

The Impact of COVID-19 through the Eyes of International Doctoral Student

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of college and university operations all over the world. Most higher education institutions have moved from physical to virtual campuses. With social distancing laws and policies, all communication, teaching, learning, and support for students have been occurring online. While adapting to the new changes, many doctoral students have had to place their research on hold due to the climate of uncertainty created by the pandemic, while others have experienced writer's block. Many of these students face challenges in implementing alternative methods and strategies for their writing routines. In this article, I share my experiences and reflection on the impact of the pandemic on my life and research as an international Ph.D. candidate in education at a private institution in the Southwest United States. The intention of this article is to shed light on the challenges and difficulties I faced during the pandemic, capture my strategies for success, and provide recommendations for practice.

Keywords: COVID-19, doctoral students, higher education, international students

1. Disruptions

The beginning of 2020 was the start of a new period of my doctoral study, with a list of goals and research agendas to smoothly navigate my dissertation process. Everything was on track until the world shut down due to the pandemic. I was worried for my family members overseas and found myself keeping up with news of COVID-19 in two countries: the United States and Saudi Arabia. I was driven to connect, to check-in on how they were navigating through the crisis. WhatsApp messages, texts, and video calls became the only relief. I was worried if I would be able to see them again. The experience of time shifted as the hours, days, and weeks passed. I kept asking myself, how long will this last? Although the stress that comes with dissertation writing is nothing new, I was not prepared for how much COVID-19 would affect my doctoral research. A collaborative research environment plays a pivotal role in my professional growth in regard to resource sharing and networking. However, the social distancing and stay-at-home orders denied me an opportunity to collaborate with other students. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the health and well-being of many doctoral candidates and limited their access to different needs (Cahusac de Caux, 2021; Colpitts et al., 2020; Donohue, 2021; Nash 2021).

Being a parent of three children is a full-time job, especially as an international student far away from my support system of family and friends. The pandemic turned my children's classroom lessons into homeschooling and online learning activities. Before the pandemic hit, I would seek isolation and focus on my dissertation writing away from home at my university library or coffee shop. After the school closures, I asked myself how I could concentrate on my research with the kids staying at home. Having a quiet environment to focus and write became a dream, as each day was filled with noise and interruptions from my children. I struggled to find high-quality educational activities and resources to support their physical and mental health during quarantine and physical isolation. The house had become the school, the university, the gym, the restaurant, the library, and the coffee shop. My daily responsibilities proved to be challenging, which led to additional anxiety and psychological pressure. My days were full of ups and downs. The lack of structure that I had before was a shock to my writing routine. I tried to concentrate, think, and write, but my mind was everywhere else. Additional challenge was mood fluctuations, whether it was worry, anger, anxiety, or feeling overwhelmed. Also, the uncertainty about when life will go back to normal compound my stress and anxiety.

2. Adaptation

As an international student, I tend to spend more time reading and writing than a native English speaker would; writing my dissertation during the pandemic added even greater pressure. At first, I struggled with the loss of control. I often asked myself in shock, "What if I don't meet the deadline for my scholarship?" I was confused and directionless. I lacked confidence in my writing and research skills.

However, over time, I started to prioritize what I needed to accomplish and developed different ways to deal with the new reality. I needed a new strategy. I started by identifying the most important tasks in completing my research, which helped me to focus on executing high-priority tasks first. I also created a daily schedule for each item. I am a morning person, so I tried to do tasks that required a lot of focus (e.g., data analysis) before noon. In the evening, I worked on tasks that required less focus (e.g., reviewing my writing). This strategy did not always work as planned. Sometimes, I spent extra hours in the evening to meet a deadline, even though I was often mentally and physically exhausted. I developed some self-care habits and incorporated them into my everyday routine. Each day when I woke up, I combined prayer with positive-thinking meditation. Whenever I got overwhelmed, I tried to shift my focus to what was working well at that moment, and how I might expand on that. I decided to squeeze in a little time every other day to nurture my soul and mind by making my favorite cake, watching a comedy, or working out. I tried to build up and strengthen my resilience by living each day at a time.

The lack of social interaction made me irritable, especially as an international student with no family members close by. However, the calls, texts, and emails between my peers and me helped me to better understand that the challenges I was facing were not unique to me. It was through these check-ins, video chats, and laughter my sense of isolation and loneliness began to decrease. Many days, our brains were preoccupied. However, the support we received from one another helped allay some of the pressure. Keeping physical distance from one another does not mean disconnecting from friends and loved ones. I found that reaching out to peers regularly was very valuable. Living through COVID-19 has proven that human connection, relationships, and belonging matter more than how they occur.

