

# Impacts of COVID-19 on International Students in the U.S

Mohammed Alaklabi<sup>1</sup>, Jamilah Alaklabi<sup>2</sup> & Amal Almuhlaifi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dreeben School of Education, University of the Incarnate Word, Texas, United States

<sup>2</sup> College of Arts, Bisha University, Bisha, Saudi Arabia

<sup>3</sup> College of Education and Human Performance, Texas A&M University, Kingsville, United States

Correspondence: Mohammed Alaklabi, Dreeben School of Education, University of the Incarnate Word, Texas, 4301 Broadway, San Antonio, Texas 78209, United States. Tel: 1-210-947-8777. E-mail: alaklabi@uiwtx.edu

Received: April 14, 2021

Accepted: May 22, 2021

Online Published: June 10, 2021

doi:10.5539/hes.v11n3p37

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v11n3p37>

## Abstract

COVID -19 is a recent pandemic that has affected all sectors of the economy, including higher education. The magnitude of the pandemic in the education sector has been diverse, with many disruptions being evidenced. The pandemic has particularly disrupted learning across the world due to the closure of schools. The international students have been adversely affected owing to their precarious situation. This literature review study explored how COVID 19 affected international students in the US. The study identified that the closure of on-site educational instructions coupled with international travel restrictions left international students in precarious situations where they were not learning but the international students could not travel back home. This had trickle-down negative effects on their finances/budget and emotions. The move to e-learning put the international students at a disadvantage as it amplified inequality in the education sector. Based on these devastating impacts, the study recommends the need for policy and practice changes to protect international students from such devastating impacts in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, international students, learning institutions

## 1. Introduction

The education sector is ubiquitous in every economy owing to its role in imparting appropriate knowledge and skills to the populace, which is critical for the improvement of the economy and the society in totality. Education is directly associated with improved living standards, good health, reduced social conflicts among others, while the vice-versa is true. Thus, countries around the world have always taken measures to enhance access to quality education for all citizens. However, challenges emerge and negatively impact the access and quality of education; the most recent challenge to the sector is the novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) which was first identified in Wuhan China in December 2019 (WHO, 2020).

The spread and devastating impacts of the Covid-19 spread compelled countries to take unprecedented measures to curb its spread. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended frequent hand-washing, wearing face masks, avoiding touching ones' face, physical distances, and avoiding mass gatherings and assemblies (WHO, 2020). In light of these recommendations, many countries around the globe suspended in-person educational instruction and adopted the remote learning model of delivery. According to UNESCO, about 186 countries had shut down their educational institutions affecting about 74% of enrolled learners on the planet. These unprecedented COVID-19 coping measures have had considerable impacts on the education sector as identified by studies such as DePietro *et al.*, (2020). However, these studies explored the impacts of the COVID-19 on the education sector as a whole and did not explore the impacts of COVID-19 on international students. This systematic review singles out international education, exploring how COVID-19 impacted international students in the U.S.

### 1.1 Importance of the Study

COVID-19 is a relatively new phenomenon thus there are relatively fewer studies delving on its impacts on education, and particularly how the pandemic affected international students. This study brings together available data pertinent to the impacts of the pandemic on international students aiding in understanding how the pandemic affected international students. The study sought to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on international

students in the US since the US is the most popular study abroad country hosting more than 1 million international students each academic year. As such, understanding how COVID-19 affected international students in the US will help in comprehending how the pandemic affected international students globally. In this study, the term “international students” will be used to refer to categories of students. The first category includes international students that require student visas (either an F-1 or J-1) to study in the US. The second category includes students that are internationally educated and looking to further their education in the US. This includes students that have already acquired permanent residence status, are refugees, asylum seekers, or holding immigrant visas.

## **2. Methods**

This qualitative study undertakes a systematic review of the available literature pertinent to the impacts of COVID-19 on international students. The study used electronic data sources mainly articles that are contained relevant journals such as ERIC, Project MUSE, JSTOR, and ProQuest Dissertation and Theses accepted for higher degrees (Ph.D., Ed.D.), and articles written by reputable organizations.

