

Mental resilience or mental fiasco? Covid-19 pandemic: ethnographic reflections of international students in higher education from Czech Republic¹

Resiliência mental ou fracasso mental? Covid-19 pandemic: reflexões etnográficas de estudantes internacionais de ensino superior da República Tcheca

¿Resiliencia mental o falla mental? Pandemia Covid-19: reflexiones etnográficas de estudiantes internacionales de educación superior de la República Tcheca

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Abstract

This article makes a case for the existence of “Mental Resilience” in international students in the Czech Republic. This article analyses international students and coping during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches. A quantitative survey was utilized, conducted by Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020) in the Czech Republic with college students during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. This article then goes beyond each quantitative graph that analyses social and mental factors, drawing on 7 full-time international students stories of their voices, through ethnographic and auto ethnographic stories. The identity of international students is anonymous except for myself as the writer. The stories here span from the onset of high alert and borders closing in March 2020 to November 2020. From the stories of international students, it is clear that coping during these times is varied, complex, and situational depending on multiple individual and contextual factors, however, the stories point to an existence of “Mental Resilience” as the article narrates coping processes.

Keywords: international students; Covid-19 pandemic; mental resilience.

Resumo

Este artigo defende a existência de “resiliência mental” em estudantes internacionais na República Tcheca. Este artigo analisa os estudantes internacionais e o enfrentamento durante a pandemia de Covid-19 em andamento, por meio de uma mistura de abordagens quantitativas e qualitativas. Foi utilizada uma pesquisa quantitativa, conduzida por Klusáček e Kudrnáčová (2020) na República Tcheca, com estudantes universitários durante a primeira onda da pandemia de coronavírus. Este artigo vai além de cada gráfico quantitativo que analisa fatores sociais e mentais, baseando-se em 7 histórias de vozes de estudantes internacionais em tempo integral, por meio de histórias etnográficas e autoetnográficas. A identidade dos estudantes internacionais é anônima, exceto eu, como escritora. As histórias abrangem desde o início do alerta máximo e o fechamento das fronteiras em março de 2020 até novembro de 2020. A partir das histórias de estudantes internacionais, fica claro que o enfren-

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tamento durante esses tempos é variado, complexo e situacional, dependendo de vários fatores individuais e contextuais, no entanto, as histórias apontam para uma existência de “resiliência mental”, à medida que o artigo narra os processos de enfrentamento.

Palavras-chave: estudantes internacionais; pandemia de Covid-19; resiliência mental.

Resumen

Este artículo defiende la existencia de “resiliencia mental” en estudiantes internacionales en la República Checa. Este artículo analiza a los estudiantes internacionales y cómo afrontar la pandemia Covid-19 en curso a través de una combinación de enfoques cuantitativos y cualitativos. Se utilizó una encuesta cuantitativa, realizada por Klusáček y Kudrnáčová (2020) en la República Checa con estudiantes universitarios durante la primera ola de la pandemia de coronavirus. Luego, este artículo va más allá de cada gráfico cuantitativo que analiza los factores sociales y mentales, basándose en las historias de sus voces de 7 estudiantes internacionales de tiempo completo, a través de historias etnográficas y autoetnográficas. La identidad de los estudiantes internacionales es anónima, excepto yo como escritor. Las historias aquí abarcan desde el inicio de la alerta máxima y el cierre de fronteras en marzo de 2020 hasta noviembre de 2020. A partir de las historias de estudiantes internacionales, está claro que afrontar estos tiempos es variado, complejo y situacional dependiendo de múltiples situaciones individuales y contextuales. Sin embargo, las historias apuntan a la existencia de “resiliencia mental”, ya que el artículo narra los procesos de afrontamiento.

Palabras clave: estudiantes internacionales; pandemia de Covid-19; resiliencia mental.

Introduction: Covid-19 world pandemic and the Czech Republic

The novel coronavirus, Covid-19 first appeared in Wuhan, China before the world realized the virus was at each of their doorsteps as well, having travelled across borders as easily as the most privileged of passport countries. Covid-19 has thus spared no country, currently running riot in the whole world with glaringly high numbers in the ‘free world’. The stress is on the ‘free world’ because the world of higher education has been built on the ideas and goals of how the ‘most developed’ have set standards for what learning and higher education should look like and how it should be recognized. But with the onset of Covid-19 the idea that our psyche as human beings lives and learns on a spectrum of opportunity from ‘under-developed to developed’ has been contradicted on many levels.

Covid-19 has created the realization that during this pandemic we can no longer say that one section of the world is more ‘progressive or developed’ than the other in the handling of this pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), more than 100 Covid-19 potential vaccines are undergoing human trials around the world. There is hope that a successful vaccine is on the horizon in 2021.

In the Czech Republic, the infection of Covid-19 was confirmed on March 1, 2020, with three cases. The country went into a first wave Covid-19 state of emergency on March 12, 2020 and extended this state of emergency till May 17, 2020. State of emergency meant restrictions on the free movement of people, closure of most businesses, and all institutions and border closures. The Czech Republic went back into the restrictive measure and state of emergency on October 5th, 2020, and is currently extended into November 2020 as it experiences a second wave Covid-19.

