

International Postgraduate Students' Lived Experiences of Academic, Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Alina Schartner^{a*} and Yao Wang^a

^a*Newcastle University, UK*

*Corresponding author (Alina Schartner): Email: alina.schartner@ncl.ac.uk

Address: School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom

Abstract

This in-depth qualitative study investigated how international students experienced academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst a burgeoning body of research examines the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on international students, few studies foreground students' lived experiences. This study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with 30 international postgraduate students who undertook degree programs at British universities in 20-21. A thematic analysis revealed that COVID-19-related stressors negatively impacted students' psychological adjustment and led to a sense of isolation and detachment from the host environment, with students reporting difficulties in instigating and maintaining social ties. Experiences of academic adjustment were nuanced, with findings suggesting that the pandemic acted as either a barrier or facilitator of adjustment, depending on the students' personal circumstances. With global epidemics increasingly likely, the findings from this study can support higher education institutions in developing institutional policies on how to support their international students in times of global health crises.

Keywords: international students, adjustment, pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

Despite the “seismic impact” (Fischer, 2021, p. i) of the pandemic on international higher education (HE), there are currently more than 6 million internationally mobile students globally, with the most popular destination countries being the United States (US), Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Germany (OECD, 2021). An internationally mobile student is “an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin.” (OECD, 2017, p. 38).

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of adjustment among a sample of international postgraduate students, who undertook degree programs at UK universities in the academic year 2020-21. The impact of the COVID-19

pandemic on the HE sector has been widely documented (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Marinoni et al. 2020; Tilak & Kumar, 2022), but the lived experiences of international students remain relatively underexplored in the academic literature (Mbous et al., 2022).

As researchers have begun to assess the impact of COVID-19 on internationally mobile groups, it is becoming increasingly clear that international students were largely overlooked in the global response to the pandemic (Lai et al., 2020), and that efforts to curb the spread of the virus have hit this group disproportionately hard (Hari et al., 2021). The international student experience is often characterized by precarity, in legal, economic, and personal terms (Gilmartin et al., 2020), and the pandemic is likely to have exacerbated this (Mbous et al., 2022). Studies suggest that international students shared many pandemic-related challenges with their domestic peers, such as the sudden transition to online learning, delayed academic progress, social isolation, and uncertainty about future careers (Wang et al., 2020). However, certain stressors were unique to international students' temporary status as transient migrants (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021), including immigration issues as a result of border closures and travel restrictions, and concerns about the wellbeing and safety of loved ones abroad (Gomes et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2022).

When campuses shut down and teaching was moved online, many international students were left isolated with little access to support in situ (Chen et al., 2020), and in some cases unable to go home (Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2021). As part-time jobs were lost overnight, many international students faced financial hardship (Gallagher et al., 2020) and turned to food banks for help (Burns, 2020), with many also experiencing housing insecurity (Morris et al., 2020).

Students from Asian countries, or of Asian heritage, faced additional difficulties with studies suggesting that public hostility, scapegoating, and racial abuse were exacerbated by the pandemic (Chen et al., 2020; Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020), reflecting a resurgence in Sinophobia in “western” countries more generally (Gao, 2022). Research on Chinese international students found evidence for racial discrimination, stereotyping, and verbal assaults (Nam et al., 2021), as well as microaggressions and stigmatization associated with mask wearing (Ma & Zhan, 2022).

In response, this study seeks to explore how international students made sense of their adjustment experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are international students' lived experiences of academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic? and (2) What challenges and opportunities do they perceive? In order to situate this study in the broader international student literature, a brief overview of relevant research on international student adjustment during COVID-19 is provided in the following section.

Literature Review

Whilst international student adjustment is a fairly well-established research area (Schartner & Young, 2020), relatively little is known about how international students experience adjustment amidst a global public health crisis. A study sojourn abroad is typically conceptualized as a stressful life event (Ward et al. 2001), and the “uncertainty-inducing” (Thorson et al., 2022, p. 667) nature of the coronavirus pandemic has likely intensified this.

