

Distance Learning: Impacts for Offshore Students Amid COVID-19

Dr Anushia Inthiran

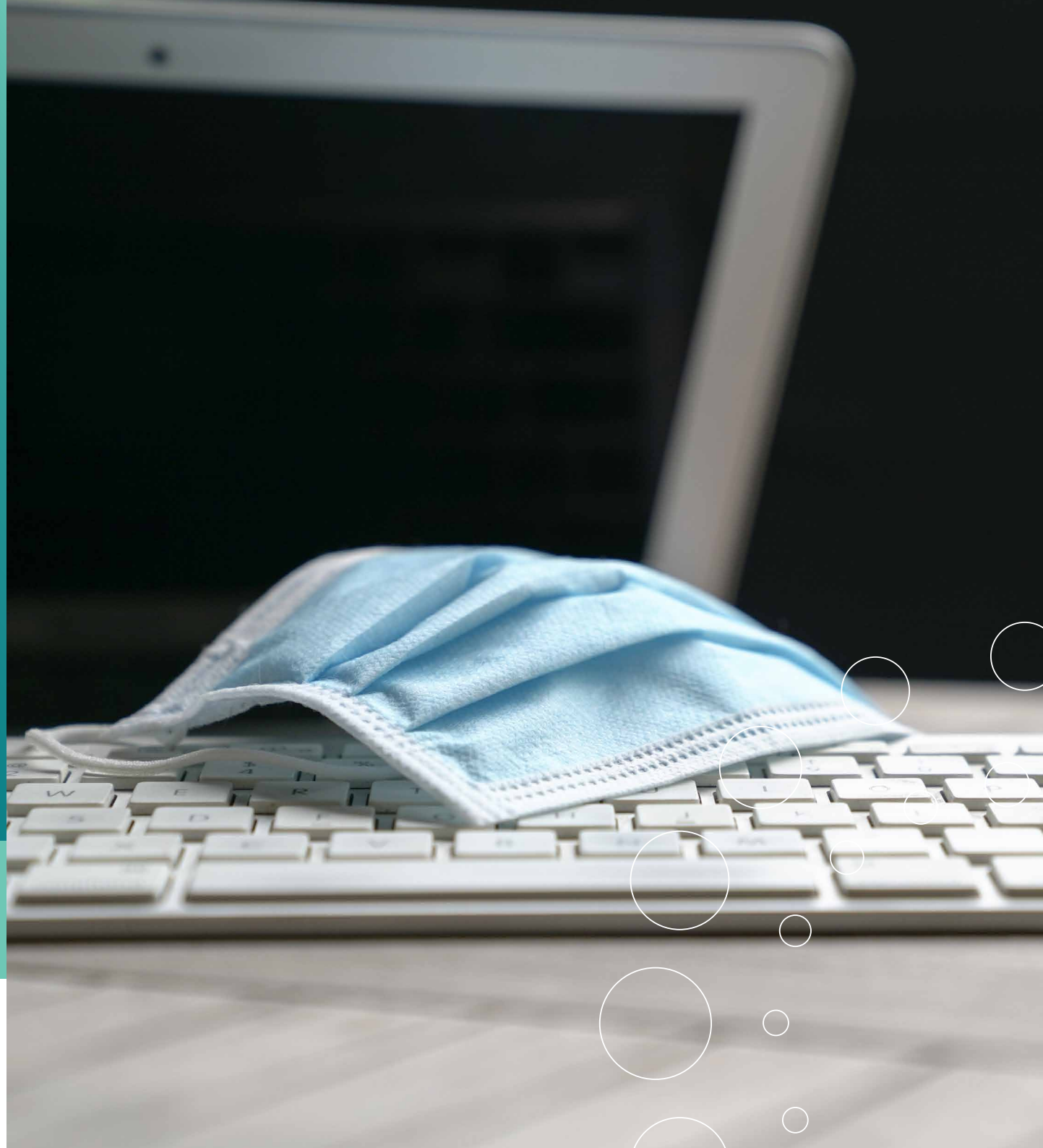
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The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted global education and necessitated a shift to online learning. Due to ongoing border closures, even after the pandemic eased, offshore students were prevented from attending their university in person long after their local peers, impacting their learning ability and future perspectives. **Dr Anushia Inthiran** from the University of Canterbury conducted a survey among a group of offshore students to understand the consequences of distance learning on their education.

COVID-19 and Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic had wide-reaching impacts, and the education realm was no exception. Within higher education institutions, information and communication technology became a vital lifeline as universities implemented 'education in emergency' strategies. These included online teaching and remote learning. However, while blended learning – the incorporation of online learning activities in addition to face-to-face teaching – has long been a part of education, this sudden and complete switch to online approaches required rapid adaptations to teaching methods.