Methodology

This paper analyses through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches the question, “How are international students in higher education in the Czech Republic coping during this Covid-19 pandemic?”. This paper makes a case for the existence of ‘Mental Resilience’ in international students in the Czech Republic. This paper draws on a quantitative survey conducted by Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020) in the Czech Republic with College students during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. The researchers analysed possible factors impacting the mental and social well-being of students during the first wave of Covid-19. This paper then goes beyond each quantitative graph, drawing on 7 full-time international students’ stories of their voices, through ethnographic and autoethnographic narratives. The identity of international students is anonymous except for myself as the writer. The stories here span from the onset of high alert and borders closing in March 2020 to now, November 2020.

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is one of the most relevant methods in qualitative research, and both psychology and sociology use qualitative methods in their research (HANSON, 2008). Its characteristic methodology consists of detailed descriptions of the situations and observable behaviors. It embodies what participants say, their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and reflections uttered by themselves instead of their descriptions of themselves. Besides the use of observation and interview as assessment or information collection techniques, ethnography as a paradigm and psychology and sociology as scientific disciplines have in common the fact that they do not separate people’s behavior from the context in which it is shown (MARCÉN *et al.*, 2013).

What is Auto-Ethnography?

In research that seeks to discover personal experience, there is a unique relationship between researcher and participant, and the issue of voice arises. It is suggested that the freedom of a researcher to speak as a player in a research project and to mingle his or her experience with the experience of those studied is precisely what is needed to move inquiry and knowledge further along. If a researcher's voice is omitted from a text, the writing is reduced to a mere summary and interpretation of the works of others, with nothing new added (WALL, 2006). What can be learned about methods in autoethnography is that it varies widely, from the highly introspective, through more familiar approaches connected to qualitative research, to somewhat experimental literary methods, experimental, at least, in terms of thinking of writing as research (WALL, 2006).

The Czech Republic and Higher Education

The Czech Republic is part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and Bologna Process. This means that the Czech Republic along with 48 other countries collaborates based on free movement between staff and students to increase employability and exchange of faculty and staff learning with the European Union (CZECH REPUBLIC, 2020).

The Bologna Process is an interesting one, for in many ways it allows the opportunity of all students to learn within multiple borders of the European Union. On the other hand, there is a neoliberal side to its function (KUSHNIR, 2020). The voice of inclusion in the midst of neoliberalist noise in the Bologna Process writes, Ball (*apud* KUSHNIR, 2020), who analyses the shift in governing of higher education, states that competitive self-ambitions are replacing collective interests and transforming them into commercial values.

The scholar maintains that the all-devouring focus on benchmarks, tests, and audits in higher education is undermining the professionalism of education practitioners at all levels of education; and the author calls for the need to reignite the focus on 'real educational work' which is about ethics and morals (BALL *apud* KUSHNIR, 2015, p. 1046).

Functioning within the framework of EHEA, the Czech Republic is home to several good universities drawing a significant number of students for both European Union and non-European Union passport holders to pursue affordable, English-taught quality higher education in the context of this small Central European

country. The universities grapple and evolve within the EHEA identity drawing international students with a definite neoliberal arc while delivering an affordable overall valued higher education opportunity for many international students.

Under “normal circumstances” the “pre-Covid-19 era”, what I alongside many international students that chose to study here have discovered, the study experience goes beyond the classroom right into the heart of each vibrant city within the Czech Republic. Many times students around the world find that their universities are built outside the city centers, sometimes in areas that do not have easily accessible public transport or proximity to big cities and airports. The beauty of education in the Czech Republic is how the universities are part of not just the central city architecture but intellect and learning are drawn in equal measure from the classroom and within each city. Then under ‘normal’ circumstances the Bologna process and the open borders within the EU have been valuable for students to access learning in person beyond borders within the European Union.

However, today, with the onset of Covid-19 the world as we know it has dramatically changed with worldwide border shutdowns, including within the EU countries, flights cancelled and we are seeing a slow decline in the world’s economy. The world of education has gone from problems that often affected ‘certain sections of the developing world’ to a worldwide contextual problem. The coping of students in higher education has been catapulted from a primarily understood classroom-based learning to a massively online solo based learning experience with no country a ‘normal haven’. This has thrown the thought process of learning into new, large-scale, unprecedented territories. This has also created the question of ‘Are online classes at the same cost of in-person classes a fair charge’?

Mental resilience or mental fiascos

Here in the Czech Republic, confusion, disbelief, fear, adaptability, resilience, acceptance, at ease are some of the many emotions tied to the onset of the pandemic chaos and the continued months into seeing no concrete sign of success in eradicating the repercussions of this pandemic.