An explicit focus on adjustment is largely absent among studies examining the impact of COVID-19 on international students (one of the few studies with a focus on adjustment is Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022), but there is a growing body of research documenting the challenges this group has faced. Many of these studies emanate from the Australian and North American contexts (Morris et al., 2020; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2021), and there is limited published literature on the experiences of international students in the UK. The small existing body of work focuses primarily on the psychological impact of the pandemic (Al-Oraibi et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2020), including mask wearing practices and associated stress (Lai et al., 2021), as well as learning experiences (Khan, 2021), and decision-making around whether to remain or leave the UK (Hu et al., 2022). Although the UK is among the European countries worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2022), a recent report by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) suggests that a majority of international students continue to see the UK as a positive place to study (UCAS, 2021). This is reflected in

recent statistics which show that 605,130 international students chose to study at UK universities in 2020-21 (HESA, 2022).

Beyond the UK context, a number of studies have examined the psychological impact of the pandemic on international students (Lai et al., 2020). Although COVID-19 had a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of university students generally (Zhai & Du, 2020), this was likely heightened for international students who typically have their core support network in their countries of origin (Koo & Nyunt, 2022). Studies across different host countries have reported increased levels of stress and anxiety among international students, and commonly identified pandemic-related stressors include academic challenges such as compromised academic progress, personal challenges linked to social isolation and health concerns, and immigration-related uncertainties (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022).

Comparatively, few studies have been published on the impact of the pandemic on international students' social experiences, and the evidence remains mixed. Some studies suggest that social isolation among international students was exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions (Malet Calvo et al., 2022). In other studies, international students reported that the pandemic brought them closer to friends and family (Thorson et al., 2022). A small number of studies have examined the challenges of remote learning (Sahu, 2020), how host countries' COVID-19 responses have mediated international students' perceptions and experiences (Qi & Ma, 2021), international students' multilingual communication experiences and perceptions of crisis communication (Li et al., 2020), and how the pandemic has impacted student destination choices (Yu, 2021).

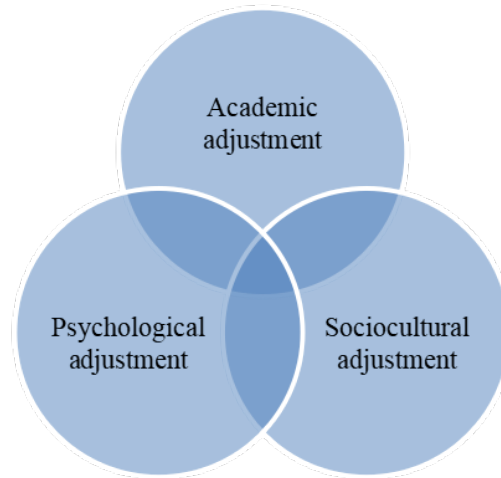
Theoretical Framework

We employed a conceptualization of *adjustment* as a multidimensional, holistic, and complex phenomenon that involves interrelated academic, psychological, and sociocultural processes, depicted here as a Venn diagram (Figure 1). It posits that *adjustment* is a process that can be most usefully explored through qualitative methods of inquiry whereas *adaptation*, a closely related term, can be viewed as an outcome of adjustment that is best captured using measurable indices (Schartner & Young, 2020). The model distinguishes between *psychological* and *sociocultural* adjustment, a common distinction in the sojourner adjustment literature (Ward et al., 2001), where psychological adjustment is understood as affective responses to the experience of transition, and sociocultural adjustment is conceptualized as behavioural factors associated with effective functioning in the host environment. Academic adjustment is defined as “adjustment to the specific demands of academic study” (Schartner & Young, 2016, p. 374). This model allowed us to explore adjustment holistically, recognizing the interconnectedness of the three domains (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). Many previous studies are conceptually limited in either not recognizing the interrelated nature of different adjustment domains or investigating different adjustment domains separately (Zhou & Todman, 2009).

