





Distance education under duress: a case study of exchange students' experience with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 caused universities around the world to transition overnight to some type of remote learning or online format. The way this occurred, though necessary, was a departure from the standards and norms of traditional distance education and was a drastic change for the majority of faculty and students who had no prior experience with remote, blended, or online learning. This case study was conducted in the Republic of Korea with 15 international exchange students who found themselves forced to take distance education courses on an empty campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Themes of isolation and loneliness, diverse learning experiences, little-to-no social interaction, teaching, cognitive, or social presence emerged from the interviews. In this paper, we discuss our findings and the implications for future research and practice.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world across all industries and sectors. In education, schools and institutions worldwide were forced in 2020 to close campuses and to transition courses to a remote or online learning format in an effort to maintain educational continuity (Hodges et al., 2020). In the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea), the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus saw roughly 10,000 cases between February and March 2020 alone (Ministry of Health and Welfare, n.d.), making it the largest epicenter outside of Wuhan, China at the time. This timing was particularly problematic since it coincided with (a) the start of the winter school holiday (late December to late February); (b) the Lunar New Year (late January); and (c) the start of the 2020 academic year (early March).

This became a significant concern in Korea for the upcoming semester since Chinese nationals comprise both the largest immigrant (1 million+) (Shin & Moon, 2019) and international student groups (100,000+) nationwide (Park, 2019). Government officials and university administrators feared that the return migration en masse after the holiday would inevitably bring COVID-19 cases to campuses, prompting the Korean Ministry of Education to delay the start of the Spring semester for elementary, middle, and highschools which led universities to follow suit (see Arirang, 2020). As universities grappled with how to operate, some chose to transition the first few weeks of courses online, whereas others chose to move courses online immediately for the entire semester. While unwelcome by most students, the sudden transition to emergency remote

teaching (ERT) and online courses disproportionately affected international (degree-seeking) and exchange/study abroad students in adverse ways.

While most international students were trying to return to campuses, many exchange students were arriving for the first time and expecting to conduct their exchanges in residence. However, social distancing measures made it difficult for students to interact with classmates or instructors. Further, many campus facilities (e.g., libraries, cafeterias, study rooms) were shut down. At the same time, popular tourist attractions were also closed, many of which likely influenced students' selection of Korea as an exchange destination in the first place (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Ahmad et al., 2016). There were few, if any, places for students to go beyond their dormitories. As COVID-19 cases grew, travel restrictions (both domestically and abroad) were enforced and continued to expand in scope (McCurry, 2020); international and exchange students were simply stuck.

There is some extant literature (e.g., Forbes-Mewett, 2019, Lee et al., 2017) to draw on to understand the student experience amid these compounded linguistic, cultural, social, physical, educational, and geographical distances, though nothing specifically addressing a national emergency/global health pandemic at the time of writing. Moreover, exchange students are primarily motivated by the desire to have new international/intercultural experiences in person (Stewart, 2020a) yet during the pandemic, makeshift distance and online courses became students' only recourse for educational, and in ways, social continuity. In the following paper, we report on a case study conducted in the Republic of Korea with 15 international exchange students who found themselves forced to take distance education courses in a residential manner on an empty campus at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of literature

Distance education is not new. Formal distance education dates back to Europe in the 1830s through postal correspondence (Bower & Hardy, 2004). Since then, distance education has continued to evolve, influenced by technology advancements, from radio-broadcasted courses in the 1920s and later television (Casey, 2008), to computer networked courses in the 1980s (Harasim, 2000), and ultimately to internet-based online courses from the 1990s to the present (Saba, 2011). Online courses are the type of distance education that the world is mostly familiar with today, with over a third of college students taking at least one online course a year (Seaman et al., 2018). However, the distance education experiences that students and faculty have had under the duress of COVID-19 contrast sharply with the best practices and research on online learning.

Online learning triage

Conventional online courses are developed and iterated over time, well-supported, and delivered on robust educational platforms (Lowenthal et al., 2009; Means et al., 2014). These courses are maintained by faculty and staff with dedicated expertise and training/experience in distance education (Hodges et al., 2020). By contrast, the online courses being delivered on the fly as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic are far from the polished and mature online courses institutions traditionally offer. In fact, Hodges et al. (2020) argued that we ought to refrain from labeling the current wave of learning experiences as online courses since what educators, students, and the community at large are ultimately witnessing is a distinct subset of distance education which they refer to as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT).

