

## Behavioural and Psychological Impact of Covid-19 on a Group of Youth and Young Adults Repatriated Back to Sri Lanka from the uk: a qualitative study

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**Abstract.** The COVID-19 pandemic affected international students around the world, including the Sri Lankan undergraduate and post-graduate students who were studying in the UK, and they were repatriated to Sri Lanka by the government last May. The current study aimed to explore and understand the impact on behaviour and psychological changes on this youth and young adult group of being under lockdown in the UK, repatriation, quarantine processes and self-isolation, as well as the experience during the journey from the UK to Sri Lanka. This qualitative study was planned and conducted in a quarantine environment based on the lived experiences of investigators, who were also students repatriated back to Sri Lanka from the UK due to COVID-19 pandemic, which is also the significance of this study. A convenient sample of sixteen (16) students (age ranged from 18 – 34) participated in the study. Data was collected using three investigative methods: questionnaires, researcher's objective observations and semi-structured interviews (over the phone or online). Data analysis was done using thematic analysis method. There were three preliminary themes that emerged from the study: (1) Fear, worry and anxiety, (2) Adherence to safety precautions, and (3) Agitation. Findings indicate that the abrupt

changes to their education and day-to-day lifestyles, perceived stigma and emotional imbalance during this stressful situation caused psychological as well as behavioural challenges and difficulty in coping among this group. Findings highlight the need for addressing their age-specific psychological needs when developing guidelines to manage similar situations in the future and to increase resilience.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, repatriation, youth and young adults, psychological and behavioural patterns.

### Introduction:

With its highly prestigious, world-recognised universities and the culturally diverse environment, the United Kingdom (UK) is popular among thousands of international students choosing to pursue their higher educational qualifications. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, over five million international students were pursuing their degree in the UK under Tier 4 and tier 5 visa categories in year 2018/2019. Majority of these students are from China, India, Thailand, Hong-Kong as well as African countries. Twenty-nine percent of all students in the UK are from former colonies including India,

Thailand and Sri Lanka (International Student Statistics in UK 2020).

During December 2019, a novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak was reported from Wuhan, China, soon progressing it to an epidemic distinct from SARS-Cov and MERS-Cov (Zhu et al., 2020). COVID-19 was then identified as a highly contagious disease, making it a pandemic that led the whole world to shut down and undergo lockdown periods (Watkins, 2020). While countries started proceeding with lockdown and social distancing measures, people started working from home, home-schooling and major consequences such as Airport closures occurred due to the fast spread of the disease. The COVID-19 pandemic affected international students around the world, including the Sri Lankan students who are studying in the UK, as it resulted in disruption of their daily routines, sudden and abrupt changes to their academic activities, social lives and lifestyles. For example, the lockdown, social distancing and self-isolation procedures led Sri Lankan students studying in the UK to be confined to their accommodations, being unable to move to Sri Lanka causing a negative effect towards their psychological wellbeing. Throughout this difficult period, the Sri Lankan students (aged 18 – 34) in the UK were advised and supported by their universities, immigration compliance and the Sri Lanka High Commission (SLHC). On 03<sup>rd</sup> and 05<sup>th</sup> May, 2020 they were repatriated to Sri Lanka by the government and quarantined in Colombo.

It is not clear how long the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to limit the usual academic activities and lifestyles of this group of students. Clearly, there are challenges of continuing academic activities such as attending online virtual classes and completing assignments while being under quarantine with limited resources and distractions and also being far away from their universities in a different time zone. Young

adults are one of the high-risk category group of individuals who are more likely to develop negative psychological and behavioural patterns due to outbreaks and self-isolation (Pang et al., 2004; Brooks et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to explore and understand the impact of being under lockdown, self-isolation, repatriation and quarantine processes during the journey from the UK to Sri Lanka, on the behaviour and psychological changes on this youth and young adult group.

Taking this into account, the present study opens an avenue to see how these youth and young adults stranded in overseas could be subjected to different psychological and behavioural issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, this study was conducted in the natural setting of the participants and it was first-hand experience research where the researchers were also present in the setting, overtly observing the particular group of participants. Having a real-life experience of being affected by the lockdown, repatriated back to Sri Lanka from the UK due to COVID-19 pandemic and being under quarantine as Sri Lankans based in the UK, we aimed to carry out a qualitative study to explore and understand the experience (including views, perceptions and attitudes) of youth and young adults. This study also aimed to observe and describe the psychological and behavioural impact of COVID-19 global pandemic on the lives of this group. In this paper, we wish to describe the methodology and preliminary findings of the study.

### **Methodology:**

This research study was developed based on the lived experiences of the investigators (KA, NW and MH), who are also international Sri Lankan students, repatriated back to Sri Lanka from the UK due to COVID-19 pandemic. The study setting was one of the government quarantine centres located in Colombo. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the

expedition review committee at Rajarata University (Ref: ERC/2020/38)

A convenient sample of undergraduates and post-graduate level students who were repatriated back to Sri Lanka due to COVID-19 and underwent quarantine in the selected study setting were recruited in the study. Investigators shared information about the study via a closed WhatsApp group and invited the students to take part in the study. Those who wished to take part voluntarily were recruited using an online consent form, developed via google forms. Then they were encouraged to contact the study team (KA, NW, MH and TK) via the online messaging platform, considering the ease of convenience and the need of maintaining physical distancing measures at the quarantine centre.