There were two broader theoretical underpinnings for this conceptualization of adjustment. Firstly, stress and coping approaches that highlight the cognitive appraisal of stressful life transitions and coping strategies employed to deal with these (Ward et al., 2001). Secondly, culture-learning perspectives that emphasise the importance of learning salient characteristics of the new environment (Furnham & Bochner 1982, 1986). Stress and coping approaches are typically used by researchers to study psychological adjustment, while culture-learning approaches are more commonly employed to investigate academic and sociocultural adjustment (Schartner & Young, 2020). We acknowledge that *adjustment* has been a much-debated notion in the HE literature for some time (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Marginson, 2012), and are mindful not to perpetuate a deficit view of international students as “passive” (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). We view this group as active agents that respond to their mobility experiences in rational and intentional ways (Tran & Vu, 2018). Nonetheless, we feel that adjustment can offer a useful conceptual lens for exploring international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schartner, 2023).

Figure 1

Conceptualization of Adjustment



Methodology

The interview data reported here were collected as part of a larger mixed-methods project exploring the experiences of international students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to a quantitative self-report questionnaire aimed at elucidating the impact of COVID-19 stressors on adaptation outcomes (see Schartner, 2023), the project had a strong focus on international students' lived experiences of adjustment. This qualitative strand of the project was underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology foregrounding participant meaning and understanding rather than objective reality (Capper, 2018). This is rooted in the belief that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals interacting with the world” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 3).

Individual lived experiences are best captured using semi-structured interviews (Galletta, 2013), thus 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with international students who undertook postgraduate degree programs (at master's or doctoral level) at UK universities in the academic year 2020-21. The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Board and informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study, a commonly used qualitative method aimed at collecting open-ended data about participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, using a flexible interview protocol (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interviews were conducted online on Zoom in May and June 2021 by either the first or the second author. Mindful of implications of potential underlying power dynamics in qualitative interviewing (Edwards & Holland, 2013), the researchers took care that the interviewer had no preexisting relationship with the interviewees.

Most interviews were conducted by the second author, a bilingual English-Mandarin speaking international doctoral student. The second author's positionality as an international student and cultural 'insider' (Ganga & Scott, 2006) was harnessed as a strength that could be utilized to establish rapport with the research participants. Twenty-seven interviews were conducted in English and three in Mandarin Chinese. In line with a researching multilingually approach (Holmes et al., 2013), the Mandarin transcripts were analysed in the original language in order not to lose subtle and nuanced meanings. The interviews varied in length with the shortest lasting 20 minutes and the longest lasting 110 minutes. They were audio

recorded (with participant permission), transcribed verbatim using Zoom transcription¹, and fully anonymized. Each interviewee was offered the opportunity to review their transcript but most declined and were happy for their verbatim accounts to be used. In response to calls for alternatives to full transcript member-checking (Harvey, 2014), we employed a dialogic approach where the two authors discussed each interview transcript and compared key themes against our theoretical framework (Figure 1). The interview protocol included questions about participant demographics, their academic, psychological, and sociocultural experiences, as well as questions about social ties and support.

Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) through an online survey, part of the larger project, where respondents could express an interest in a follow-up interview, and (2) through a separate call for participation that was distributed via the researchers' professional networks. The interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 51, were predominantly

Table 1
Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Gender	Age	Degree
1	Ying	China	F	23	MA
2	Mei	China	F	22	MA
3	Laura	USA	F	41	MA
6	Gaby	Romania	F	Late 30s	MA
8	Xuan	China	M	25	MA
10	Rachel	USA	F	22	MA
13	Yiling	China	F	22	MA
14	Feng	China	M	26	MA
15	Yujia	China	F	23	MA
16	Abdullah	Saudi Arabia	M	26	MA
18	Ika	Indonesia	F	23	MA
19	Min	China	F	23	MA
20	Lixin	China	M	26	MA
21	Emma	USA	F	28	MA
30	Hans	The Netherlands	M	31	MA
4	Karolina	Czech Republic	F	23	MSc
5	Liz	USA	F	34	PhD
7	Aya	Pakistan	F	51	PhD
9	Yuwei	China	F	26	PhD
11	Jake	USA	M	29	PhD
12	Ji-woo	South Korea	F	33	PhD
17	Marianna	Costa Rica	F	32	PhD
22	Lars	Sweden	M	26	PhD
23	Olivia	USA	F	25	PhD
24	Aayan	Indonesia	M	40	PhD
25	Amir	Algeria	M	27	PhD
26	Mary	Ireland	F	42	PhD
27	Layla	Algeria	F	26	PhD
28	Daniela	Bulgaria	F	-	PhD
29	Ece	Turkey	F	-	PhD

female (n=21), and were mostly undertaking degrees in the humanities and social sciences. A majority (n=22) were based in the UK at the time of data collection (Table 1).