This dramatic modification had consequences not only on teaching and learning but also on the health and wellbeing of staff and students. However, the students arguably most affected are those referred to as 'offshore students', that is, international students enrolled online at a university, as opposed to receiving in-person tuition. The advent of the pandemic enforced widespread border closures, meaning many of these students had never stepped foot on their university's campus, creating detachment from a typical university setting.

As the pandemic progressed and lower alert levels ensued, many students were able to return to campus. However, national borders were still closed, preventing offshore students from doing the same. This development was thought to beget further feelings of isolation among the offshore students, necessitating additional support to remain engaged.

Surveying Offshore Students

Dr Anushia Inthiran from the University of Canterbury explored the experiences of 'new offshore students' at a New Zealand university – a term coined to describe those who had never set foot on campus. Her pilot study, the first of its kind, assessed the impact on learning and wellbeing. A questionnaire was developed by Dr Inthiran to assess various aspects of their experience and distributed to 20 students. It received a 75% completion rate, the results of which were analysed both quantitatively (i.e., numerically) and qualitatively (i.e., descriptively).

In order to encourage participants to answer freely, open-ended questions were used, which followed four broad topics of enquiry, namely: (i) how new offshore students felt not having visited their university campus, (ii) what strategies they used to engage with teaching and learning material, (iii) the teaching strategies used by staff to engage offshore students, and (iv) feedback on strategies the teaching and learning team could have used to better engage offshore students. Multiple questions were posed in each broad topic.

Illuminating 'Invisible' Students

Survey responses revealed high levels of negative emotion among new offshore students. Responses to the question of how they felt about their situation were categorised into distinct emotional categories: (i) miserable and depressed, (ii) frustrated, (iii) upset, (iv) missing out, and (v) regret. Most responses fell into the 'miserable and depressed' category and included responses such as *'I will Graduate in my room'* and *'I feel left behind, better to have enrolled in local university'*.



A related question addressed how students might suggest mitigations to these negative effects, and responses included both positive and negative suggestions. Positive responses detailed how they were able to self-motivate and make the most of personal hobbies. Negative responses evoked a 'grin and bear it' attitude.

Live Zoom tutorials and communication with peers were preferred for learning, while recorded and live lectures were less effective due to limited interaction and inclusivity from lecturers. Offshore students recorded that 53% of communication from staff was via email, with a further 23% taking the form of drop-in Zoom sessions. When asked to assess their effectiveness, 40% of the offshore students considered these to be effective, while 60% either disagreed or were unsure.

Dr Inthiran's analysis suggests that many frustrations among new offshore students stem from feeling 'invisible'. She highlights a misalignment between the services provided by universities and students' perceptions, noting that specialised programmes developed for offshore students may not be effectively communicated and, therefore, utilised. For example, services such as online mentoring were established, but it is unknown if the targeted students were even aware of such services.

Furthermore, it appears the teaching and learning team did not fully utilise available methods of communication, such as an offshore discussion board and student Zoom sessions. This is evidenced by email being the dominant communication strategy, which is likely reflected in the 60% of students who were not sure or

did not think that the strategies were effective in engaging them with teaching material.

On the basis of her findings, Dr Inthiran highlights potential factors that impact learning and suggests potential remedies. For instance, she notes that the difficulty experienced by new offshore students in creating bonds with and trust in their lecturers arose from not being able to 'see' them during lectures. Suggestions such as turning on videos while teaching, acknowledging their presence during lectures, and conducting Zoom tutorials would help foster a more inclusive learning environment for offshore students.

Shining Light on Barriers Facing Offshore Students

While Dr Inthiran acknowledges limitations to her study, such as a small sample size, her research highlights important issues faced by new offshore students and offers mitigations to such concerns, as suggested by the students themselves.

Her future work aims to involve students who are not just new offshore students but general offshore students who had previously attended their university in person, but were blocked from returning to New Zealand after border closure was enforced by pandemic restrictions. Her student-centric focus will inevitably lead to improved outcomes. By providing such students with a voice in academic literature, her work shines a light on barriers facing offshore students in their right to access high-quality education from their institution.



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MEET THE RESEARCHER

Dr Anushia Inthiran, Department of Accounting and Information Systems, UC Business School, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Dr Anushia Inthiran earned her Bachelor of Computing from Monash University in 1999 and her Master of Science in Technology Management from Staffordshire University in 2006. Her PhD from Monash University in 2013 focused on Medical Information Searching, and in the same year, she became the primary investigator on a grant from the Ministry of Education. She then obtained a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education from Monash University in 2015. Since 2017, she has served as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Canterbury, later becoming Senior Lecturer above the bar in 2021. Dr Inthiran's research interests span from human-computer interactions to health informatics. She is recognised for her significant contributions to the field. Her dedication to education is evident through her leveraging her expertise to act both as a lecturer and as a mentor to graduate students, for which she was awarded the Student Choice award for Postgraduate Supervisor of the Year by the University of Canterbury Student Association in 2021 and the Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning in 2016 whilst at Monash University.



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FURTHER READING

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