

# “Switching to the Online MA TESOL Program”: Experiences and Decision-Making Processes of International Learners

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the curricula and mode of instruction for many postgraduate taught and research programs. Before the pandemic, many MA TESOL programs included on-campus tutorials as requirements, as the curricula were designed based on on-campus activities. However, as the United Kingdom restricted face-to-face teaching due to social distancing, most of the courses were switched to online learning platforms during the pandemic. Although most courses returned to on-campus teaching during the 2021/2022 academic year, a group of East Asian international students decided to continue their MA TESOL program online as an alternative option. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and decision-making processes about this group of MA TESOL students and their decisions to finish their degrees via the online completion option. In line with social cognitive career and motivation theory, the results indicated that flexibility, career development through online learning options, and concerns about job security were the main three themes that arose within this group of students. The outcomes provide suggestions to university leaders and program directors in regard to developing additional online courses and programs to meet the needs of adult and postgraduate students who cannot attend on-campus courses, particularly MA TESOL learners.

**Keywords:** MA TESOL, language teaching program, online learning, social cognitive career and motivation theory, teachers' professional development, teacher training

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

English language teaching and learning is one of the most popular educational topics in the fields of foreign language teaching, language education, and teachers' professional development (Smith & Foley, 2015). A large number of pre-service and in-service teachers decide to take one or two years-off teaching in order to develop their foreign language teaching and learning skills, strategies, and developments. Besides the traditional Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Teaching degree programs for undergraduate students who want to gain their initial teacher's license for kindergarten, primary, and secondary school education (Castéra et al., 2020; Suryani, 2021), most of the Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MA TESOL) programs do not lead to the teacher's initial license, such as the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England. In other words, the MA TESOL usually plays as an enhancement program for qualified teachers or individuals who want to upgrade their teaching strategies and skills without the goals for initial teacher license after graduation.

In the field of foreign language teaching and learning, the MA TESOL is a popular academic program and option for teachers—particularly graduate teachers—looking to upgrade their skills (Caswell, 2017). Although there are no official statistics or reports from government agencies, nearly 50 British universities offer the MA TESOL or related degrees (e.g., Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Master of Arts in Teaching English as an Additional Language, etc.). As the United Kingdom (thereafter the UK) is a popular educational destination for undergraduate and postgraduate learners, particularly for English language teaching, many international students, regardless of their geographic locations and nationalities, come to the UK for postgraduate education and training (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015).

Unlike educational leadership, which may rely on theoretical training and conceptual developments for managerial skills, some scholars (Moorhouse, 2020; Murray et al., 2008; Sokal et al., 2020) have indicated that teachers' professional development, particularly in foreign language teaching and learning, may require intensive face-to-face interactions, on-site training, student teaching activities, and peer-to-peer exercises on campus (Gao & Zhang, 2020; Lightbown & Spada, 2020) in order to enable learners to gain a full understanding of the teaching activities at hand. In the case of the MA TESOL programs, some pre-service student-teachers do not have prior teaching experiences. Therefore, the student-teaching activities become one of the first chances to conduct real classroom teaching before they managed their own classroom environments after graduation (Nasrollahi Shahri, 2018).

Although the MA TESOL and foreign language teaching programs rely on on-campus teaching and learning experiences (Jaramillo et al., 2020), many classrooms and universities needed to switch their instruction to online platforms during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to lockdowns, social distancing recommendations, and international travel restrictions. As a result, many MA TESOL academic courses and programs were delivered via online and distance learning, particularly in the United Kingdom. This sudden change in academic program delivery modes significantly changed the plans and decision-making processes of many students and teachers (Iqbal & Sohail, 2021; Yunus et al., 2021). Many MA TESOL learners had applied for on-campus programs to gain face-to-face experience with their teachers and classmates. Some learners also believed that study abroad opportunities would provide them with significant student experiences (Brux & Fry, 2010) as MA TESOL learners. Some further believed that the social and external English language environments would increase their language proficiency and applications (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018). Therefore, on-campus experiences offer useful and meaningful experiences for international students, particularly MA TESOL learners from different global communities.