### *2.1 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria*

The study reviewed articles pertaining to the effects of COVID-19 on education /international students, particularly those written in the English language. The study checked the validity and reliability of the articles and only selected the articles that proved to be valid, reliable, and with the results consistent with the findings.

### *2.2 Search Strategy*

The keywords used to find the electronic sources for the study include “impacts of COVID-19 on” EITHER “international students in the US” AND/OR “international students” AND/ or international education in the US” AND/OR “international education”

### *2.3 Quality and Relevance Appraisal*

The researcher appraised the validity and reliability of the selected studies using a five-item evaluation rubric. This included evaluating the purpose, the literature reviewed, participants, methods, findings, and conclusions of the study. The five items will be scored using a four-point scale, where;

- 1 = Does Not Meet Standard;
- 2 = Nearly Meets Standard;
- 3 = Meets Standard;
- 4 = Excellent

Table 1. Validity and reliability appraisal Rubric

ITEM	1	2	3	4
Purpose and objectives	Purpose and objective cannot be determined from the study	Some items of purpose and objective are missing.	Purpose and objective are well articulated but few elements are missing.	Purpose and objective are present and clearly articulated:
Literature review	Literature is unorganized and does not address inconsistencies and critical issues	Literature is illogical though informative. Few studies used for the literature.	Literature is excellently organized and is relevant and informative.	Literature is relevant and informative. It is also logical and identifies the literature gap
Participants	Population is not defined	Population is not clearly defined. Sampling is erroneous	Participants are well defined but there are some biases in sampling.	Population is clearly defined, sampling strategy is relevant and has no selection bias
Methods	Methodology is irrelevant for the study	Methodology applied is unclear	Methodology is relevant but not clearly defined. However it is applied appropriately	Methodology is relevant, clearly defined and appropriately applied
Results and conclusion	No clear link between conclusion and findings. The findings do not respond to research questions	Conclusions loosely link to the findings, and they are ineptly explained.	Interpretations are stated and some are linked to literature review	Conclusions link to the findings. The interpretations are clear and coherent.

Possible scores ranged from five to twenty points. The researcher selected the articles that scored ten points and above as they met the minimum quality standards. This ensured that the researcher used studies that were appropriate, valid and reliable to enhance the quality of the study.

#### 2.4 Data Analysis

The researcher read the articles identified as appropriate for the study, to acclimatize with the data. Afterward, the researcher identified the various themes identified in individual studies. The themes were coded and reviewed, with the common or popular themes being identified as the findings for the study.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Suspended Learning and Its Impacts

The WHO recommended the need to avoid mass gatherings and assemblies, a recommendation that compelled countries to suspend in-person educational instruction programs. This ultimately disrupted normal learning: some schools and learning institutions were ultimately closed, leading to different spill-over effects. For instance, the school closure led to the suspension of exams and delays in the start of classes or new admissions, thus disrupting academic calendars Schulmann (2020). The prolonged closure is likely to increase the possibility of international students dropping out of school as they are likely to channel the resources to other activities.

#### 3.2 Shift to E-learning And Associated Challenges

While some learning institutions ultimately closed their doors for all students, a majority of institutions chose to shift to offer learning services via online learning (e-learning) platforms (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020). However, the study noted that there was no much time and considerations given to the transition to online learning, a factor that greatly affected the quality of learning offered via e-learning platforms. Aristovnik *et al.*, (2020) explained that e-learning requires a greater sense of self-discipline and motivation particularly during the formative years, thus students taking e-learning for the first time require considerable guidance and mentorship to enhance their learning. However, COVID-19 led to a rushed transition to e-learning, thus a considerable number of international students that were forced to transition to e-learning were not adequately prepared for this form of learning. Amplifying this challenge is the fact that a majority of international students come from disadvantaged families where the parents are uneducated or have only received basic formal education. This meant that such

international students could not receive guidance or any form of assistance from their parents, adding to their disadvantages (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020).