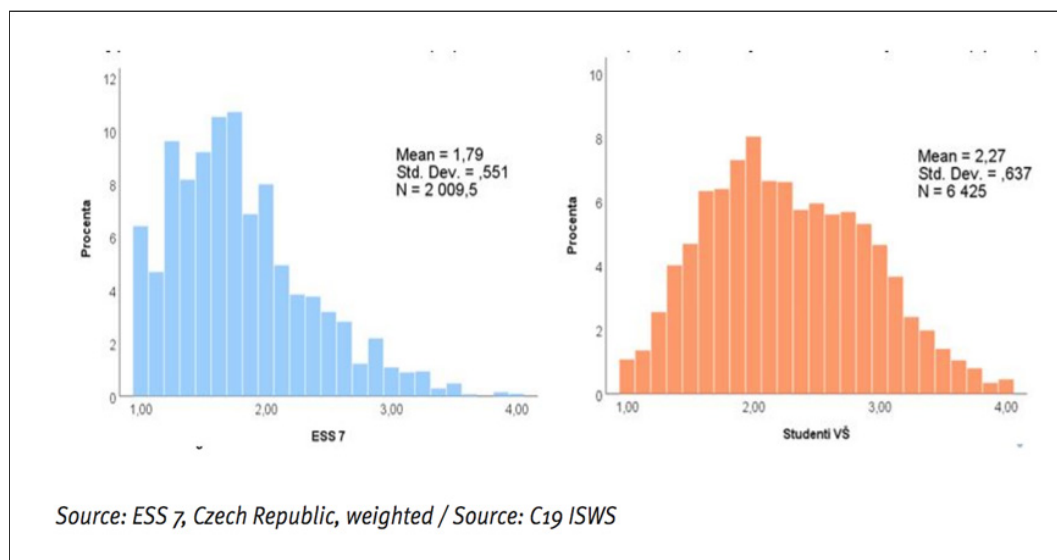
“Should we stay or should we go?” was on the mind of international students here in the Czech Republic when the pandemic grabbed the world. The reflections in this paper generate thoughts on the coping precarity of the international student as Third Country Nationals in the Czech Republic. According to the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic - MOI, a Third Country National is defined as a citizen of a

state that is not a member of the EU nor a citizen of Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway or Switzerland (CZECH REPUBLIC, 2020). Something to note is that students as ‘Third Country Nationals’ in the Czech Republic have to renew their student visa every year.

A survey was conducted by (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020) on “College students during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic”. The survey and graphs have been translated from Czech to English using Google Translate. Their research spanned 28 April to 19 May 2020 through online data which provided insight into students and mental health here in the Czech Republic. Students from 7 universities in the Czech Republic were involved in contributing to online data. The researchers Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020) examined the physical, mental, and social well-being of students. The pandemic in the Czech Republic during the period of the hardest measures was psychologically stressful.

The Graph 1 shows the sum index of the eight items of the Depression Scale from the European Social Research – ESS (feeling sad, frustrated, anxious, isolated...). The authors of the research compared the latest available data of the Czech general population (ESS 7, 2014) with newly collected data concerning university students. Students appear to have been more prone to depression on average between late April and early May 2020 than the general population under normal circumstances.

Graph 1 – The sum index of the eight items of the Depression Scale from the European Social Research – ESS



Research source: (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020).

Graph 1 translation Czech to English. Procenta = Percent.

Student story 1: a student from India (Masters program)

I always wanted to go abroad to pursue my masters. I opted for Prague for my masters for the fact that it is a very beautiful city and the benefits students get to study in EU countries. I arrived on 1st October with lots of hope and excitement for my new beginnings. From October till February, everything was going so smoothly. My classes were going well, I was enjoying the interactions with my professors, going out for trips with my friends, and tasting all the delicious European cuisines. But as they say, every good thing comes to an end, around March the first case of Covid was detected in the Czech Republic. I was a bit frightened, knowing the seriousness of this virus, I consequently, started to take necessary precautions. I went and bought 2 liters of sanitizer and sanitized my room. Soon the cases began to rise and the Czech government was planning for a lockdown. I remember vividly, the government announcing lockdown, I rushed to the grocery store to stock up. I wasn't surprised to see that the store was packed with people, making it heavily crowded. It was a total frenzy. I bought all the stuff and arrived back at my apartment. Then my father contacted me from India telling me to come back home immediately, he had already booked a ticket to India. Alas! all my efforts to store up groceries went in vain. But, I was excited to go back to my parents during this difficult time. Since the cases were spiking, all the universities in the Czech Republic announced that the classes would be online. So I left for India. I returned to Prague on 12th June, and I remember my arrival at Prague airport where the concerned authorities were strictly checking the Covid test of all the incoming international passengers. Luckily, I had a slip which I showed them indicating my Covid negative status. I booked a cab and went to my apartment where I did a strict 14 day quarantine. During this time, the cases reported in the Czech Republic were very low. After a few days, the Czech government eased the restrictions, and to mark how well they had fought the pandemic, the government announced that they would do a feast for the public on Charles bridge with a 500- meter long table and 2,000 guests. However, the same week Prague reported many new Covid cases. People seemed to be going back to 'normal'. During this time, I was also facing other problems with which I couldn't cope, and because of which I had lots of depression and anxiety. Subsequently, I started taking online counselling. From June to August, my days were the worst. I started consuming alcohol more than usual. I had no idea what was going around me. It was the worst nightmare I had ever got but in real life, far from my family. Fortunately, during this time only one

good thing happened to me, and that was I found another new apartment in the city center with an amazing owner. My previous apartment was not good and a little gloomy and the owner was also not very welcoming. I love my new cozy apartment. It was also close to an amazing friend. While my anxiety and sadness were growing it was my friend close by and my online counsellor that kept me sane. But I desperately wanted to go back to India now as my mental health was not getting better. My student visa was going to expire on 20th October and I had to apply for my renewal as it's advised in the Czech Republic to apply for it 2 months before to the expiry. It was already the 1st week of September. But thank goodness, I got the help of a visa agent to quickly reapply for a visa. He arranged everything and my visa process started on time. While waiting for my visa, I got the news of my grandmother's death. This made me even more desperate to go back to India. To get my visa fast so I can go back and be with my family in India.

