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'Bittersweet' and 'alienating': An extreme comparison of collaborative autoethnographic perspectives from higher education students, non-teaching staff and faculty during the pandemic in the UK and Singapore

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'Bittersweet' and 'alienating': An extreme comparison of collaborative autoethnographic perspectives from higher education students, non-teaching staff and faculty during the pandemic in the UK and Singapore

Abstract

This article, via collaborative autoethnographic reflections, provides an extreme comparison of intra-period responses in two countries (the UK and Singapore) to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in higher education. Taking autoethnographic examples from these countries from three pairs of stakeholders of higher education (HE) – students, non-teaching academic staff, and lecturers – we discuss contrasting experiences in pursuit of answering the research question: What were our experiences working/studying in HE during the COVID-19 global pandemic? Despite the pronounced differences of the higher education landscapes in the UK and in Singapore and the heterogeneous experiences of them, five common themes emerged during an inductive analysis: impact on work, impact on learning, wellbeing, awareness and flexibility. There are significant opportunities to learn by examining the different experiences. We recommend overcoming the many separations between HE stakeholders and to engage all of them (students, lecturers (both adjuncts and full-time faculty), non-teaching staff) with the overall goal of improving the teaching and learning experiences. Technology should not be revered as a panacea and sound pedagogical practices are as important as ever.

Practitioner Notes

1. This research created a glance at the voices of students, lecturers and non-teaching academics during COVID-19 in the UK and in Singapore.
2. Technology must not be isolated from sound pedagogical practices, such as the constructive alignment of learning objectives, teaching and learning and assessments, student engagement for critical thinking and the enhancement of metacognitive competences.
3. Credibility and authenticity of the teacher are more important than technical gimmicks, though it is of course appropriate to use technology as a tool in the classroom.
4. To build online learning capacities and increase staff and student readiness, continuous online training should be provided.
5. Staff wellbeing epitomises an 'Achilles tendonitis' where the initial trauma of rapid adaptation leads to pain, stiffness and affected movement.

Keywords

Singapore, autoethnographies, coronavirus, COVID-19, United Kingdom

Authors

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Introduction

The two chosen higher education systems to illustrate our case are those of the United Kingdom (UK) and Singapore. These two systems were deliberately chosen as they are situated in different parts of the world and to determine the common challenges and to examine the issues that arose across the two countries, given their socio-cultural, political, and economic dissimilarities. Rather than looking at COVID-19 and higher education from a single perspective, it was important to us to gain multi-perspectivity. There is an overrepresentation of emergent studies focusing on single institutions, jurisdictions, and stakeholder responses (for examples on Singapore, see Cleland et al., 2020; Compton et al., 2020; Fung & Lam, 2020; Goh & Sanders, 2020; Rai, 2020; for examples on the UK, see Bluteau & Bluteau, 2020; Darnton et al., 2021; Eringfeld, 2021; Fowler-Watt et al., 2021) despite growing calls for cross-cultural and cross-institutional studies (Butler-Henderson et al., 2020, 2021).

This article is significant as it presents the first qualitative multi-stakeholder research study based on students, non-teaching staff, and academics within an extreme comparison between Singapore and the UK. As the manuscript focuses on two jurisdictions, it adds to the nascent comparative literature on COVID-19 and higher education. Specifically, we were guided by this research question:

What were our experiences working/studying in HE during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

To examine this research question, we have organised this manuscript as follows. First, we offer an overview of higher education in the age of COVID-19 in Singapore and the UK. Next, we provide a brief literature review. Further, we describe and justify the collaborative autoethnographic method within an extreme comparison adopted for data collection and analysis. After discussing and synthesising our findings, we conclude by considering the practical implications and limitations of our research as well as opportunities for future studies.

Background

Our article employs an extreme-comparative method (Shelley et al., 2019). Such an approach regards the two selected countries as significantly different. By employing an extreme-comparative method, stark structural and cultural inter-country differences are highlighted, and against this backdrop, a rich picture across inductively generated themes emerges with broad implications that go beyond single-country analyses (Cifuentes-Faura et al., 2021; Kefalaki et al., 2021). This extreme comparison is further accentuated by our comparing the experiences of students, teachers and non-teaching academic staff. Such a strategy is apt as we explore two contrasting approaches to higher education in two countries that are rather different in terms of history, culture, language, ethnic composition, geographies, economic development, internet infrastructure, as well as COVID-19 incidence and mortality rates. Singapore and the UK are a study in contrasts. While the UK as one of the major higher education export countries is rather dependent on international students (Parker et al., 2021), Singapore's higher education is less dependent on international students studying locally (Tan et al., 2021). Table 1 highlights the two countries are in contrast.

