

# Online Seminars: Challenges Encountered by International Postgraduate Taught Students at LSE

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## Background of the Study

Covid-19 has had a tremendous impact on the world-wide educational institutions from elementary to tertiary level. The global pandemic has challenged the educational system throughout the world and forced educators to move to an online mode of teaching-learning overnight in order to adapt educational needs to the unprecedented situation (Dhawan,2020). However, different studies show that there are some difficulties related to this online system of education and its technological complications became clearer after global implementation of the various online systems. Stakeholders were not prepared to adapt to the abrupt educational change and their unaccustomedness with online modes of education system and technological incompetency left challenges across the globe when having to embrace the present situation (Mishra, et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020). Consequently, many 'students felt that online education is stressful and affecting their health and social life' (Chakraborty, et al.,2020).

As with many other institutions worldwide, pandemic forced LSE to adopt a flexible online/on campus and a hybrid teaching approach. It has adapted various forms of seminars including online seminars, hybrid model and in-person seminars in order to ensure that both online and on campus teaching and learning could continue. Therefore, a lot of international postgraduate taught students of LSE who became unable to join in LSE's on campus seminars at the beginning of the Michaelmas term because of travel restriction, visa related problems or issue required self-quarantines, were able to join remotely. It is important to note, seminar discussions are one of the most crucial parts of LSE's master's taught programs and therefore, recognizing the above-mentioned research findings, it is important to understand how much these students have been able to engage themselves with the learning activities through the online/hybrid seminars. The aim of this research is to explore the experience of the international postgraduate taught students with this newly approached online seminars and find out any hurdles they face while taking part in them. Finally, I have presented some recommendations so that LSE can work to make future students' learning experience better.

## Research Question

The research work was conducted based on the following research question.

What are the challenges faced by the LSE international postgraduate taught students in attending the interactive seminars with their peers and academic faculties via online?

## **Methodology**

Present study is qualitative in nature. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the required data collection. I recruited post graduate students from diverse countries and different departments through by posting messages in the students' different WhatsApp groups and personal contacts. Total 5 international postgraduate (taught) students (1 Chinese, 1 American, 1 Indian, 1 South Korean and 1 Chilean) from four different departments ( Gender Studies (2), Public Policy (1), Social Policy (1) and International Development (1)). Respondents all, have the experience of attending seminars remotely for at least three weeks were selected, so that more reliable data can be collected. The Chinese, Korean and Indian respondents attended all the seminars online and participated in the interviews from their home countries whereas the American and Chilean respondents attended both online and in-person seminars and took part in their interviews from London. All the interviews were conducted online through zoom and lasted between 35minutes to one hour. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for the interviews.

The collected data was analyzed using a thematic analysis. I transcribed the participants responses and categorized them under different themes such as experiences in online seminars, hybrid seminars and technological experience.

## **Data Findings**

### **Hybrid Seminar**

All the students participated in the study found hybrid seminars' full of technical difficulties and didn't have good feelings about them. The most common challenge faced by the students who participated hybrid seminars through online is that they could not hear the discussion in the classroom clearly because of having only one computer in the classroom and the microphone being attached with that computer which was situated in the front of the class. Students who participated in in-person were socially distanced, 6 feet apart from other students with mandatory masks being worn the entire time, therefore, online students commonly encountered difficulty hearing because the sound was muffled. Consequently, it was hard for the students in online to hear what the teacher or students in classroom discussed. Though in some cases, teachers repeated what the students said in the classroom, most of the online participants shared they already lost the track of the discussion and their concentration went down. Moreover, frequent experiences of loud noise or echo came from the sound system in the classroom also made it difficult to hear discussion or to maintain concentration throughout the class.

Besides, though teachers used the microphone, sometimes they were not heard very well because of the poor sound quality of the microphones/ sound system of the class. Sometimes they wrote some points on the board or played videos in the class, but online students could not see them.

Hybrid seminars also created a sense of isolation among students who were in online. Discussion was mainly based on the class and students who were in class were more engaged with the seminar leaders. Fully online students often felt like that they were not present in the class. They also found it difficult to integrate themselves in the group discussion with their peers as most of them sat in the classroom and discussed among themselves and online students found it embarrassing too interrupt in their discussion. A respondent says “when people are talking, you unmute yourself and start to talk, it’s quite rude”. Moreover, it was also intimidating for them to speak hybrid seminars because when someone talks their faces were displayed largely on the screen and voices projected through loud speakers.

Finally, they also felt embarrassed as they lost their internet connectivity or froze during group presentation or doing small group assignments. In that case other group members had to wait until they reconnected which took a lot of time or other group members had to do their part, though they were the expert or responsible of that part.

### **Online Seminar**

Participating in the all online seminars was less challenging for the students as all were in the same method of delivery and same position, making their communication feel more equal. However, many felt reluctant and hesitant to participate because of having no previous experiences. They also found meeting new people in breakout rooms difficult as they did not get adequate time to get to know each other, though it progressively improved throughout the semester. They also found it less meaningful participation in the breakout rooms if students do not want to speak, turn their speaker and camera off and avoid their responsibility to participate in the class.

However, like hybrid seminars, naturally internet connectivity still posed a great challenge for them in taking part in online seminars. Sometimes due to the slow internet connection or connectivity problems they missed discussions or could not participate even they were inclined to take part in it. A respondent says “I had house internet connectivity problem, that is frustrating because I wanted to participate in an interesting class discussion and I had a lot of to contribute in it”. They also sometimes could not hear the voices of other students because of their internet connection. A student also reported about internet connection problem of a seminar leader. “one day my seminar leader had internet connection problem, then the seminar cut 20 minutes early. Though the teacher extended the duration later, I was not able to stay because I had another seminar”.

In terms of technical difficulties, Chinese students faced double problems due to the internet censorship in China for accessing foreign websites. They usually connect through using some applications like virtual private network which are often not stable. If they were disconnected from the online seminars, they had to change the application to get access to London route and see which link is available to connect again. Sometimes this took a lot of time and in that case they missed an important part and time in the seminar.

## Recommendations

- Seminar should be either all online or in-person as hybrid seminars were found problematic for both online and in-person students.
- Improving technology in the classroom by allocating out more computers and microphones. As classrooms are big and a microphone could not pick up the whole class.
- LSE or related department should organize a short training for students by informing different technical sides of online seminar such as doing presentation, creating break out rooms.
- A balanced number of students should be allocated per seminar.
- Seminar should be conducted in a more structured way so that every student can get to speak and they should be given more open and good feedbacks on their comments so that they can feel more confident speaking up.
- Introducing a warmup or ice break session before the seminar starts as something compulsory and give the students some time to get to know each other.

## Bibliography

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