

# The Impacts Of Covid-19 Regulations On The Blended Learning Mode: A Case Study Of International Students Studying A Master's Course At Delta University

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigates the impact of Covid-19 on the blended learning mode during the Covid-19 era on international students studying a postgraduate course at Delta University. Previous studies have not explored in detail the impact of Covid-19 on blended learning on international students during the Covid-19 era when universities in the UK shifted teaching from face-to-face to blended or online learning. This research thus seeks to address this research deficit by employing the zoom interview method to explore the impact of Covid-19 on blended learning on international students who moved to the UK or are studying remotely a postgraduate course at Delta University. The research discovered that online sessions were ineffective during Covid-19 as there were many distractions when students switched off their cameras and microphones. This resulted also in students experiencing challenges engaging with other students online. Because lecturers could not meet students in person due to Covid-19 restrictions, it was difficult*

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*for students to do practical activities in laboratories at school. Additionally, students were dissatisfied with the pre-recorded videos made by lecturers because they are more of a one-way communication. Moreover, international students found an issue with navigating the electronic system. Furthermore, time differences between countries affected students' participation in activities as some international students could not travel to the UK due to Covid-19 travel restrictions and were thus studying remotely. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the lecturers offer the pre-recorded videos as an online live session because students concentrate effectively when lecturers lead the session compared to when students are on their own.*

**Keywords:** *blended learning, Covid-19, face-to-face learning, international, online learning, and postgraduate students.*

## **Introduction**

The number of international students studying in the UK has drastically increased. Wawera and McCamley (2020) note that the United Kingdom is the second most favoured destination for students coming from overseas to study higher education as a result of the internationalization of higher education markets. During the academic year 2004/5, 318 395 undergraduates and postgraduate international students were pursuing a degree in the UK and this number increased to 435 230 in 2011/2

(McDonald, 2014). According to the 2018/2019 statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency HESA (2021), 485 645 undergraduates and postgraduate international students were studying in the UK, an increase from the previous year's statistics of 458 520 international students. Regarding the 2018/2019 proportions of international students studying in the UK, Higher Education Student Statistics (2021) reports that full-time international master's students had the highest ratio of international students which was estimated at 45%.

The internationalization of higher education is advantageous to developing countries because it upgrades the quality of education, boosts the host country's wealth, and promotes global communication and understanding (Chien, 2015). In the context of the UK, international students from across the world are beneficial to UK universities because they contribute one-third of the total revenue for British universities through their fees (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). UKCISA (2012) estimated that international students will boost the British economy by £26 billion by the end of 2025.

Additionally, there are cultural benefits to having international students. For instance, Owens and Loomes (2010) assert that the existence of international students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds in educational institutions enables intercultural interactions and learning as well as the expansion of worldwide networks so crucial for successful engagement in knowledge society.

Various factors have led to an increase in the number of international postgraduate students studying in the UK. The major reason is the lack of opportunities at home which has pressured students to further their education abroad to upgrade their knowledge and skills with the hope of increasing their chances in the labour market (Chien, 2015). Additionally, international students might opt to study a postgraduate course in the UK because the master's programmes tend to last one year, which is shorter compared to other countries where they can take up to 3 years to complete (Bamber, 2014). Moreover, Wawera and McCamley's (2020) study reveals that international students are motivated to pursue postgraduate study in the UK to enhance their English language skills.

Unlike previous years, the experiences of international postgraduate students studying a postgraduate course during the academic year 2020/2021 were severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic restricted some postgraduate students from traveling to the UK for studies because of travel restrictions between their home countries and the UK. Therefore, these students studied remotely. As a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, universities in the UK shifted from full face-to-face teaching to blended or online learning.

This study examines international postgraduate students' experiences of studying at one university, Delta University. The university was cited as Delta University to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. It is important to carry out this study because the findings could inform policies and practices of Delta University and other universities regarding the support to

international students. Delta University employed a blended learning approach where technology was utilized to create inclusive and engaging learning tasks and then used limited face-to-face sessions to expand students' knowledge and understanding.

