

Post-COVID Challenges for Incoming and Returning International Students

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Abstract

The article aims to highlight the unique challenges faced by international students who were pursuing education abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, the two main obstacles faced by international students were acculturative stress due to lack of access to social support, and economic stress associated with job uncertainty. A literature review and evaluation of past government reports and news articles were used to identify the common challenges faced and to understand the importance of the experiences to inform application-based strategies in order to better support international students. The literature review indicates that developing programmes that allow international students to connect with current students from the same national/cultural background while also encouraging programmes or orientations that discuss issues specific to international students can provide a solid foundation that allows the students to explore their host country confidently. Furthermore, developing a dedicated careers team trained to understand the obstacles that international students face in seeking employment in the host country while also encouraging previous international students to share their insights and journeys can allow for students to initiate networking and also prepare to navigate the job market.

Keywords: COVID-19 affecting international students, COVID-19 pandemic, acculturative stress, economic stress, international student wellbeing, job uncertainty for international students

Post-COVID challenges for incoming and returning international students

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered how we live, work and interact, and there is now much research studying this impact. However, an important yet often overlooked topic is the experiences of university students. Literature has identified university students as being an especially vulnerable population owing to separation from family and consequent individuation, as well as increased personal and academic responsibility upon moving to university. Substantial changes in mode of education, loss of social support and disruption to daily routine, combined with uncertainty about future employment prospects, make university students more vulnerable during the pandemic. Global and cross-cultural research highlights how students' wellbeing was adversely impacted while studying during the pandemic. American and Chinese students reported higher depressive symptoms (Browning *et al.*, 2021), while Greek students also reported increased suicidal ideation and reduced quality of sleep (Kaparounaki *et al.*, 2020). Students with prior mental health issues reported the greatest decline in wellbeing, citing social isolation, increased screen time and reduced physical activity as the main reasons (Browning *et al.*, 2021; Giuntella *et al.*, 2021; Hamza *et al.*, 2021; Misca and Thornton, 2021). For international students, these issues were further exacerbated as enduring travel restrictions and local lockdowns prevented access to familial and social support, as well as [economic stress](#) and job uncertainty due to visa restrictions, thus raising their vulnerability (Chen, Li, Wu and Tong, 2020). The article explores how international students were affected during the pandemic and suggests application-based strategies to better support them.

International students experience [acculturative stress](#) – stress associated with adjusting to a new environment – which reduces social connectedness and impedes access to social support. Research indicates that reduced social integration is associated with poorer academic performance (Rienties *et al.*, 2012) and increased depressive symptoms (Browning *et al.*, 2021), highlighting the importance of addressing this issue. Studies also indicate that adopting [Berry's integration approach](#) – maintaining strong connections with people from the same as well as different cultural backgrounds – results in increased social support satisfaction (Sullivan and Kashubeck-West, 2015). However, the online-only mode of education, lockdown restrictions and further restrictions on students in university accommodation around forming support bubbles prevented opportunities for social interaction in an authentic fashion and thus affected access to social support. While social media has been an obvious alternative, research suggests that increased social media usage was associated with increased reports of loneliness and lower social-seeking behaviour (Lisitsa *et al.*, 2020) as well as increased mental health problems (Gao *et al.*, 2020) during the pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative to recognise the detriment of passive engagement with social media, and to cultivate a method to combat the adverse impact of complete social isolation on mental health and to better support international students.

International students also experienced stressors associated with future employment prospects, increasing economic stress. Research indicates that economic stress and worries about employment prospects affect academic performance (Moore *et al.*, 2021) as well as psychological wellbeing (Dodd *et al.*, 2021; Godinic *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2021), with international students being more sensitive to economic downturn (Guo *et al.*, 2019). As the pandemic led to decreased job openings, and visa restrictions further limited these opportunities, international students were left navigating an unfamiliar terrain, despite possessing high cultural sensitivity, good academic performance and international experience valued by organisations, leaving them vulnerable to financial insecurity (Threadgold *et al.*, 2020). Reports indicate that only about a quarter of international students tend to secure graduate opportunities in the UK, with only 5639 students granted a Tier 2/Skilled Worker Visa in 2014 (according to the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)). This gap exists primarily due to insufficient and/or inappropriate career guidance and support offered to international students, who bring specific problems such as visa sponsorship issues, and not having the value of unpaid and/or untraditional work experience in their host country recognised (Huang and Turner, 2018). Understanding the purpose/goals and expectations of international students, while simultaneously tailoring a support service that prepares them for job hunting in their host country – for both part-time and full-time opportunities – can help reduce the stress associated with securing a job.

Acculturative stress and career prospects appear to be linked, and they affect students' wellbeing and academic performance. Reynolds and Constantine's (2007) research found that higher acculturative stress was associated with lower career outcome expectations and aspirations, highlighting the need to address both these issues and how their interaction affects international students.

A possible strategy to combat the consequences of acculturative stress includes designing a scheme that allows new university students to connect with currently enrolled students from the same academic department or belonging to the same country and/or culture. For example, Royal Holloway's Peer Guidance scheme connects new university students with current students enrolled within the same academic department for ease of transition. In addition to this, organising an interactive orientation session run by international students to address common obstacles that they face and to share essential coping skills can offer insight and allow international students a strong foundation through which they can explore their new environment with confidence.

Secondly, providing a career team dedicated solely to support international students can diminish economic stress and stress associated with seeking employment. The University of Missouri brought this idea into fruition by creating The Career Center for international students. Its services are designed to cover visa and working permit issues, build resumés specific to that of the host country's expectations, share advertisements for part-time, graduate and summer work placements, provide one-to-one sessions to understand the students' goals and expectations and create a plan to meet those goals (Furnham *et al.*, 2006). This allowed international students to make well-informed decisions for themselves, which led to an increase in obtaining graduate jobs as well as satisfaction with the support available.

Finally, inviting former students to share their journeys and allowing an opportunity to network will allow international students to learn from them, gain insight into different career opportunities and network with people with a similar background.

Adopting these schemes simultaneously would allow international students to thrive in their host country and thus feel better supported.

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Glossary

Acculturative stress: The stressors associated with relocating to a country as an immigrant or an ethnic minority.

Economic stress: The stressors associated with the current state of one's personal finances and/or (due to) fear about the economy.

Berry's integration approach: The act of maintaining strong connections with people from the heritage culture as well as with people from the receiving culture.

To cite this paper please use the following details: Pal, A. (2022), 'Post-COVID Challenges for Incoming and Returning International Students', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Volume 15, Issue 2, <https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/948>. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.