'S' is still currently waiting on the renewal of her Czech student visa before she can head to India.

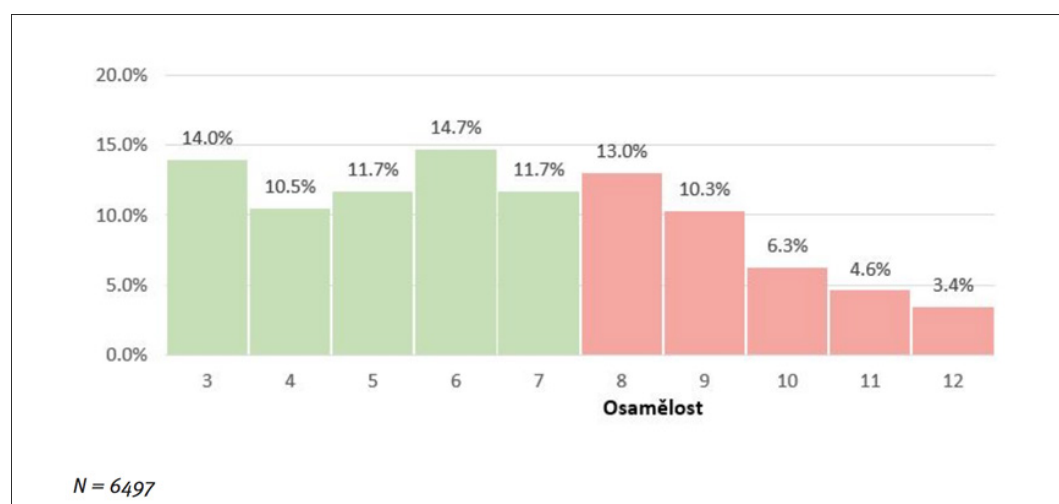
Student story 2: a student from Chile (Masters program)

I first met 'P' in the university corridor of the university building both our departments shared. This was a month before the pandemic hit. We had exchanged numbers feeling a quick sense of camaraderie when we mutually laughed in delight at a poster on the department bulletin board. I do not remember now what that poster was advertising, but it started the two of us dialoguing. We exchanged phone numbers to meet up for coffee and we did manage to meet once, but then the Czech Republic went on a strict lockdown. Since then we have kept in touch online. 'P' She volunteered to share her experiences over time from the onset of the pandemic to now. 'P' and we had an online Google Meet hangout as she reflected on her life here personally within the framework of being an international student. She told me it was tough when the pandemic hit, she juggled a personal life back home in Chile with an ailing parent, while living here alone in the Czech Republic. She has a Croatian passport which allows her flexibility within the EU, but home is very much Chile and the affordability of an EU passport was rendered a bit useless when the Czech Republic went on lockdown since it seemed at the time that the Czech Republic was doing better than some western European countries. So she stayed at home. But the stress of the pandemic was anxiety-inducing for her as not only was part of her family in Chile, part of her family was in the USA. The

pressure of her university study then was too much to handle and she decided to take the semester off. Over time the pandemic was not getting better as the world continued to be glaringly suffering from online news. ‘P’ said she has been seeing a therapist and is currently on prescription medication to help deal with her stress and anxiety and she is doing ‘okay’.

Quantitative survey continued: Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020) researchers also measured loneliness using the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) loneliness scale, 37.5% of college students felt lonely (scores 8 to 12).

Graph 2 – The scores of the three-item scale of loneliness UCLA (3 = does not feel lonely at all, 12 = feels very lonely)



Research source: (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020).

Graph 2 translation Czech to English. Osamělost = Loneliness.

Student story 3: a student from the United States of America (Ph.D. program)

