



How does online mode impact the
study experience and future career
options of postgraduate Arts students
at the University of Melbourne?

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Executive Summary

This report aims to provide an overview of the impact of online learning in the academic experience of international graduate students at the University of Melbourne. To explore this, semi-structured online interviews were conducted, and relevant information regarding the study and employment experiences of students were gathered. Four international graduate students from the faculty of arts agreed to be interviewed. Participants come from different cultural and academic backgrounds and are currently completing different graduate programs at the university. The present report is intended as a preliminary study for the development of informative materials and marketing strategies by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. The findings from the interviews illustrate a similar pattern among students regarding their experiences and reactions to online learning and the university's response to the COVID-19 crisis. In general, students expressed negative attitudes towards the transition to an online study mode and lack of academic and personal support. Common themes that emerged during the interviews are presented in the discussion section, including the decline of course quality, lack of accessibility to university resources and support, mental health decline, and lack of employment information and opportunities for networking. These responses also show some individual differences which seem to vary depending on each student's personality, career path, course structures, and current location. The results show the importance of considering not only academic experiences but also students' personal situations when making future decisions regarding crisis-prompted online learning.

Introduction

The sudden emergence of COVID-19 prompted a huge shift from traditional face-to-face teaching mode to online delivery strategies at the University of Melbourne. Articles published on the university's website shows that the university has adopted a series of measures in response to the COVID-19 outbreak since February 25th, 2020. For example, the university has provided financial support to students who were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak during the first and second semester of 2020 (Student Support, 2020). This included the provision of emergency student support grants of up to \$7500 in order to assist students from disadvantaged financial backgrounds or those who have lost their income as a result of the pandemic (Student Support, 2020). In addition, the university promised from the beginning to provide academic support and a "high-quality teaching and research in the transition to a virtual campus" (2020). According to the university's COVID-19 student support page (2020), students were provided with detailed information regarding the changes in their studies to online learning, and they were also informed of the support services available to them during these unprecedented times.

Looking at these responses, it is evident that the University of Melbourne has enough resources to build up a crisis-prompted educational system and to provide assistance to its students in financial need. These responses were adopted in order to reduce any negative impact that the COVID-19 situation may have on students' academic performance. However, the university's response has also been widely criticised by students and student organisations. According to the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU, 2020), the university updated its policies regarding COVID-19 in an inefficient way, and this created a level of uncertainty and anxiety among students. For instance, students were concerned with the quality of online education and the level of financial and academic support available to them. In addition, the university's response not only affected students but only its professional staff. According to the latest published data on the University of Melbourne's website (2020), there was a revenue shortfall of \$1 billion and a reduction of approximately 450 positions in both the academic and professional workforce during the first semester of 2020, which was brought by the decrease of international students as a result of the border closure.

Regardless of the university's controversial policies in response to the current global pandemic, students enrolled at the university have expressed a strong interest in continuing with their study

online at the University of Melbourne. The September student census data (2020) shows a higher-than-expected student enrolment numbers in semester two of 2020. This means that the University of Melbourne must continue to improve its current virtual campus plan, especially as the global pandemic is presumably to continue into 2021 and the student demand continues to grow every year. According to the latest Annual Report, international students represent 59% of the total student population and the international demand has been increasing yearly (2019). That is, the international student market is one of the main contributors to the university revenue as demands for the university's program continue to grow. In order to ensure prospective international students are provided with high-quality academic support from the university, it is important to explore the experiences and common complaints of current students, especially regarding the newly implemented crisis-prompted policies.

This report explores the perspectives of international students in the Faculty of Arts regarding their online learning experiences at the University of Melbourne. The results would yield important preliminary information regarding the overall perceived support by international students, which would enable us to provide tailored recommendations to the University of Melbourne and to the Faculty of Arts. This information would also allow the university to ensure high-quality education to current and prospective international and domestic students during the COVID-19 crisis.

