the influence of Confucian-heritage culture on Chinese learners’ engagement in online discussion in U.S. HE. Based on observing the engagement patterns of 12 students from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the author concludes that

*As a result, when encountering difficulties in learning, the Chinese learners were intimidated to interact with their instructors. Instead, they tended to seek help from*

*peers, particularly those who shared similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds.*  
(p. 238).

Significant questions can be posed in relation to such statements, such as: how do researchers know and determine which students are from “Confucian traditions”; and can it be assumed that all students from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (each with distinctive historical and societal characteristics, and the former a very large-scale geographical construct) are from the same cultural background? To address the same issue from a different angle, we might consider whether we would think it acceptable to assume that all *Western* students had shared attitudes towards their instructors and peers, ones fundamentally different from Chinese students. This issue seems increasingly urgent given the growing recognition of diversity and multiculturalism within societies across much of the globe. In addition, some studies projecting this type of narrative are in danger of disregarding that “learning at a distance” can, by itself, be a challenging task for all—even for domestic students (see Lee, 2017). Thus, the validity of the empirical warrant for these deficit narratives can be critiqued methodologically, on the basis that the difficulties of non-international students in the same settings have typically been obscured.

Thus, these deficit narratives fail to provide online educators with balanced and sophisticated views about what it means to be an online international student, or how tutors might support such students in their courses. At their worst, narratives of this type can serve to reinforce those preconceptions and biases that online tutors might already have regarding different ethnic groups and/or nationalities. The sense of international students having a degree of agency to pursue their own development is underplayed.

### ***Narrative 3: Specific others as pedagogical resources (N=8)***

The third type of narrative highlights the pedagogical value of intercultural exchanges, and of learning about other “cultures” through interacting with international students. Texts incorporating this type of narrative often proceed from favourable notions of international education and internationalised curricula, positioning them as an essential component of contemporary HE provision. Narratives of this type share a sense of urgency about preparing students for participating in a global economy as competent workers; doing so will be achieved, it is suggested, by providing them with a range of educational opportunities to develop global perspectives and knowledge, as well as intercultural communication skills.

One striking finding from our analysis is that the main focus of these narratives is often not on international students but, rather, on their domestic counterparts. Such counterparts often have an identified need to access international learning opportunities without leaving their own institutional context—that is, without directly immersing themselves in international situations. This type of narrative, therefore, positions international students as pedagogical resources whose presence in online HE serves to make learning environments and curricula ‘internationalised’. Thus, international students are seen as having instrumental or economic value for providing internationalised learning:

*Traditionally, international opportunities are undertaken as expensive elective placements, out of the reach of many students. By undertaking this online module, I have been able to develop a strong understanding of the issues and challenges faced*

*by US nurses, an opportunity that would not have otherwise have been open to me. Wider access to international opportunities is important. (Strickland et al., 2013, p. 1164)*

Another striking finding, related to the preceding point, is that these value-oriented narratives most commonly arise in papers describing or evaluating specific educational initiatives: ones that create international connections between two more courses or universities across different countries. One such initiative is described in the following way:

*International partnerships for this module were developed from existing networks. Partners from Western Carolina University (USA) and Lahti University of Applied Sciences (Finland) were involved in negotiating the learning activities to ensure a comparable learning experience for all students [...] Students collaborated through the wiki for an 8 week period during this trimester with a total of 22 students from the three participating institutions: 8 from USA, 7 from UK and 7 from Finland (Strickland, et al., 2013, p. 1161)*

The narratives go on both to celebrate the success of the initiatives they evaluate, and to provide illustrative data indicating positive results about learning satisfaction, behaviours, and outcomes. From an educator vantage point, there are at least two significant shortcomings. Firstly, these narratives are often not focussed on the complexity (or the multi-voiced nature) of the educational phenomena they highlight. Intercultural communication—and specifically *online* intercultural communication—is a challenging and disruptive situation even for experienced researchers with willing international collaborative partners. As one of the present authors has noted elsewhere, providing students with international learning experiences is a challenging task for individual tutors where they cannot leverage considerable social and linguistic capital (Lee, 2018). It is worth emphasising that in the above example, Strickland, et al. (2013) utilised existing international networks to develop their online module. Not all online tutors, of course, would have those “existing” networks.