Three investigative methods were used for data collection: (1) Researcher's objective observations (Ethnographic research approach), (2) Questionnaires (including demographic information questions, The Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7) scale and the 'Ways of Coping Checklist-Revised (WCCL-R) scale; Sawang et al., 2010) and (3) Semi-structured interviews (over the phone or online) to explore participants' lived experience. Data collection was conducted at three phases.

*Phase 01:* At the time of obtaining the consent, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire and the GAD-7 scale (circulated online via closed WhatsApp group or email). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a topic guide to further explore the real-life experience and perceptions of being locked down in the UK, repatriated to Sri Lanka and quarantined. The ethnographic research approach was considered most appropriate as the investigators interact with the participants while observing them in a real-life environment. Journal keeping was a continuation of a fun activity among this group

of students while they were under lockdown in the UK as a coping method. The student group were informed verbally regarding the objective observation of their psychological and behavioural patterns on the day one at the arrival of Heathrow, London, where they first met in person. KA, NW and MH maintained independent personal journals based on their experience and objective observations in the UK and continued this exercise during their stay at quarantine centre and entered daily notes in their own time.

*Phase 02:* GAD-7 scale was administered online at the end of the quarantine period in Sri Lanka.

*Phase 03:* GAD-7 scale and WCCL-R scale was administered three weeks after the students being sent home at the completion of quarantine (after a week of completion of self-isolation at home).

The research team used these personal journals as a data source for the current study. However, this was reminded to the participants at the time of obtaining consent; observations of those who did not give the consent for the study will not be entered in any research report/ publication.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Diary entries and interview transcripts were anonymised in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and to prevent them from being traced back. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Relevant descriptive and inferential statistics measures were also used when presenting demographic information.

### **Results:**

Sixteen undergraduates and post-graduate level students completed phase one. Among them, all agreed for observations and seven agreed to take part in interviews. However, dropout rate was high after the quarantine period; thirteen of them completed the second phase (GAD-7 scale) and only 08 students

completed the final phase of the study (GAD-7 and WCCL-R scales).

Findings indicated both positive and negative psychological and behavioural impacts. There were three themes emerged: (1) Fear, worry and anxiety, (2) Adherence to safety precautions and (3) Agitation.

#### *Fear, worry and anxiety*

Many young adults reported that they were not worried or did not take the condition seriously during the epidemic level at China and carried out their normal routines until the lockdown started in the UK or the outbreak reached Sri Lanka and Europe.

*“At first, I thought it would not go for a pandemic scale. I thought it would just stay in China. So, I wasn’t taking it that seriously. When the outbreak reached around Europe... Italy and Spain, I realised it’s a serious issue.” (P01)*

Almost all students reported that they were stressed or worried that their academic activities were hindered during the lockdown period due to the university closure and after repatriation mode of studies changed to distanced and online learning. Students’ main concerns during the lockdown in the UK were that their loved ones being overly worried and afraid of them staying in the UK alone, with lack or no access to health care facilities if things went wrong.

*“I wasn’t worried or panicking that much. But my parents were... since they were in SL and I was in the UK. They kept on thinking about the distance between us [...] It was quite of pressure for me. Actually, I was worried about them more than worrying about myself.” (P04)*

*“I started getting anxious at the end. I realised that it’s not that easy as you think it is since I didn’t have any flatmate or friend whom I can rely on in an emergency.” (P03)*

Fear of being exposed to COVID-19 infection during repatriation and anxiety caused by perceived social stigma and judgements

related to the quarantine also commonly reported.

*“I still don’t know what to expect once I go home, how people view me... whether as a diseased person or I’m like Coronavirus career, like I would just be spreading all over... I kept thinking about what would people think about my parents as well.” (P01)*

When asked about how they were coping, many reported that they ‘felt at ease’ after coming back to Sri Lanka:

*“In the UK... I had the worst mental break downs. I overslept and just kept thinking ‘is this going to finish or not?’ The travelling part... It was a bit overwhelming. But, the overall process in quarantine is good.” (P01)*

*“I knew I’m safe and in good hands at the very moment I stepped out from the flight. What a relief!” (P02)*

During the interviews the students reported that they experienced moderate to severe anxiety levels during the lockdown period and repatriation process as well as the last day of quarantine. However, the GAD scores show minimal or mild anxiety levels and therefore indicate a discrepancy between the verbalised anxiety levels and the evidence reflected by the GAD scale.

#### *Adherence to safety precautions*

Level of adherence to the safety precautions among the study participants was varied over time. Best adherence was reported at the beginning of the lockdown in the UK and during the repatriation process.

