

## **ADAPTION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO THE NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WHEN LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMICS**

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The switch to online classes raised related issues regarding the new learning environment it created for students. The unavailability of university facilities and utilities like classrooms, libraries, cafes, and study rooms simply does not mean they were completely diminished in value and essence. It then becomes necessary to look at issues like a type of apartment, availability of study space, and ascertain if the situation offered any form of flexibility in management of space while studying during this period. This is because different cultures have different approaches to space management. How international students managed this and other uncertain situations this new learning environment created becomes the focus of the paper. The qualitative study is based on five in-depth semi-structured interviews with international students studying in Tallinn.

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Learning on its own is challenging, because it usually requires a healthy mental state to achieve good outcomes. Learning under situations of a pandemic is even more demanding due to the attendant uncertainties and anxieties that come with it. This is heightened by the sudden move of lectures from classroom environment to virtual learning. The COVID-19 measures created unique and creative conditions for research into interplays between learning and learner’s cultural affiliation. This study aims to answer the research questions: does cultural backgrounds play a role in influencing international students adapting to new environments of online studies. To gain important insights into how to support international students’ learning online or, to be more precise, “at “home” while still in Estonia” (i. e. distance learning from dormitories, rented flats) during this type of situation, data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews.

### ***Informants***

Purposefully chosen five informants were selected based on criteria that these are students studying in Estonian universities who are not originally from

Estonia, who come from different countries (with relatively collectivistic cultural dimension), who do not speak Estonian nor Russian (the language used by one third of Estonia's population), whose programmes are conducted in English and who have been here for at least six months, i.e. have already started their studies in Estonia prior to the initial lockdown in March 2020. Five males in the age group of 25–30 from three different countries – China, Nigeria and Pakistan – were included.

This study uses the analytic framework of face-to-face interactional sociolinguistics (Goffman 1974, Tannen 1993), the ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike 1995) and microethnography (Erickson 1995) and is concerned with language, culture, host society, and online learning.

## **Results**

Regarding type of apartment, the respondents said they were living in shared apartments, which was in either a hostel or a flat. However, regarding availability of study space, some of the participants said they actually had to create what they can call study space out of their living arrangement.

**FS (Pakistan):** I live in a shared apartment – yes. I'm sharing the same apartment, I have my own room, and my other mates have their own room... I have a study place – like table and chair – where I can put my laptop, sometime I write on the table... it (was created) as a result of online study.

**MO (Nigeria):** Oh! Actually I reside in my own – my own rented apartment... it's a studio apartment ... I have ... a corner of my own. There's a table and two study chairs, my system on the table and I have my books piled up at the edge [...] and I also have *a lamp* close to my table – a long standing lamp ... moving over – moving into this apartment I have to make do with what is available – with the space in the room so I will – I created it – part of it because of this online study. I need to put in the system where it is visible for me to be more comfortable whenever there is a video call or seminar or zoom meetings or stuffs like that for a better background

**MZ (Nigeria):** I live in, I will call it a mini flat where – made up of 2 rooms we have a separate kitchen, you have a separate bath, you have a separate toilet separate lobby., so it's a bit spacious... I think I had to on my own – because I discovered that in the living room, that's where the TV is and most times you may have someone who wants to watch the TV and that may not be... so I had to create a separate corner for myself in the kitchen with my reading table where my laptop and my screen and my chair could perfectly sit.

**SR (Pakistan):** I'm living in an apartment which we rented out this year in January, before that I was living in a hostel – university provided the dormitory ... and I'm sharing the flat with my friends and we are actually from the same background so I'm sharing it with them – we have a room separate rooms.

Respondent **YC** had to choose between living room and bedroom for studies. Sometimes he conceded to using the living room so as not to lie in bed while using the bedroom:

**YC (China):** OK. I live in an apartment and I share it with my flatmates (3) it's like (3) an apartment, including two bedrooms, one living room with kitchen. M: I was sharing a room with another student from the university and thankfully the room was (very) large... So basically, yea (.) – study – I do it in the living room or mostly my own room (3) eh, In my room, there's a desk behind the bed and sometimes, I don't want to choose to study in the bedroom, cos once I (stay) there, I just lie on the bed instead...It's either "in bedroom or in the living room"

**SR** feels quite comfortable with their living and study arrangement.

**SR (Pakistan):** I'm living in an apartment which we rented out this year in January, before that I was living in a hostel – university provided the dormitory ... and I'm sharing the flat with my friends and we are actually from the same background so I'm sharing it with them – we have a room separate rooms... I do have a working table and eeh all necessary stuff like computer and every the other stuff that I need to study or work – so I feel like I'm quite comfortable with what I have so (2) I can work, I can study within the same place where I'm sleeping as well.

Students were asked, if in the course of this online studies, there were times they had to connect to classes outside these study space or if there were times they had need to go to another suitable place to attend classes. **YC** explained about very stressful and annoying experience where they had to go to restaurants and café to find a suitable place for classes.