Secondly, by comparison with the second theme, these resource-oriented narratives do laudably position international students as the equal counterparts of domestic students. Indeed, in some cases, narratives of this type further blur the distinction between “international” and “domestic” students—on the grounds that both groups need to acquire intercultural communication skills, and that both groups are “needed” to create meaningful intercultural communication opportunities. And, it is possible because participating international students are fully capable of engaging in the communicative activities; it is a starkly different assumption from those narratives in the preceding theme. What then is driving that difference? The answer can be found by recalling Strickland, et al.’s (2013) description of their participants as being “8 students from USA, 7 from UK and 7 from Finland”—all Western!

The answer can be found by recalling that international students in the deficit narratives were largely specified as non-Western and non-native speakers. This double standard (Western vs. non-Western international students) may create or reinforce destructive, rather than supportive, attitudes towards international students among online educators and students: attitudes whereby distinct groups of international students are treated differently, according to the instrumental value they bring into online learning settings.

#### *Narrative 4: Active participants in international learning communities (N=6)*

The fourth, final type of narrative suggests more constructive understandings of international students and their experiences: perceiving them as active participants within international learning communities, in which every single participant is unique regardless of their origins or locations. This comprehensive, more inclusive view of international students often proceeds from authors' critical reflection on their *own* interactions with those students. From the vantage point of online educators, we find these emancipatory narratives more helpful and insightful for two key reasons.

The first reason is that the narratives describe international students' online learning experiences, without unnecessarily generalising them (as having fixed characteristics) or being judgemental about what is observed and described. These accounts, thereby, allow for a greater possibility of noticing development or change—in the texts we found, that development most typically relates to students' gradual accommodation to online learning environments or to intercultural communication practices. For example, Chen, Bennett, and Maton (2008) illustrate one moment within an in-depth description wherein two particular Chinese students *themselves* proactively addressed some of the challenges they faced when participating in an online course offered by a university in Australia. The authors subsequently expand that focus, to conceptualise the adaptation processes of international students as they encounter a variety of challenges within an online learning environment. In the study, international students are not simply disadvantaged, needing support from other parties (such as their domestic peers, tutors, and universities); instead, they are active agents in their own learning processes who attempt to develop their own coping strategies and skills.

Secondly, the texts maintain a relatively practical essence to their narratives; typically doing so by emphasising what online educators actually did (rather than merely 'should do') when designing an individual module or working to unfold a set of teaching-learning interactions. Furthermore, the actions described often highlight the integration of pedagogical practices and strategies across courses and students—both international students and their domestic counterparts—rather than focussing on providing remedial support for targeted individuals or groups. The essential difference between the resource-oriented narratives above—in which international students are a *means* to achieve the specific goal of international education—and these more emancipatory narratives is this: here, both international education and students are each perceived as the natural educational background and conditions for online higher education.

For narratives built on such assumptions, there seems no particular need to problematise international students (or, indeed, to celebrate their presence). The narratives in the 6 papers we highlight under this theme are more inclined, instead, towards developing a comprehensive understanding of what is going on in particular modules experiencing growing diversity in their participants. Sometimes that narrative is expressed more specifically, as being about and how to make the international learning community stronger (see Sadykova, 2014). Thus, this type of narrative is emancipatory in its nature but *not only with regard to international students*. In this type of narrative, both tutors and students (including international students themselves) are responsible for supporting international students' experiences and developing supportive learning communities.

## Conclusion

Overall, our review highlights that the fourth type of narrative is of particular merit. That narrative proceeds by perceiving international students as a natural part of online teaching practice—as authentic beings with their own unique strengths and weaknesses, just like any other students in an online course. That supports a holistic view: one that focuses on developing a supportive international learning community in collaboration with our students. Through focusing on our daily interactions with *all* of our online students, rather than isolating the international, we might be able to notice possibilities for taking small yet practical steps towards more inclusive online learning—in ways that take advantage of both contingent possibilities and wider pedagogical strategising.

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