ERT is characterized by a "temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternative delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" wherein its main purpose is "not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports" (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 14); ERT is ultimately a band-aid for a temporary injury. And while

ERT has been employed in past responses to natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, fires) or armed conflicts to maintain educational continuity, ERT has never occurred on a global scale under such complex and/or dire circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). While scholars in distance education may be well aware of the challenges facing students and educators alike, for the vast majority of students, faculty, and even family members, these are being confronted for the first time. And for everyone, they are occurring in novel and poorly understood ways.

Known distance education challenges and obstacles

Distance education is not suitable for every learner for numerous reasons. Dabbagh (2007), though, argues that a definitive archetype of distance students only exists in simple terms, and misperceptions of distance students can often be compounded by homogenous cultural frames of reference (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2016). Under normal circumstances, research suggests that a successful online student is one with strong emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation abilities, self-discipline, time management knowledge, organizational skills, interpersonal communication adeptness, technology fluency, and an internal locus of control (Colorado & Eberle, 2010; Dabbagh, 2007; Kauffman, 2015). While such ideal online students do in fact exist, many real-world factors and conditions limit the applicability of this profile even under the best of conditions (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Means et al., 2014). In this regard, distance education is often paradoxical; the students who need (or may benefit from) distance courses the most, may be ill suited for the conditions, demands, rigors, and requirements of the practice (Means et al., 2014). The structure, rigidity, effort, and time that is required to be successful is often underestimated by students (Selwyn, 2011). Students often rely on an online course community to overcome such challenges, yet this rarely occurs organically or without thoughtful facilitation (Trespacios & Uribe-Florez, 2020). International students typically experience more isolation in face-to-face and online courses (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). For international and exchange students during the pandemic, these known difficulties have been combined with the challenges of ERT, as well as the intrinsic difficulties (e.g., homesickness, limited language skills, cultural differences, limited socio cultural knowledge) that occur normally in academic exchanges.

Compounded issues among international students

Often international/exchange students are experiencing life for the first time as a foreigner, as a minority group member, and as an exchange student which can lead to a sense of alienation on campus (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2015). Under normal circumstances, international/exchange students can experience a lack of sensitivity or awareness of minority issues by local students and faculty (Lee et al., 2017). Further, depending on country of origin (such as China or Japan in the case of Korea), there can be issues exacerbated by current/historical political tensions which can result in experiences with neo-racism or neo-nationalism (Lee et al., 2017). This type of racism/discrimination was a significant concern in the case of Chinese students returning to campuses in Korea (see Kasulis, 2020; Won & Yi, 2020). Moreover, prejudicial incidents need not be overt or dramatic; they often occur as subtle microaggressions (Ee, 2013). In any case, there is an onus of responsibility of host institutions to “consider ways to counter problems undermining the international experience” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 406) since universities play a central role in hosting students (Alfattal, 2016; Martirosyan et al., 2019). However, COVID-19 has not simply undermined international education; it has hit the conventional realization of the enterprise (i.e., physical mobility, co-presence) at its core with national lockdowns, restricted domestic and international travel, empty campuses, and the inability to meet peers and faculty (Dietrich, 2020; Fischer, 2020). Exchanges are often driven by the motivation to have new experiences in the host country (Stewart, 2020a) yet the compound impact of online, social, and exchange isolation

situated within a pandemic is unknown with many lessons yet to come (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Dietrich, 2020). Thus, the purpose of this paper was to address this gap in the literature by exploring the experience that exchange students had with ERT during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea.

Contextual overview of current study

This study was undertaken at a large, private research institute in northern Seoul during the Spring 2020 semester (early March to late June) which coincided with the start of the COVID-19 epidemic in Korea. The university has a student population of approximately 20,000, and 3,300 of whom are “international.” The university delayed its semester to accommodate the arrival of international students from China to account for the two week incubation period of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The delay afforded students the opportunity to self-isolate (per Korean government regulations) or take advantage of university quarantine accommodations, which were provided at no cost, at its other campus 40 km south of Seoul. At the same time, exchange students were directed to arrive on campus to check into the dorms as originally scheduled in late February.

