What do business students value in the emerging virtualisation of learning and teaching that is accelerated by COVID-19? A pilot study of the business students at Bath Spa University

Lu Liu, Li Li, Inna Pomorina, Anna Walker and Victoria Opara (Bath Spa University)

Friday 3 September, 09:10-10:40 BST

Due to the development of high technologies and the changing market environment of high education, the HEIs in the UK have already been moving onto the virtualisation of learning and teaching to attract, retain and engage with students as well as expanding internationally. However, this progress has never been so swift after the outbreak of COVID-19. Since the first lockdown announcement on 19 March 2020, the restrictions and advice put in place by the Government have fundamentally changed the ways that universities are operating, and the experiences students are having. The immediate changes including: Shifting to online delivery of teaching and learning; encouraging home working of students and staff; and changing examination arrangements, etc. Although most of the universities implemented blended teaching in Sept/Oct 2020 when the new academic year started, the on-going pandemic status does not allow the university students to go back to the normal life they had before. This study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 on how business students value the virtual learning experience and environment at university by answering the following research questions and by employing Bath Business School as a pilot study. The key objectives include: to explore students' attitudes to the emerging virtualisation of learning and teaching; and to better understand students' personal adaptive strategies to handle the challenges arising from the emerging virtualisation of learning and teaching.

This study follows the critical realist epistemological stance and adopts a qualitative research approach. CR combines realist ontology with an interpretive epistemology. CR researcher begins with the experienced results of something and then works backward in an attempt to explain why it is the case, or what must have caused it to happen (Bhaskar, 2020). COVID-19's unpredictable and ongoing nature makes the studies of its influence and consequence on the universities students not only a must but also complex. CR's philosophical stance provides a feasible and realistic perspective for the researchers to conduct this study. Accordingly, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology (Larkin and Thompson 2012) is employed to investigate, identify and explain the factors and the individual's perceptions and experience regarding the impact of COVID-19 on undergraduate business students at Bath Spa University. The data collection method is semi-structured interview. The participants are six undergraduate business students who currently study at Bath Spa University. The number is decided in line with the IPA methodology, i.e. to qualitatively analyse detailed, reflective, first-person accounts from research participants. The thematic analysis method, which is widely used in the IPA approach to identify and understand the themes within the personal accounts being interviewed (Maguire and Delahunt 2017), is adopted for the data analysis to enable the researchers to compare and synthesise these personal accounts to draw generalisable conclusions.

The findings show that the students have mixed feelings about the changes in their studies. The transition to online teaching has been a challenging one for most of them, although the students have reflected that there have been both positive and negative impacts. It significantly changed the learning skills and processes they were used to and more importantly, their perspectives on teaching and learning at the University. On one hand, the students appreciate detailed or additional teaching and learning materials provided by the tutors, which has not been the case in in-class teaching, for example, video lecture recordings; detailed answers/explanations to seminar activities; swift online meeting arrangements; etc. The students feel the teaching and learning activities were more structured, enriched and active than before. The students also observed their personal development in being more organised and mature. On the other hand, some students are still not comfortable with online teaching and learning. Even though they recognise that online teachings made their attendance better, it does not necessarily mean they have gained a better performance in their studies. They think it is easier to be self-motived when coming to the university. They also miss the social life at the university. From observing the students' academic results, the researchers also find a bigger deviation between the students, i.e. the majority of the students become more diligent while there is an increased number of students whose performance is worsened due to a lack of face-to-face contact with the tutor, other students, and the University.

In conclusion, although there could still be too early to observe and understand the profound impact of COVID-19 on the HEIs and their students in the UK, with the findings from this pilot study, the researchers argue the necessity for pedagogical rethinking and organisational restructuring in the HEIs to enable the build-up on the speed and enthusiasm with which both academics and stakeholders embrace interactive online teaching & learning as the future of the HEIs.

Bhaskar, R. (2020) "Critical realism and the ontology of persons". *Journal of Critical Realism*, 19:2, pp. 113-120, DOI: 10.1080/14767430.2020.1734736

Larkin, M & Thompson, A (2012) "Interpretative phenomenological analysis". In Thompson, A. & Harper, D. (eds) *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy: a guide for students and practitioners*. John Wiley & Sons, Oxford, pp. 99-116. DOI: 10.1002/9781119973249

Maguire, M. and Delahunt, B. (2017) "Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step
Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars*". All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (AISHE-J)* No.3. pp. 3351-33514 URL:
http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/335