Table 1*UK and Singapore. An extreme-comparative method*

Country	UK	Singapore
<i>International student dependency</i>	High	Low
<i>National culture</i>	Highly individualistic; low power distance	Collectivistic; high power distance
<i>Ethnicities</i>	White majority with Asian, Black and other minorities	Chinese majority with Malay, Indian and other minorities
<i>Languages in education</i>	Predominantly English (with French and Spanish being popular foreign languages)	Bilingualism: 'mother tongue' (Mandarin, Malay, Tamil etc.) + English
<i>Geography</i>	North-western Europe	Southeast Asia
<i>Population</i>	66.6 million	5.7 million
<i>Land area</i>	242,495 km ²	728 square km
<i>Population density</i>	275 inhabitants per km ²	7,810 inhabitants per km ²
<i>Per capita income</i>	\$47,880	\$92,270
<i>Average internet speed</i>	47 th in the world	6 th in the world
<i>COVID-19 infections as of 21 October, 2021</i>	8.59 million	158,587
<i>COVID-19 deaths as of 21 October, 2021</i>	139,031	264

Sources: Kefalaki et al., 2021; Britannica, 2021a, 2021b; Hofstede Insights, n.d.; Guardian News and Media, 2013; Worldometer, 2021.

We now elaborate on the two countries' backgrounds and trajectories during the pandemic.

Singapore

Singapore's higher education landscape comprises six local autonomous universities (AUs), eight international university transnational satellite campuses, and approximately 329 private education institutions (PEIs). The latter model ranges from 'fly-in' faculty with full control to variations with complete domestic faculty. PEIs occupy a unique facet of the education sector with a limited

proprietary offering under the regulatory supervision of the government's Committee of Private Education.

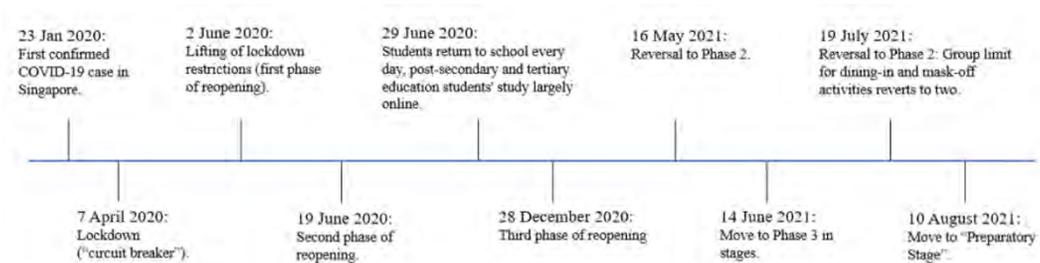
The rapid adaptation response in Singapore was influenced by early detection and high sanitisation and social distancing efforts. In the first quarter of 2020, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remained open, teaching either fully online or through blended learning approaches. In the second quarter of 2020, the rate of new infections increased alarmingly, leading to the announcement of a nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 from 7 April to 1 June (Crawford et al., 2020). Prior to the lockdown ("circuit breaker"), universities began delivering learning activities online and redesigning summative assessments (e.g. invigilated examinations) into online and take-home modalities. After the lockdown, activities were planned to be resumed gradually over three subsequent phases. We provide a brief overview of these phases for context.

Phase 1 ('safe reopening': 2 – 18 June 2020) saw the recommencement of low-risk economic activities. This included HEIs returning to campus for practical and laboratory-based sessions during existing teaching periods, with instructional learning remaining online. However, co-curricular and enrichment activities, and tuition were not to resume (Gov.sg, 2020). In Phase 2 ('safe transition': 19 June – 27 December 2020), some medium-risk economic and social activities had recommenced (Ministry of Health [MOH], 2020a). Phase 3 (from 28 December 2020) was expected to run through mid-2022 (MOH, 2020b; Lim & Ho, 2021). However, there was the occasional easing and re-tightening of stop-start curbs around work and social interaction (Cortez et al., 2021; Ho, 2021).

As of October 2021, the city-state is in Phase 3 and the government has achieved a high rate of around 85% percent of fully vaccinated people (Lim & Ho, 2021). Booster vaccinations were actively encouraged, with "vaccine-differentiated safe management rules" also preventing unvaccinated people from, amongst other things, eating at food courts and entering shopping malls (Lim & Ho, 2021). There was an increase in bilateral arrangements for quarantine-free travel. The highly infectious delta variant had made it impossible to continue a zero-COVID-19 policy that initially had been enacted and that helped avert the huge loss of lives that many countries saw (Ho, 2021). With the pandemic being redesignated as endemic, "Singapore is trying to do what no other nation has successfully done to date: Get through the COVID-19 pandemic without significant loss of life and safely reopen to the rest of the world" (Cortez et al., 2021).

Figure 1

Timeline of Singapore government coronavirus lockdowns – January 2020 to August 2021



Sources: Ang, 2021; Chong, 2021; Channel News Asia, 2021; Ng, 2021; Ministry of Health, 2021a, 2021b.