Exchange students arrived during the onset of the epidemic in Korea (see Ministry of Health and Welfare, n.d.) to find that normal campus amenities (e.g., cafeterias, study rooms) had been closed, and that the usual arrival/welcoming events (i.e., orientations, departmental outings) were canceled. Since most local Korean students could simply stay at home or in their provincial hometowns, international and exchange students were some of the only residents on an otherwise empty campus. Nor was there anywhere to go as entertainment and tourist venues (e.g. museums, parks, movie theaters, etc.) had closed. Although students intended to conduct their exchanges in a normal residential manner hoping to meet local Korean students, they ended up living on a mostly vacant campus taking ERT courses instead. And all of these unusual circumstances occurred while having moved to a foreign country (often traveling internationally for the first time) with little to no knowledge of the local language, culture, or society.

Methodology

Since exchange students found themselves distanced across multiple dimensions (i.e., from home, faculty, peers, language, culture, etc.) under unprecedented circumstances, it is likely that such experiences affected the ways students engaged and learned in their courses (Xie et al., 2019), especially since students did not choose to do so online. Therefore, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What were exchange students' general experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea?
2. What were exchange students' experiences with emergency remote teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea?
3. How did exchange students engage with their online courses (instructors, classmates) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea?

Case study

Yin (2014) defined the case study as “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a “case”), set within its real-world context - especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). This method has been extensively used in educational research to study multiple individuals and the activities that take place within the boundaries of a real-life setting (Merriam, 2009). Case studies address descriptive and exploratory

questions, as well as ones that typically begin with ‘what’ or ‘how’ (Yin, 2012). The “case” in this study was defined as exchange students who were required to complete coursework online as a result of campus-wide COVID-19 prevention measures. Students also had to be enrolled via an official bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or multilateral consortium agreement (e.g., CONASEP) versus fee-paying study abroad for typological uniformity. The units of analysis and observation were individual students.

Participants and sampling

In qualitative studies, the number of participants can vary greatly and be contingent upon the nature of a study (Creswell, 2013, 2015). It can be hard to predict when there are “enough” participants to understand the phenomenon in question (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This study was guided by data saturation, which was considered reached when there were no new significant codes/themes derived from the interview data. Upon discussion among the researchers, saturation occurred around interview eight, however, in total 15 students were interviewed. No incentives were offered for participation.

Trustworthiness

Interviews were held around midterms (early to mid-May) on campus and followed a standard interview protocol where interviews were recorded and transcribed after each session. A safety protocol was also followed which consisted of using face masks, hand sanitizer, and lavalier mics (with a 2 meter cable) connected to a smart phone to assist in maintaining physical distance during the interviews. Around this time, however, there were only a few daily (and sometimes no) new COVID-19 cases nationally in Korea (see Yonhap, 2020). Case descriptions were written, and participants were asked to “member check” summaries (about one page, single spaced) of their interviews to “judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” before finalization (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). All research activities were documented in a spreadsheet serving as an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview transcripts were coded by each of the researchers independently, and then a discussion occurred thereafter to reach consensus on the meaning of statements expressed by participants, as well as reach consensus where our thoughts diverged.

Data collection

All participants consented to being interviewed, and all interviews were conducted on campus by the first author who is a member of the university’s Office of International Admissions and Management. The interviews consisted of 15 questions (with various sub questions) regarding student exchange experiences during the pandemic, their perceptions of ERT courses, and their ability to engage with fellow students and instructors. The interviews lasted 20-35 minutes each and were conducted in English (exchange students must have an English proficiency of upper intermediate or higher [e.g., B2-C2] to participate in the program). Students were provided the interview questions beforehand to preview them and prepare any notes or questions if desired since English was students’ L2. In terms of our epistemological views, these researchers took the interpretive, constructivist epistemological view that “the findings are a construct produced by the interaction between the interpreter and the interpreted as situated in society. Knowledge of the observed is constructed rather than discovered” (Levers, 2013, p. 4). Participants’ demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