¹ We compared each transcript against the audio file to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed in NVivo12 using thematic analysis, a process that “involves the identification of themes with relevance specific to the research focus, the research question, the research context and the theoretical framework” (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 1). The second author followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process, a well-established and frequently cited analytical approach of which they had extensive experience. This involved reading through the full set of transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data (1), before coding excerpts of relevance to the research question (2). Next, the initial codes were grouped into potential themes (3) which were then reviewed (4) and assigned labels (5), before selecting compelling data extracts to illustrate each theme (6) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used a “hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 80) with *adjustment* acting as an initial analytical lens in accordance with the framework above (Figure 1) while also letting themes emerge naturally from the data. This ensured that the analysis process remained iterative throughout alternating between theory and emergent findings (Tracy, 2018). To enhance trustworthiness and credibility we used peer debriefing, where the first author acted as a “critical auditor”, reviewing the transcripts, emerging categories and final themes to assess whether any issues were missed or overemphasized (Janesick, 2015).

Results

Academic Adjustment

For the vast majority of the students in this study, teaching was being delivered exclusively online at the time of data collection. Although many found joy in their chosen program of study, remote learning presented a range of challenges. There were 89 references in the data to problematic aspects of online delivery, with students describing it as “challenging” (Ika), “boring” (Abdullah), “awkward” (Lixin), and “like something is missing” (Ika). Several students explained that they had difficulties absorbing information, struggled to fully engage with online classes and found themselves easily distracted, becoming “tired” (Ika) and “not really focusing, just looking at the camera” (Abdullah). Hans described this as “Zoom fatigue”. Some were concerned about an apparent lack of digital skills among their lecturers, for example, Hans, who felt that “it seems that professors have more trouble managing time online than they would in front of class.” Similarly, Laura explained that “some of the module leaders are, in my opinion, doing a very poor job of even covering the content that they're supposed to.” Emma recalled instances of technical difficulties as “not all lecturers were equipped or trained in using zoom or IT.”

Online learning was perceived by many interviewees (46.67%) as a barrier to meaningful interaction. Lars felt that an interactive classroom environment was not easily replicated online as “you couldn’t really engage with your classmates in the same way”. This generated a fair amount of frustration for students like Mei who explained that she “didn’t make new friends in real life but I do make friends online but that only happened in group discussion.” Students reported a lack of “personal connection” (Lars) with their lecturers and lamented in particular the absence of incidental conversations such as “knocking a door and quickly ask a question” (Hans) or chatting to fellow students in the corridor. Laura expressed frustration about the lack of opportunity “to have academic discussions outside of class”, and there was a sense that online interactions often ended abruptly with few opportunities to pick up conversations later. As Mei explained, “after that activity ends, you just lost the connection with that person.”

This lack of connection was compounded by technical issues, such as webcams being switched off, or unstable internet connections which some felt impacted the quality of online interactions. Ika explained that “some people are just

with the camera off and make microphone mute and just really don't know if they're really there or not.” This lack of social presence online was also raised by Liz who explained that “I knew their voices, you know I knew their English, but I didn't even know what their faces look like.”

Several interviewees felt that COVID-19 restrictions and the switch to online learning hampered their academic progress. This was especially evident for doctoral students, such as Layla, who had her fieldwork disrupted.

I was not able to go to Algeria and conduct face to face interviews which delayed my data collection process a lot. Until now I'm still conducting interviews but it's not the same as doing them face to face.