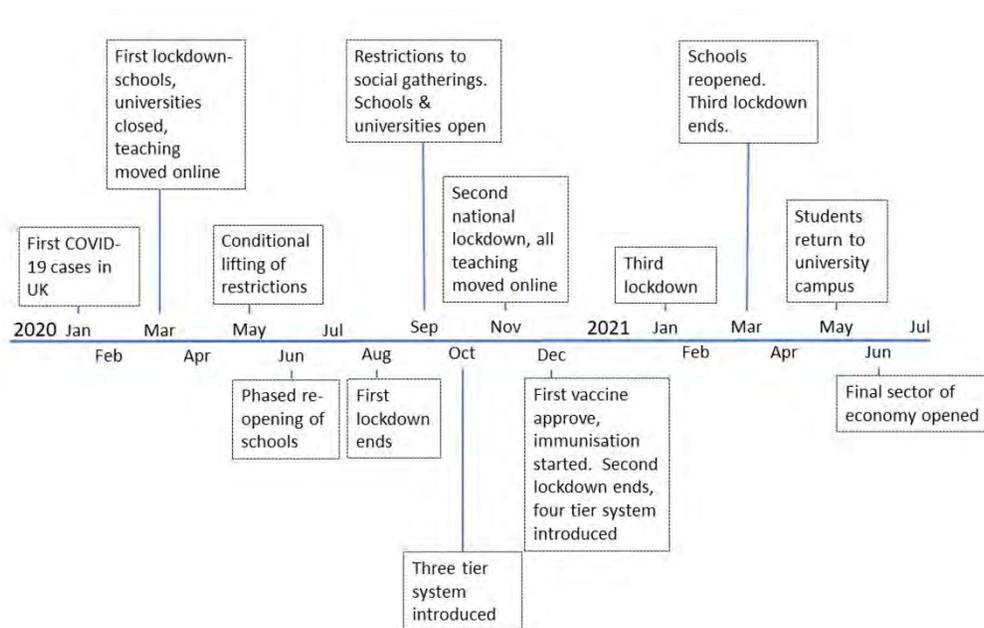
United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is home to some of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world. The UK has a variety of institutions with ten universities established prior to 1872. Universities established post-1992 were mostly former polytechnics focussing on vocational courses and helped by the massification of UK HE (Brady, 2020). The total number of UK universities (including private) is 164 (Clark, 2021).

The UK is the second most popular destination for international students. As of 2018/19, there were 496,000 international students (20% of the student population). The 2018/19 cohort of international students contributed £25.9b to the net UK economy, an increase of 19% from 2015/16 in real terms (Halterback & Conlon, 2021). It is forecast, however, that the pandemic and other political factors will affect the number of international students applying to university in the coming years (Holmes, 2020).

Figure 2

Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns – January 2020 to June 2021



Source: Institute for Government (2021).

As shown in Figure 1, the first positive cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in the UK in January 2020 (Wright, n.d.) and by 21 October 2021, the number of confirmed cases stands at over 8.59m with 139,031 deaths (Gov.UK Coronavirus, n.d.). The first lockdown/stay at home order was issued on 23 March 2020, ending on 14 August.

The start of the 2020/21 academic year saw most universities adopt a hybrid learning approach. Although some in-person teaching was taking place, a three-tier system (tier 1: medium alert (maximum of six people mixing indoors); tier 2: high alert: no mixing of different households indoors apart from support bubbles; tier 3: very high alert (as in tier 2: except outdoor mixing restricted to parks, public gardens, or sports courts: Walker, 2020)) placed some parts of the country back in lockdown and the second UK-wide lockdown began on 5 November 2020, pushing university learning wholly back online.

After an immunisation campaign began on 8 December, restrictions were eased, and the tier-system reintroduced with a tier four announced for London and South East England before Christmas and most of the country moved to Tier 4 on 26 December (tier 4 meant staying at home and was similar to tier 3, except that outdoor mixing was restricted to a maximum of two in parks, public gardens or sports courts: Institute for Government (2021)).

The seven-day moving average of new infections was over 61,000 by 1 January 2021 (Gov.UK Coronavirus, n.d.) and England entered the third lockdown on 6 January (Institute for Government, 2021). Phased reopening began in March and was completed by 21 June. University students could return to campus from 17 May. However, the majority of teaching had finished and exams remained online.

As of mid-October 2021, 78.9 percent of the total UK population over 12 years of age (Gov.UK Coronavirus, n.d.) were fully vaccinated and the booster COVID-19 vaccine rollout had begun. Most travel restrictions have been eased, so vaccinated people do not need to self-isolate upon returning to the UK. Businesses have adopted hybrid working arrangements where possible and schools and universities have reopened to in-person teaching.

Literature review

The literature on COVID-19 and higher education has been growing exponentially (Butler-Henderson et al., 2021). Due to the novelty of the phenomenon, it is understandable that the bulk of the literature thus far has focused on single-institution and single-country studies (Butler-Henderson et al., 2020, 2021). While the numerous institutional case studies all usefully add to our knowledge on the pandemic, the downside of such piecemeal approaches is their fragmenting focus on specific local contexts. This could easily lead to a myopic perspective that misses the big picture (e.g., Bao, 2020; Karalis & Raikou, 2020). While these studies were important in the initial stages of exploration, there is a genuine need to explore the issue more broadly as we seek to generate consensus and shared understanding. Some early works began to take national and international approaches (e.g., Jena, 2020; Toquero, 2020). However, these were not common, and often lacked extensive rigour likely due to time constraints.

Comparisons are important as they bring together disparate approaches to cohesive narratives. Comparing reminds us that the pandemic is not only an institutional problem, and it enables us to learn from one another by adopting best practices, and learning to continually improve them (Sahlberg, 2021). Four stages of pandemic response for higher education institutions are discernible: (1) rapid adaptation ("to rapidly adapt core business for the new context"), (2) improvement ("to optimise the adapted core business to improve quality and begin to consider non-core activities"), (3) consolidation ("to evaluate pre-pandemic measures of social, economic, and environmental success"), and (4) restoration ("to determine what a return to business-as-usual looks like, and how it can occur": Crawford, 2022). A review of the literature up to December

2020 concluded that the vast majority of institutions were still at stage 1 (rapid adaptation), with a minority of institutions being at stage 2 (improvement), an even smaller number at stage 3 (consolidation), and very few articles indicating that their institutions were at stage 4 (restoration). An analysis of hundreds of articles across 2020 showed that whilst there had been growth in stage 2 (improvement) throughout the year, most institutions were yet to transition into stages 3 (consolidation) and 4 (restoration: Butler-Henderson et al., 2021).