	Gen.	Age	Home Country	Exchange Length	Level of Study	Degree Major	Living Situation
1	F	19	France	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Korean	Alone
2	F	21	Spain	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Translation	Roommate
3	F	22	Brazil	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Law	Roommate
4	F	25	Colombia	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Psychology	Roommate
5	F	22	France	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Tri-Language	Roommate
6	F	25	France	2 sem.	Graduate	English Studies	Roommate
7	F	24	Mexico	1 sem.	Undergraduate	English Teaching	Alone
8	F	22	Turkey	1 sem.	Undergraduate	English Literature	Alone
9	F	21	Belgium	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Japanese	Roommate
10	F	23	Mexico	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Int. Relations	Alone
11	F	22	Mexico	2 sem.	Undergraduate	Business	Alone
12	M	23	Mexico	2 sem.	Undergraduate	Engineering	Alone
13	F	21	Mexico	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Business	Alone
14	F	21	Mexico	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Business	Alone
15	M	24	Mexico	1 sem.	Undergraduate	Law	Roommate

Note: Total exchange student enrollment was $n = 183$ for the Spring 2020 semester.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed by “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). First, we used ideas in the data as the units of analysis, and then coded transcripts for individual ideas, ultimately grouping similar ideas together to create categories. We grouped relevant categories to create themes which represented important and patterned responses in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings and discussion

Experiences as exchange students during a pandemic

Nine major themes emerged from our data analyses and are presented in Table 2. The exchange student experience during the spring 2020 semester during the COVID-19 pandemic can be described as paradoxical due to both positive and negative experiences that were constantly in flux. On the one hand, students in this study were highly committed to conducting their exchanges, yet did so knowing it would be abnormal. Moreover, no one would have known at the time that South Korea's response to the pandemic would become a successful example touted worldwide, or that Seoul (where the campus is located) would be relatively unaffected by the pandemic.

Students often compared the situation to back home as Participant 5 (France, 22, F) shared: “I'm just telling everyone that is great, I'm having a great time. Even though there's the pandemic. I'm way better here in Korea than back home.” Nevertheless, one of the most pervasive experiences was a rather extreme isolation from living on their own abroad where most could not speak the local language. While loneliness and isolation are often intrinsic to academic exchanges to a certain extent (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2015), mandatory social distancing and ERT amplified the potency and effect. Participant 8 (Turkey, 22, F) explained:

Campus was a ghost town... I was planning on, like, eating at the cafeteria, and I made my plans according to that... I couldn't actually grasp the situation that I was in an exchange, because I was always in my dormitory for the first couple of weeks. And I was like, yeah, am I in an exchange? I'm in my room doing nothing.

The surreal experience was not limited to new arrivals either, as Participant 6 (France, 25, F) described the stress and anxiety that began building at the start of her second semester:

Table 2. Major themes.

Theme	Description
Adapting and Shifting Expectations	Students reported that they enjoyed their experiences as exchange students during COVID-19 but that they had to adapt and shift their expectations to enjoy the experience.
Varying Online Learning Experiences	Students reported that they had both good and bad experiences learning online as exchange students during COVID-19.
Loneliness, Stress, and Mental Health Challenges	Students experienced loneliness and at times extreme isolation as exchange students during COVID-19. They struggled meeting Korean students in person on campus or in their online courses. The stress and worry of COVID-19, while being away from home, further challenged their mental wellbeing.
Challenges Learning Online	Students reported a number of different challenges learning online as exchange students during COVID-19 that included long synchronous sessions, prerecorded lectures, cultural and language differences, and completing courses in a small dorm room, often with roommates present.
Benefits of Online Learning as an Exchange Student	Some students found benefits from learning online such as learning from home, enabling more flexible schedules, or being able to learn when it was most convenient.
Need to Adjust	Students struggled with the lack of uniformity from course-to-course and from faculty-to-faculty with some courses offering synchronous sessions, others using only prerecorded lectures, and many with little-to-no interaction with their instructors once courses moved online.
Lack of Interaction in ERT Course	Students struggled interacting with other students as well as instructors. This made it difficult for them to form relationships with other students (e.g., to build friendships) or to learn more from instructors.
Bad ERT Course Experiences	Some clearly had bad experiences with their makeshift remote courses; they were just waiting for things to return to normal face-to-face courses.
Enjoyment of Flexibility of Learning Online	Some, based in part on their personal dispositions, really liked the flexibility of learning online or were lucky to be taking courses that ended up being good online courses.