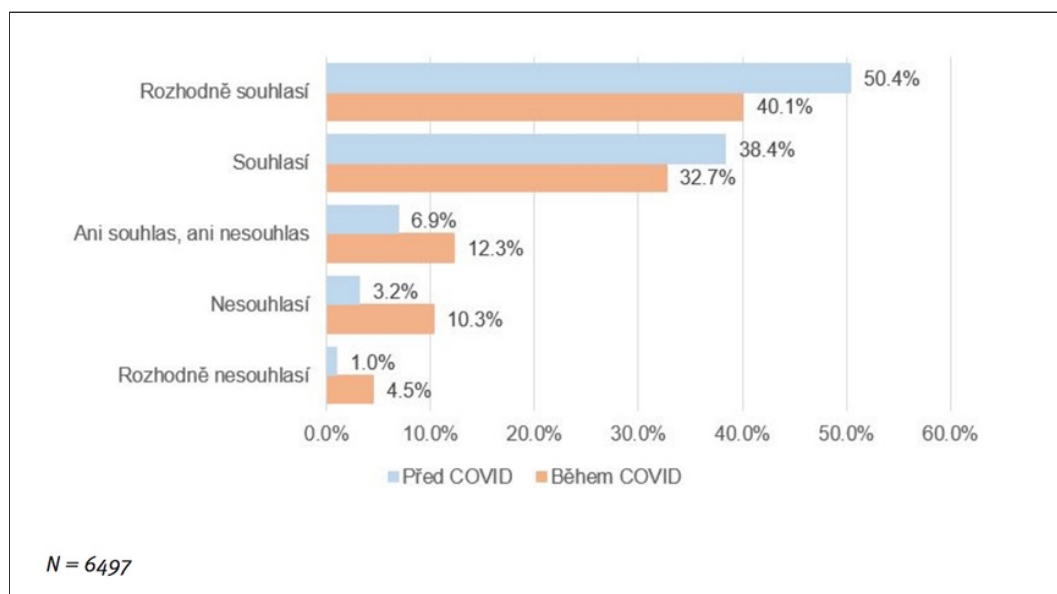
‘L’, an African-American studying in the Czech Republic reflected on his life as a student during the pandemic. For a self-identified introvert who loves to spend more time alone than with a group of people, ‘L’ initially proclaimed that the lockdown in Prague suited him well. He did not have to force himself to interact with people. He told me he could spend all the time he wanted in his apartment, blogging, reflecting, collecting research for his dissertation through online conversations with people and he was not forced to have in-person conversations with

people unless he needed to. As the weeks turned into months, his forced isolation started to wear him down a bit. He wondered about 'home'. But he said to me:

I think in a nutshell, it makes the isolation you already feel, a little more here in the Czech Republic. Everyone is wary of strangers these days, and when you're different... in a way it makes international students and expats closer than ever. And if 'home' was better (you know what I mean) then it might be easier. 'Home' as you know is not a 'better place', especially right now. So, I am choosing to look at all this time on my hands to 'get sh**t done'.

Quantitative survey continued, Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020), the researchers, also tried to map the financial situation of university students before the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis (before restrictions and lockdown set in) and during it in early May. They found that financial problems did increase from 4.2% to 14.8%, decreasing financial security in the students.

Graph 3 – To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "I had sufficient funds to cover my monthly expenses"



Research source: (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020).

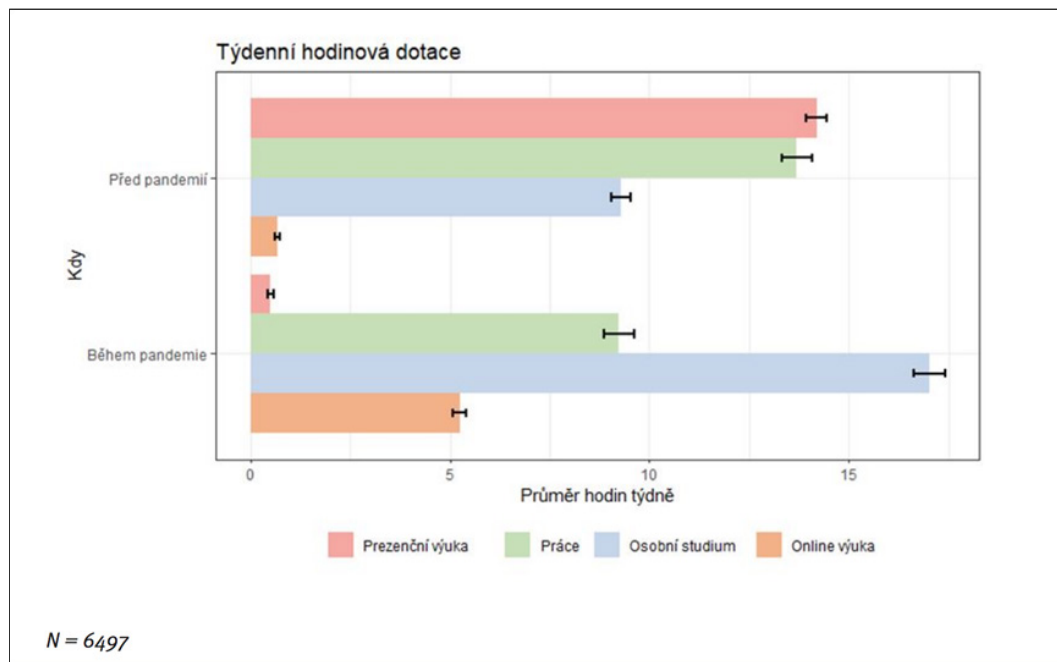
Graph 3 translation Czech to English. Rozhodně souhlasí= Strongly agree; Souhlasí = Agree; Ani souhlas, ani nesouhlas = Neither agree nor disagree; Nesouhlas = Disagree; Rozhodně nesouhlas = Strongly disagree.