### *1.2 Purpose of the Study*

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the British government asked colleges and universities to switch their on-campus courses and programs to online delivery in order to follow lockdown and social distancing recommendations. Many international students were unable to come to the UK due to travel restrictions, self-funded quarantine conditions, and visa issues. As universities continued to offer excellent educations to learners regardless of the global pandemic, learners were able to continue their coursework online or defer their offer of a place at university to the next available term. Under these circumstances, the researcher aimed to understand the experiences and decision-making processes of a group of East Asian MA TESOL learners who decided to continue with their academic program online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on social cognitive career and motivation theory, the research study was guided by two research questions:

- 1) Why do MA TESOL learners decide to complete their academic program via the online alternative (even if face-to-face lectures will be available after the lockdown)?
- 2) How would the MA TESOL learners describe their online learning experiences and decision-making processes, as they had expected to gain on-campus learning experiences during their admission period?

### *1.3 Significance of the Study*

Currently, many studies have addressed online learning, online degree completion plans, motivations underlying online teaching and learning, and online students' experiences (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Iqbal & Sohail, 2021; Yunus et al., 2021). However, only a few have investigated the problems involved in switching from on-campus to online programs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. More importantly, many universities developed and continued to offer the online MA TESOL as one of the completion options after the lockdown. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns created a new direction in terms of educational trends (i.e., online learning for traditional on-campus programs). Therefore, the results of this study will fill research and practical gaps in the field.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Social Cognitive Career and Motivation Theory*

Social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a; Kwee, 2021) was used in this study. Social cognitive career and motivation theory was developed based on two theories: 1) social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) and 2) self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1995). Social cognitive career and motivation theory argues that individuals' motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes might be impacted by psychological and internal factors through self-efficacy, and by social and external factors. In terms of the internal factors, academic

interests, personal considerations, and achievements regarding education and career goals may influence individuals' self-efficacy and internal understanding, which lead to individuals' motivations and decision-making processes. In terms of the external factors, career development, financial considerations, and surrounding environments and individuals may play a role (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021b). Although one or more factors may impact individuals in this context, researchers argue that learning motivations could be influenced by one of the above factors. For details of social cognitive career and motivation theory, please refer to Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Social Cognitive Career and Motivation Theory (Dos Santos, 2021a; Kwee, 2021)

## 2.2 Online Learning and Decision-Making Processes

Research directions regarding decision-making processes and learning motivations usually depend on the learners' geographic locations, backgrounds, economic factors, academic majors, and career developments (Diegelman & Subich, 2001; Dos Santos & Lo, 2018; Flores & O'Brien, 2002; Kwee, 2021). Although some studies (Thomson et al., 2012) have drawn conclusions about individuals' and groups' motivations and decision-making processes, these motivations and processes may change due to internal and external factors. For example, a recent study (Lent et al., 2019) collected data from a group of college students regarding their understandings of social cognitive career theory and self-efficacy in order to examine their (online) learning achievements and career decision-making processes. Hoang and Wyatt (2021) also argued that pre-service teachers' self-efficacy could be impacted by their heritage culture and personal beliefs about teaching and learning. Although schools and university lecturers provided guidelines and directions, self-efficacy played significant roles in their career decision-making processes and the self-efficacy as pre-service teachers in their foreign language classroom environments and career pathways, particularly in some unfamiliar backgrounds, such as online classrooms (Kwee, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic became a milestone in online learning (Dos Santos, 2022). Online learning is not a new educational trend. Many colleges and universities offer on-campus and blended learning courses and programs, as some forms of instruction, such as roleplay interactions, cannot be delivered as easily via online platforms (Dhawan, 2020). Students may argue that the learning quality, outcomes, and achievements involved in their studies may be impacted due to online-based interactions. As a result, the satisfaction of students can be impacted (Wang et al., 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, not all English as a Foreign Language teachers and students experienced online and blended classroom environments. Students in the face-to-face classroom environments usually had higher motivation and more interests as the individuals could interact with each other. Although students might receive flexibility from their online classrooms, students continued to take the face-to-face courses for better experiences (Setyaningsih & Sunaryo, 2021).

Due to the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK, students could not select their learning delivery modes. However, after the government ended lockdown regulations, on-campus courses began to return. A recent study (Tang et al., 2021) indicated that higher education students had positive experiences with online learning, regardless of their gender. Thus, more online-based activities and interactions should be employed in order to enhance learning experiences. Some scholars (Lee et al., 2021) also argued that the COVID-19 pandemic offered inconvenience to university students and lecturers who did not have any prior experiences in online learning. Many could overcome the technological challenges as students could continue their education during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly international students. Other scholars (Littenberg-Tobias & Reich, 2020) have indicated that male learners in

particular might enjoy online learning, especially in MOOC and postgraduate education. The results of Lin's (2021) study indicated that the participating university students expressed their support for the way in which attainment value, utility value, mastery-approach goals, mastery-avoidance goals, performance-avoidance goals, and functional self-efficacy played significant roles after the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin, 2021). Another study (Zapata-Cuervo et al., 2021) also argued that, although online learning might limit peer-to-peer and on-campus experiences, self-efficacy and concerns for their achievements could impact students' positions and roles in online learning. More importantly, many students expressed that, if the quality and learning outcomes of online learning met their needs and standards, they would be willing to continue their online education (Brown et al., 2015; Stewart & Lowenthal, 2021).