I was so stressed [and sick]. I had, like, nothing related to coronavirus, but because of the fact that I was sick, I was living in International House C [a dorm behind campus], which was completely empty at that point ... I was alone, and I became, to be kind of anxious.

Other students, such as Participant 4 (Colombia, 25, F), saw their stress manifest into an eye tick prompting her to seek out medical treatment at personal expense, which then threw off her budget: “I had just enough money to be in my, my exchange here. Paying the exact amount of everything. It was a huge problem.” Participant 9 (Belgium, 21, F) worried about her mental health: “It’s definitely made it a bit harder because it’s [OCD] a problem, it’s with the coronavirus for me personally, it’s just because I struggle a bit with OCD and anxiety, so that kind of it’s automatically a bit, just a bit scary situation.” The isolation, as a result of social distancing, resulted in atypical stress and mental health issues being the rule rather than the exception. Social interaction plays an important role in education in a general sense, but is vital to residential undergraduate programs. It is arguably even more important in exchange programs where students’ integration into campus life is dependent on co-presence, and linguistic/intercultural interactions with peers (Jon, 2013) as well as the primary purpose of an exchange in general (Stewart, 2020a). Almost all participants in this study described difficulty making friends which, in some cases, was amplified by socio-cultural differences. Participant 7 (Mexico, 24, F) shared her bewilderment: “It is so difficult to talk, to meet the people. In fact, not only Korean people, but exchange students.” Participant 2 (Spain, 21, F), who was living in a dorm with another Spanish exchange student, elaborated on the challenge of making friends when social distancing was necessary:

I see through social media, like Instagram, I feel like some of them [exchange students], they made friends, like, it’s, it’s really good and like they even go, like, partying, and I think, like, that’s dangerous. Like, we are okay right now, but going clubbing, it’s not the best thing to do ... they’ve made relations, but some of them, also, like, they don’t want to make any contact not because they’re lazy, but because they’re scared.

Although social media use among study abroad participants can lead to a fear of missing out or “FoMO” on social events (Hetz et al., 2015), Participant 2’s concern was not without merit

where “missing out”, ironically, could be beneficial and equate to health, safety, and peace of mind. For example, shortly after this interview, a coronavirus outbreak occurred in a popular entertainment neighborhood in Seoul over a long holiday weekend (see Kim, 2020). Around 50 exchange students from the university who were present were then required to get COVID-19 tests as a consequence. Their roommates, however, had nowhere else to stay while awaiting the results, serving as a source of more stress. Another element affecting exchange students’ ability to make local friends was the contextual power-dynamics of Korea in relation to exchange students’ home countries. Participant 4 (Colombia, 25, F) noted that certain exchange students developed the impression that “*Koreans, just try to meet American person or people who look like American, like white people. Yes, and not with, with another kind of person that are not white or with blue eyes.*” This dynamic has been described in prior research where “Korean students on campus acted kindly to those from Western European countries, which are economically and politically powerful in the international society” (Jon, 2012, p. 446). The absence of normal social interactions as a result of social distancing was then not only compounded by socio-cultural dynamics, but also exacerbated by the sudden transition to ERT courses, adding proverbial insult to injury.