A few students, such as Amir, felt that remote learning had made them “more productive” and had accelerated academic progress. Amir explained that due to fewer social distractions as a result of lockdowns there was “no excuse” to not focus on academic study .

Over half of the participants (53.33%) felt that the quality of their degree program suffered because as a consequence of the pandemic. Hans felt that he had missed out on key aspects of the student experience and explained, “I moved to [host city] to experience the academic life of a renowned university and basically all I did was staring at a screen.” Likewise, Mei felt that “my lifestyle is not like real university life”. Some interviewees questioned the value of their degree program. Laura felt that remote delivery meant that she had been offered “reduced content” and had missed out on “the benefits of being on campus” making her ask herself “am I getting my money worth?”. Similarly, Ika commented on the lack of “hands-on experience” and explained, “I still question whether it’s actually really worthy.” Yujia felt that “my experience is much lower than the money I have paid.” A sense of dissatisfaction with the value of the program of study was especially palpable among students who were unable to access crucial facilities on campus, such as “labs or equipment” (Emma).

I couldn't get the lab and obviously if you don't do that you are not progressing so I was very stressed out about graduating, how much my study would be compromised and that kind of thing. (Daniela)

However, for some of the participants, online delivery and remote learning was an enabler rather than a barrier. This was especially the case for those who would normally travel to campus from afar, such as Feng, who appreciated having “more time to read, to research, all by my own because I don't have to commute”, and Aayan, who was happy to “be able to reduce the amount of time spent on just going to university and coming back.” Similarly, mature students with family or work commitments like Mary, a mother-of-two from Ireland, described the pandemic as an “opportunity”.

It opened up the door that I needed to go back into study because I couldn't have done it if it wasn't online, if I was going to have to be travelling to [university city] just in terms of the logistics of getting childminders or arranging my husband's schedule around the kids. So, from that perspective it was absolutely brilliant and being able to work from home in front of my computer, I mean to me it's God's gift, I could not have done it without the pandemic.

Ika also commented on positive aspects of remote learning, such as “being flexible” and being able to “take my time to learn”. Recorded lectures also made materials more accessible, as Ying explains, “sometimes the teacher might add subtitles under the video to ensure the accuracy of the content and knowledge.”

Psychological Adjustment

Many interviewees reported feeling “anxious” (Ji-woo, Layla, Ying), “stressed” (Daniela, Gaby), “unhappy” (Yiling), and “depressed” (Laura, Feng) during the pandemic. Sources of stress included media reports on COVID-19 infection rates which prompted Gaby to avoid following the headlines. She noted the “constant stress that comes from the news. I don't watch the news regarding the Covid and how many deaths that the UK have happened or in Romania.” Similarly, Mei explained that she felt unhappy “when I see those news on those social media, like how many cases increase today.” A fear of contracting the virus was also reported by some interviewees, such as Yujia, who explained that “I didn't want to go out because I'm afraid of infection.”

The health and safety of loved ones in their countries of origin was on the mind of some students like Layla who explained that “I was thinking a lot about my family and kind of them get infected.” Similarly, Liz raised the impact of travel restrictions and noted that “you're thinking about, okay well, if somebody gets sick, then you can't see them.” These worries were amplified for students with direct experience of COVID-19 infection. Marianna recalled that she struggled to sleep when her father contracted the virus. “I received a call from my sister that father had Covid...he is a high blood pressure situation, so I was so worried for him.”

A sense of loneliness was evident in many interviews, with several students reporting feeling “isolated” (Laura, Aayan, Jake) and “lonely” (Ying). Several interviewees (33.22%) explicitly highlighted that they struggled with the separation from family and friends in their countries of origin which was compounded by the uncertainty of when they would be able to see them. This was illustrated by Laura:

I haven't been able to go home and visit my family in the United States for much longer, much longer than normal. So just keeping up motivation, being able to focus, I definitely noticed that I'm more I don't know depressed or less able to deal with stress, less resilience.

Eight interviewees highlighted the challenges of studying exclusively from home during lockdown. Lack of physical space or having to share office space with others impacted some students' ability to work efficiently, as described below by Mary, who had to juggle writing her thesis with home-schooling her children.

