


The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Study Abroad Students of the Academic Year 2019-2020



Abstract:

This study provides an insight into how the Covid-19 pandemic, beginning in March 2020, has impacted students who were studying abroad during the academic year 2019-2020.

The existing research regarding this topic was carried out in the early stages of the pandemic (see Bilecen, 2020). However, this study began in September 2020 (6 months after the pandemic emerged) and continued into March 2021, therefore, giving a clearer insight into how study abroad students were impacted in the longer-term. A series of semi-structured interviews with study abroad students, as well as the analysis of online blogs written by such students, were carried out, to gain an idea of how they felt they were impacted by the pandemic.

The findings highlighted that these students are displaying characteristics associated with reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000). Originally, they were shocked and anxious on hearing of the pandemic, but their feelings developed into sadness and loneliness after being forced to return home early from their host universities and live under lockdown situations (Misirlis et al, 2020). As lockdowns and government restrictions associated with the pandemic continued into the new academic semester (gov.uk, 2020), these students reported that their loneliness increased as classes were moved online, and they felt isolated by the lack of interaction with their peers.

However, despite these negative impacts, each student noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has not negatively coloured their study abroad experience, overall. They all said the experience they had was just as beneficial and 'life changing' for them as those study abroad alumni before them (DeGraff et al, 2013). Therefore, while the Covid-19 pandemic has had a great impact on the study abroad students of the academic year 2019-2020, it is unlikely that it will have a major negative impact on future study abroad experiences.

Introduction:

In recent years, the number of students studying internationally, either for their entire degree or for a short-term period, has been gradually increasing (Gu et al, 2010). Reasons for this include, the economic benefits gained by universities from international students being so great that institutions put a great deal of effort into enticing foreign students to come and



study with them (Douglass and Edelstein, 2009). There are also personal benefits, including the opportunity to build social and cultural capital - a huge incentive for perspective international students (Heath, 2006). As well as this, studying internationally can be a second chance to attend elite universities; for example, a student from the UK who missed out on a place at Oxford or Cambridge, may then decide to apply for Ivy League colleges in the USA, (Brooks and Waters, 2010). International student numbers were expected to continue to rise throughout the next few years, but the pandemic raises questions on whether the effects it had on international study when it emerged, will halt this increase (Adams, 2020).

While the international student experience is often reported to be extremely positive and highly recommended by all alumni, it is widely known that it comes with hardships. Culture shock is a factor at some point in all international students' experiences (Zhou et al, 2008). This is feelings that come with arriving in a new place and being overwhelmed by new people, cultures and languages. This can lead to stress, anxiety and in extreme cases depression, and can last for the entirety of a student's experience or present itself at random (Nailevna, 2017). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these effects will have been heightened as it had a major effect worldwide, including national lockdowns and the suspension of international travel. Therefore, students were faced with the prospect of isolating in dorm rooms on empty campuses or travelling home, possibly putting themselves and their families at risk (Peters et al, 2020).

As most of the existing literature in this area focuses on students studying abroad for their entire degree (see, Bilecen, (2020) and Misirlis et al, (2020)), this study provides new insight in the field by focusing on students carrying out a 'year abroad' study experience. Through a series of interviews, as well as the analysis of study abroad student blogs, this study aims to gain an insight into how these students felt the pandemic changed their international experience and if they were sufficiently supported by their host and/or home universities. Students will also be asked if they feel the pandemic interrupting their study abroad experience has changed how they feel about it entirely i.e., is it still something that all those who participate in recommend?

Finally, suggestions will be made as to how universities might further support these students as they continue to navigate this unforeseen circumstance, and what they can do better, should a similar situation ever occur.



Literature Review:

Previous research has shown that the number of students undertaking a study abroad experience, either for the entirety of their degree or as a short-term program, has been increasing, and was expected to increase further (Gu et al, 2010). However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 led to fears that numbers would drop dramatically (Adams, 2020). Interestingly though, numbers still increased in the UK, with a record number of international student enrolment for the academic year 2020-2021, (9% increase on the previous year) (Adams, 2020). There are several reasons to explain this increase.