*“Whenever I get my groceries I would come back and washed most of the things. I think I got pretty paranoid about it... I realised that I should do it [smiles], I can’t take a risk. I kept washing my hands and I made sure that I had at least 3 sanitizers with me. Even my shoes, I sprayed them with Ethanol and stuff [laugh]. (P01)*

Girls reported more adherence when compared to boys all the time. However, the students appeared to become normalised living with COVID- 19 over time and complained of getting bored, forgetting to adhere to strict safety precautions:

*"At the beginning, I was very keen. Later on, I started forgetting things... perhaps I got bored and wasn't bothered to do it. Sometimes I did it just because my mother or boyfriend reminded me so often." (P02)*

*"I was like, 'why should I keep doing this?' It's a headache. It's too much of work." (P01)*

Observation notes from the researchers' diaries support the interview findings and reveal strict adherence on the first few days at the quarantine Centre but gradual decrease towards the end of the quarantine period.

*"The students were afraid of the staff who were wearing PPE. They asked many questions [from the nurses] and worried about their temperature levels, about the passengers who had fever and hospitalised. They all wore masks; only appeared at the door for checking temperature and went into their rooms quickly." (R03, Observation notes- Day 01 at quarantine)*

*"Some of the students appeared not following the instructions. Some even walked along the corridors without wearing masks and chatting with each other." (R01, Observation notes- Day 10 at quarantine)*

#### *Agitation*

Majority of this group reported that they experienced hostility, irritability or agitation as well as low mood and frequent arguments with their roommates, parents or partners during this period. Over-sleeping, smoking, alcohol consumption, gaming or increased screen times and avoidance of adherence to strict physical distancing and safety guidelines were reported as a result.

*"I got quite irritated even for smaller things really quickly... Even if my parents called me and say something really simple, like 'are you okay?' that irritated me pretty easily. At some point I even wanted to avoid people, I mean the phone calls came from [my loved ones]." (P05)*

*"We played cards, sometimes smoked and had a beer to relieve our stress." (P06)*

However, positive experiences such as improved work efficiency, making new friends and changes to one's lifestyle, perspectives and behaviour was also reported. Some students appreciated increased productivity during self-isolation due to fewer distractions, enhanced tolerance and coping, team working, new connections established via online communication, peer support during the quarantine period and especially the opportunity they got to return to their families in Sri Lanka as a result of the pandemic.

*"It was an adventure, a good experience. I managed to get most of my work done during the lockdown as well as while being under quarantine." (P02)*

*"I became really close to some. Met interesting people unexpectedly. We were in the same boat since we all faced the similar situation, maybe that made us bond easily. So, that togetherness was quite a good feeling. I feel really good, I felt quite comfortable around them as well." (P06)*

#### **Discussion:**

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, similar epidemics such as SARS (during 2002-2003), led to major self-isolation procedures and quarantining of individuals, during the absence of a proper treatment method (Yan, Zou 2009). Similar to the findings of the current study, Chan et al., (2007) reported that dramatic changes in lifestyles may be accompanied by fear of being infected to self or loved ones resulting in a significant negative impact to their psychological wellbeing.

In line with the findings, existing evidence also reports that prolong home confinement during a disease outbreak can have negative effects on young people's mental and physical health (Liu et al., 2020). Less physical activities, outdoor activities and inability to interact with friends and family may cause changes to their psychological and behavioural patterns. For example, an exhibition of discomfort in forms of confusion, anger, aggressiveness, irregular sleep patterns, addiction to internet or screen time (TV or computer) and less favourable diet preferences were commonly reported among young people (Brooks et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that quarantine processes result in depression, low mood, fear, confusion, anger and other psychological issues such as post-trauma stress symptoms among youth (Pang et al., 2004; Brooks et al., 2020). Young age (16-24), lower levels of educational qualifications and female gender are some of the predictors that may increase negative psychological symptoms (Brooks et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the current study shows positive experiences (e.g. adventure and befriending) as well. Investigators (KA, NW, MH and TK) think that objective observations and journal keeping was fun and also was a good coping mechanism during this difficult period.

The ethnographical method is fully immersive, 'live and work' approach where the researchers observe and reflect people's behaviour patterns (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Ethnographic research approach (i.e., use of objective observations written in personal journals as research data) was very much appropriate for the current study as the investigators could interact with the participants while observing them in a real-life environment. It was also pragmatic for this research because objective observations and online interviews were feasible (while maintaining physical distancing and safety precautions (such as wearing a mask) as three

members of the study team were residing with the study sample in the same quarantine centre. WhatsApp platform allowed sending photos, voice clips and texts so that participants could easily send their expressions when they go home after quarantine; WhatsApp was easier for the participants than email as it has one-to-one secure encryption.

### **Conclusion:**

This qualitative study was planned and conducted in a quarantine environment based on the lived experiences of investigators, who were also students repatriated back to Sri Lanka from the UK due to COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the current study provided evidence-based guidance on identifying how the students responded to the closure of schools and universities, how they coped with their studies during a time of a pandemic. Findings identified the psychological and educational needs, challenges, coping strategies of youth and young adults in this group and indicate the need of addressing them and developing guidelines to manage similar situations in future and increase resilience. The investigators learnt positive life lessons by actively participating in this research and being able to share their lived experience during this difficult period. The study contributes to the research gap in the present literature regarding the impact of COVID-19 on a group of young academics in Sri Lanka.

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