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“International students learning experience in a post COVID era: Preference on Delivery model for Academic English Support”

From face-to-face to Remote Learning

The Higher Education landscape has changed substantially since the 2020 COVID pandemic. Emerging back from two disrupted years, it is apparent that UK universities are not going back to what was normal before this but evolving into a different system, and the international area is not an exception.

While many predicted international recruitments would stop in 2020/21, the UK’s Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported that during that academic year enrolment for international students actually increased 10.6% in 2020/21 and 12.3% in 2021/22 for overseas students. Nevertheless, a proportion of these students did start or complete their courses virtually rather than in the UK, despite not being enrolled for a fully online or distance course.

For international students, the experience of studying abroad differed from what it was expected, adding new challenges, especially for those who arrived after the course started. Cultural adaptation and understanding the new learning and teaching system are the main challenge for international students, and they can impact equally on the performance and outcome of the study abroad experience.

This research project aimed to understand the post-COVID changes on the learning preferences between online and presential L&T of international students, with special focus on Academic English.

Manchester Metropolitan University, through the “Coaching for Academic English” programme offers free language support to all international students which includes English for Academic Purposes classes and writing consultations. The delivery mode pre-COVID, was either face to face classes or with consultations for the 1,828 students in 17/18, and 1,915 students in 18/19) that engaged with this service. Online consultations were available pre-COVID but, there was not a demand for them.

During the academic years 19/20 and 20/21, all sessions were moved to online, however, from the academic year 21/22 the service has offered a mix of face to face and online classes for all areas except for writing consultations which continue to be online. The following table indicates the number of students engaging with “Coaching for Academic English”.

From 19/20, the service also started offering ESP courses and consultations (English for Specific Purposes). This consists of workshops created with a specific unit assessment in mind. Students are

then given the opportunity to submit a draft for feedback. This has replaced the need for consultations for many students.

The attendance in 2122 for online classes and face to face classes shows a preference for online, demonstrated by the attendance to the module "Dissertation writing course" (5 weeks): **121 students online and only 23 students (<20%) attending face to face**. This is mirrored across all courses. One student commented: *"Dear tutor, my colleagues and I would like to request if the academic skills class could be run online as most of us will be attending the OET course online and will be unable to make it on time / attend."*

Data indicates that students continue to prefer online delivery after experiencing blended delivery during the COVID academic years (2019-2021). The impact of the mode of delivery on international students' experience is evident based on lower attendance to face to face English sessions, compared to online sessions. This ultimately will continue to affect their employability and their proficiency of the English language.

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