A general reason for increasing international enrolment is a lack of access to, or competition for, enrolment in home institutions, thus international study ensures a higher education opportunity (Phang, 2013). However, the record increase in the UK this year, may be because popular destinations for study abroad have put in place measures that make international students feel unwelcome. For example, in the US, often a popular study abroad destination, President Trump made the decision that if classes were to be completed online this academic year, international student visas would not be supported (Woodward, 2020). This then entices students to choose other destinations, such as the UK.

Also, some host universities were extremely accommodating to ensure international students could come and study with them. For example, Queens University, Belfast chartered planes to bring their Chinese international students from China to Belfast, and provided quarantine accommodation, so that these students would not miss out on their international experience (BBCNews, 2020). This seems extreme, but it is known that international students are a great asset to a country's economy and so universities put a great deal of effort into enticing students to come and study with them (Douglass and Edelstein, 2009).

There is no limit to what a university can charge an international student for tuition fees across their entire degree (Bekhradnia and Vickers, 2007). For example, Imperial College London charge up to £25,000 per international student in fees (Universities UK, 2017). For this reason, they are attractive economic assets to a university (Bekhradnia and Vickers, 2007). While this mainly applies to students studying internationally for their entire degree, short-term international students do have a high spending power and contribute to the regional and university economy (Schroeder et al, 2009). This is especially important to universities now, as budget cuts in education are a rising problem (Benito et al, 2019).

However, there is little research into how universities continue to support students when they arrive to study with them, despite the numerous studies that highlight the struggles international students face when they arrive at their host university. For example, Williams and Johnson (2011) completed a study at a university in the southern United States in which



they found international students wish to fit in and make friends with native students. However, despite this desire, it is more likely that they will form close connections with those of similar cultural backgrounds or other international students as the US students had little to no interest in forming friendships with their international classmates (Beech, 2018).

The US students' lack of interest is unexplained as the study also uncovered that there were academic and social benefits for both the international and host student when they had interconnecting friendships; while a lack of friendships with students from the host nation led to feelings of isolation within the classroom and social settings for internationals (Williams and Johnson, 2011). This could be an indicator of a lack of support from host universities to aid the transition into a new environment for the international students.

Support for these students is important as the international experience often comes with the effects of culture shock, such as homesickness, anxiety, loneliness and in severe cases, depression (Nailevna, 2017). These feelings can last throughout the student's experience or can present themselves at random. Therefore, each student will deal with it differently.

For some, these feelings can make it difficult to cope (Smith and Khawaja, 2011); while others will see the challenges facing them as opportunities to overcome obstacles and create positive experiences that allow growth and development in their new environment. This leads to greater interpersonal skills, more confidence, an appreciation for foreign cultures and more respect for their own (Gu et al, 2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened these challenges for international students. Young people studying abroad have struggled with the dilemma of whether or not to go home, as local students returned to their parental homes, leaving campuses empty and adding to the loneliness internationals felt; increased anxiety and financial worries will also have arisen as closed borders and the suspension of international travel meant not all international students could return to their home countries immediately, or at all (Bilecen, 2020). Some international students have also been subject to increased racism as a result of the pandemic (Bilecen, 2020).

As this is a new, and still emerging situation, there is a lack of research on what the direct effects of the pandemic on international students are. However, preliminary studies found that lockdowns put in place to curb the spread of the virus brought additional stress for the students, especially those living thousands of miles away from their home countries (Misirlis et al, 2020). Lockdowns also created problems, in terms of learning, that again increase anxiety for international students.



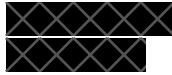
Although online learning allows students to continue studying virtually, it comes with a myriad of other problems. For example, the use of laboratories for natural science or engineering students, or patient visits in hospitals for medical students etc. are no longer an option and so a crucial part of the learning experience has been lost. A participant in a study by Peters et al (2020) commented that classes are not the only valuable part of an international education and so much of the social experience, which enticed them to enter a study abroad program in the first place, has been lost. This loss is even more evident in the case of students who did choose to return home and are now not in their host country anymore and face further difficulties when online classes are paired with time differences (Peters et al., 2020).

