

No Man is an Island: International PhD students' engagement during the pandemic

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The unforeseen global pandemic since 2020 radically shifted the approaches to learning, interacting and engaging in the HE settings. Many universities and educational settings are, seemingly, 'getting back to normal' with the gradual returns of in-person teaching and learning. However, how international PhD students engaged with their research and life during this extraordinary time is arguably still crucial since it may provide meaningful insights and implications for similar challenging situations. Based on our personal experiences of completing PhD studies in the UK during the pandemic, this co-written student voice piece intends to share our first-hand experiences on student engagement during the several lockdowns (from early March 2020 to June 2021). This paper firstly demonstrates the multifaceted challenges we confronted in this difficult situation, which strongly impacted our study and life, and forced us to take necessary coping strategies. Through capturing several dimensions of engagement, e.g., interactions, community building, partnership and peer support, we then share how we strived to proactively engage with our academic and social life despite the physical restraints posed by the lockdown. Finally, we reflect on some beneficial experiences that different cohorts (i.e., international students, supervisors and supporting staff) in the HE context may consider for facilitating student engagement in similar challenging circumstances

Multifaceted impact

We are two international Chinese PhD researchers at the School of Education (SoE), University of Glasgow, completing our PhD studies during the pandemic. Compared with colleagues whose projects were heavily affected by the pandemic, e.g., paused or deferred data collection, we were 'lucky' to have already collected data before the pandemic and managed to focus on thesis writing up in our studio rooms in student accommodation. However, the anxieties triggered by the lockdown and the uncertain

situation had a massive impact on our everyday life. One of us is from Wuhan, where the first outbreak was recorded, and was constantly concerned about families and friends back home; the other left China in early February 2020 after visiting family, and later quickly stopped her academic visit in Canada in mid-March 2020 and decided to fly back to the UK to avoid getting stuck in a foreign country alone.

For someone who used to work in the lab, office and library, such a shift to work from home is the most challenging transition throughout the PhD trajectory. Though we thought we were capable of understanding the independent nature of this research journey and the unavoidable loneliness from the outset as PhD students in Social Sciences that requires more independent and desk-based work (compared with the students in Science whose work is mostly lab-based), what we encountered at the beginning of the pandemic still posed considerable threats to our progress and wellbeing. For instance, the insufficient learning and research equipment and resources, (e.g., books, desktops and comfortable chairs) that are essential for our PhD completion were the primary challenges we needed to cope with. For example, we both encountered the challenges in accessing books given that there were very limited e-books available on our library website at the early stage of the lockdown, and the inter-library service was also shut down at that time.

We also tried to keep our thesis writing daily schedule “normal” and regular, however, there were still many factors beyond our control. The term ‘social distancing’ could be found everywhere, guiding people to take action to fight against the COVID-19 in the UK. However, we found the social distancing moving beyond the intention of physical distancing: we were becoming more reluctant to contact people during the lockdowns (especially the early stage of it – early 2020) since we were stuck in a small student accommodation alone. One of the authors only worked in her office or library before the lockdown given her ‘philosophy’ of keeping a work-life balance was never to bring work home. Demotivation, sadness and lack of concentration on learning and research brought multifaceted challenges that forced us to take necessary reactions to sustain and develop our engagement at this extraordinary time. Even though one of us prefers and used to work at home (i.e. in her student studio room), this forced transition and

isolation from colleagues and friends inside and outside the university and research group led to many negative emotions permeating our daily lives.

Additionally, interactions with family and friends, colleagues and supervisors were more crucial than ever and were essential to break the isolation. Aiming to develop coping strategies for self-help and peer support, we engaged with a variety of interactional opportunities both inside and outside our university. The following section will exemplify three key themes that embraced our engagement to maintain our mental health and psychological wellbeing while also improving our research progress: community-building events in our School, online group learning with peers in similar research domains, and finally the peer support between us.

Our multileveled engagement in action

One of the great opportunities that our School provided was a series of community-building events led by the PGR Community Building Team. There were various activities for SoE PGRs and staff such as PhD-led seminars, 'Write On' sessions, 'Walk and Talk', international meals and cultural evenings pre-COVID. The team continued some of these effective ways wherever possible to support our academic progress, social interactions, and psychological wellbeing when learning and teaching were moved online.

For example, we were encouraged by the PGR Community Building Team (especially our shared supervisor who was part of the team) to attend several PhD-led seminars. We met up with peers and staff members, and gained new insights into what is going on regarding research progress, topics and methods among PGR researchers, which motivated us to reflect and carry on our work. We were also invited to share research skills in some of these activities to connect with peers and disseminate our research. For example, we benefited from the data management tool NVivo for literature review and data analysis for our PhD projects, then, we shared how to use this tool for research purposes with hands-on tasks via Zoom. We also led sessions where we shared our research expertise, e.g., on researcher development and research technique. Such a process encompassed communicating with the community building

team, collaborating with peers and discussing our academic progress and daily life, which greatly supported our studies and overall wellbeing.