The literature on COVID-19 has begun to extend to cross-cultural contexts (e.g., Connor et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021), and some have even begun to bridge the divide between rapid case-based publications and theoretical exposé (e.g., Bartolic et al., 2021). One study focused on synthesising sustainable blended teaching theory with the COVID-19 response (Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020) and another began to compare open innovation theory in the pandemic context (Tejedor et al., 2021). These studies are important as connectors between the pre-pandemic theoretical frames and the pandemic case study literature. What is happening in the COVID-19 environment is offering a research bubble within which we may better understand our students and staff in the intra- and post-pandemic environments (e.g., Bartolic et al., 2021; Tice et al., 2021). Prior to the pandemic, conversations about student experiences (Mann, 2001), student wellbeing (Collings et al., 2014), and transformative education (Moore, 2005) were established, along with many others. These conversations and insights need to be networked into the emerging pandemic literature database. There has also been a recent trend of articles using collaborative autoethnographic reflections as the main research method, meaningfully providing comparative international qualitative research perspectives on the experiences of the pandemic within HE (Wilson et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Singh & Chowdhury, 2021; Stevens et al., 2021; Sumer et al., 2021). Our article continues with this line of inquiry seeking to explore the experiences of multiple higher education stakeholders during the pandemic in Singapore and the UK.

Method

We adopted a collaborative autoethnography approach (Wilson et al., 2020) to enable a critical reflection of six individuals during the pandemic. We were interested in examining the effect of COVID-19 during the pandemic from the perspectives of several stakeholders. As the focus of the study was to allow a cross-cultural analysis (Davidov et al., 2018), communication was conducted via virtual methods, using Zoom as a platform. The author team consisted of two students, two non-teaching academics, and two academics involved in teaching ($n = 6$); three participants each were from the UK and from Singapore. Each team member wrote an independent autoethnographic reflection addressing one of the two broad questions: “What were my experiences working in HE during the COVID-19 global pandemic?” or “What were my experiences studying during the COVID-19 global pandemic?” These questions are an elaboration of the research question that was arrived at because of discussions between all authors via Zoom.

This individual exercise allowed for deep reflection without groupthink and enabled ethnographic reflexivity. The reflection documents had an average of 788 words (range: 533 – 1,071 words). Our team then reviewed each other’s reflections, familiarising ourselves with the data, coding independently, and searching for themes. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method, an inductive approach was employed in analysing the transcripts, and themes were coded without trying to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame. This process reflects the first two stages of thematic analysis – compiling and disassembling (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). At this phase, the team also employed NVivo, a Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA)

tool to facilitate data analysis (Beekhuyzen et al., 2010; Hilal & Alabri, 2013). Thereafter, the data were reassembled and mapped into context, creating the following themes: impact on work and learning, wellbeing, awareness and flexibility. Finally, these themes were then defined, interpreted, and explored (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In alignment with previous research (Wilson et al., 2020), the emphasis has been on enabling an ethical research process that de-identifies autoethnographies by applying gender neutral pseudonyms (Bo, Kim, Nico, Nuru, Robin, and Sam), to protect the identities of the authors. Nonetheless, it may be useful to the reader to have brief background information about the authors:

Irving is a very recent graduate of the University of Portsmouth, with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Games Technology. He is currently working as a motion capture technician.

Jürgen is the Head of Research and a Senior Lecturer with Kaplan Singapore. He is also the editor-in-chief of an educational journal. Jürgen teaches management and business subjects with Kaplan's partner universities. The first time he taught in a higher education context was 30 years ago in his native Germany, and he has held senior management positions in various private education institutions in Singapore.

Lena is a senior lecturer in Accounting and Financial Management at the University of Portsmouth. She is also the course leader of the Accounting Programmes for University of Portsmouth at Kaplan Singapore. She has been teaching finance and accounting programmes in higher education for 15 years. Prior to this, she held various positions and worked internationally in banking and accounting for 13 years.

Michelle has been a member of the Technical Services Unit within the Faculty of Business and Law (BAL) at the University of Portsmouth for over 10 years. As a mature student, she graduated in 2020 with a BA (Hons) degree in Leadership, Business and Management and plans to use this to move to a student-centric role within BAL Study Support.

Shannon is a Research Assistant with Kaplan Singapore, and also the Journal Manager of an educational journal. Her work focuses on the journal and organizing symposia with Kaplan's partner universities. She has two years of work experience.

Tammy is a first-year student of Murdoch University, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Criminology via Kaplan Higher Education Singapore.

Findings and discussion

While analysing our collaborative autoethnographic reflections on experiencing higher education during COVID-19, our binational, diverse group of co-authors independently proposed some common themes, which were derived and synthesised from our reflections and discussions. A summary of the themes and coding rules are provided in Table 2.