Additionally, some courses implemented blended learning by utilizing a hybrid approach, where teaching took place simultaneously with certain students present in the physical lecture room and other students joining the teaching session online. This simply means that all international students studying remotely did not attend face-to-face lectures but could attend the lectures online. The types of tasks offered by Delta University comprised on-campus and online live sessions, pre-recorded lectures, online tasks, workshops, and tutorials.

Since previous studies only utilized face-to-face interviews or questionnaires to gather data, this study employed the zoom interview method to collect in-depth data about international students' experiences of blended learning during Covid-19 period and this method was successful. This research thus made a methodological contribution to the field because it has highlighted the usefulness of the zoom interview method to gather in-depth data.

Due to the pandemic and the fact that blended learning is a new learning approach for most students, especially international students who may not be familiar with the UK education system, there is a need to explore the impact of Covid-19 on blended learning on international students studying a postgraduate course. This research thus seeks to answer the question of,

what are the impacts of Covid-19 on the blended learning mode of international students studying a master's course at Delta University.

The paper consists of three parts. Initially, it presents the methodology utilized, followed by descriptions of the impacts of Covid-19 on blended learning mode of international students studying a master's course at Delta University. It concludes with recommendations for enhancing international students' experiences of studying a postgraduate course via blended learning during Covid-19.

## **Methodology**

This research utilized a qualitative approach to collect in-depth data about the impact of Covid-19 on the blended learning mode of international students studying a postgraduate course at Delta University. Additionally, the data collection method was semi-structured one-to-one online (zoom) interviews. The main theme of the interviews was to explore in depth how Covid-19 impacted the international students studying a master's course via blended learning. Qualitative data was collected from the interviews.

This study typically utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) aspect of thematic analysis. Moreover, NVivo 12 Pro software was used to analyse data thematically. There was a mixture of in vivo codes and descriptive coding. Thematic analysis was mainly accomplished in an "inductive data-driven manner" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83), where the themes were developed from the interview data itself. This approach was selected because there is

little research regarding this area of investigation and themes thus emerged from the interview data.

The study collected qualitative evidence from a sample of twenty purposively selected international master's students. The selection criteria were that participants should represent both genders and that some international students should have completed their undergraduate studies in the UK and others in their home countries. Additionally, participants should be studying remotely in their home countries or moved to the UK to study a master's course. Moreover, participants should be from various countries and studying different courses at Delta University.

The table below specifically outlines the characteristics of the participants. Out of the 20 participants, 15 were females and 5 were males. Additionally, 3 participants studied their undergraduate studies in the UK and 17 studied their undergraduate studies outside the UK. Moreover, 4 participants studied remotely while 16 participants moved to the UK to study a postgraduate course at Delta University during Covid-19 era.

**Table 1 – Participants’ profiles**

Participant Pseudonym	Participant’s course of study	Participant’s Country of origin	Moved to the UK	Studyin g remotel y	Gende r	Undergraduat e course	
						In the UK	Outsid e the UK
Angelina	MSc Accounting and Finance	Botswana	√		Female	√	
Tina	MSc Accounting and Finance	Malaysia	√		Female	√	
Tabea	MSc Arts and Political Communication	Malta	√		Female		√
Jasmine	MSc Water Engineering	Malawi	√		Female		√
Patricia	MSc Child Psychological disorders	Egypt		√	Female		√
Peter	MSc Advanced computer science	India	√		Male		√
Caroline	MSc with Computer and IT management	Pakistan	√		Female		√
Amber	MSc Computing	Pakistan	√		Female		√
Roby	MSc Structural Engineering	Indonesia	√		Male		√
Sofia	MSc Financial economics	China	√		Female		√
Clement	MSc Data Science Analysis	India		√	Male		√

Nonvula	MSc Arts and Political communication	Cameroon		√	Female		√
John	MSc Leadership management	Panama, USA	√		Male		√
Kylie	MSc Education	China	√		Female		√
Claudia	MSc Education	China	√		Female		√
Josh	MSc Data Science	Tanzania		√	Male		√
Diana	MSc Radiography	Ghana	√		Female		√
Maria	MSc Education	China	√		Female		√
Selma	MSc Structural Engineering	Uganda	√		Female		√
Eliza	MSc Political communication	Egypt	√		Female	√	

## Findings

After an initial analysis and generation of themes, comments from data were categorized addressing the impacts of Covid-19 on blended learning mode. Two sub-themes emerge: the impacts of Covid-19 on online learning vs face-to-face learning and issues navigating the electronic system. All these two emergent sub-themes inform each other and signify the impacts of Covid-19 on blended learning mode on international students studying a postgraduate course at Delta University.