These preliminary studies were carried out shortly after the pandemic emerged and focused on surveying students studying internationally for their entire degree. Due to this there is a lack of research on how those students who were studying abroad for a short period were affected by the pandemic, as well as the effects of an unexpected journey home during a health crisis, as Kulyar et al (2020) found, many full-time international students chose to stay in their host countries and wait out the pandemic (Kulyar et al, 2020).

The quick turnaround between the onset of the pandemic and the distribution of current studies means there is a good chance the answers participants gave are not reliable as they were likely still numb to their feelings due to shock and so had not processed what they were feeling (Misirlis et al, 2020). Therefore, this study, that began in September 2020 and continued into March 2021 - a considerable amount of time after the pandemic began, and in a new academic semester - should gain a more in-depth view of the effects the pandemic had on study abroad students.

Despite the perceived lack of support for international students when they have struggled in the past, it has been found that the positives of an international study experience outweigh the negatives (Lee, 2015). These positive reports may also be part of the reason why numbers of international students have continued to rise this year, despite the pandemic. Although, this study will shed a light on whether the pandemic has negatively coloured the international experience for those affected by it, or, will they still look back on their time abroad with the same fondness expressed in previous years?

It is important to note that the continued increase in international student numbers is not reflected worldwide. A recent study conducted by Mok et al, (2021) suggests that in China, 84% of the student participants had no interest in undertaking a study abroad opportunity after the pandemic. However, those who did express interest said they would now prefer to study in destinations closer to their home countries, as this would make travelling home



easier, should a similar event ever occur. The study found that the USA and UK were no longer the top destinations for Chinese study abroad students but instead countries such as Japan and Hong Kong were favoured (Mok et al, 2021).

Methodology:

Primary data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with students who had been carrying out a 'study abroad' year as part of a degree they were completing at a home university, at the time in which the pandemic emerged (Table 1). These student participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, allowing for a suitable number of participants to be selected, who could best represent the entire population of study abroad students affected by the pandemic (Vasileiou et al, 2018); while reducing the likelihood of saturation (Alsaawi, 2014).

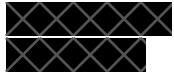
Table 1: Detailing the interview participants (under pseudonym), their home universities, host countries and when they left their study abroad experience.

Participant	Home University	Host Country	Leaving Details
Catherine	University of Birmingham, England	USA	3 months earlier than planned
Niamh	University of Birmingham, England	USA	3 months earlier than planned
Tom	Keele University, England	USA	2 months earlier than planned
Lukas	University of Bern, Switzerland	USA	3 months earlier than planned
Greg	University of Strathclyde, Scotland	USA	2 months earlier than planned
Mark	University of Chester, England	USA	2 months earlier than planned

The interviews were then transcribed and coded, leading to the identification of themes within the responses. These themes were, 'Experience', 'Stress and Processing Emotions', 'University Support', and 'Online Classes'. This analysis allowed results to be compiled and answers to the main research questions developed (Cloke et al, 2004).

Semi-structured interviews are the most suitable research method for this study as their use in similar studies has provided qualitative data that aided researchers in answering their main research questions (see for example, Gu, 2010 and Lee, 2015). Furthermore, in current studies regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on international students, questionnaires have been the primary method of data collection (see Peters et al, 2020).

While there are notable advantages to questionnaires (Cloke et al, 2004), there is a stronger likelihood of participants misunderstanding questions within them, and they neglect the opportunity to correct this or probe for more information (Oppenheim, 1992). Furthermore,



questionnaires may be returned incomplete, leading to gaps in the resulting data, creating difficulty for the researcher (Oppenheim, 1992). Therefore, it will be advantageous to use semi-structured interviews in this study.