Experiences of distance education during a pandemic

Distance education is not new, but its practice requires specialized education and training, as well as dedicated support structures (Hodges et al., 2020). A few relevant areas that distance education researchers and practitioners alike have focused on over the last 30+ years is in creating equivalent distance education experiences (Simonson et al., 2012), effective synchronous/asynchronous communication strategies (Stavredes, 2011), developing teaching, social and cognitive presence online (Garrison, 2007), and using appropriate types of distance pedagogy/andragogy (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). It comes as no surprise, then, that the sudden transition to remote learning by faculty, most with little to no background or prior experience in distance education, was an incredibly difficult if not impossible task. Additionally, distance students *traditionally choose* to take courses at a distance, whereas under duress of COVID-19, they were forced to. The resulting experiences with ERT were bound to be flawed in various ways. Prior research (e.g., Colorado & Eberle, 2010; Dumais et al., 2013; Hachey et al., 2012; Hachey et al., 2013; Kauffman, 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Wladis et al., 2014) has consistently shown the paradox between retention rates and prior online course experience which is an ongoing challenge. Most students in this study had no prior online course experience, and did not have any local support structure or system (e.g., friends, family) in place as foreigners if they needed help with their courses, which has also been reported in cases of expatriate and transnational distance students in Korea (Stewart, 2020b). Moreover, cultural and linguistic sensitivity has often not been addressed in conventional distance courses in Korea (Lee, 2011), potentially making the experience worse. Participant 9 (Belgium, 21, F) explained the disorientation and confusion that was likely common to many students early on:

Every professor has their own way of doing online class[es] or like, [ways] to check attendance. So that was a bit difficult and confusing to figure out in the beginning, because I've never had online classes... so it was [all] very confusing at first.

Even after the initial adjustment period, communication from faculty/peers was often sparse if non-existent. Participant 1 (France, 19, F) described how she tried to communicate with a course instructor to no avail: “*I sent him a bunch of mails which I didn't get any response to.*” In synchronous courses, Participant 12 (Mexico, 23 M) described “*We are mostly interacting with the teacher. And there's actually no environment to talk to one another [classmates].*” Participant 5 (France, 22, F) was more blunt in her appraisal:

It's [ERT] horrible. I need to be surrounded by people to be motivated and since I'm just studying alone in my room, and for some of the classes I don't even see the teacher, it's not really an online [class], it's just [a] recorded [narrated PowerPoint presentation]. I'm just trying not to fall asleep.

It is also important to note that undergraduate students typically take only one or two courses online per semester (Seaman et al., 2018), whereas exchange students this semester were taking full course loads (i.e., 4-6 courses on average) online. Students consequently spent hours alone in their dorms, which was a source of more isolation for some. Participant 7 (Mexico, 24, F) captured this paradox:

I kind of feel lonely because I don't have a roommate. I don't know if she's going to arrive. I feel lonely because like I kind of don't [have friends]. I do, like, have a lot of neighbors in the [dorm], on my floor, but they are not exchange students, so I don't get to talk to them, or they usually do not go out.

For students who did have roommates, the experience with ERT could be complicated by the scheduling of each other's courses, the communication method, as well as the comparatively small space/layout of their dorms (particularly in Korea). Participant 9 (Belgium, 21, F) described the added challenges and stressors associated with this situation:

I just feel very [awkward] because the camera has been, has me on. I just feel way too self-conscious. It just makes it hard to concentrate. I'm just, it just feels uncomfortable, sitting in front of a mic while you're in your dorm, having to pay attention to class, and then your roommate is there behind you also having online class.

Participant 9 (Belgium, 21, F) also shared that “*I know a lot of people are, like, here are struggling with, like, sleep and things like that because it is very hard to structure your days if you're not forced to go out.*” Overall, the general experience with ERT created additional isolation/loneliness, and presented more obstacles students needed to navigate to simply engage with their courses. Distance learning is often a solitary and rigid endeavor (Selwyn, 2011) and ERT is no exception. However, against the backdrop of social distancing, socio-cultural and linguistic distance, and status as a short-term international student (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Stewart, 2020a), the net effect was one where stress, isolation, and poor mental health came to the forefront of the student experience.

Experiences of distance course engagement during a pandemic

ERT experience among exchange students was diverse in terms of formatting, quality, and satisfaction. To a certain extent, personal attributes and characteristics (e.g., self-directedness, prior online learning experience, independence, motivation) enabled certain students to make the best of a bad situation. For example, Participant 10 (Mexico, 21, F) was particularly optimistic and saw ERT as an opportunity to get experience with taking online courses. Participant 12 (Mexico, M, 23) found value in developing his own self-directedness when it came to scheduling work and completing assignments. Participant 15 (Mexico, 24, M) explained that courses were better than expected:

I thought all my classes will be a little bit more boring or just, I wouldn't care too much about them but honestly, I like all the material. Everything I need is right there. And I've been really making use of it and I have learned a lot so far.