Methodology

This report aims to investigate the views of students regarding the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the transition to an online learning system and the Faculty of Arts' career support. To gather this information, we conducted semi-structured interviews with graduate and postgraduate students from the Faculty of Arts. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Four participants agreed to be interviewed and signed a consent form (See Appendix 1). Two of the participants are currently completing a master's degree by coursework, one in Applied Linguistics and the other in Cultural Management. One of the participants is a doctoral candidate completing a PhD in Linguistics. The last participant is an alumna from the University of Melbourne who experienced half a year of online study before graduating in absentia in July 2020. Table 1 shows an overview of each participant's characteristics.

Participant	Program	Course Name	Country	Current Location	Start Date	Graduation
A	Master of Arts	Cultural Management	China	China	March 2020	March 2022
B	Master of Arts	Applied Linguistics	China	China	July 2018	July 2020 (Alumnus)
C	Master of Arts	Applied Linguistics	France	Melbourne	August 2019	August 2021
D	PhD	Linguistics	Chile	Melbourne	February 2018	August 2021

The interview scripts contained 7 close-ended questions and 14 open-ended questions (See Appendix 2). Close-ended questions were designed to obtain demographic information including students' current location, nationality, commencing date of study and graduation date. In addition, 10 open-ended questions were designed to gather information on students' academic experiences and their views on the university's response to COVID-19. The last 4 questions were designed to determine students' employment experiences and career plans, as well as the perceived support from the Faculty of Arts regarding employment information. The recorded interviews were manually transcribed and compared by themes. The most relevant information is presented in the following discussion section.

Discussion

3.1 International Student experience at the University of Melbourne

The majority of our interviewees chose the University of Melbourne due to its top international ranking and reputation among international students. Even though the participants were from different programmes, they mentioned that the structure and content of their courses were among the main reasons for choosing the University of Melbourne. Moreover, the location of the university also influenced their decision greatly. An important factor that seems to influence students' decisions is the existence of partnerships between the university and other institutions around the world, which allows international students to complete exchange programmes and later continue their studies at the University of Melbourne. Another aspect mentioned in the interviews is the quality of life in Melbourne, which some students consider to be better than in their countries of origin.

When students were asked whether the university fulfilled their expectations regarding their course programmes, only one of the students replied that the university entirely met her expectations (participant D). This response is probably due to the student undertaking a PhD which is a completely different experience from that of coursework students. Particularly because PhD students are responsible for organising their own work and time schedules, while coursework students are constrained by the course options available to them. The gap between students' expectations and course satisfaction among coursework students was amplified by the sudden change to online learning due to COVID-19 restrictions. For example, our PhD student felt that her supervisors and the department of linguistics remained supportive and friendly after the transition to online learning. Whereas our coursework students felt less supported by the University and the Faculty of Arts after COVID-19 measures were implemented.

3.2 Online learning mode and COVID-19 challenges

The implementation of COVID-19 restrictions, social distancing and remote learning affected our interviewees negatively. The main challenges described by the students were a lack of organisation by the university which led to uncertainty and anxiety at the beginning of the pandemic, difficulties

completing online classes, loneliness due to social distancing, no financial support from the university and mental health issues.

One of the most significant challenges faced by our students during the pandemic was loneliness. The reason is because all activities on campus and outside of university were suddenly cancelled and our international students faced the unprecedented challenge of not being able to interact with peers or friends. Moreover, communicating with supervisors and professors became challenging because communication was only possible through email and other online platforms such as Canvas. This lack of peer and teacher interaction was especially challenging for one of our interviewees, participant A, as she recently started her degree but was unable to travel from China due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions. Another of our students (participant B) stated she was also not allowed to come back to Australia after traveling overseas, and claimed she has lost motivation to study online. The lack of enthusiasm for online learning was also experienced by those who were currently living in Melbourne. For example, participant C stated that she struggles with anxiety and stress while living far from her family. The added stress of worrying about her family in France made it difficult for her to focus on her studies. Additionally, our students also suffered from panic attacks and required medical assistance. According to participant D, she was not able to receive the necessary mental support from the university due to its social distancing rules.