I have a boy who's nine and he shared my office space with me, and oh my God nightmare, I mean it's impossible even when I think back, I'm like how did I keep sane? Because you know I could be in a meeting with my supervisor and he'd be waving his hand over my camera, he'd be blocking my camera, turning off my camera, showing pictures of some you know dinosaur that he had just drawn.

Study and living spaces easily blurred, as illustrated by Jake, who explained that differentiating “between my home living space and my workspace is a real struggle. It just like everything kind of became the same, and particularly in the middle of lockdowns when there's nowhere else to go.”

Students who had parental commitments were especially impacted by the closure of schools, described by Mary as “awful”. Below, Laura explained how home-schooling and caring for her children added an additional layer of stress and impacted her ability to focus on their academic studies.

So, my kids have been home from school for most of that time. So that's like a logistical thing...I have my kids to interrupt me, or I need to provide lunch, or they need help with their own homework.

Some ethnically Asian interviewees like Ji-woo worried about their security and felt “not safe when I'm walking down the street”, recalling instances of public assaults such as “a few months ago, an Asian guy got physically attacked next to the library, which has to be a very safe place.”

There have also been times when Asian students of [name of university] were attacked by local people, which affected me. When I first came, I would go out for a run or go for a walk after dinner every night. Then after this happens, I won't go out. (Xuan)

The interviewees employed a range of coping mechanisms to deal with heightened levels of stress, including exercise and “trying to sleep well” (Yiling). Yujia explained that reading was an escape for her to “enter another world of imagination”.

Only six interviewees reported accessing university wellbeing centres or counselling services, and whilst students generally appreciated that this help was offered to them, it was not always perceived as useful. Ece commented on a lack of continuity in the support provided, explaining that she “felt like was I was talking to someone different every time, and I have to repeat the same thing to two different people.” Hans highlighted long waiting times and explained that “waiting for that counsellor to be allocated to me already took weeks, if not months.”

Sociocultural Adjustment

With social mixing curtailed, students had few opportunities to socialize and explore their host cities. This made it difficult for newly arrived students, like Karolina, to forge social ties.

When I moved to [host city], it was quite hard because I was alone there, and I had to stay in a quarantine. I didn't know anyone and then I didn't really have a chance to meet anyone because everything was closed and everything was restricted, so it was just me.

Several students reported a lack of engagement with their host environment, for example, Laura noted that “I don't feel like I have really experienced the UK at all. I've experienced British people and some British lectures, but I don't really have any sense of.” Abdullah noted a sense of “disconnection” from British people. A similar sense of disconnect was reported by Gaby who noted that “you get a degree from UK but you don't experience the life”. Students who were undertaking their degree programs from their home country felt especially detached from the host culture. Ying, who remained in China for the duration of her course, noted that “I can't experience the local customs, food, culture.” Similarly, Lixin stated that “talking to the classmates during the seminar, that's the only thing that I can experience about the British culture.”

Many interviewees (63.33%) highlighted that there were fewer or no social activities on offer to them, and a majority (70.00%) discussed the dynamics of virtual socializing. Although some interviewees reported positive experiences such as online study groups and Zoom Christmas celebrations, the students overwhelmingly felt that these could not replace in-person conversations as “online communication is different” (Daniela) and “you don't have more deeper communication” (Min). Feng explained that “I really miss the physical engagement like being able to see that person or giving a hug.” Jake gave an example of a virtual lunch hour, saying “it's just that's not the same when you all eat while Skyping together.” Lars perceived online socializing as “formal” and explained that “you have to put down a time for a meeting...if it was face to face, you might take coffee and sit down and talk.” There was a sense that naturally occurring conversations, especially one-to-one encounters, were not easily replicated in an online setting and that there was a lack of “true friends” (Xuan) and “friends in real life” (Mei).