While positive experiences were had, more commonly participants were frustrated by the lack of communication and interaction in their courses, often because there was no uniform ERT protocol in place. Students' courses varied greatly from interactive synchronous sessions to passive synchronous ones where they simply listened to the instructor deliver a lecture. Asynchronous courses were also delivered with prerecorded lectures, and often included synchronous attendance components following the regular course timetable and university attendance policy. Some students, such as Participant 15 (Mexico, 24, M), really enjoyed having the structure and a sense of educational normalcy in this regard. However, engagement in the

classroom was principally lacking in the majority of students' courses, and compounded to some degree by cultural differences (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2016). For example, Participant 11 (Mexico, 22, F) explained "*in Mexico, most of the time, the teacher and the students are so close and we're just joking together. So it's like more of a friendly relationship. And here it's, like, more [a] hierarchy relationship.*"

Participants all described various types of difficulties forming relationships with classmates and instructors such as Participant 11's; these were simply amplified by ERT, and the lack of online interaction with faculty and peers (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). However, if faculty did reach out to students, the gestures were powerful. Participant 8 (Turkey, 22, F) shared "*we both [a friend and I] expressed [via email] that we were, like, frustrated because we couldn't see our friends, also our teachers. Our teacher offered to talk and meet [in person] if we ever wanted and have a conversation about the class.*" While she did not actually take him up on the offer, "*alone [it] was enough so I could actually feel that I was just taking a class from someone who actually cared about their students.*" Participant 10 (Mexico, 23, F) similarly described how meaningful it was to receive personalized feedback:

I just felt so great because I think that's sort of also motivating for me to keep engaged in the class and keep participating...she bother[ed] to take the time to write me, like a personalized message, and send it to me regarding this class.

Other instructors had seemingly never even tried:

Four of them have mentioned at least once that I haven't done this any like, this is the first time that I have online classes. So, I don't know how to do these. And then if you have any questions, just send me an email, you know. Okay. And that's it.

Other participants expressed their frustrations with not receiving feedback on assignments or exams throughout the semester. For example, Participant 10 (Mexico, 23, F) mentioned how even at mid terms "*I wish I could know if I'm doing good or if I'm doing wrong, like, I would like some feedback because I haven't received any feedback... I don't know if I'm gonna fail, [if] I'm gonna pass, if I'm good, if I'm wrong.*" Students who did end up interacting with fellow classmates did so serendipitously at a pub near campus. While it may have been more difficult for exchange students to recognize their Korean classmates, the reverse is often true as exchange students can stand out more easily in Korea's ethnically homogenous society. Participant 3 (Brazil, 22, F) shared how this experience happened several times:

I decided to take this [Interactive Spoken English] class, and I was at Cheers (pseudonym), a bar next to The University (pseudonym) and they found me there! They just say "Sarah (pseudonym) is that you?!", you know, because, yes, it happens already three times...we have to show our face in this specific class, so they recognized me.

Nevertheless, students were not always required to use webcams, or to use avatars as a way of projecting themselves in the virtual space (Garrison, 2007). When considering how exchange students engaged and interacted with their instructors and peers in ERT courses, they largely did not, adding to the alienation that can occur in academic exchanges normally (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2015), regardless of course perceptions.

Implications

It is understandable and expected that ERT courses were inevitably going to be a departure from the norms and standards expected of conventional online courses, and it is not necessarily appropriate to judge ERT courses or teaching with traditional quality indicators. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from participants' experiences in this case study. Given the cascading nature of isolation, stress, frustration, loneliness, etc., that resulted from social distancing and subsequent ERT, it seems that there are at least two practical avenues to address this adverse process in