Among the most common challenges related to online learning, as described by our participants, were the issues with accessing physical materials from the library, accessing printing facilities and coping with internet connectivity problems. Because of these existing challenges, all of our participants, except participant A, expressed that they were not entirely satisfied with the university's response to COVID-19. Despite the university offering a COVID student support grant, which was highly valued, the overall response from the university was not well received by the students and student organisations. The students felt alone, unsupported and they stated that the information was confusing at the beginning of the pandemic.

When we asked students about their preference between on-campus and online learning, they unanimously agreed that they prefer studying on campus. Students prefer interacting with peers and professors and prefer having access to libraries and study spaces outside their homes. Our PhD

student (participant D) expressed that although it was possible for her to continue her research work online, she would prefer to discuss with her supervisor in person. She also expressed that when having administrative issues, it is easier for students to deal with them online, as students can receive assistance without having to visit STOP 1. This view was also shared by participant A who stated that she is satisfied by the support provided by STOP 1. Consequently, all students stated that the same online learning approach must not be adopted as a long-term strategy. Instead the university should improve its course delivery and provide more learning opportunities in order to enhance the student experience in online settings. Our students suggested the university should provide a solution for internet connectivity problems, improve the availability of eBooks and provide virtual reality technologies for tutorials and practical classes.

Regardless of these complaints, all interviewees expressed they would recommend the University of Melbourne to prospective students. Particularly, participant D stated that in traditional face-to-face contexts “the university provides a lot of resources; access to software, great libraries, good study spaces, rich social life, especially important if you move to another country on your own. The campuses are beautiful, visually inspiring, and pleasing. The university has good infrastructure and really good teachers and professionals”. The recommendations suggested by our participants included practising English, improving time management, being motivated and well-organised and of course, they recommend future students to apply. Suggestions for the university included improving the online experience, checking on the mental health of students, simplifying the admission process, improving internet connection and offering more flexibility for online learning, specifically in terms of assessments and group activities. Finally, our participants acknowledge that the University of Melbourne and the government of Victoria were not prepared to face a global pandemic that continues to affect arts students. However, they believe that there is room for improvement in terms of adapting the University’s support system to online contexts, especially when there is a possibility this pandemic could continue into the next semester.

3.3 Working experience and current employment challenges

When it came to the challenges of finding jobs, all of our interviewees agreed that employment opportunities in 2020 were scarce due to the pandemic. For example, participant B originally planned to return to Australia at the beginning of 2020 to complete her last semester, after which

she was planning to find a job in Melbourne. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, she was not able to return to Australia. As a consequence, she had to stay in China and finish her last semester online. She also made the decision to start applying for jobs in China, as she still could not travel back to Australia. The employment situation in China is also grim at the moment. Our participant stated that she sent more than thirty resumes to different schools and institutions but only a few contacted her for an interview. Finally, after a long search, she was accepted as an English teacher at an international school.

On the other hand, participant D who is now living in Australia, stated that she did not get any job opportunities due to COVID 19. Particularly under the current restrictions where countless of employees lost jobs and institutions and companies have been reducing recruitment. For this reason, our participant decided to give up finding jobs and to focus on her PhD studies. In contrast, participant A is currently studying in her first year at the University of Melbourne and has no intention of looking for jobs in 2020. However, she is deeply concerned that her English proficiency and communication skills may worsen as she does not have many opportunities to practice the language with other students. If her proficiency skills do not improve, she fears that it will impact her future career and job opportunities.