Semi-structured interviews are a rich source of qualitative data that provide an authentic insight into people's experiences, thoughts and feelings (Silverman 1993). This makes them an appropriate method for scratching beneath the surface and fostering a deep understanding of the participants views of the subject matter (Cloke et al, 2004). As well as this, each participant interviewed will be different and so will provide different styles of answer. For this reason, some interviewees will offer up any information they feel is relevant, creating responses rich in detail (Cloke et al, 2004). Structured interviews on the other hand, may hinder the richness of responses as they do not allow for follow up questions based on previous responses (Alsaawi, 2014).

However, the limitations of this method cannot be ignored. For some participants, the interview process is intimidating, so they may wish to keep their more personal experiences private and will be reluctant to give full, detail rich answers (Cloke et al, 2004). Often, this reluctance is exacerbated by the knowledge that the interview is being recorded. Previous studies have noted that the presence of a tape recorder can be intimidating causing participants to become guarded and give formal, unauthentic responses (Cloke et al, 2004). The resulting lack of information then creates difficulties for the researcher when identifying themes in responses.

These limitations, as well as a small sample size, have been accounted for and justified in the fact that secondary data was collected and analysed from a series of online study abroad university blogs (Table 2) such as the Ulster University DIAS blog (Ulster University, 2020). Blogs are a useful tool that allow researchers to gain access to the opinions, views, and experiences of those who write them (Murthy, 2008) and so analysing those of study abroad students will add to the responses gathered through the interview process. The blogs will be analysed to deduce whether the same themes that emerged from the interview process will come up again within the study abroad blogspace or if they are anomalies to more general findings.

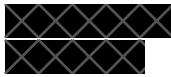


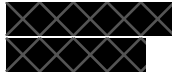
Table 2: Detailing the online study abroad student blogs analysed.

University Blog Website	Host University	URL
College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA	Universidade da Coruña, Spain	https://kfmcla21.me.holycross.edu/
	Universidad Católica del Perú, Peru	https://smshor21.me.holycross.edu/
University of Glasgow	Keio University, Tokyo	https://uofgabroad.wordpress.com/2020/03/19/from-the-south-to-the-north/#
	University of Mexico City	https://uofgabroad.wordpress.com/2020/07/09/reflections-on-mexico/
Ulster University	University of Alicante, Spain.	https://uudas.blogspot.com/
University College London	University of Toronto, Canada.	https://www.ucl.ac.uk/arts-humanities/ucl-joint-faculties-student-blogs-lockdown-series/returning-my-year-abroad-during-covid-19

The analysis of blogs is an appropriate research method as they eliminate the discomfort encountered in the interview process. A blogspace allows for anonymity and neutrality, leading to more open discussions of thoughts and feelings on a subject, giving researchers a deeper understanding of the feelings an experience invoked, that may have been omitted in interviews (Murthy, 2008). As well as this, government restrictions and social distancing measures that were in place at the time interviews were being carried out (gov.uk, 2020), made reaching participants difficult but, analysing blogs gave access to populations that were beyond the physical reach (Wilson et al, 2015).

Although, there has been very little research into the use of blogs as a method of qualitative data collection. Therefore, there is not a known set of disadvantages, but it is possible that unreliability due to a lack of regulation of blogs may cause gaps or anomalies within data sets (Wilson et al, 2015). There is also a degree of uncertainty as to which type of study blog analysis fits into (Harricharan and Bhopal, 2014), which again could lead to a lack of clarity in the data collected from the blogs in this research.

Finally, a risk assessment was carried out to ensure the dissertation process adheres to the University Ethical and Health and Safety guidelines (Quinn, 2020). Firstly, all interviews took place via the online platform, Zoom, to adhere to social distancing measures in place at the time (gov.uk, 2020). Secondly, participants were made aware, prior to agreeing to interview, that the audio of their responses would be recorded. This allowed them to choose not to



participate or make the researcher aware that they were uncomfortable with being recorded, allowing necessary adjustments to be made. Participants were also assured that they would remain anonymous throughout the study and will be referred to using a pseudonym that may be chosen by them. Further precautions will not be needed for vulnerable groups, as participants in this study will be of university age and so can consciously consent to take part themselves.