**YC (China):** Yes! Before I moved out, to the apartment, I stayed in the dormitory and during that time, I need to find a place to conduct it online because – in my room I have my flat mates and he may listen to music or in the kitchen (it's like) doing like kitchen stuff and it's noisy and I need to like find a public place like Macdonald or Hesburger or I need to book kitchen on the first floor of the dormitory – first floor like public use [...] but sometimes it's just booked and I need to move somewhere else like Macdonald or Hesburger [...] not easy. you are not lucky there are many customers and – it's noisy and you get annoyed and – sometimes network is not just working for like 1 minute, 2 minutes and you feel like upset [...] and (displeased)

For the rest, they agreed that there were many times where they had to connect to class with their mobile phones while being in transit.

**MO (Nigeria):** Oh! Oh Yes! *Lots of times*. Let me give you an instance. There was a particular class I am supposed to have [...] I thought could make it home from work to the class, but it was not possible because that very day I did not know. . I could not engage in class because of the noise in the bus and

everything like that, so I could not engage. I said, there were so many discussions going on and I needed to maybe say some things but I couldn't say anything, the only thing I could do was just to chat and the responses were not what I want.

**MZ (Nigeria):** there were times that I went out and I was rushing home and my class was starting before I get home and I have a smart phone and my smart phone equally have internet connectivity – so most times I just join the lecture with my smart phone then when I get home I move on with my laptop (that's how it is)

Respondents were asked if the situation presented any form of flexibility regards to how they managed their time and space. Interestingly, two of the participants agreed that the new arrangement offered them some measure of flexibility. Most of their responses was in relation to the reduction in commuting time, ability to shift easier between different activities and offering better opportunities to work alongside studies.

**MZ (Nigeria):** Yes, yes, yes I think just the way it had – just the way there is a disadvantage, there is equally the issue of– the positive side. There's flexibility in the sense that if I calculate the time of where I live to the school, that should take me nothing less than 40 minutes, but now I wouldn't have to jump into the bus, especially now with this whole Covid issue and the risk of getting infected is high..., so I think there is that flexibility in terms of time there is that flexibility in terms of being punctual because I can attend to a lectures from anywhere – even with my phone, I could equally connect on Zoom on my smart phone and I'm in a lecture so I think there is that flexibility.

**SR (Pakistan):** Definitely. Definitely I will say [...] for example if I'm working online, you know it cuts a lot of travelling time – for example if I'm going to office I need to wake up 30mins before – actually an hour before – breakfast and then eat and get ready, then go to office and the commute time and everything – when all the commuting time is you know crossed out.

However, **YC** didn't really feel any form of flexibility with the new arrangement.

**YC (China):** Not really, cos – before the shutdown, I have – I have a more like tensed time schedule [...] I have work, and there are more classes – courses compared to now, but I still can manage it. For the time management, it did, cos you can easily use computer and conduct online classes when – whether you are at home or in the restaurant. For the space management, it's not really convenient cos usually – before shutdown you go to the campus in the classroom, that's it [...] but now you need to find – at least a place with internet and it has – it has to be quiet enough (as well as) conducive.

When finding out if interviewees faced “uncertain situations” regarding studies; and how they were able to handle it, it became evident that the

respondents interpreted and responded to it in quite varying ways to the extent of their understanding. **MO** relates his situation to a cancelled academic conference:

**MO (Nigeria):** If it's relating to that, there was a conference – two conferences that I was supposed to attend and abruptly they cancelled at the minute. *It's so terrible*, it affected a lot of things of course we need to apply for mobility and stuff like that, and at the end of the day it affected that. I was so very disturbed because I really needed that – one of them could have helped me in my thesis. I was devastated...

For **MZ**, it had to do with adapting to the new online environment

**MZ (Nigeria):** Well, I would say – I would just say that at the first time when we started the online issue – like the online lectures, we were all trying to get used to the technology because a lot of us weren't used to Zoom, a lot of us weren't used to – you know how it could work... I'm the curious type that when something is new to me, I just want to learn – I want to know how it work – so I had to equally during lectures look at how this technology functions.

For **FS**, it was the difficulty in finding the right platforms for assignments and the impromptu cancellation of some classes.

**FS (Pakistan):** Yea, like sometime – you know I don't even know where to look for assignments because – some teachers say I have put it in google classroom – some say check your email – some say it is on Moodle, check your Moodle –so there's a lot of platforms and it's confusing to look for the assignments. and sometimes, things happened – like they will cancel Zoom meetings and you will be waiting (hours) and the teacher has not started meeting yet and you will be 30 minutes, maybe 40 minutes and suddenly a friend of you texts you – hey the class is cancelled, didn't you know.

**SR** did not recall experiencing any uncertain situations this period, and for **SR**, he thinks it was because the university handled the situation very well:

**SR (Pakistan):** You know, to be very honest, I believe that our Tallinn University have – controlled it really really well – because the way they have communicated through emails and every student is aware of what's happening so I believe they managed it really really well and I cannot remember a single case where I have face you know some trouble regarding my classes or something.

### ***Conclusion***

To conclude, the unavailability of university facilities, which often complements students, learning process led to the creation of alternative study spaces that were in some cases uncomfortable for learning. Studying in shared apartments was not comfortable and convenient. Just like **YC**, students in some cases had to go to café and restaurants to attend classes and they had to connect

to classes while on transit in public transportation in several instances. However, the near unanimous agreement of the participants with the use of their created learning space in this period affirmed that the online learning environment afforded a lot of flexibility in this regard. Whereas certain uncertain circumstances affected their studies, international students found a way to handling the situation by adapting and applying themselves to the situation.

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