Participant C is in her last year of postgraduate study. She claims that the pandemic has discouraged her from applying for any jobs. She hopes to get a job offer once the pandemic is over and the employment situation improves. Participant B also mentioned that a lack of internship and work-related experiences may have a major impact in students' employment outcomes. For example, most of the educational institutions and schools that she applied to required candidates to have some teaching experience. However, her lack of teaching experience was one of the main reasons why she was rejected by many institutions, despite her solid academic knowledge on second language teaching. The other three participants expressed having similar concerns about being rejected by future employers because of their lack of work experience.

3.4 Degree of satisfaction and workplace training

In response to whether the university has provided graduates with sufficient employment information, three participants (participant A, B and C) held negative views except for participant

D. Among participants, participant B was least satisfied with the university's support especially under such a tough employment situation. She thought the university did not provide enough internship or job information, or guidance on how to find jobs in Australia. The main tool she used was the internet rather than any university resources. She regularly visited job-hunting websites to find job positions. Once she found suitable jobs for her, she used to send resumes and then waited for a response. She believes this endeavour was time-consuming and unproductive. However, participant D held an opposite view to this. She thought the university had provided her with sufficient employment information. For example, the university offered many resources such as seminars, talks and workshops, to polish her CVs and resumes in addition to enhancing interview skills. Moreover, she often received emails which included employment information and activities, which could prepare her for the employment market. The reason participant D may have a positive experience which is different from all other participants may be because she is currently undertaking a PhD. Participants A and C mentioned that the university resources did have seminars all the time, but most of them were poorly advertised. For example, they hear about such employment seminars after they have already happened. Even when they could hear about the seminars before they happened, these seminars often conflicted with their class time, and therefore our students had to give up attending them.

3.5 The benefits of studying at the University of Melbourne and employment opportunities

All four interviewees acknowledged the benefits of studying at the University of Melbourne. They expect that having a qualification from the university will help them when applying for jobs. In addition, they believe that the theoretical and practical knowledge they acquire during their degree will help them in the workplace. Participant B emphasized the advantage of studying at a top-ranked university in Australia when applying for jobs in China. Many institutions, schools, agencies or companies in China prefer applicants with overseas study experience because of their proficiency in a foreign language such as English. Moreover, these companies also favour applicants with good communication skills and knowledge of diverse cultures. One reason participant B stood out from other candidates was that the University of Melbourne is highly ranked in four major international rankings and has a good reputation around the world. In addition,

she stated that she gained communication skills by working in groups at the university. Participants A and D said that their experience of studying at the university has equipped them with a theoretical foundation and professional skills which could be necessary in their future workplaces. Finally, participant C thought that she also acquired valuable skills at the University of Melbourne including organizational and planning skills, as well as being able to collaborate in groups, which she believes will be essential in her future workplace as a teacher.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Arts students mainly chose the University of Melbourne due to its top-ranking position and international reputation. Course content and partnership programmes were also among the decisive factors for choosing the university. The experience between PhD students and master students were relatively similar when it came to facing challenges regarding online learning and COVID-19. The common themes that emerged in the interviews were a perceived lack of support from the university regarding library services, mental health assistance, and employment information. According to students, course quality declined after transitioning to online learning. Social distancing measures have also made it impossible for students to interact with peers and supervisors outside of class, which resulted in feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, stress, loneliness and a lack of motivation to study. Our PhD and master students held different attitudes regarding the university's role in providing employment information. Our PhD student seemed to have more access to information regarding seminars, workshops and job opportunities. PhD students seem to be contacted directly by the Faculty of Arts regarding job and seminar opportunities. Whereas master students need to search for such information on the university's website or on other job-hunting sites.

Some limitations of these findings should be noted. First, the small number of participants limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the interviews. Secondly, the interviews were conducted with international students, which does not provide us with any insights on the experience of local students. Finally, the interviews were conducted only with female students which also does not provide us with information about the academic and employment experiences of male and non-binary students at the university.