Analysis and Discussion:

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews and student study abroad blogs led to the emergence of themes that appeared frequently in the responses. These are 'Experience', 'Stress and Processing Emotions', 'University Support' and 'Online Classes' and will be discussed individually to present clarity on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on study abroad students of the academic year 2019-2020.

Experience:

In accordance with Lee's (2015) findings, all interview participants and blog writers commented that the positive elements of their study experience greatly outweighed the negatives, even despite the pandemic.

"I want to do it again right now!" (Catherine)

There are several reasons why students continue to have glowing reports of their study abroad experiences. In terms of education, Ritz (2011) notes that an overseas educational experience provides holistic and transformative learning experiences. This leads to a deeper understanding of a student's chosen degree subject, as university curriculums vary and so students who study abroad short-term, gain access to a branch of their degree subject they previously were not aware of (Kitsantas, 2004). This also presents an opportunity to enhance critical thinking skills as cultural differences in the classroom provide different perspectives on subjects. Study abroad students can take these on board and apply them to their own studies, giving them the opportunity to improve their own academic work (Ritz, 2011).

Also, learning through experience provides critical linkages between theory learnt in classrooms and their application in the real world (Ritz, 2011). This leads to an understanding of intercultural communication, cultural differences, world geography, and the development of students' organizational and planning skills (Kitsantas, 2004).

There are also social benefits to a study abroad experience. From the initial excitement of a new adventure, a chance to explore new places and gain experience, to the personal growth



that students feel they achieve, it is rare that students will report any negative impacts of a study abroad experience (DeGraff et al, 2013). Study abroad alumni repeatedly refer to their experience as 'life changing'. They report changes in attitude, international and cultural awareness, self-efficacy, and independence, even years after their time abroad has ended (DeGraff et al, 2013).

Studies show that these qualities stay with study abroad students long-term and lead to greater academic and employment opportunities. Often their time at another university allows them to develop their academic skills, while also giving them an insight into another culture's academic expectations, introducing them to new techniques that may be beneficial to the quality of their academic work (DeGraff et al, 2013). Additionally, an experience abroad suggests an ability and willingness to appreciate and communicate with people of other cultures. This is desirable to employers who have staff members, clients, or customers of other cultures, thus study abroad students' career prospects are enhanced (Liwinski, 2019).

These previous positive reports, paired with those of the students whose experience was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, are likely to have contributed to increases in study abroad student numbers in previous years, and the increase in enrolment in the UK for this academic year (Adams, 2020). This research shows the pandemic has not managed to negatively colour the entire study abroad experience for the students who took part, as despite being directly asked how their experience was negatively impacted, they continually reiterated the positives,

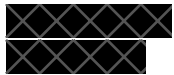
"...when I think back on it, I remember just all the great stuff that happened... I don't really think about the leaving bit..." (Niamh).

Furthermore, all student participants said that once travel resumed to normal, they would highly recommend a study abroad experience.

However, despite these positive reactions to their study abroad experiences overall, all interview participants and student bloggers did not dismiss that the onset of the pandemic brought with it emotional struggles.

Stress and Processing Emotions:

All interviewees and bloggers said that the emergence of the pandemic brought the decision of whether to stay and wait out the pandemic or return home to their families. It was a tough dilemma as staying meant isolating on empty campuses in small dorm rooms, as many local students returned to their familial homes when classes moved online; however, the option to return home came with its own questions as borders were quickly being shut and



international travel suspended (Bilecen, 2020). Moreover, the decision to make the journey home meant students putting their health at risk, as well as that of their friends and family (Kulyar, 2020).