## The Impacts of Covid-19 On Blended Learning Mode

Table 2 presents the two sub-themes that were discovered during the analysis of data about the impacts of Covid-19 on blended learning mode.

**Table 2: Sub-themes: the impacts of Covid-19 on blended learning mode**

Sub-themes
1. The impacts of Covid-19 on face-to-face learning vs online learning
2. Issues navigating the electronic system

### *The impacts of Covid-19 on face-to-face learning vs online learning*

80% of participants who moved to the UK revealed that they preferred the face-to-face learning mode of blended learning during Covid-19. Maria clarified that:

I preferred face-to-face because I am a chatty person and I struggle to be alone on my computer all day. I don't like it. I need to be with people, I need to see them, I need to talk to them, and I need the spirit of going out of my room and going to school.

Furthermore, Peter highlighted the level of engagement in face-to-face learning, both with fellow students as well as the teaching team that “in a face-to-face class, students will talk actively during discussions and there is a lot of interaction with the teachers.”

Similarly, Angelina remarked that:

[The benefit of face-to-face learning] is the ability to communicate directly because in face-to-face seminars you can ask questions anytime and you can get feedback directly.

Unlike a high level of student engagement in face-to-face learning, Nomvula argued on the contrary that there is low participation in online learning mode because “online seminars are more of a one-side communication where we just sit and listen or watch the lecturers giving a presentation but we do not get to communicate much.”

Selma gave her response regarding the level of engagement in online learning during Covid-19:

The first thing is engagement. In online lectures, students are not that engaged, like students are not talking to each other that much because they are not physically there. You are not even engaging with the lecturers that much.

The ability to actively talk during discussions was stated by participants as one benefit of face-to-face learning during the Covid-19 period. However, Robby shared a concern regarding the difficulties with group discussions in online learning that “there are times when you are in breakout rooms and no one wants to say anything. [Students] will switch off their cameras and microphones and it was hard to do group work.”

Claudia also remarked as follows:

There is little interaction between students and teachers. In most cases, students are reluctant to express their opinions during group discussions. Some students don't share their opinions with others and they don't even open their microphones or chat in the chat bar.

The experience of students who had an opportunity to attend a few face-to-face sessions was not entirely stimulating as students had to abide by Covid-19 regulations. Sofia clearly expressed that "I attended a few like 6 or 7 face-to-face sessions. Given the Covid-19 circumstance, social distancing and covering our faces, it [the face-to-face session] was awkward."

Covid-19 regulation of social distancing was a challenge to students whose subjects require laboratory sessions because they could not attend full face-to-face sessions. Tina sadly stated that:

My course is not really a theory-based course but more of a practical course. Now that we are studying online and we are not required to attend face-to-face classes it is kind of difficult for us to do practical tasks that require us to sit in the laboratory under the guidance of the lecturer to see how we are progressing in executing some of the software because we do not have face-to-face classes.

On the other hand, online learning was stated by participants to be beneficial. Diana happily remarked that:

Online enables me to record videos when the lecturer is presenting. I can record videos and review them later if I don't understand them until I get to know the concept very well. I found online [live] lectures more interesting because you can even engage with your lecturers were [sic] you don't understand and they have been helpful to me.

Participants favoured the asynchronous part of online learning because the learning materials were issued to students before attending the live sessions. Kylie stated explicitly that:

I enjoyed them in the sense that they give the pre-recorded sessions first before the [live, synchronous lecture] and give the readings in advance, so it is always like 3 or 4 days in advance before every class. So, I was able to prepare quite a lot. During the online lectures, the lecturers will discuss what we have studied.