Table 2*Themes identified*

Themes	Coding rules	Quoted examples
<i>Impact on work</i>	The impact on work refers to how remote working has affected the wellbeing and efficacy of staff.	Due to the abrupt decision to transition to remote working, I did not have time to prepare an appropriate desk or seat for working from home; I also did not have a fully functioning laptop (Kim).
<i>Impact on learning</i>	The impact on learning refers to how remote study has affected students; their wellbeing, self efficacy and learning journey	One of the challenges presented by the lockdowns is the inability to access crucial or important tools necessary for study (Bo).
<i>Wellbeing</i>	Wellbeing refers to the balance between an individual's resource pool and challenges faced.	Suffered from dry eyes and blurred vision from constantly staring into the laptop screen, backache from inappropriate equipment leading to weight loss (Kim).
<i>Awareness</i>	Awareness refers to the knowledge or perception of a situation or fact.	Being confined at home with little physical interaction with peers, coupled with the day-by-day monotony of things, would lead to a decreased capacity and drive to learn, thereby leading to the search for stimulation elsewhere, i.e., online media, games, etc. (Bo).
<i>Flexibility</i>	Flexibility refers to the flexible working arrangements that have been seen as a way of achieving a work/life balance because of the increased control they give to individuals.	While in my opinion, the impact [of the lockdowns] was mostly negative, there are some positives to come out of it as well (Nico)

The switch to online learning and teaching has largely been a negative experience across the board for participants. Despite the socio-cultural, political, and economic dissimilarities between the two countries, both were impacted in their technology in similar ways. Numerous studies have discussed that stakeholders in higher education have been struggling in different ways with the various restrictive measures that were enacted in response to COVID-19, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'pandemic fatigue' (Lilleholt et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Zerbe et al., 2020). The literature shows that academics and students found it challenging to rapidly adjust to emergency remote teaching (Aboagye et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Nolan et al., 2021; Papagiannidis et al., 2020).

Impact on work

Work is central to our existence and renders meaning to it. Many people work to live and live to work: Work “defines who we are; determines our future prospects; dictates where and with whom we spend most of our time; mediates our sense of self-worth; moulds many of our values and orients our political loyalties” (Suzman, 2020, p. 2). Ochoa & Blanch (2018) argue that the quality of peoples’ lives is marked by work as a source of wellbeing, malaise, blessing and curses, emancipation and alienation, success and failure of health effects and pathological consequences. For this reason, people’s wellbeing is impacted by how they perform at work. In higher education, chronically overworked academics experience managerialism and the metrification of their work and in addition to their ‘real work’, there is also ‘sludge work’, encompassing activities such as filling in forms and following procedures that are caused by over-bureaucratisation (Fleming et al., 2021; Fleming, 2021).

In the initial stages of the lockdown, there was a drop in productivity, due to poor equipment. Mustapha et al. (2021) found that the available resources and infrastructure were insufficient for digital education. Due to the rather sudden switch to digital learning and teaching, some participants did not immediately have the opportunity to acquire the equipment they needed. Kim shared: “Due to the abrupt decision to transition to remote working, I did not have time to prepare an appropriate desk or seat for working from home; I also did not have a fully functioning laptop”.

Most employers acted swiftly and supplied equipment, however, lack of stable internet connectivity at home, although to a lesser degree, did reduce productivity. Pressure of work also intensified in the rapid adaptation stage (Crawford, 2021), and considerable time and effort was needed to convert teaching to an online format, develop new online resources, and interact with students and colleagues virtually (Wray & Kinman, 2021). Nuru noted that preparing online exams was more time consuming.

Employees have been more productive, “working longer hours... starting early and finishing late” (Sam). Kim found that she was working odd hours and constantly checking emails. This was particularly so for academic non-teaching staff, who primarily worked in the office pre-COVID-19. Sam commented that although having never worked from home before, she was able to achieve more when the house was quiet.

Impact on learning

The concept of online learning has existed in some shape or form for many years (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Most universities have integrated the internet and other digital technologies into the curricula, making use of online learning management systems (LMS) or virtual learning environments (VLE). The majority of students will make use of internet-enabled devices, such as a laptop, desktop computer, tablet, or mobile in the classroom.

Chen et al. (2010) investigated how often college students in different types of courses used the web and internet technologies for course-related tasks. Overall, their results point to a positive relationship between web-based learning technology use, student engagement and desirable learning outcomes. In the transition to online study, the student participants did not exhibit any limitations with the use of technology, rather their learning was impacted negatively due to not being able to access “crucial or important tools necessary for study” (Bo) that were only available on campus. The greatest impact to learning was largely due to distractions and poor

communication, although a lack of stable internet access did cause disruption to some students. Nico lamented: “Unfortunately, I had many internet connection issues while I was doing my Zoom classes and because of my WIFI that couldn’t function properly, I missed half of my classes”.

Students’ perception of university life is built around the construct of unique social interactions, experiences and opportunities (Wilson et al., 2020). The rapid adaptation (Crawford, 2021) of digitalised or online learning distorts this perception to an uncomfortable place, leading to a social void that is quickly filled by distractions. The core reasons for distractions from our participants were boredom or lack of stimulation due to being confined at home, are summarised by Bo as follows: “The day-by-day monotony of things would lead to a decreased capacity and drive to learn thereby leading to the search for stimulation elsewhere, i.e. online media, games, etc.”