The interviewees craved intercultural contact but found this difficult to instigate. Mei noted that there was “very little chance to make friends to foreigners.” Several students from China found their social circle largely limited to nationals with whom they were either studying or sharing accommodation. Yujia explained “the whole social life is relatively closed, and then not very open and is very Chinese-centric.” This was similar for Feng who noted “all of us are

Chinese so I find myself in a totally Chinese environment.” Ying felt she had missed out on opportunities to develop her English language abilities, explaining that “my initial aim of studying abroad was to immerse in the English-speaking environment. However, the online learning made this unable to come true.”

Although examples of encounters with people in the local communities were largely limited to brief one-off service interactions such as food shopping, several students recalled instances of kindness and local people were described as “friendly” (Lixin, Xuan) and “kind” (Aayan). This is illustrated by Feng’s example of supermarket staff, “I always talk with the shopping assistance in Tesco or Asda. They’re very patient and they greet with me every time when I went there for food.”

As COVID-19-related restrictions began to ease, the students started to explore their host environment and socialize with local friends, something described as a “highlight” by Hans. Similarly, Jake recalled that “I was able to go to a pub with my friend and just have a drink and chat and that was really nice.”

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the adjustment of international students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst a growing number of research studies investigate the experiences of international students during the coronavirus pandemic, there is presently a lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring how a global health crisis affects how international students adjust to life and study abroad. Accordingly, we discuss our findings below through the conceptual lens of “adjustment”. With the vast majority of research assessing the impact of COVID-19 on international students conducted in North America and Australia, our data contributes to understanding how those studying at UK universities have fared during the pandemic.

Our data showed that, by and large, the coronavirus pandemic had a negative effect on international students’ academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment, and that COVID-19-specific stressors either caused or heightened adjustment barriers across all three domains. However, in some areas the findings suggest a more nuanced impact as the pandemic also created opportunities for some students, as discussed below.

Findings regarding international students’ academic adjustment were nuanced as the shift to online learning due to the pandemic acted as both a barrier and enabler of academic adjustment. Most interviewees felt that online classes were less effective than present-in-person teaching, particularly for more interactive discussion-based sessions that rely on students’ social presence. Many students missed a sense of connection with their peers and tutors, while others commented on a perceived lack of preparedness of lecturers which resulted in poor time management and disorganized lecture content. This chimes with evidence that major factors for the success and effectiveness of online classes are learner interactivity (Johnson et al., 2008) and the digital skills of teaching staff (Dorfsman & Horenczyk, 2022).

However, whilst many interviewees would have preferred present-in-person teaching, the flexibility and accessibility of online provision reduced barriers for some, including commuter students and those with childcare responsibilities. This links to evidence by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency showing that online learning during the coronavirus pandemic has coincided with a narrowing of access and attainment gaps as it allowed students to study at their own pace, revisit lecture materials, and organize their studies more flexibly around other responsibilities (Universities UK, 2022). Similar mixed perspectives on the effectiveness of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic were also found in other studies (Almahasees et al., 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). This shows that hybrid course delivery could remain an attractive option for universities in future, with several recent student surveys in the UK indicating an appetite for a blended approach (Cook, 2021; Neves & Hewitt, 2021).

It was evident that COVID-19-related stressors hampered international students’ psychological adjustment, and the pandemic was reported by all interviewees to be detrimental to their sense of wellbeing and mental health, albeit in different

ways. Heightened stress and anxiety levels, as well as feelings of isolation and loneliness, were common experiences among the participants, corroborating previous research on the mental health toll of the pandemic on international students (Lai et al., 2020). Students with parental responsibilities faced additional pressures as they tried to juggle their academic studies with lockdown childcare, providing further evidence for the negative impact of the pandemic on parental mental health and wellbeing (Dawes et al., 2021).

Our data showed that international students faced unique psychological challenges during the pandemic, including concerns about the health of loved ones abroad, whom they were unable to see due to travel restrictions, and increased levels of loneliness compounded by not being able to form a new social support network in the UK. For students of Asian ethnicity, worries about COVID-19-related discrimination and hostility, or first-hand experience thereof, caused additional stress and anxiety. This latter finding adds to a growing body of research on the unique challenges faced by students of Asian heritage during the pandemic and serves to illustrate how the racial stereotyping (Madriaga & McCaig, 2019) and collective “othering” of international students (Ladegaard, 2017) may intensify during times of global crisis. It also demonstrates how broader issues such as the portrayal of COVID-19 as a “Chinese virus” in the national media of countries that host international students can have severe implications for individuals (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022).