Many student's blogs refer to a difficult discussion with parents and advisors at both home and host universities that eventually led to the decision of returning home,

"My parents advised me to return home as soon as possible... However, there were so many things to consider... but The Geography Year Abroad leader... was extremely reassuring and relieved a lot of my worries..." (Saeed, 2020)

All students in this study noted a quick turn-around between their decision to leave and arriving at home. The pace of these events made some students feel as though they were having to 'escape' from their host region,

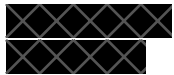
"I rush home and realize that I have two hours to pack a year's worth of belongings into a suitcase... It was surreal how fast everything changed." (McLaughlin, 2020)

Understandably, all participants said this unexpected event caused great shock and anxiety at the time as they battled with the feelings of their year abroad ending and worried for their health as well as that of their family and friends. This corresponds with previous studies that uncovered anxiety as a huge impact of the pandemic on international students (Bilecen, 2020). However, the students in this study remarked that as time progressed, after arriving home, anxiety developed into sadness and loneliness as they had time to process what had happened, and the loss of their study abroad experience sank in,

"... [coming home] made me quite nervous because it was very rushed... [but] when I got home, I just got really sad..." (Catherine)

This confirms Misirlis's et al (2020) notion that in early studies, participants will have been suffering with shock and may have been numb to their deeper feelings regarding the situation, possibly making the findings of such studies inaccurate.

These longer-term feelings of sadness and loneliness reported by Catherine could link the impacts of the pandemic on international students to grief. In 1915, Freud described grief as a process of gradual withdrawal of the energy that ties the bereaved to the lost object or the deceased (Jacob, 1993), proving that it is not a feeling tied only to the loss of a person, but to loss altogether. Later studies delved deeper, describing grief as a process that began with shock and developed over time (Jacob, 1993). As this corresponds to the feelings described by the participants in this study, it is likely that a major impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international students is the process of grieving the loss of their experience.



These feelings of loss paired with the initial shock and anxiety may also be indicators of 'reverse culture shock'. This is the "process of readjusting, re-aculturating, and reassimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time" (Gaw, 2000, pp. 83-84). As with regular culture shock (Nailevna, 2017), this process can affect students in different ways, with many managing to cope well with the support of others, but for some it can lead to stress, anxiety and in extreme cases depression (Gaw, 2000). Due to the unprecedented situation the students of this study are in, it is likely they will have suffered with reverse culture shock, given their responses regarding their feelings, and the lockdown situations they find themselves in. Due to this, it is likely that students do not have access to the support that deterred previous years' students from suffering the worst effects of reverse culture shock. Therefore, it is imperative that these students are receiving help and support from their universities to reduce the likelihood of depression. This then poses the question of whether the students in this study feel they have been well supported by their host and/or home universities.

University Support:

When interviewees were asked about the level of support, they have received from both their host and home universities, a majority reported that their host universities were most supportive, especially during their initial departure process,

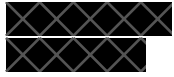
"[My host university] was definitely supportive and they have kept in contact with emails..." (Mark)

A similar pattern emerged within the blogs of those students who chose to mention their university support,

"... the [study abroad] team reassured all... that regardless of their travel decision, everyone will pass the year if they continue to study from home." (Saeed,2020)

This was true for all participants except Tom. Tom reported that initially, his host university did all they could to ensure he could stay there for as long as possible, before aiding in the process of returning home. On arriving at home, Tom described his home university as being just as helpful, as they organised quarantine accommodation, with all necessary amenities to ensure he could continue with his online studies, while also protecting the health of a vulnerable family member,

"My father was 'at risk'... so when I got back my [home] university provided me with somewhere to live for 2 weeks, to quarantine..." (Tom)



It is interesting that these students being well supported by both their host and home universities is the anomaly in this study. It seems illogical for universities to leave their students unsupported this way. Still, the rest of the participants did not speak highly of their home university's support efforts. They mentioned that their universities were more concerned with the students who had been studying at home that year rather than those who had been away. Niamh even went as far as to say she felt neglected by her home university,

“My home university didn't do much at all... they were more concerned with sorting out students that had been here... They really didn't pay much attention to study abroad students... they kind of left us in the dark...” (Niamh)

Given the risk of depression, brought about by worst cases of reverse culture shock for these students (Gaw, 2000), it seems extremely important that further research is done into the support systems universities have in place, and how accessible they are. Young (2014) notes that reverse culture shock can often be worse than the initial culture shock experienced when a student arrives in their study abroad destination. Students expect to return home and re-assimilate with ease, however this is often not the case. The support group of fellow students in the same boat, or faculties there specifically to aid the transition when they arrived at host universities, are not at home and so effects can be surprising (Young, 2014).