Student story 4: a student from Brazil (Ph.D. program)

I'm 'J'. I'm a Ph.D. student at Charles University in Prague. My current project examines the lives and experiences of football and futsal migrant athletes in Central and Eastern Europe. When the Covid-19 pandemic reached the Czech Republic, I had just moved into a permanent place in Krakow. I was planning on doing fieldwork in Poland, and taking courses at the Jagiellonian University. My life in Poland up until that moment was living in a hostel [I can't remember the name of it, but it was super central], going to courses, planning fieldwork, organizing my attempt to publish. I guess I made my research project more interesting to me in this way, I "follow" sports migrants, and used academic mobility periods to answer my research questions. While I could have stayed in Poland when the classes switched to an online mode, some friends told me to come back to the Czech Republic because the borders were going to close. So I arranged everything with the landlady. She was kind enough to return the rent I had paid her. I guess we're talking about March 2020. It was the most troublesome period. I was thinking about coming back to my home country. I started feeling a lot of anxiety about my mother. She lives alone, and I guess that was a critical moment for me. She raised me as a single mother, and there is always this feeling that I will come back to take care of her when she gets older. Surprisingly, my mom reacted most calmly, and she did help me going through these moments. I remember I started to drink a lot at this point, and I was not the most motivated student to finish with the courses in Krakow. Slowly, I came back to "myself", my supervisor just gave me a lot of advice via email. I used the first wave of Covid-19 to look for more data online, and I managed to write the remaining two chapters of my thesis. But I guess framing things in this way, "I managed"... is unrealistic. I could "manage" because I received the rent money in Poland back, that gave me some money to get by, I have a steady source of income, my project is funded, I can study from home, and I still have a deadline to finish a thesis. Now that we see a second wave, I confess I feel a lot more pessimistic about "the future". Maybe my pessimism will eventually fade away when a vaccine is out there. I certainly hope so.

Quantitative survey continued: Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020), the researchers continued to study 'study load and stress' possibly created by the difficulty of meeting students and professors after the onset of the pandemic and when full-time teaching was disrupted at universities. It was found that there was an increase of 4.5 hours per week during the pandemic of teaching hours and, to a bigger extent, personal study time was increased to 7.8 hours per week.

Graph 4 – “How many hours did you normally spend on teaching, personal study, and paid work?”



Research source: (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020).

Graph 4 translation Czech to English. Týdenní hodinová dotace = Hours weekly; Kdy = When; Před pandemií = Before pandemic; během pandemie = After pandemic; Počet hodin týdně = Average weekly hours; Prezenční výuka = Offline courses; Práce = Paid job; Osobní studium = Personal study time; Online výuka = online courses.

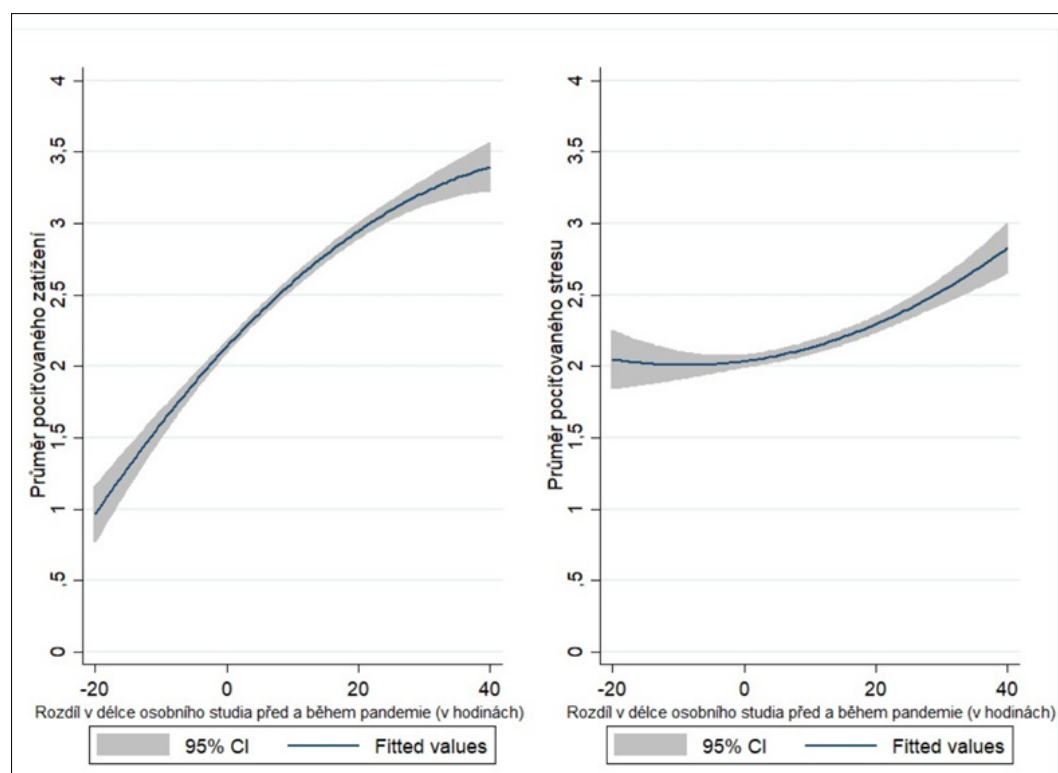
Student story 5: a student from China (Masters program)