However, Caroline criticized the pre-recorded videos that they were not stimulating because “the lecturers recorded the lectures already and you just watch a video. So, is like YouTube”. Patricia further claimed that “we have to stay home to watch videos on the laptops. We can't see each other physically and some lecturers don't turn their cameras on, so it will just be like a listening practice if we don't see the lecturer's face.”

Asynchronous online learning was favoured by participants during Covid-19 in the sense that it allowed them to study at whatever time and place desired contrary to face-to-face learning. Amber responded that:

I preferred the online part because I can manage my time at my own pace. That means I can choose what time and where or what period to study because all the learning materials and all the pre-recorded lectures are online. That means it is more flexible for me to manage my study.

However, there were major drawbacks claimed by participants regarding distractions in online learning during the Covid-19 period. Patricia asserted that “students open their computers, join the meeting online and do other things like playing games”. Tabea explained this issue in detail:

I have to convince myself that I am in class when actually I am in the comfort of my room. Sometimes it is convenient but there are a lot of distractions especially when I switch off the camera and I am on mute ... I can do anything else and forget that I am in class. So I have to program myself that when I open the zoom link I should set myself that I am in the classroom environment [and]...be attentive to whatever is being taught. So, it was kind of crazy and there were a lot of adjustments to be done.

Additionally, Covid-19 negatively affected students who were studying remotely in their home countries due to the time difference between their home countries and the UK. Clement who studied the first semester remotely stressed that:

It was [my] first time [studying online] and it was harder at first when I was studying from home because I could not participate in [asynchronous] online activities at the same time with my classmates

because of the time difference but when I travelled to [UK] it became easier.

From this quote, it is clear that students who are studying remotely experienced issues engaging in asynchronous class tasks simultaneously with peers who are based in the UK because of time variations between the UK and their home countries. For instance, if students were given a group assignment and some are based in the UK while some are studying remotely could be an issue because if the UK-based students want to meet online in the morning to work on the assignment, it could be very late in the evening in another country and that makes it difficult for students studying remotely to participate at that time. These findings support Liu *et al.*'s (2010) findings whereby it was discovered that time zone variations between countries harmed students' timely participation in the asynchronous discussion forums because this factor was not usually regarded in the course design of most of the courses.

As noted, students diligently participated in discussions and collaborated with fellow students and lecturers when the lessons were offered face-to-face because there is a high level of engagement in face-to-face. These data support Tratnik *et al.*'s (2019) findings whereby students found face-to-face learning rewarding because of higher interactivity between peers as well as arousing and engaging learning tasks.

Furthermore, online live lectures were beneficial to students because they could record the live lectures and study the recorded live videos until they fully comprehend the material. These findings link to Cooner's (2010) research whereby lecturers record live synchronous sessions which students can access after the online session and it was vital as students could stop and rewind the recorded lectures as well as search for words that they do not know. In contrast to Cooner's (2010) study, online live sessions were recorded by students but not lecturers. However, the benefits of the recorded live sessions to students are similar.

In addition to this, students found asynchronous online learning rewarding because they are in control and can manage their learning as the learning materials such as pre-recorded lectures were available on the internet anytime. This evidence supported the findings of Adekola *et al.* (2017) whereby students claimed that asynchronous learning offered them flexibility and control over their education as well as the opportunity for peer learning utilizing forums.

On the contrary, students' ability to switch off their cameras and microphones during online live lectures encouraged them to engage in other activities. As a result, students' learning was distracted because students shifted their concentration from the live lectures to other activities which were not part of the online lectures. Such findings support the research of Maqableh and Alia (2021) whereby it was discovered that students experienced several distractions which hindered their concentration because they could do anything when the live session is delivered online.

Moreover, students are not socially interacting with classmates as well as their lecturers in the online setting because they are not together in person. These findings align with the findings from the previous study of Smyth *et al.* (2012) whereby it was reported that students' chance to socially interconnect with peers is restricted in an online setting leading to students' isolation in an online setting.

### *Issues navigating the electronic system*

Another impact of Covid-19 on blended learning mode was that students experienced issues navigating the electronic system. Jasmine clearly gave her response regarding challenges experienced in navigating the electronic system in this manner:

[Online lectures were] something out of the ordinary. I have never been online setting before. I have always studied face-to-face lectures. For the first time being online, I have to convince myself with the technology used... how I am going to access my lectures, how I going to access the recorded content, and even how I am going to ensure that I am not missing anything that is related to my course in particular. Thus, navigating the electronic system. So, it was kind of crazy.