Young's (2014) study emphasises the importance of alerting students to reverse culture shock and makes a list of suggestions as to how universities may be supportive. However, Brubaker (2017) points out that there are problems encountered when implementing these suggestions such as: a lack of staff to facilitate re-entry programs, a lack of professional development in the area, university prioritisation of other programs and low student turn out (Brubaker, 2017). Gaw (2000) emphasises the problem of low student turn out as his study found that the worse the effects of reverse culture shock the less likely a student is to seek help (Gaw, 2000). Therefore, further research must be done to ensure re-entry programs are in place and vulnerable students are steered towards them.

It goes beyond the scope of this study to add to the research on re-entry programs for study abroad students, however, the initial research is there (see Young (2014) and Brubaker (2017)). Therefore, it is imperative that academics and university institutions heed these suggestions to better support the students effected by the Covid-19 pandemic in the academic year 2019-2020 and to be better prepared for future students if a similar event occurs.



Online Classes:

Each of the students in this study were given the option to either continue with their host universities' classes online, after they returned home, or withdraw and complete an alternative assignment for their home universities to ensure they still received the credit for their full study abroad year. 50% decided to continue with their studies at their host university, while 50% undertook the alternative assignment. Each group reported both positives and negatives that came with their respective decisions.

Those who chose to continue online with their host university, noted that while they were glad to continue having interactions with their host professors and classmates, the adjustment was difficult as the addition of time differences meant their classes were late in the evening rather than during the day,

"It was alright but it was kind of awkward for me because... the time zone is different so I was having classes at like 9 o'clock in the evening... so it was not ideal..."

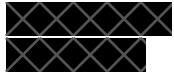
(Greg)

Whereas those who chose to undertake an alternative assignment with their home university noted that they felt less stressed about trying to reassimilate into their home lives, with the addition of Covid-19 restrictions and their feelings regarding their study abroad time ending abruptly. However, Niamh did say while she was grateful to have had a reduced stress option, she was disappointed to have missed out on her host university courses as she had taken a great interest in subjects which differed in content from what her classes at home entailed,

"I think it was less stressful because obviously where we had been it was a big time difference... But I do also think it's a bit of a shame because... some of the modules I was doing were really interesting so... I was a bit disappointed..." (Niamh)

These reactions reinforce the findings by Peters et al (2020), which noted that students lost out on more than just academics by being forced to return home (Peters et al, 2020).

This study being carried out after a new academic semester began, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, has allowed an insight into how it continues to impact study abroad students of the year 2019-2020. As government restrictions and lockdown measures continued (gov.uk, 2020) many universities took the decision to move all learning online, holding virtual classes and seminars so that students can continue with their degree paths remotely (Wahab, 2020). This was true of each of the home universities of the participants in this study. However, feelings regarding online classes have been majority negative.



The participants in this study remarked that online classes have left them feeling lonely and isolated due to a lack of peer interaction. For many of the participants, their choice to study abroad, added a year onto what was previously a 3-year degree. Due to this, many of their classmates whom they had got to know over the first 2 years of their degree had graduated in the summer of 2020 and so they are in class groups with unfamiliar peers. While they had known this would be the case before they left, they expected to have face-to-face classes with their new peers on returning home, allowing the opportunity to get to know them and become friends. However, as they only interact with them for short periods of time virtually, they have struggled to get to know them, adding to their feelings of isolation,

“The only interaction I’ve had with them has been in a breakout room for like five minutes, so I haven’t actually been able to make new friends. Which is kind of sad.”
(Catherine)

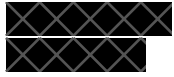
This was true for all but Mark, who expressed he has an introverted personality and so felt more comfortable with online classes, than face-to-face and felt he was not affected by the isolation that comes with lack of peer relationships with classmates,

