

Chapter 4

Distance Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Delivery of UK Top-Up Degree Programs in Hong Kong From the Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Since December of 2019, every human being is exploring solutions to adapt to the “new normal” in all aspects due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is no exception for educators. Apart from the obstacles faced by teachers in the switching of teaching pedagogies from a physical classroom setting to different virtual platforms, there are also foreseeable challenges faced by students which might have been neglected by most studies. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with students of UK top-up degree programmes studying in Hong Kong to explore insights of the challenges and barriers of online distance education from the students' perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

2020 is an extraordinary year in the human history that everyone in every industry are being significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and were forced to adapt to the “new normal”. For professionals in the education field, academic year 2020/2021 is already the second academic year for institutions to seek alternative approaches to deliver teaching and learning opportunities to their fellow students. A

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number of studies have already been published on the impact of COVID-19, most studies investigate the response of intuitions and the opportunities and challenges faced by educators (Mseleku, 2020).

To investigate the different barriers affected by e-learning, Assareh and Bidokht (2011) suggested researchers to explore on four different aspects: teachers, curriculum, institutions and learners, but a lot of the studies are relatively anecdotal from the viewpoint of the service providers (Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2004) and might have neglected the importance of the end users, the students (Mseleku, 2020). Most institutions are not prepared to deal with any possibly difficulties arising due to e-learning while most educators have limited or no experience in e-learning (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). When teachers are struggling with the redesign of teaching materials and alternative methods of delivery through the Internet, students on the other hand, are also seriously affected by the sudden change of learning mode and were forced to passively accept all the arrangements solely decided by their institutions and teachers. To enhance the teaching and learning environment for the end-users, students' point of view should be included in the design of effective e-learning curriculum. It is crucial to explore students' voices to examine the factors that are hindering them from achieving the learning outcomes (Mailizar et al., 2020).

Amongst the higher education institutions worldwide, most programmes consist of overseas students and there is a growing popularity of local institutions offering top-up degree programmes with overseas partner institutions in recent decades. Apart from the obstacles in the switching of learning knowledge and skills from a physical classroom to a virtual platform, different students with different backgrounds, located in different parts of the world, might have encountered different difficulties (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). On top of the difficulties in adapting to online education, the foreseeable cultural differences between teachers and students may also add on to the existing challenges which might have been neglected by most studies. There is a need to explore the influences of differences cultural-specific factors on students in different socio-cultural contexts (Amiryousefi & Geld, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 68 University of Northumbria (UNN) and Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) undergraduate students studying at the School for Higher and Professional Education (SHAPE) in Hong Kong. The original design of the programs requires lecturers from United Kingdom to fly over to Hong Kong and deliver lectures in a face-to-face mode. But due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, lecturers were not able to fly over due to the travel bans and quarantine restrictions, modules were switched to be delivered through MS Teams, Moodle and Blackboard instead.

The study aimed to explore the challenges and obstacles of online distance education from the students' perspectives. The findings of this paper may provide valuable insights to the significant but neglected group of overseas students in higher education programs, strategies in the design of online distance modules will also be discussed.

SCHOOL FOR HIGHER AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION (SHAPE)

School for Higher and Professional Education (SHAPE) in Hong Kong provides collaborative top-up degree programmes. All programmes are collaborated with well-known international universities. At SHAPE, students directly transit from higher diploma to the final year of degree programmes, which are career-oriented across a variety of professional areas, including business, childcare, and community services, design, engineering, health and life sciences, hospitality, tourism, and leisure, and information technology. They study locally but awarded a degree by the universities globally such as in the United

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