However, another study by Marinoni, Van't Land, and Jensen (2020), noted that e-learning amplified inequalities in education, with international students bearing the greatest burdens. According to the study, e-learning requires specific information and communication infrastructure, including the internet. While a majority of American students enjoy improved infrastructure, a majority of international students do not have access to quality infrastructure, a factor that created an obstacle to accessing quality education.

### 3.3 Travel Restrictions and Their Impacts

Right after WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, many countries in the world including the US closed their borders to prevent the importation of the disease into their homelands. While some countries instituted a total and partial ban on international travels, the US instituted targeted bans, barring travelers from China, Iran, and twenty-six European countries. According to Marinoni, Van't Land, and Jensen (2020), a majority of international students in the US were already in the US and were unable to return to their home countries after the travel restrictions. This left a majority of international students stranded in the US at a time when they were not physically attending schools.

Considering that the U.S. is the epicenter of the pandemic, even the re-opening of the higher learning institutions will not guarantee the international students' confidence. It is unlikely that international students' mobility to the U.S. will improve due to the pandemic's severity in the U.S. (Schulmann, 2020). Nonetheless, the resumption of international students' attendance at U.S. learning institutions is dependent on the time taken to control the pandemic.

### 3.4 Budget/ Financial Implications

The closure of learning institutions meant the freezing of on-campus employment opportunities available for international students. The devastating impacts of the pandemic forced some institutions suspend Optional Practical Training (OPT) programs for graduate students further reducing employment opportunities for international students. The reduced employment opportunities for international students have negatively impacted the finances/budget of the international students (Marinoni, Van't Land & Jensen, 2020).

WHO foresaw the negative impacts of the pandemic and requested countries to offer relief programs aimed at alleviating suffering among citizens. Thus the US designed a financial support program to help its citizens including the citizens. Unfortunately, the US considers international students to be non-permanent residents of the country, thus they are exempted from relief programs offered by the Federal and state governments in the US. Worse, some international students reported challenges with their funding. For instance, countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reduced the financial aid they were giving to their citizens enrolled in international educational programs around the world. Further, international students surveyed by Fischer & Whatley (2020) attested that their sponsors stopped or lessened their financial support. For instance, an international student in the study quipped

"I don't even know what my budget is for the coming year," (interviewee cited in Fischer & Whatley (2020, p. 4)

Other students detailed that their sponsors had experienced challenges sending their support owing to bank closures due to COVID.

The lack of finances was further strained by the suspension of social and support services offered by educational institutions to international students. For instance, Fischer & Whatley (2020) identified that the closure of schools in community colleges led to the suspension of food services, medical health support, and housing. Combined, these issues left a considerable number of international students struggling financially, unable to meet even the most basic needs (Fischer & Whatley, (2020). Studies such as Aristovnik *et al.*, (2020) and Firang (2020) and confirmed that most international students especially from developing countries experienced challenging life circumstances and financial crises in their destination countries. For instance, Firang (2020) explored the impacts of the pandemic on international students in Canada and two international students from Africa shared their plight that they had not eaten after their institutions were crossed down.

However, Marinoni, Van't Land, & Jensen (2020), noted that the pandemic jostled governments, banks, and universities to action, compelling them to institute different social-economic measures to alleviate the suffering of international students. For instance, some universities allowed students that could not travel back to their countries to continue residing on campuses even when the campuses were crossed. Other universities offered free transport and froze rents, while banks deferred loan repayment (Fischer & Whatley, 2020).