‘N’ reflected on her experiences here once the Czech Republic went on lockdown. She said:

My personal opinion, especially as an international here, we don’t have much contact with others other than our schoolmates, so we feel alone and lonely often when we are restricted to our housing. Online courses are not as efficient especially to us social sciences students, due to a lack of face-to-face discussion. Recreational life has been greatly impacted too so most of the time I am just confined to my dorm room and my income has decreased. I speak for several international students who have experienced the same as me and have lost part-time jobs or have fewer opportunities. As far as I know, quite a few international students are struggling with depression. I don’t feel different as a student here bcz of my nationality (I do get asked questions about the communist regime and some stereotyped Chinese society tho). but about studying here I feel it’s way more like living/studying in Prague than studying at my university. The integration and interaction among faculties are insufficient and bcz of some other reasons too, I don’t feel the school spirit. and to know non-schoolmate ppl is even easier than to have connections with students from other faculties.

Quantitative survey continued: Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020), researchers also found a marked difference between university faculties in their approach to dealing with the disruptions in regular teaching styles. This played a part in how students dealt with the perceived level of study load and stress. There was the possibility that with the lack of coordination and clarity in teaching delivery, students created their versions of study time and keeping up with class content on their own and is seen in Graph 05 when the students indicated a progressive increase in study load stress which was similar to the rise in stress during the pandemic.

Graph 5 – Averages of perceived study load and stress according to the difference in the length of personal study before and during the pandemic (in hours)



Research source: (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020).

Graph 5 Czech to English translation. Průměry pocítovaného zatížení = Average perceived load; Průměry pocítovaného stresu = Average perceived stress.

Student story 6: a student from Indonesia (Ph.D. program)

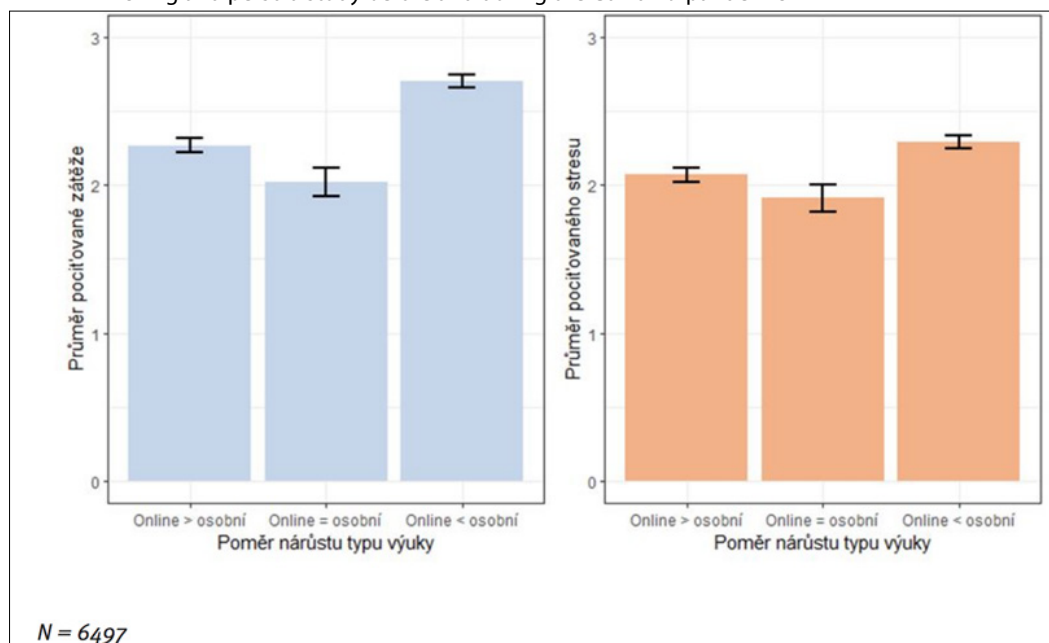
A student from Indonesia, 'R' studying in the Czech Republic was content thinking of remaining in the country while waiting out the pandemic. But he did periodically worry about his aging mother back in Indonesia and the lack of proper family support for her. He said he was quite content with having online classes here and was keeping busy. Most recently, with several months passing by with no sign of the pandemic getting better with Europe's second wave, 'R' tells me:

I am now thinking of going back to Indonesia, collecting my research within Indonesia, and being with family, and then we'll see. I can't bear the idea of spending Christmas here with everything closed and restrictions on meeting people, it would be sad. I am better off being at home. I can't concentrate on my research and online classes here. I plan to go to Indonesia before Christmas and come back in March.

A few days later 'R' called me to tell me he found out his research stipend will not be enough to cover his expenses in fieldwork in Indonesia and with the economy the way it is, he is unsure how best to navigate staying in the Czech Republic or going back to Indonesia. 'R' is also waiting on the renewal of his Czech student visa feeling uncomfortable about leaving on a temporary short-term visa for Indonesia with the current unreliable rules of borders opening and closing but also keeping in mind how best to collect data for his research project from within Indonesia.