### *2.3 The Relationship between Online Learning and Self-Efficacy*

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their skills and abilities in terms of handling, managing, organizing, and conducting a series of behaviors required to create given attainments (Bandura, 1995). When individuals have a strong belief in the targeted behaviors and goals, the behaviors and goals are more likely to be achieved with strong levels of self-confidence, and vice versa (Jones, 2017; Kwee, 2021). Four elements have been categorized in this respect: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states (Hodges, 2008).

Peechapol et al. (2018) stated that teachers' self-efficacy might influence their understandings and beliefs regarding online learning, particularly in regard to teachers' professional development. A recent study (Regier, 2021) indicated that pre-service teachers' self-efficacy was mostly impacted due to unfamiliar backgrounds. In the 2000s, teachers' beliefs in online learning tended to focus on the applications and understandings of their computer skills and knowledge, as not all teachers could use computers for their assignments and peer-to-peer interactions. Although computer-aided language learning and technologically-assisted teaching and learning approaches were widely discussed, teachers did not receive enough training for their computer-aided language classroom environments. As a result, teachers' self-efficacy could be significantly impacted as they could not use technology in their classrooms (Alqurashi, 2016). However, due to successful studies and applications over the past decade, many foreign language classroom environments have incorporated computer-aided language teaching tools and strategies, particularly in blended learning classrooms (Güntaş et al., 2021; Kuimova et al., 2017) and flipped learning classrooms (Gok et al., 2021). Due to the positive outcomes with their students, many teachers have decided to acquire new knowledge about online learning and upgrade their classrooms with technologically-assisted tools (Dos Santos, 2022b; Rafiola et al., 2020). According to Alqurashi (2016), teachers could employ some computer-aided and technologically-assisted tools and approaches in their classroom environment without significant limitations.

Positively, scholars (Safapour et al., 2019) argued that pre-service, in-service, and students understood the relationship between social media and online classroom environments. As many teachers and students use social media for their daily practices, they might transfer the management and application from social media platforms to their online classroom environments. Although not all teachers were ready to use social media and online platforms in their online classroom environment during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, many could overcome the challenges (Hong et al., 2021).

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 The General Inductive Approach*

The general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) is appropriate to use in this study because it can capture qualitative data from a group of people with similar backgrounds in a given situation and setting. In this case, the researcher wanted to understand the experiences and decision-making processes of a group of East Asian MA TESOL learners who decided to continue with their academic programs online during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this problem impacted almost all MA TESOL learners with British university backgrounds, the current methodology may represent a wider perspective than that specifically examined in this study, covering the problems faced by most MA TESOL learners.

### *3.2 Recruitment of the Participants*

A snowball sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009) was employed to invite 110 MA TESOL learners who had planned to enroll as on-campus learners to participate in this study. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown regulations, many learners decided to switch, continue, and complete their MA TESOL program online. The researcher contacted the program administrators of the MA TESOL at nine British universities. All nine program administrators agreed to participate in the study and forwarded the invitation letter to their MA TESOL learners. As a

result, a total of 110 participants agreed to participate. The participants needed to meet all of the following criteria in order to join the study:

- 1) Applied to the MA TESOL as an on-campus program (both full-time and part-time students were accepted);
- 2) Decided to switch to the online TESOL option due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- 3) Decided to continue and complete the MA TESOL through the online option (although on-campus courses were available after the lockdown);
- 4) International students who needed to be sponsored with student visas for the on-campus program;
- 5) Currently living in the East Asia region or categorized as an East Asian learner.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Three qualitative data collection (Merriam, 2009) tools were used: semi-structured interview sessions, focus group activities, and member checking interview sessions. In the semi-structured interviews, the researcher captured the students' experiences, decision-making processes, and motivations about switching (i.e., from on campus to the online option). Each session lasted between 63 and 74 minutes. After the semi-structured interview sessions were completed, all participants were invited to participate in the focus group activities; 11 focus group activities were carried out, with 10 participants in each group. Each focus group activity lasted between 89 and 112 minutes. After the interview sessions and focus group activities were completed, the researcher categorized the qualitative data based on each participant. The researcher sent the qualitative data back to each participant for confirmation and for the member checking interviews. During the individual member checking interview sessions, the participant confirmed and agreed with what they had shared. All participants agreed with their data. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of these data collection procedures were conducted online via cellphone applications. During the data collection procedure, a digital recorder was used to record the voice messages from the participants.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Open coding and axial coding techniques were used to study the data acquired (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once the data were collected from the participants, the researcher transcribed the voice messages to form written transcripts. Then, the researcher re-read the written transcripts multiple times to categorize some of the potential themes and subthemes. The open coding technique was used to narrow down the massive amounts of data acquired to different categories and themes. Based on this technique, the researcher categorized 15 themes and 11 subthemes. However, further data analysis needed to be conducted in order to group together meaningful themes for the results (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the axial coding technique was used for further data analysis. As a result, three themes and three subthemes were yielded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### 3.5 Human Subject Protection

All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was supported by the Woosong University Academic Research Funding 2022.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

Although the participants were from different countries and regions and enrolled in five MA TESOL programs at different British universities, many shared similar stories and experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to how the government regulations and university management changed their plans for learning. Based on the data from the participants, the researcher categorized three themes and three subthemes. Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes of this study.

**Table 1.** Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes
Flexibility: Geographic Limitations and Time Zone Differences
Access to the Materials
Balance between School Matters and Personal Responsibilities
Career Development with Online Learning Options
Online Teaching and Learning become an Educational Trend
Job Security Concerns

#### 4.1 Flexibility: Geographic Limitations and Time Zone Differences

*...time, location, and the COVID-19 pandemic...cannot limit my learning achievement...I can learn my materials in my home country...I do not want to defer my study...because I want to upgrade my brain and my personal goals...the university offers us flexibility...I accepted it and enjoyed the online learning option...(Participant #41, South Korean)*

Participants indicated that the online MA TESOL options offered them flexibility because the lectures could be studied during their leisure time (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019); this was particularly valuable as the participants are currently living in East Asia. Although many could not attend on-campus lectures with their peers and instructors, many believed that the benefits of online learning outweighed the disadvantages (Iqbal & Sohail, 2021), such as a lack of peer-to-peer discussions.

*...I can glad that the university offered us the option...to complete this degree online...although we are living in different part of the world...the learning outcomes and the discussions are still on-time and great...students, teachers, and tutors are all engaged...I did not feel regret...because of this smart movement...(Participant #22, Hong Kong)*

##### 4.1.1 Access to the Materials

*...I can re-read the materials...I am not a good note-taker...the materials and keynotes were posted online...I can download the materials and read it during my leisure time...I can listen to the lecturer...in my car...on my way back home and to work...between my home to downtown Tokyo...my spouse also listened to my lecturer...and we learned new knowledge together...(Participant #31, Japanese)*

*...the live lessons, recording, and pre-record lessons are excellent...many of us [students] can download and re-watch the videos again...because many of my classmates are non-native English speakers from Asia...also, when I was doing my assignment, I could watch the video again...so I can gain some new ideas from my professor...(Participant #40, South Korean)*

A previous study (Brown et al., 2013) indicated that, although on-campus, live, and pre-recorded lessons might have different channels and structures, learners can receive the same quality of teaching and achievements due to the structures and curriculum plans involved. In this case, many participants expressed that the live and recorded lessons allowed them to re-access and download the lessons. Learners could re-watch and re-listen to all their lessons without geographic and time limitations, which was particularly valuable when clinical and hands-on practice was involved (McCutcheon et al., 2018). Other participants also expressed that the recorded lessons helped them to overcome difficult exercises that they were not familiar with.

*...for some ideas, such as lexical sets...this is not my expertise...because in Hong Kong, we tended to focus on the teaching strategies and English language classroom management...I can re-watch the videos multiple times...so I can learn from the lessons and textbook...I am glad that my tutor uploaded the lesson on the platform...(Participant #21, Hong Kong)*

*...we have to complete a module about textbook design...I understood the ways of...textbook designs for East Asian learners...but I don't know the designs for non-East Asian learners...I have no interest in this area...but I could re-watch and re-access...and re-activate my knowledge...with the videos...multiple times...if I can only listen to the instructor once, I do not think I can pass the module...(Participant #25, Hong Kong)*

In short, many East Asian learners argued that, as they had received undergraduate training in their home countries, they were not completely ready for new knowledge and ideas from British perspectives. Therefore, accessing the videos and materials after the lessons helped them to overcome related challenges.