### 3.5 Impacts on Admissions

International travels in a considerable number of countries, including the US, have resumed, and so is a majority of educational institutions. However, the pandemic will continue having considerable impacts on international students in the US as part of the trickle-down effects. For instance, Aristovnik *et al.*, (2020) noted that though on-campus instructions in the US have resumed since the summer of 2021, there is a general lack of confidence among the current and potential international students on their commitment to enroll or even continue studying in the US, particularly because the US is currently the epicenter of the disease (Schulmann, 2020). This is further complicated by the rising racist scapegoating of Asians for the outbreak and the spread of the virus, and the rising political tensions between the US and China, the home country for the majority of international students in the US. This means that continuing international students from China are likely to discontinue their international education in the US. Further, the US has suspended the issuance of H-1B visas and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program both of which are major draws for international students from India, China, and elsewhere. This means that potential international students from India, China among other countries may find it challenging to undertake international education in US schools before these directions are repealed. Thus, Schulmann (2020) noted that even the re-opening of the higher learning institutions will not guarantee the international students' confidence. It is unlikely that international students' mobility to the U.S. will improve due to the pandemic's severity in the US.

### 3.6 Emotional Impacts

COVID 19 and its unprecedented impacts had huge negative impacts on the emotional wellbeing of international students. Aristovnik *et al.*, (2020) noted that the health concerns, financial burdens among others made international students anxious and frustrated.

### 3.7 Behavioral Changes

Since COVID-19 is highly communicable, the WHO proposed an array of guidelines to stem its spread. These included wearing masks, washing hands, avoiding crowded places among others. These guidelines led to abnormal behaviors such as cancellation of public transport systems, working from home among others that were not the norm became the new norm that international students had to live by (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2020).

### 3.8 Discussion of Findings

An evaluation of the articles found that COVID-19 has greatly affected international students in the US. The study identified that the closure of schools and the suspension of international travels left international students in precarious situations whereby they could not travel home, and they could not study. On-campus employment and OPT programs were suspended thus international students could not get employment opportunities. Worse, some sponsors suspended financial assistance adding to the financial plight of international students. The situation was further complicated by the suspension of students' welfare programs offered by educational institutions to international students such as health services among others were suspended, leaving international students with huge financial burdens, unable to afford even the basic wants.

Further, suspension of on-campus instructional programs, a majority of institutions moved to e-learning. However, the adoption of the e-learning program was rushed and without appropriate planning, thus a majority of students felt that the adopted e-learning was ineffective. In addition, e-learning amplified educational inequalities, putting international students at a disadvantage as they lacked the infrastructure for e-learning, and could not receive appropriate assistance from their parents. Finally, the pandemic caused international students to adopt new behaviors in an attempt to prevent the spread of the disease and caused considerable emotional turmoil for the majority of international students (Aleksander *et al.*, 2010).

The devastating impacts of COVID 19 on international students in the US have led to concerns that it will reduce the popularity of the US as the top destination for international education. Further, Schulmann (2020) hypothesized that the huge economic implications of COVID 19 on families might compel students to study in their countries, or seek international education in other countries besides the US where such services are offered cheaply. Schulmann (2020) explored these assertions and identified that the US remains the most popular destination for international study. Further, the study identified that the decisions of two-thirds of interviewed international students to study in the US were unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Irrespectively, the U.S. must adopt strategies that will make it more attractive to international students.

Further, the increased use of e-learning during the pandemic has made e-learning quite popular, and there are concerns that e-learning might replace face-to-face instruction. This is particularly amplified by the increased automation in the education sector. However, Zawacki-Richter, Mar ń, Bond, and Gouverneur (2019)

noted that a teacher remains a critical element in the teaching process, be it in online or in face-to-face instructions.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study identified that the COVID 19 pandemic had huge devastating impacts on international students in the US. The pandemic led to the suspension of in-person instructions forcing the shift to e-learning, but which kept the international students at a disadvantage. Further, the suspension of in-person instructions led to the deferment of on-campus employment and OPT programs causing a huge financial and emotional burden on international students in the US. Further, the pandemic led to restricted international travels, thus the international students could not go back to their home countries even though they were not attending schools. Finally, the pandemic disrupted the normal school calendar as it affected examination and admission periods. Evidently, the pandemic had devastating impacts on international students. Thus, the US needs to formulate relevant programs and policies to shield international students in the country from challenges of such magnitudes to retain its stature as the preferred study abroad destination.

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