This would inadvertently lead to disengagement when handling group tasks and students would ignore contributions from others during online classes (as Bo noted for less self-efficacious fellow students). As observed by Wilson et al. (2020), students’ propensity to self-efficacy seems to be an influential factor in engagement with online learning.

Communication

Communication with lecturers or students online can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Students found that they had to wait longer for email responses from their lecturers. This meant they could lose the learning momentum and cause some to disengage. Bo remarked: “It became very clear how integral it is to be able to go speak to a lecturer when you have concerns or need answers to a problem”.

Nonverbal communication is described by Matsumoto et al. (2013) as the transfer and exchange of messages in any and all modalities that do not involve words and is an intrinsic part of any communication. With a nonverbal connection largely removed during digital engagement, it was possible for misunderstandings to occur. Students felt they may have missed out on key information, leading to distress (Nico). Lecturers, too, found it difficult to keep students engaged, largely due to the lack of visual contact and feedback by students whose cameras were mostly switched off. Hence, communication was difficult (Nuru) and Robin commented that when teaching online, “I am used to speaking into the void”, as students mostly do not switch on their cameras for a wide variety of reasons.

Academics were forced to rely on their own resources overnight, using teaching materials not adapted to online delivery (Crabtree et al., 2020, Mustapha et al., 2021). Student dissatisfaction is evident in Office for Students Insights (2021) where only 47.6% of UK students (on-campus) were content with the delivery of learning and teaching of their course during the COVID-19 pandemic. By contrast, 79.9% of distant learners were content with online delivery. Such a contrast between on-campus and distance learners was already observed prepandemic by Chen et al. (2010), and the negative impact of the pandemic was felt more by the traditional on-campus learners.

The technological impact of COVID 19 on the HE working/studying experience was partially perceived as negative due to a lack of adequate infrastructure and the consequent inability to effectively communicate (Mustapha et al., 2021). By critically analysing the specific cause of the negative work/study experience, solutions can be devised and effected with time. This has already been seen in some participant experiences where the institution supplying adequate equipment and technologies improved the working experience.

Wellbeing

Dodge et al. (2012) define wellbeing as the balance between an individual's resource pool and challenges faced. That stability in wellbeing is achieved when individuals have the psychological, social, and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenges. Huppert (2014) maintains that feeling good all the time is not conducive to wellbeing, as it would devalue the role of negative and painful emotions that play an important role in our lives.

Negative wellbeing experiences were evident in all participants as they transition from remote/online working or learning, following the rapid adaptation (Crawford, 2021). All participants felt distressed and experienced loneliness because of isolation. However, the negative effects were more pronounced in academic staff. The increase in workload tilted Dodge et al.'s (2012) 'seesaw' rather rapidly as the staff tried to cope with their limited physical resources and meet the challenges of remote/online working. In a sense, the rapid adaptation (Crawford, 2021) meant individuals were ill-prepared for remote working, in terms of equipment and life structure. Kim suffered from dry eyes and blurred vision from constantly staring into the laptop screen, backache from inappropriate equipment leading to weight loss. Poor work-life balance, physical and mental health were the most overwhelming negative wellbeing experiences. For example, Sam found work-life balance challenging in the initial stages of the lockdown. Nuru found that it was necessary to work during annual leave just to cope. More than a third (36%) of UK university staff indicated that they always or almost always neglect their personal needs due to pressure of work (Wray & Kinman, 2021). Stress-related illnesses manifested themselves in both physical and mental conditions. Nuru found the online classes stressful and exhausting, and suffered from neck and shoulder pain that required constant physiotherapy. Staff also experienced other negative hedonic and eudaimonic aspects (Huppert, 2014), including confusion, uncertainty, and fear (Nuru), and bereavement (Robin). Indeed, more than half (53%) of UK university staff are showing signs of probable depression (Wray & Kinman, 2021).

For students, the 'seesaw' – that represents the drive of an individual to a set-point for well-being and equilibrium between resources and challenges (Dodge et al. 2012) – dips into negative manifestations primarily due to a strain on the social resource pool. Being confined at home during the lockdown meant that they could not meet with their peers (Bo) or make new friends (Nico). Although our student participants do not express psychological issues, only 41.9% students in the UK agree that their university or college has taken sufficient steps to support their mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Office for Students Insights, 2021). The number of students experiencing stress and mental health issues also increased substantially during the pandemic and the need to provide pastoral support was highlighted by Wray & Kinman (2021).

By December 2020, many institutions were in the improvement stage in response to the pandemic (Crawford, 2021), and eudaimonic aspects (Huppert, 2014) set in, meaning that people coped well and their self-perception of wellbeing improved. According to Kahneman et al. (2006), nonwork activities such as active leisure (exercise) or passive leisure (sitting in the garden) can bring happiness. Although staff wellbeing remains fragile, all participants commented on positive experiences such as improvements in work-life balance, health (physical and mental), and good social and family interactions. Despite the increase in workload, Kim experienced work-life balance by taking short breaks throughout the workweek and engaging in physical activities, more family time and meeting friends. Sam found balance by sitting in the garden during breaks in good weather. Remote working enabled Robin to develop new academic networks and lasting

friendships, and even indulge in thoughts of life in retirement. Nuru saw the benefits of lifestyle improvements due to better quality sleep, healthy homemade meals, and more time for exercise. Nico was surprised to find that meeting friends online could lead to lasting relationships, whilst Bo had more time to perform or engage in other activities of interest, along with studies. Although there seems to be a general improvement in the wellbeing, some of the negative effects to the physiological and psychological wellbeing caused by the pandemic cannot be ignored, therefore HEIs need to continue to do more to tackle mental health issues in all its stakeholders.