##### 4.1.2 Balance between School Matters and Personal Responsibilities

Some learners are parents and busy professionals with an intensive working timetable. Not all could attend live lessons, as they are not located in the same time zone (i.e., the time differences between British and East Asian time zones). The flexibility of the online courses and programs offered them opportunities to find a balance between school matters and personal responsibilities (Dos Santos, 2022c), said:

*...I am a parent...I was planning to complete the degree on-campus as a part-time student...but the COVID-19 pandemic stopped all the on-campus activities...then, I switched to the online program to handle my work and family issues...things changed...I think I will just complete the program entirely online...(Participant #8, Chinese)*

*...I planned to go on-campus for the full-time program...but the country [the United Kingdom] recommended the lockdown, and all lessons were taught online...I have to stay in my home country...for the program...because the program is almost completed...I do have some new plans and new ideas for the next step...I have to balance between my education and my future plan...the degree and education is over...the online master is not my priority anymore... (Participant #50, Singaporean)*

In short, as East Asian learners are located in different time zones to their British universities, many could not attend the live lessons hosted by the instructors or tutors: “*our module started at 7 PM in the evening...but it is 3 AM in China...*” (Participant #5, Chinese). As a result, in line with social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a), many participants believed that the flexibility and balance between personal responsibilities and school matters played significant roles in their online MA TESOL and online learning options. The online learning and online courses met the learners’ needs, particularly in terms of flexibility and balancing other responsibilities (Sinring et al., 2022).

#### 4.2 Career Development with Online Learning Options

Although some learners work toward postgraduate education for the sake of personal enhancement, many plan ahead for their career development after graduation, particularly East Asian learners (Jung & Lee, 2019). For decades, online learning options have offered busy professionals the chance to gain qualifications through online platforms, which is particularly valuable for senior-level managers who cannot leave their positions for full-time education (Dos Santos & Lo, 2018; Guerin et al., 2015). Although many participants knew about online learning programs, they stated that online completion options completely changed their understanding of postgraduate education, said:

*...I knew online MA TESOL...but I did not think about it...I did not know it is a good chance or option for me...the admission team emailed me and asked if I wanted to start my program online...or wait for the on-campus modules...I took the online ones because I want to gain the qualification as soon as possible for my enhancement and CV...many Malaysian employers need that qualification...I needed the degree for new career opportunities... (Participant #54, Malaysian)*

*...I need to enhance my CV and my teaching skills...I was planning to go to the United Kingdom for the degree...but due to the COVID-19 pandemic...the online option was available...and I believed it is a good start and good try for all students...not only us...but our English Language Learners in my classroom environments too...so why not enhance my career development with the online learning options... (Participant #53, Malaysian)*

##### 4.2.1 Online Teaching and Learning Become an Educational Trend

Many teachers’ professional development courses and initial training programs are currently designed based on on-campus learning experiences and face-to-face curricula and instruction, particularly courses and degree programs in Asia (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Shin et al., 2018). Although many universities have designed initial online-based training programs, many require face-to-face student teaching internships to enable students to gain supervision experience in real classroom environments (Zehr & Korte, 2020). In this study, many believed that the online MA TESOL programs offered them an innovative form of professional development and training, which are required for future teachers and school professionals, especially considering that online teaching and learning is becoming an educational trend, particularly in foreign language teaching and learning (Yunus et al., 2021), said:

*...not only my master’s degree is taught online...many English courses and language courses are taught online too...I can see the massive opportunities and options here...I am happy that I enjoyed the teaching and learning methods of online delivery...I knew how to teach and learn online...in the future, I think I can teach both online and on-campus English courses...in any centers or schools... (Participant #74, Taiwanese)*

*...many schools and employers are looking for people who can deliver online courses...I enjoyed online learning for my master’s degree...and I understood the challenges and problems for online courses and modules’ learners...I could see this online master’s degree is a career opportunity for me to apply to other on-campus and online teaching jobs in the future... (Participant #84, Vietnamese)*