Quantitative survey continued: Klusáček and Kudrnáčová (2020), the researchers also found that university faculties that had the could go straight into online teaching created a scenario where students were more at ease and indicated lesser extended study periods and lower study stress as indicated in Graph 06.

Graph 6 – Averages of perceived study load and stress according to the ratio of the increase in online teaching and persola study before and during the Covid-19 pandemic



Research source: (KLUSÁČEK; KUDRNÁČOVÁ, 2020).

Graph 6 translation Czech to English translation. Průměry pocítované zátěže = Average perceived load; Průměry pocítovaného stresu = Average perceived stress.

The quantitative survey above indicates, the general student well-being within the students who participated in the Czech Republic did show a marked decrease overall in multiple areas.

Student story 7: (author) this is my story so far (Ph.D. program)

My passport is from India, I was born in Papua New Guinea and I am here in the Czech Republic researching higher education migration from Asia, Latin America, and Africa to what was historically Czechoslovakia while looking at current higher education migrations to the Czech Republic. The year 2019-2020 seemed like a regular start to any new academic year for all students involved. I joined the many students in the Prague Czech Republic in October 2019 a few short months before the pandemic took hold of the world and the Czech Republic went on lockdown.

For an international student who grew up in a developing context that was postcolonial and widely ‘English speaking’, being a newcomer to a primarily Czech speaking country where English is a second language was exciting and a challenging welcome. As I think back to a few months before the pandemic hit the Czech Republic, some several interesting thoughts and emotions made up my experience:

1. The excitement of learning a new language;
2. The confusion of buying groceries where the language is not ‘English’;
3. The navigation around the city trying to learn the different trains, trams, metros, and districts or city locations and pronouncing Czech names of various destinations within the Czech Republic;
4. Navigating the immigration government offices where the information was primarily in Czech though English translations were available if a student learned where to look and there was extra excitement if the immigration officer spoke English;
5. Classroom education was in Czech and English and it was fun.

So, the joys of new experiences, confusion in language translation, and continued learned resilience seemed like a ‘normal’ cross-cultural experience to have overall with its ups and downs within any new country. My mental state was ‘normal’ with the stresses and excitements of the new cross-cultural experiences. Then came the pandemic, borders shut down and utter confusion around the world started. I had just planned a trip to do some Ph.D. research in Ecuador in March 2020. Just before I was to fly out, Ecuador shut their borders and the Czech Republic followed. It’s November 2020 now and my visa has expired for Ecuador. The Czech Republic is going through a second wave of Covid, more severe this time and we are back on restrictions. Like me, many students have had to halt their fieldwork data collection. It has been easier for me as I am using ‘Ethnography’ and can interview people online. However, the pandemic has created a different context within the Czech Republic that will influence how my higher education migration research will be narrated. In terms of my personal life, I miss my family in India and we stay connected through online channels regularly. We hear there might be a positive outcome for a vaccine in the next few months, but at this point, everything around the world is still in the ‘new normal chaos’. When I was asked to consider writing a paper on Education and Health, I knew an ethnography in the Czech Republic, my current residence would work best. This paper would not have

been possible without access to the internet to reach out to each of the full-time international students like me, living during this pandemic in the Czech Republic.

Analysis

In “Covid-19, higher education and the impact on society: what we know so far and what could happen”, (HUGHES, 2020) points out that right now, Covid-19 is threatening the cohesiveness of human relationships: lockdowns are creating a fractured world of isolated individuals experiencing fewer opportunities to congregate than ever before. “The consequences could be dramatic, exacerbating the type of atomized society that the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim warned against” (HUGHES, 2020, p. 1).

While the world is reeling from outbreaks of the Covid-19 pandemic with the ongoing infection rate, it is practical to say that even post-Covid-19 our world has taken a massive shift in every possible way conceivable. It is not possible to fully comprehend and understand right now how and what will get affected long term once a successful vaccine to combat Covid-19 is discovered. However, keeping in mind the mental pressures and push toward more isolated living, this paper hoped to understand if a case could be made that shows there is mental resilience in the face of coping as an international student from overseas living in the Czech Republic during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The world is full of adaptable human beings making up ways to cope in little and big ways to keep surviving, evolving, while at the same time the pandemic is forcing the world to re-think and re-develop. From the stories of international students, it is clear that coping during these times is varied, complex, and situational depending on multiple individual and contextual factors. While certain references can be drawn from the fact that all student narratives depicted here deal with incredible themes of loneliness, anxiety, stress, and a lack of in-person community, the international student narratives indicate resilience, the ability to function, think, plan and reach for available resources.

We cannot forget that neoliberal frameworks of higher education have for the sake of large monetary gains, allowed access to education for international students from overseas. What this points to is an inner resilience within an international student to leave their sense of comfort and community in one country for a further desirable education and opportunity in another country and institution. In the international student stories above, 4 out of 7 students are continuing to stay

in the Czech Republic during this pandemic, far from their passport country and family. So when faced with a pandemic of this magnitude, international students already have resources in place to allow survival within new places or pandemic isolation for a long time.

Nota

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