Awareness

Awareness usually refers to the knowledge or perception of a situation or fact (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In reflecting on our experiences of the pandemic, we demonstrated awareness of the broader situation in our respective national contexts, and commented that they were “a rollercoaster” (Sam), “challenging” (Kim), and a “bittersweet one” (Nico). Covid-19 had “a large impact on student life” (Bo). These comments show similarity across experiences and that the pandemic took a toll on us.

Some of the academic and non-teaching staff experienced increased opportunities of “international... academic collaboration” (Kim, Robin) with “more... fulfilling and thrilling” (Robin) projects materialising, especially the writing of collaborative journal articles. This experience is echoed by Cai et al. (2021), who observed a drastic increase in ‘parachuting collaborations’ during the pandemic, i.e. new and fast-increasing international collaboration not seen pre-pandemic. Nico commented that they cultivated “self-discipline” and “time-management” and felt that “all in all..., the pandemic has given me an opportunity to grow as a person”. Whilst appreciating the flexibility in creating their own timetable, studying from home made them more personally responsible. Bo noted that there was a “flip side” to the newfound freedom: “that it became very easy to lose track of one’s priorities and just keep on pushing work to later”. Both student participants had to overcome the easy access to all manner of distractions that come from studying from home. For Nuru, they used new software (Notability) in their teaching to create “a classroom effect for the quantitative part of the topic”, something they “always intended to use..., but [ironically] it took COVID to make it work”.

The themes of self-awareness and social awareness can be combined, as awareness of self and the social are intrinsically entwined. Kim observed that they “learned to be more appreciative of what I have throughout the pandemic”, whilst Nico learned “not to take things for granted”. When Sam’s organisation used a rota system and they worked half of the time in the office, they “appreciated the social aspect and being able to separate work and home life during this time”. This shows opportunities for cultivating gratitude and spending more time with family members, especially as many people around the world fared much worse during the pandemic as compared to the researchers. Robin commented that “social justice and the [ecological] environment have become increasingly more important to me”, showing that the pandemic allowed some participants to develop a heightened sense of awareness of the importance of our relationship with nature.

Flexibility

Flexible working arrangements have been seen as a way of achieving a work-life balance because “of the increased control they give to individuals” (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020, p. 678). During the lockdowns however, working from home became the new normal, where teaching in classrooms was suspended and moved online and most materials and academics needed to be

adapted at short notice (Crabtree et al., 2020). Although some of the changes were perceived as negative, such as technology issues or changes to wellbeing, the flexibility of working from home was seen as one of the positive aspects of the new online and blended learning.

While in my opinion, the impact [of the lockdowns] was mostly negative, there are some positives to come out of it as well. I feel that because I didn't have to commute to and from campus to get any work done I had more time to perform or engage in other activities of interest to me along with my study (Bo).

According to Vyas et al. (2020), the pros of working from home and studying online were decreased transportation time and increased flexibility of time during work. Nico was able to attend class even when sick, while Robin stated working from home “increased time and flexibility”. This reduction in commuting time was considered a benefit, saving time, expense and energy while learning online enabled greater flexibility in terms of both teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020). There was also a benefit to the ecological environment (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). The extra time gained was also used to engage in other activities and with other people in the household leading to an improved work/life balance. Some employers also assisted with the additional financial costs of working from home such as heating, lighting and computer equipment (Wray & Kinman, 2021).

Crabtree et al. (2020) understood the rapid switch to online teaching had resulted in excessive work demands. This sudden move meant academic staff required more training and assistance with the design and uploading of resources. Those who were using the virtual learning environment successfully for resources prior to the lockdown became more accustomed though, “using the technology to provide lecturers and seminars” (Sam) and “after a month or so it became the new normal” (Robin). Robin also felt it was “a liberating experience” being able to teach and work anywhere, not just from home allowing for flexibility in where and when they worked leading to a better work-life balance (Vyas et al, 2020). Taking short breaks throughout the workweek (Kim) and systematically planning the work schedule throughout the week when traditional office hours do not have to be adhered to impacted on work engagement. Nuru observed: “Getting the balance right was difficult. Preparing online exams is more time-consuming than paper-based exams”.

During some periods of increased workload, it also meant starting work earlier and finishing later (Sam), and some self-discipline (Nico) was required to avoid some of the distractions at home. Flexibility in workloads and deadlines gave more autonomy to staff and students (Wray & Kinman, 2021) allowing them to mitigate the amount of stress experienced.