Giving these findings, the recommendations for the University of Melbourne and future students in the Faculty of Arts are as follows:

Recommendations for the university:

- 1- Ensure online students have access to mental health support services
- 2- Create more flexible course designs and assessments options
- 3- Provide online students with solutions regarding internet accessibility
- 4- Provide a wider range of eBooks, online academic journals and other essential course materials.
- 5- Provide virtual reality technologies for tutorials and practical classes
- 6- Expand the COVID-19 emergency support grants to benefit students living overseas
- 7- Provide online students with opportunities for networking outside the classroom
- 8- Offer more employment seminars to suit students with different schedules, and advertise them more efficiently.

Recommendations for prospective students:

- 1- International students must constantly improve their English proficiency levels
- 2- Online students should learn time management and organisation techniques to manage their study schedules effectively
- 3- Students should be able to cope with stressful situations related to their studies or personal lives and know how to contact the university's support services
- 4- Arts students should be open to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds and work in groups
- 5- Online students should maintain contact with family, friends and peers throughout lockdown stages
- 6- Students should consider the employment opportunities in a particular field before deciding to take a course
- 7- Arts students should complete internship or volunteering programmes during their course in order to build a resume before graduation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Consent Form

By checking the box below, I agree that [researcher name] can collect and use the data I provide in this interview for a 'Professional Literacies' Assignment at the University of Melbourne.

I give consent to use my data as described above.

Signature of the researcher: Yi Qi

Signature of the interviewee: 于新晶 Xinjing Yu

By checking the box below, I agree that [researcher name] can collect and use the data I provide in this interview for a 'Professional Literacies' Assignment at the University of Melbourne. I understand that I will be given the opportunity to review a copy of the assignment before it is submitted.

I give consent to use my data as described above.

Signature of the researcher: _____

Signature of the interviewee: J. Reynolds

By checking the box below, I agree that [researcher name] can collect and use the data I provide in this interview for a 'Professional Literacies' Assignment at the University of Melbourne. I understand that I will be given the opportunity to review a copy of the assignment before it is submitted.

I give consent to use my data as described above.

Signature of the researcher: Shuwen Zhang

Signature of the interviewee: Jingjing Wang (Allegany)

By checking the box below, I agree that [researcher name] can collect and use the data I provide in this interview for a 'Professional Literacies' Assignment at the University of Melbourne. I understand that I will be given the opportunity to review a copy of the assignment before it is submitted.

I give consent to use my data as described above.

Signature of the researcher: _____

Signature of the interviewee: Mathnick C

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1- Background Details	1- Where are you from?
	2- Are you currently in Australia or overseas?
	3- What's your major?
	4- Which year did you commence your studies at the University of Melbourne?
	5- How long have you been studying at the university?
	6- Did you study or are you studying on campus or online?
	7- When will you graduate?
2- Study Experience	8- Why did you choose to study at the University of Melbourne?
	9- Has studying at the University of Melbourne met your expectations so far?
	10- Is there a gap between your initial expectations and your current learning experience?
	11- How has COVID-19 impacted your studies?
	12- What challenges have you encountered when learning was transferred to online mode? Could you describe some of the challenges that you have faced relating to your studies, library, accessibility to resources, club activities and interpersonal relationships.
	13- Are you satisfied with the university's response to COVID-19?
	14- Do you prefer to study online or on campus and why?
	15- Do you think remote learning could be adopted as a long-term strategy if the COVID-19 pandemic lasts longer? Why?
	16- Will you recommend the University of Melbourne to potential graduates who desire to undertake their studies at one of the top-ranked universities in Australia?
	17- What are your recommendations for future students?
3- Employment experience	18- Have you encountered difficulties in finding jobs, especially under the current situation where countless employees have lost their jobs and many companies cut down recruitment due to COVID-19?
	19- Do you think the university has provided you with sufficient employment information during your studies?
	20- Do you think your experience at the University of Melbourne will benefit you or has benefited you when applying for jobs?
	21- Do you think the academic knowledge you acquired at the University of Melbourne will help or has helped you in your professional workplace? How?