Another significant opportunity we had was from our monthly online group learning with peers in a similar research domain. Our shared supervisor initiated it and one of her colleagues and most of their PhD supervisees answered this call. Before the pandemic, we used to meet monthly in person as a group, sharing recent news or thoughts (either academic or personal), discussing research progress, challenges or helpful tips, and also learning specific academic writing skills (e.g., signposting, critical literature review, etc.). When this global health crisis came, we decided to keep this tradition and move it online. Members in our group included those who were 'stuck' alone in student accommodation (like us) or with partner/spouse at home or bearing childcare responsibilities. We might have different roles or faced different situations; one shared desire we had was to 'meet' those familiar faces more regularly, be kept updated about how people are doing, and most importantly, keep this familiar, though somewhat new, normalcy in learning. We benefitted from this group learning in terms of making academic progress and maintaining a sense of community in which we were connected with each other.

However, regardless of how active we were in either the school-level community or the smaller groups, given our various roles and situations, a notable challenge we realised was the difficulty to negotiate each participant's schedule. Fortnightly or monthly meetups were significant but, unfortunately, not enough in such a worldwide challenge, especially for those who, like us, were stuck in student accommodation alone and needed to be energetic, motivated and focussed to complete our theses. To better cope with this extraordinary challenge, our agency (i.e. how we make the best the resources available for our PhD completion) and self-regulation (i.e., how we plan and monitor our progress) played pivotal roles. The two of us proactively decided to have a more regular paired peer support to facilitate our thesis completions. For instance, we had daily 'come-and-go, shut-up-and-write' zoom meetings (i.e., free to come and leave at any time of the day) to encourage each other to concentrate on thesis writing. We also discussed each other's work (e.g., how to structure a particular chapter or the clarity of the discussion section) with regular check-ins on our mood states toward the pandemic and life. This paired online peer-support opportunity

greatly facilitated us to re-build our new routines at this difficult time. It also provided a regular, meaningful and effective pathway for us to continue our learning, engagement, and development as international PhD students and as independent researchers.

What (international) PhDs, supervisors and universities can get from this reflection?

We hope to share our stories and voices with PhD students (especially international PhD students), supervisors, and universities, as we believe this reflection has meaningful implications for them. For PhD students, what we need to do is to make the most of these crucial capabilities and skills for turning dilemmas into a new level or dimension of engagement (i.e., seek learning, engagement, and development opportunities proactively). In return, we will also gain more vital skills for further development in our PhD journeys and future careers. For supervisors and universities, guidance and awareness-raising of different pathways and dimensions of engagement for students (e.g., online community-building events and opportunities, peer support initiatives, tips and tools for PhD writing and completion, etc.) are pivotal in supporting their final success in the PhD journeys and even future careers. Bearing these in mind, better support could be provided for PhD students to help their development, maximise their engagement, and cope with or adjust to various situations. It will also sustain PhD students' professional development, and at the same time, facilitate their mental health and psychological wellbeing in challenging circumstances.

Similar to many challenges, this global crisis also brought important learning and development opportunities to us. All unanticipated physical, psychological, academic, personal, and social challenges, serendipitously, pushed us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of student engagement. It is no longer static, onefold, or even passive, but more multifaceted, dynamic, and proactive. In challenging circumstances, in particular, the investment we put into learning includes effort into academic attention and curiosity, personal interest and passion, social connections and support, and psychological wellbeing rather than merely academic input. It would

also require us to be proactive to sustain and enhance learning, development, and engagement opportunities according to the various and changeable situations. These unanticipated fresher insights into student engagement and acquired engagement skills are meaningful in supporting us to further develop into independent researchers/academics. We believe what we gained, though reluctantly and forcedly in the beginning, from this difficult situation will be helpful for our future careers and life, and we hope our shared stories will potentially inspire our peer (international) PhD students and other relevant stakeholders (i.e. supervisors, universities).

A PhD journey has never been an easy one, let alone the even more challenging international one which crosses geographic and temporal distances and aggravates complex personal, social, and psychological challenges in adjustment. However, it is crucial to understand the new dimension and insights into student engagement. PhD students are thus more likely to stand a chance to make more solid academic progress, form a stronger connection with people, institutions, and the society around them, and also have a more positive social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing to achieve the eventual growth.

Blogs posts about our various experiences during the pandemic:

- [Showcasing the Hidden Curriculum via PhD-led research sharing activities](#)
- [Considerations for designing pandemic-friendly research](#)
- [Peer-mentoring: Becoming independent from teaching collaboratively](#)