It is the very goal of thematic analysis to uncover common themes. Consequently, despite the extreme comparison between the two chosen diverse countries (see Table 1) – and the different experiences of students, teachers and non-teaching academic staff notwithstanding – it is unsurprising that quasi-universal themes such as work and learning emerged. This is not to say that we were not a tad astonished by the commonalities of our experiences across continents. As both Singapore and the UK easily qualify as ‘rich countries’ and as higher education is of a high quality in both countries, these similarities perhaps outweigh the otherwise extreme differences. Comparing a rich country (e.g. Singapore) with a poor country (e.g. Mozambique: Martins et al., 2021) would have yielded a greater heterogeneity in the findings.

Conclusions

Practical implications

This research created a glance at the voices of students, lecturers and non-teaching academics during COVID-19 in the UK and in Singapore. There is a tendency to look at technology as a panacea. History, however, has repeatedly shown that technology must not be isolated from sound pedagogical practices, such as the constructive alignment of learning objectives, teaching and learning and assessments (Biggs et al., 2019), student engagement for critical thinking (Brookfield et al., 2019) and the enhancement of metacognitive competences. Credibility and authenticity (Brookfield, 2015) of the teacher are more important than technical gimmicks, though it is of course appropriate to use technology as a tool in the classroom, and gamification may lead to some increased student engagement (Bawa, 2019; Göksün & Gürsoy, 2019). Our above discussion on the impact of learning leads to our recommendation that HEIs need to have the basic ICT infrastructure for online learning and provide access to applications and learning platforms to their staff and students (Ali, 2020). In order to build online learning capacities and increase staff and student readiness, continuous online training that emphasises basic and advanced functions of online learning platforms, student response systems and other educational technologies, should be provided to both teaching staff and students.

Although there have been online proctored exams, COVID-19 has led to a reduction of examinations and a trend towards more open-book exams (Rudolph et al., 2021). However, many of the open-book exams are not good practice yet, as they are likely quick replicas of traditional examinations. All in all, a reduction in closed-book exams is perhaps one of the few positive developments that the pandemic has brought about, leading potentially to more authentic assessments, more real-world examples and advice, more industry partnerships as well as co-curricular employability training.

The above-mentioned principles and practices should continue to perform as foundational underpinnings and serve all higher education stakeholders well, even or especially in an extraordinary crisis such as the ongoing pandemic. In higher education, there have been many artificial separations between stakeholders – those between students and lecturers and between lecturers and non-teaching staff (and full-time faculty and casualised adjuncts). With the nature of the pedagogical relationship having shifted towards commercialism, a near-derogatory narrative towards students has evolved in some of the literature (Fleming et al., 2021). However, in order to improve the learning and teaching experiences, all stakeholders need to work together. Good practices include student-staff partnerships that may involve students' active learning, subject-based research and inquiry, scholarship of teaching and learning; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (Harrington et al., 2014).

Finally, our discussion demonstrates that staff wellbeing remains fragile. Staff wellbeing epitomises an 'Achilles tendonitis' where the initial trauma of rapid adaptation leads to pain, stiffness and affected movement, i.e. the heightened level of stress and poor psychological wellbeing that manifested itself in stress-related illnesses. The treatment for tendonitis is rest, ice and support to prevent further injury (NHS, 2020). Rest is important through annual leave (and not working during it), and staff were able to engage in some 'ice', through exercise or leisure activities as evidenced in the positive wellbeing section. However, the question for the employer is how they can best aid the recovery and support employees, as they begin to return to the office and in-person teaching resumes. Therefore, counseling services are not only required for students, but

also for all staff involved in HE. Other recommendations may involve looking at research that examines the consequences of the pandemic such as financial difficulties, and the necessity of parental support with childcare during the pandemic (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Tomar, 2020).

Limitations

A limitation of this paper is the small sample size. As collaborative autoethnographies typically entail rich analysis and deep reflexivity, the sample size tends to be small. In our case, the research examines the perspectives of the six authors. This kind of qualitative research makes no claims of generalisability, objectivity or measurability (Queirós et al., 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Another limitation is the subjectivity of autoethnographies. As each researcher has their own unique experience not only based on demographics such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and occupation, but also on highly personal perceptions, the findings of another group of researchers may differ and even the analysis of the findings is the result of social constructions.

Conclusion

Our manuscript begins with an overview of the effects of COVID-19 on higher education. However, we focus more on the comparisons, bringing together a cohesion of contrasting approaches. We also examine the reflections of multiple HE stakeholders; students, academic teaching and non-teaching staff, and their experiences during the pandemic in both the UK and Singapore. Although there are vast differences between the two countries and their HE sectors, five common themes emerged from the analysis showing both positive and negative aspects of the experience. Wellbeing was the main theme linking all the others together. A review of the literature and to some extent, our primary research show that there is an opportunity for continuous improvement with respect to online delivery and curriculum enhancement, and to achieve this, we need to engage all stakeholders. The research has also shown that staff wellbeing remains fragile, therefore support for staff, and of course students, in terms of counselling is required.

There are many opportunities for future research, both regarding themes identified in our article and beyond. For instance, while we thankfully did not experience too many financial, parental support, or childcare-related issues, we are fully aware of them, just as we are about new pressures on the environment as well as increased racism, inequality and global unemployment (United Nations, n.d.). In particular, we would like to encourage more comparative research on countries in the peripheral vision of mainstream academia, such as most African and Asian countries that generally remain under-researched. Universalising our own experiences and those similar to ours is unhelpful in attempting to appreciate complex global phenomena such as higher education in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest or funding.

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