Despite the challenges, this period brought many advantages. By reflecting on what has worked, what has been learned, and what has been missed, I know that I have grown personally and professionally. The disruption imposed by the pandemic and the sudden nature of the changes pushed me to evaluate and reconstruct my identities as a Muslim, a woman, an international student, a doctoral student, a wife, and a mother. While some aspects of identities tend to remain central; others constantly shifting based on the circumstances (Sequeira & Dacey, 2020). The identity reflection and inner dialogues pushed me to consider the need for identity reconstruction in each domain to maintain a positive sense of self while being away from my family and the familiarity of support systems back home. My experience correlates with Hennekam et al., (2021) research, which points out that identities in multiple domains were jolted during the COVID-19 confinement, which can lead to identity growth over time.

3. Academic Community

As the last stage of the doctoral program, dissertation writing is often characterized by the students working independently on their research projects with the absence of extensive daily engagement and interaction with their peers and faculty, which has likely been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), “the shift from being instructor-led through coursework to autonomous and self-directed during the dissertation process may be a very difficult transition” (p. 213). I greatly missed meeting face to face with my supervisor and interacting with my colleagues. No more coffee shop chats, shaking hands, or pats on the shoulder.

The pandemic led to changes in the format of supervision, as meetings moved primarily online. I started to meet virtually with my supervisor each month or every two weeks based on my needs. Sometimes, we met as a group with other cohorts who were also in the dissertation phase. This group supervision was a valuable support network, which aligns with a recent article that found that supervisory group served as both a source of support and motivation for doctoral students during the COVID-19 crisis (Colpittset al., 2020). It provided us with the opportunity to feel connected to a community and regularly shared our progress under difficult circumstances. We provided emotional support through active listening, empathy, and encouragement. In a recent study, Cahusac de Caux (2021) indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected doctoral candidates’ writing output and strategies and called for more support and compassion. In our group, we talked about common worries, frustrations, tips, and solutions to stay productive. We discussed how to handle writer’s block and recognized one another’s accomplishments. The connections and interactions with other cohorts helped motivate me to write and diminished my sense of isolation. I have come to see the importance of having an additional support mechanism during stressful times.

My supervisor played a central role in helping keep me on track. She used a supportive supervisory style that showed her compassion. The quality of the student-supervisor relationship is one of the most powerful influences on doctoral students’ retention and success, as the quality of this relationship can either increase or decrease the challenges of the doctoral journey (Fiore et al., 2019). In times of crisis, stronger student-supervisor relationships and understanding are more important than ever. Nash (2021) added that “during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a new model for graduate mentorship and supervision is imperative” (p. 14).

The pandemic prompted me to contact my supervisor more frequently. I was surprised when some of my colleagues told me that they had not talked to their supervisors in weeks or months after the pandemic started.

My supervisor became more flexible with meeting times and deadlines. She made it clear that she was open to talking about non-research topics. We talked about what was going on in my country and how my brother recovered from COVID-19. In several meetings, we had regular conversations about strategies for writing under stress or how to stay mentally strong during the pandemic. My supervisor always started our meeting by asking about my well-being and my family abroad. Together, we discussed strategies that would work for me to meet the deadline of my scholarship, given the distractions of the pandemic. She played a dual role as both a supervisor and a mentor. She always reminded me to focus on positive things regarding my research to keep me motivated. For example, she often reminded me of how lucky I was to have finished my data collection prior to the pandemic; many of my colleagues had to suspend data collection or redesign their research due to lockdowns, site closures, or increased risk to participants. The compassion and flexibility in the student-supervisor relationship have implications on student well-being, performance, and satisfaction (Lundgren & Osika, 2021). Having a caring and experienced supervisor has been vital for me to get the support I need, especially during more challenging times.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

I have attempted to provide insight into my experience as an international doctoral candidate during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. I reflected on the disruptions of the pandemic on my life and research and shared the adaptive practices and behaviors I employed. Having support networks both within and outside the university was a critical resilience strategy for me. I have witnessed how the educational community can come together to provide academic, social, and emotional support to help overcome isolation and increase productivity at a time when other resources have been reduced. Despite the disruption of the pandemic on my life, it was also an opportunity for self-discovery, reflection on how I work best, and finding coping strategies to accomplish my educational goals. I hope that these insights can help current and future international students who encounter barriers or difficulties in their studies abroad.

The global pandemic has put greater pressure on doctoral candidates as their research projects have been halted or interrupted. International doctoral students face similar challenges as domestic students, including anxiety, frustration, and confusion; however, these feelings were exacerbated among international students by a sense of cultural isolation and lack of family support. Many were also worried about their families they left behind. There are many lessons to be learned from adapting to the COVID-19 crisis. Institutions of higher education should ask themselves how they could be more responsive to the needs of international students and make the necessary adjustments to help these students to be involved and active.

It is important for higher education institutions to provide psychological support through the staff of their international office and ensure that students can access appropriate support mechanisms. Doctoral supervisors and mentors should be aware of how the fear and stress surrounding the pandemic may affect the research progress of doctoral candidates. There is a need to maintain open and clear communication during the pandemic. Doctoral supervisors and mentors should frequently check-in, ask their doctoral students about their physical and mental well-being, and connect them to the right resources when needed, especially international students who are particularly vulnerable in this crisis. This will enhance students' sense of connectivity and belonging.

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