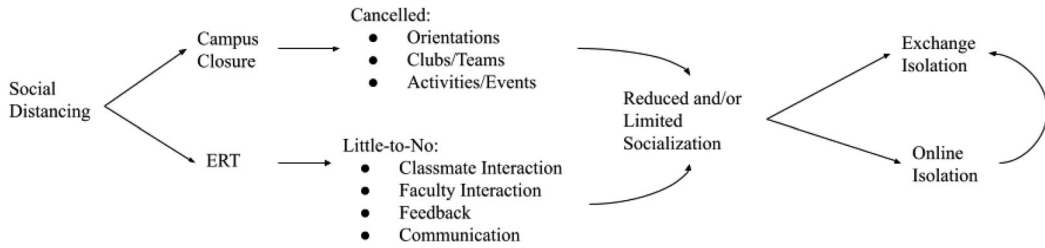


Figure 1. Process of exchange and ERT isolation.

future ERT scenarios: preventing adverse ERT effects before they start, or more realistically, mitigating them as they happen. From this case study, we witnessed how both social distancing and ERT contributed to isolation in the exchange. This process is illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

There is a clear need for faculty development on teaching at a distance since students' accounts described poor faculty communication and little to no online interaction (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), though we recognize that adding more “work” for faculty during a pandemic is likely a difficult proposition for many. Adverse ERT effect prevention/mitigation might be achieved in the future by adding a course in basic distance education to pre- and in-service teacher education programs, as well finding other ways to support faculty professional development with teaching and learning from a distance (see Lowenthal et al., 2019). Similarly, adding virtual social events for students through other official channels such as Student Affairs would help address loneliness and isolation. This may be particularly valuable considering the difficulty for certain student groups (see Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011), like exchange students, who were doubly affected by isolation as a result of ERT and campus closure. While students were not expecting regular quality courses, they were still expecting instructors to communicate with them, and to interact with their classmates. At a minimum, having active communication strategies and uniform ERT protocols may have a good return-on-investment in improving future ERT experiences, which may streamline the process of remote teaching and learning.

Mental health issues and stress were recurring and prevalent topics in interviews and highlight the need for virtual mental health services generally and during pandemics. While telemedicine in this sense is not new, it may not be widely available at all universities. Moreover, campus mental health services are often lacking for international students, and the lack thereof is a longstanding issue in student mobility (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Telemedicine would not only benefit students, but also faculty and administrators who were similarly dealing with the psychological effects of the pandemic and ERT (MacIntyre et al., 2020). While a certain level of discomfort (e.g., home sickness, language barriers, cultural differences) in academic exchanges is common (Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2015), the addition of ERT can affect some student groups more negatively than others. Addressing the needs of various student groups appropriately and proactively, while working to prevent or mitigate the adverse effects of ERT, is a necessary endeavor in supporting all members of the campus community.

Conclusion

The pandemic challenged global student mobility with travel restrictions, social distancing, and ERT. Short-term academic exchanges are inherently social, often centered around meeting local students, as well as intercultural and language exchanges with peers. Yet due to COVID-19, normal socialization was not possible. This, in turn, created isolation, loneliness, and stress among exchange students, who are an already vulnerable population to such adverse conditions (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Lessons learned from these student experiences suggest that future ERT scenarios can be improved by implementing consistent ERT course protocols, and having

faculty utilize both synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies to connect with students, as well as facilitating student-student interaction. Nevertheless, implementing these strategies will require faculty training and the long-term institutionalization of these practices.

Findings from this study are based on its context and participants. They should be considered judiciously when looking at any broader applicability. Limitations include participants being drawn from a single institution in Korea with a comparatively diverse and large exchange student body, which is not the case at most local universities. Experiences of all exchange students at the university (or even local students), let alone elsewhere in the world, will not necessarily be similar. Moreover, these participants graciously volunteered to share their experiences; thus their views are represented over exchange students who did not.

Future qualitative research can provide insight into broader trends and patterns in academic exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The world has seen not only increased national entry and exit restrictions, but travel difficulty, and the imposition of quarantines on both long- and short-term international students. Investigating student motivation and commitment when faced with these new obstacles can assist in determining how exchange programs adapt and support their students. Similarly, quarantine policies in Korea, like the pandemic, are unfolding in real time. Their effects on international students are both novel and poorly understood. Additional case studies on whether or not student mobility is “worth it” during the COVID-19 pandemic can help the educational community envision what a post-pandemic mobility landscape may look like, and ultimately how to get there.

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