Despite these challenges to psychological adjustment, it is important to highlight that the students in our sample were resilient and employed a range of coping mechanisms to manage uncertainty and stress, including exercise, hobbies, and talking to loved ones. That said, few students in our sample accessed the wellbeing and mental health support offered by their host universities which is in line with research suggesting that professional counselling services are routinely underused by this group (Boafo-Arthur & Boafo-Arthur, 2016).

More than any other adjustment domain, international students’ sociocultural adjustment suffered possibly the most as a consequence of the pandemic as restrictions on travel and social mixing made it difficult for students to fully immerse themselves in the host environment. There were few opportunities to experience “British culture” and forge friendships with people in the local communities, leaving many to feel detached from the host environment. Whilst this sense of detachment was not uncommon among international students prior to the coronavirus pandemic (Newsome & Cooper, 2016), restrictions on social mixing are likely to have exacerbated this (Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022). There is ample evidence that friendships between international students and local people, especially local students, are rare (Schartner, 2015; Newsome & Cooper, 2016), and our data strongly suggests that COVID-19-related restrictions may have intensified this segregation.

Those who studied abroad during COVID-19 missed out on many aspects of the *international student experience*, but recent surveys suggest that study abroad remains attractive despite the pandemic (Stacey, 2020; Ross, 2022), although there may be a shift in the mobility flow of international students as regional HE hubs may gain in popularity (Mok et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study offers nuanced perspectives on the lived experiences of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is one of the first studies on this topic to use the conceptual lens of *adjustment* to inform data collection and analysis. The findings strongly suggest that the coronavirus pandemic affected the adjustment of international students in multiple and complex ways. For some individuals, it acted as an enabler and created opportunities that were previously inaccessible to them, but for most, it created barriers to adjustment or heightened challenges that were salient pre-pandemic. The pandemic affected all three adjustment areas under study here and the findings contribute to a burgeoning literature that explores *adjustment* holistically, illustrating the interrelationships of academic, psychological, and sociocultural processes (Schartner & Young, 2020; Schartner, 2023). In particular, a sense of disconnect from others, as a result of the curtailment

of social mixing, affected all areas of international students' adjustment. This has implications for student support and welfare services at universities hosting international students and underpins the following recommendations for HE policy.

As epidemics are increasingly likely (Marani et al., 2021), it is imperative that universities develop clear institutional policies on how to support their international students, and staff working with them, in times of global upheaval. In order to be effective, it is crucial that future emergency response strategies are evidence-based and informed by accounts of lived experiences, such as those emerging from the current study and others (see Schartner, 2023). Insights from qualitative research can help universities to scenario-plan for future challenges and can support the development of a *blueprint* for appropriate student welfare and education continuity strategies. At the core of student welfare responses should be measures aimed at alleviating loneliness and social isolation. It is crucial that, where possible, academic departments work with student integration offices to develop virtual networking opportunities that can be deployed when social mixing is curtailed. Furthermore, given evidence that international students are often unaware of mental health support available to them (Williams et al., 2018) and reluctant to seek out professional help (ICEF, 2022); it is crucial that university wellbeing centres are sufficiently resourced to offer proactive and culturally sensitive support to students in times of crisis. Finally, digital competencies should be a priority in professional development offered to academic staff to support any future transitions to online delivery.

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Alina Schartner, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom where she teaches and researches intercultural communication. Her research interests include the experiences of internationally mobility groups, including student migrants, and language and communication in professional contexts.

Yao Wang, PhD, is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and Communication at Newcastle University. She has an interdisciplinary background encompassing philosophy, literature, education, and cross-cultural communication. Her research interests include experience of international mobile groups, including student sojourners, migrants and refugees as well as internal migrant children's education in China.