In line with social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a), interests in career development played a significant role in the experiences and decision-making processes of the participants. The East Asian learners made strong statements about the relationship between their qualifications and their career development after receiving their MA TESOL (Jung & Lee, 2019). Although many *wanted to go to school for the on-campus experiences, many could not afford the deferral “because I cannot wait for my job promotion...I have to have my degree within a year...”* (Participant #82, Vietnamese). Therefore, the online completion option was immediately selected by many of them (Dos Santos & Lo, 2018; Guerin et al., 2015; Teichler, 2015). Many participants also

believed that online education would soon become an educational trend. Their online learning experiences would become an advantage in terms of potential job opportunities, particularly in foreign language teaching and learning, after the COVID-19 pandemic (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Yunus et al., 2021). According to Nguyen (2021), online education is the trend in our educational environment. University lecturers and leadership should help students to overcome online learning barriers. After the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and online degree would become a significant part of the university system.

#### 4.3 Job Security Concerns

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries and regions have suffered economic downfalls, particularly East Asian countries, due to their strong social distancing recommendations and regulations (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, many participants believed that job security played a significant role in their long-term development. As many participants believed that their current income is more important than their education and personal development, their online education and degree completion plans matched their expectations about the balance between work and education (Lulaj, 2022), said:

*...I do not have to resign from my current job...no one can guarantee any jobs and positions after I complete my master's degree...I am fine with my job and I do not want to leave my current position...I have a good income to support my family...if I do not have any income...master's or whatever degrees are useless...(Participant #98, Person from Macau)*

*...a master's degree holder without income and jobs are useless...I need to have a good position and then a good degree...because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of my friends and teachers...lost their job...I am still working with my job...I believe income is more important than any education or degree plan...I will not give up my job...the online completion option is good for us...(Participant #39, Japanese)*

According to James et al. (2021), postgraduate students decided to attend and earn their postgraduate qualification (mainly) for career development. Many have career goals and understand the relationship between their qualification and career promotion after graduation. In short, in line with social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a), financial considerations and job security played a significant role in the experiences and decision-making processes of online MA TESOL learners. One study (Wang et al., 2021) has indicated that the financial crisis hindered the development of many Asian countries and regions. In Asia, the teaching profession also faces human resources challenges due to financial and global health difficulties (Hoang, 2020). Many participants' desires about on-campus learning had changed due to financial challenges, career pathways, and job security concerns (Lulaj, 2022).

## 5. Limitations and Future Developments

First, the current study only focuses on problems experienced in the course of online MA TESOL programs. However, other teaching and learning programs, such as bachelor's degrees, may face similar challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, future research studies should expand the scope of this study to other courses and programs in order to meet the needs of other students and university leaders.

Second, the current study focused on students who had decided to switch from on-campus programs to online completion options. However, some learners decided to defer their studies until the next academic year. The experiences and decision-making processes of these groups of learners should also be investigated. Therefore, future research studies should capture the experiences of learners who decided to wait for the next available academic term.

Third, the current study only focused on voices and comments from East Asian learners. Other international students who are currently living in other countries and regions could not travel to the United Kingdom, due to governmental policies. The voices of these groups of international students would be useful in reforming and improving online teaching and learning platforms, particularly for MA TESOL programs. Therefore, future research studies should focus on all international students who are planning to enroll in MA TESOL programs.

Fourth, some scholars may suggest that a small and focused study should be conducted in order to outline and reflect the situation of each individual university, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, future research studies should conduct a case study in order to collect comments and opinions from a small group of students under the current situation.

Fifth, the teaching and learning strategies of the university lecturers also played significant roles in the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of the participants. As many scholars argued, the teaching strategies



and styles of the teachers and university lecturers could impact the turnover and decision-making processes of the students. Therefore, future research studies should also focus on the teaching and learning strategies and techniques of university lecturers in order to see the relationships.

## 6. Conclusion

Online MA TESOL programs have become an educational trend for pre-service and in-service English language teachers aiming to improve and upgrade their teaching and managerial skills and strategies. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges and universities have created and explored online and blended MA TESOL programs for full-time, part-time, and international students with different academic and educational goals and purposes. The results of this study, particularly in regard to the experiences and decision-making processes of East Asian international learners, provide useful information for university leaders, department heads, program leaders, and instructors in regard to upgrading and reforming the current curricula for MA TESOL programs.

This study further provides recommendations for leaders in the field of education, in regard to the additional development of online learning programs. As many international students may demand online degrees and learning programs, the comments from the participants in this study may play significant roles in the development of online programs.

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