“Oh, for me I’m super introverted so if it is [lonely and isolating] I don’t notice or I’m super comfortable with it.” (Mark)

These feelings of isolation in online classes are synonymous with previous studies, before the pandemic, that reported high levels of isolation and loneliness when social interaction was removed from the learning environment (Bolliger and Erichsen, 2011). Equally, studies that compare introvert vs. extrovert reactions to online learning correlate with Mark’s response as Almusharraf and Almusharraf (2021) found that introverts were more likely to overcome feelings of isolation than extroverts. However, they also noted that this does not mean introverts are more suited to online learning, as other problems arise, such as lower participation in online classes (Almusharraf and Almusharraf, 2021). Therefore, it is important that further studies are done into the impacts on a student’s career of online study, to address the problems encountered by these students.

Conclusion:

This study has added to the existing literature regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on study abroad students, by gaining an insight into how they have been affected in the longer-term. The participants were originally met with shock and anxiety at being faced with the dilemma of leaving their host universities and returning home or staying and waiting out the pandemic. This is synonymous with the findings of the initial studies upon the emergence of the pandemic (cf: Bilecen, 2020). The students in this study all decided



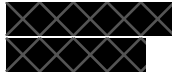
that returning home was their safest option and they each noted that upon returning their initial shock and anxiety developed into deeper feelings of sadness, loss, and loneliness. This confirms Misirlis' et al, (2020) theory that the students who participated in the preliminary studies were numb to their deeper feelings regarding the situation, because of shock.

The participants in this study noted further development of feeling isolated as they moved into a new academic semester in September 2020. In accordance with government guidelines (gov.co.uk, 2020) universities moved all learning into the virtual environment so that students could continue their classes remotely. However, the interviewees remarked that this led to difficulties in making connections with their peers, resulting in a lack of social interaction, leaving them feeling alone in their studies, and making them more vulnerable to the effects of reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000).

Despite this vulnerability, the students felt they were not well supported by their home universities, and so are struggling with these new situations and emotions. Previous studies have highlighted the negative impacts that reverse culture shock, and the isolation of online classes can have on students (Erichsen and Bolliger, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative that universities take note of these findings and heed the suggestions of academics such as Young (2014) and Brubaker (2017), while also being cautiously aware of Gaw's (2000) finding, that the worse the effects of reverse culture shock the less likely a student is to seek help, to ensure they can better support the students of this year, as well as those in the future.

These findings may be used as a foundation for future research in the field as more needs to be done to discover how reverse culture shock has impacted the study abroad students affected by Covid-19. As well as this, findings in this study show that not enough is being done to support study abroad students when they are struggling during or after their study abroad experience. Therefore, future research must investigate and suggest strategies to ensure these students have access to sufficient support.

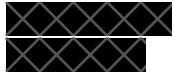
However, despite the negative impacts the Covid-19 pandemic had on the study abroad students of the academic year 2019-2020, we cannot ignore that it has not managed to negatively colour the international student experience. Much of the existing literature regarding the study abroad experience refers to the fact that students describe their time away as 'life changing' and something that stays with them long after it is over (DeGraff et al, 2013). The student interviewees in this study, as well as those who authored the blog posts that were analysed, echoed this sentiment as all made a point of noting how much they enjoyed the time away that they had, and that it would still be something they would



recommend to other students after the pandemic has ended (See for example McLaughlin, 2020; Burnett, 2020; and Tzoumas, 2020).

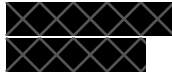
Therefore, while it is likely that the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic may stay with those students who were studying abroad at the time of its emergence, it is unlikely that it will have an overwhelming impact on future students' study abroad ventures, as is evident through the continued rise of international student applications that has been observed in the past year (Adams, 2020).

“Reflecting on my year abroad, I genuinely had the time of my life and made friends for life... The whole experience was amazing, and I can't wait to travel more...” (Mulligan, 2020).



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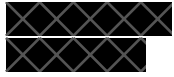
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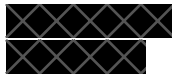
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