

Supporting international students in an online environment

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In this paper, the support of international students will be discussed in conjunction with the advice found in the main paper, 'Supporting Students in an Online Environment'. The observations and recommendations of that paper underpin the issues discussed in this one. This paper has been written in the context of the 'enforced isolation' occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic.

International students are under considerable personal stress simply because they are far from home and may only superficially know local people. The main advice in 'Supporting Students in an Online Environment' is to understand that the education institution can provide some stability and routine, and that students:

- are fearful for themselves and those in their home country
- may not know where to get counselling help and information about COVID-19
- may be reluctant to leave their home, even for medical attention or food
- may live in sub-optimal conditions for online learning

Education providers can offer links to help and information, use empathic personalised communications, and try to build a social presence in their course by organising peer networks and offering opportunities to interact online before and after a class. Moreover, educators need to anticipate additional factors that might impact on an international student's ability to study. For example, they may have a spouse or parents who were meant to come to Australia to look after their children, but the borders closed before they could come, or they may have to look after a younger sibling who was in a high school that has been temporarily closed. The international student is very likely to feel stranded in Australia, and under extreme financial stress because they relied on their previous part-time work to supplement their studies. Particular students are on the receiving end of stares and non-verbal aggression in public, and prejudice on social media. Kind words and understanding from educators and peers at this time will mean a lot. Educators need to take the time to connect with students and ask them about their individual circumstances, and be prepared to adjust accordingly, e.g. assessment timing or requirements.

The main technological advice in 'Supporting Students in an Online Environment' is to:

- check that students have adequate devices and internet connection
- not expect students to be naturally 'good' at software or troubleshooting it
- ensure students have access to technological support

It is useful to keep in mind that when they started their studies, international students did not budget to study online and may not have the right equipment to study at home. Some students may attempt to write assignments on their mobile phone. In addition, if their equipment fails, they may not know how or where to get it fixed. They are likely to be familiar with software that is less known in Australia, such as WhatsApp for mobile phones (which is very user-friendly for informal communications, picture and file sharing, and video calling). Particular students may be entirely unfamiliar with other software, e.g. Google and its online learning suite which is blocked by the Great Firewall of China. Thus, even a simple act of knowing how to read an email and knowing to check your email regularly might need to be



taught to students. The take-home message here is that technological support is needed for many international students.

There will be a certain number of international students who intended to study onshore, but now are undertaking some of their degree offshore. The conditions in their country may affect their ability to access to their courses, and this cohort needs to be asked about their particular barriers, what is working well, and what is still needed. Also, if the student does come onshore, e.g. for a practicum, a mandatory self-quarantine period needs to be factored into the timeframe.

As for educators, the technological advice includes to:

- be a competent user of the software being used
- ensure that the teaching materials and the online environment are accessible to all
- have a consistent presentation across topics and websites
- have more than one way for students to contact the educator
- consider multimedia, audio, and video to vary what the students see, and to provide an introduction to yourself and the topic, and to talk about the assessments

For students who do not have English as their first language, it is very helpful to have a consistent online platform presentation to help them navigate course materials and instructions. Having a consistent 'face' across a website means having sections appear in the same place, e.g. assessments followed by resources, and so on. The same styles for titles, fonts, and colours can also help. Since international students take longer to read text, the use of multimedia may be a welcome relief.

Generally, there needs to be a dedicated section on both the individual topic webpages and on the education provider's main website which provides highly visible links to student help and support, including a single point of contact (e.g. email address) for students to connect with. Students also need to see a direct link to the student learning support service on the main website and topic pages (or to a student learning support officer), and they need to be contacted regularly about this support being available.

In 'Supporting Students in an Online Environment', the main advice about language and teaching practice includes to:

- unpack the learning content into smaller pieces, but with an explanation of how each piece fits into the wider picture (i.e. why it is important)
- provide comprehensive glossaries and ask if students understand the point being discussed before moving on to further content
- expect to cover less content in live online classes, and instead have pre-reading activities and questions before the class
- speak clearly into a microphone and look at the camera frequently
- tell students how to use the software to contribute to online discussions, frequently invite them to talk, and consider the use of smaller break-out groups
- make regular contact with the student and ask them about their circumstances

The above points are very important to an international student. Good audio recording quality and non-verbal information is vital for people who do not have English as their first language, as are clear definitions and usage of words. International students also need explanations about how the different learning activities and resources fit together, and to receive clear instructions about how to interact online. The practices and expectations in their education system may also be at odds with those in Australia. They may need to be prompted to contribute, be surprised if you ask their opinion, and they will need more time to



formulate a verbal reply (i.e. there may be a long silence before they speak). During social distancing, the only time they might speak English is with their educator online. International students especially appreciate an approachable lecturer. One way to ensure you maintain regular contact is to keep an enrolment list where you put a tick against each student's name after each personal contact with them during the course. This tip is also helpful in online tutorials, to help you remember who has been asked a question already or who has contributed to the discussion.

In conclusion, international students have extra needs to address. Careful attention is required for the organisation of learning materials, with clear explanation of how the materials and activities contribute to the curriculum, and consistency in visual format. Students may also need to be told explicitly how best to engage online and with the course generally. Consideration of the language burden also needs to be taken into account, so the educator needs to speak clearly and preferably use multimedia to complement or balance out the required readings. Videos are especially useful because they contain non-verbal information. Finally, students need to be asked about their individual situation, and offered solutions or pathways for their problems.

Author's Bio

Dr Müller teaches international nursing students at Flinders University. She designs mobile apps, multimedia, and computer games for language learning, and she has many publications in the area of digital learning, student support, and linguistics. Among her recent teaching accolades are the National Excellence Award for Best Practice in International Education in 2018 from the International Education Association of Australia, and a Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning by the Australian Awards for University Teaching. She is a nationally accredited IPEd editor and is the Chair of the Standing Committee for Professional Development in that organisation. Dr Müller is also a member of the governing Council of Flinders University.

Readings and Links

Australian Government's Study Australia main page and student support page:

www.studyinaustralia.gov.au

www.studyinaustralia.gov.au/English/student-support

International Education Association of Australia's informative research papers:

www.ieaa.org.au/research-overview

Ensuring continuity of learning during enforced absence:

www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/ensuring-continuity-of-learning-during-enforced-absence

Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE):



<https://www.acode.edu.au/>

Online counselling sites include:

www.beyondblue.org.au

www.lifeline.org.au

www.suicidecallbackservice.gov.au

Official COVID-19 sites:

www.australia.gov.au/

www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers

Learning to Teach Online – A course by UNSW:

<https://lto.unsw.edu.au/>

Community of Inquiry research (especially for teacher presence and social presence):

<https://coi.athabasca.ca>

Universal Design Guidelines:

www.udlguidelines.cast.org/

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and other tests:

www.guides.service.gov.au/content-guide/accessibility-inclusivity/

www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/

www.google.com.au/accessibility/

www.chinafirewalltest.com/

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