Josh briefly responded as follows:

I experienced one issue during my presentation. I have to do [sic] a group presentation on some course and there was [an] electronic hitch. So, I have to apologize [sic] to the lecturers. For [sic] those who were

listening... they thought maybe I was nervous or maybe I ran out of the things to say but particularly to me it was an electronic hitch.

Covid-19 regulations forced international students to fully learn online in some courses. This was a challenge because it was students' first experience studying online and there were a lot of adjustments to be made to get the most out of online learning. To be specific, navigating the electronic system resulted in technical difficulties that further led to communication issues. These data support the findings of Smyth *et al.*'s (2012) study whereby it was discovered that students were infuriated by technical failure because it resulted in a communication breakdown.

## **Conclusion**

The research's main findings are discussed in connection with the research question.

*what are the impacts of Covid-19 on the blended learning mode of international students studying a master's course at Delta University?*

The findings of this study had shown that Covid-19 impacted international students studying a postgraduate course via blended learning in various ways at Delta University. During the Covid-19 period, 80% of students preferred the face-to-face learning mode of blended learning. For instance, Eliza bravely claimed that "I think that is how we should be attending classes".

Students believe that face-to-face learning was more convenient and productive because there was a high level of engagement between peers as well as with the lecturers. Thus, students had an opportunity to engage in discussion about the school materials with classmates and get a different perspective. Additionally, face-to-face was efficient because students could question the lecturer or tutors and get direct feedback.

On the other hand, 20 % of students favoured online learning despite them highlighting that there were disadvantages to studying online. Students noted that online learning was beneficial as some students were allowed to record online live sessions which they could revise in the future.

Additionally, online learning was advantageous because of its flexibility. This simply means that students could manage their learning at whatever desired time and place because the learning materials were always available online.

Moreover, students appreciated online learning because some lecturers provide weekly learning materials in advance of the online live sessions. These enabled students to familiarize themselves with the learning materials and to gather questions that they could enquire about during the online live session.

However, certain students revealed that lessons that were fully conducted online because of Covid-19 regulations were ineffective because there were more distractions during online live sessions. Distractions in live sessions

occurred because students were able to switch off their cameras and microphones and engage in other activities which were not part of the lesson.

Furthermore, Covid-19 regulations of social distancing forced the shift from face-to-face classes to online classes. As a result, students whose subjects require practical work were negatively affected because they were not permitted to meet in-person with peers and the lecturers. Students also experienced issues engaging with peers during online live sessions, especially during collaborative activities because students were not willing to participate in discussions, instead, they switched off their cameras and microphones. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with pre-recorded videos because students were passive and communication was one way whereby students would listen to recorded content without them contributing to the discussion or asking questions.

The issue of navigating the electronic system was also identified by participants as one of the Covid-19 challenges of adjusting to the online learning system. Technical failure was experienced during an online presentation and it resulted in a communication breakdown.

Due to the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic was a global issue, some participants did not travel to the UK on time for studies due to the travel restrictions in their home countries, instead, they studied remotely. International students experienced a challenge participating in online activities at the same time as students who moved to the UK because of the time difference between their home countries and the UK. Therefore, it was

an issue for students studying remotely to participate in activities such as group work and discussions which requires them to attend simultaneously with students who are in the UK.

## **Recommendations**

Because there has been limited research regarding the impacts of Covid-19 on international students studying a postgraduate course via blended learning, the findings of this study gave international students a voice to elaborate on their experiences of studying a postgraduate course which was offered through blended learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. International students' voices came at a good time because universities worldwide shifted teaching and learning from full face-to-face to blended learning because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Having said that, international students' recommendations for enhancing their experiences of studying a postgraduate course via blended learning emerged from the interview data. International students propose that the lecturers should alternatively offer the pre-recorded videos as an online live session because students concentrate effectively when lecturers are leading the session compared to when students are on their own.

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