International Students in Online Courses

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INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary institutions are focusing their efforts on recruiting higher numbers of international students. At the same time, they are increasing opportunities for students in general to complete courses online. We find ourselves, therefore, "at the intersection of two trends in postsecondary education" (Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012, p. 1), that is, a growth in online learning (including online courses) and an increase in numbers of postsecondary international students. However, to date, few studies have been conducted specifically on international students learning in online courses (Murphy & Rodríguez Manzanares, 2014; Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012).

The present article focuses on the little research that has so far been conducted on international students in online courses. In order to allow for a focus on recent research, only reports of studies of international students in online courses published after 2000 were included. Some of them (e.g., Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012; Sadykova, 2014; Zhang & Kenny, 2010) related to research that has been reported on elsewhere (see Murphy & Rodríguez Manzanares, 2014; Sadykova, 2013; Zhang, 2007). In terms of the studies' research paradigms, Sadykova's study relied on mixed methods and Liu's (2008) and Sheu's (2005) survey research fit within a quantitative research paradigm, while the other studies included in this article fit within a qualitative research paradigm.

In the studies that were selected for inclusion, the international students which were the focus of research were taking or had completed online courses or programs. Not all of the studies' participants were completing their programs entirely online, as there were participants in the studies who were enrolled in on-campus courses at least for part of their studies (whether taking them concurrently with online courses or not).

Researchers have different perceptions of the meaning of some terms used to describe different learning environments, such as is the case with "online learning," "distance learning," and "e-Learning" (see Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2010). For the purpose of this article, the focus was on online courses and an online course was defined as one being fully delivered using online technologies, without any face-to-face components being part of its design. For this reason, only studies in which international students completed courses designed to be completed entirely online were considered. Excluded were studies (e.g., Chen, Bennett, & Maton, 2008; Wang, 2006) that referred to most of the instruction (such as a percentage of it) being online.

The term "international student" is used interchangeably with "foreign student" (Abdullah, Aziz, & Ibrahim, 2014) in some contexts, but, in other contexts, it is used to refer to a subset of international students, in the sense that foreign students would comprise those "who are not citizens of the countr[y in which they are learning], but may be long-term residents or were born in that country" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014, p. 352). To avoid terminological confusion, for the purpose of this article only the term "international students" is used. They are defined as those "enrolled in a university in a foreign country, where they do not have permanent residence" (Mehtap-Smadi & Hashemipour, 2011, p. 418). In order to ensure that the focus of the studies included in the present article was on students who would in fact have been considered "international students" in

their institutions, only studies indicating in their title that research was conducted in relation to "international students," using that specific term, were selected for inclusion.

BACKGROUND

The increasing numbers of postsecondary international students in different countries attest to the efforts that postsecondary institutions are currently placing on recruiting more international students. For example, in the United States, the number of international students grew 72% between 2000 and 2014 (Institute of International Education, 2014) and, in Canada, international student enrollment (including students both at the postsecondary and other levels of education) grew 84% between 2003 and 2013 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015). In the period from 2000 to 2012, as reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2014), "the number of foreign tertiary students enrolled worldwide more than doubled, with an average annual growth rate of almost 7%" (p. 343). As indicated in a British Council report, demand for international student places in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States alone is predicted to increase from one million places to approximately 2.6 million places by 2020 (Bohm et al., 2004).

Alongside the trend of increasing international student enrollments at the postsecondary level, another current trend in postsecondary settings relates to increasing online course offerings (Murphy & Rodríguez Manzanares, 2014; Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012). For example, the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research published results of a survey in 2014 (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014) which showed that almost half of surveyed students (47% exactly) reported having taken a completely online course the previous year. Data were collected from more than 75,000 students in 213 institutions in the United States and 15 other countries.

The present article aims to contribute to understanding postsecondary international students' learning in online courses by focusing on the little research that has so far been conducted on international students in that specific learning setting. The next section reviews some of the findings of the studies of international students in online courses that were selected for inclusion in the article, following the selection criteria outlined in the Introduction above.

STUDIES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN ONLINE COURSES

Students' Reasons for Learning Online

Some of the insights gained from the studies of international students in online courses related to students' reasons for taking courses in that format. This information was sometimes elicited directly from students, for example by including survey items (e.g., Liu, 2008; Sheu, 2005) or interview questions (e.g., Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012) in the studies on why they enrolled in online courses.

The main reason reported for taking courses online was time flexibility (e.g., Liu, 2008; Sheu, 2005; Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012) and also place flexibility in addition to time flexibility (e.g., Sheu, 2005; Rodríguez Manzanares, 2012). In Liu's survey research, international students indicated that they enrolled in online courses, among other reasons, because of their advisor's recommendation and the opportunity to work at one's own pace (as indicated by 63% and 45.7% of the surveyed students, respectively). In terms of other findings, more than half of the students disagreed that they had enrolled in an online course because it was less expensive than a face-to-face course. Almost half disagreed that they had enrolled in online courses because they could provide the same quality as face-to-face ones.

In Tan et al.'s (2010) study, which relied on in-depth interviews with graduate international

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