

## **Investigating the Social and Academic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on International Students at a Canadian University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant disruptions in traditional educational policies and practices worldwide. The study adopted an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens to investigate the impact of the pandemic on international students in a Canadian university. The findings from data analysis identified challenges and supports for international students in five areas: academic, financial, health and well-being, socialization, and housing and accommodation. There were several gaps between international students' academic and social needs during the pandemic and the institutional support. While the university prioritized supports in the academic domain, international students identified social*

*challenges as more significant during the pandemic. The gap was also evident in communicating institutional support to students, as some students were not aware of the spectrum of institutional services. Finally, there was a need for more targeted support for international students. The pandemic called for more fundamental and comprehensive actions to support the diverse student population.*

**Keywords:** academic and social challenges, COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive excellence framework, institutional supports, international students

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In response to the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, post-secondary institutions worldwide took preventative measures to slow down the spread of the pandemic and protect their students, faculty, and staff. In March 2020, most Canadian universities closed their campuses, canceled public events, closed student residences, and moved classes from face-to-face to being delivered remotely. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been plenty of research attesting to the challenging experiences of international students in Canadian post-secondary institutions (Gebhard, 2012; Guo & Chase, 2011; Wu et al., 2015; Zheng & Berry, 1991; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). The difficulties of international students adjusting to a new educational environment had been mainly attributed to academic challenges, social interactions, and cultural aspects. For instance, Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2015) identified communication with professors, classmates, and staff as the main academic challenge. Socially, students felt isolated when engaging in different group activities. Culturally, international students experience challenges from the different ways of thinking and doing in the home and host cultures (Wu et al., 2015). Campus closure and limited resources offered to support international students during the pandemic added to these challenges.

After the campus closure, international students struggled with social isolation due to a lack of support networks that they would not be able to access campus (Gomez et al., 2020; Ebrahim, 2020). In addition to social isolation, international students also faced academic challenges associated with switching to online learning. While classes were still delivered remotely, experiential learning opportunities for international students, such as internships and field placements,

were canceled or postponed (Gomez et al., 2020). Students were deprived of indispensable work experience and opportunities to develop professional networks.

Not prepared for these extraordinary circumstances, Canadian universities developed pandemic emergency response measures to support their students throughout the pandemic. These measures included providing emergency funding for international students in need, offering emergency housing options, and providing various mental health and well-being supports (Anwar, 2020; Gomez et al., 2020). However, to what extent these measures were available or whether they were sufficient remained a question. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to understand how the unprecedented circumstances caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the experiences of international students at a Canadian research university. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What academic and social challenges are international students facing in the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the institutional supports in place for international students to cope with the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How effective are the institutional measures in supporting the academic and social needs of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Literature Review**

Posing significant disruptions to social and academic life for all students in post-secondary institutions, the pandemic had an even greater impact on international students. With the enactment of social distancing and other public health measures, challenges for international students had increased twofold. The research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students around the globe has only begun to appear in academic journals. Thus, a cross-country student well-being survey during or directly after the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic was conducted by a large international consortium of 26 countries and 110 higher-education institutions (Van de Velde et al., 2021). The resultant dataset included information on students' living and financial conditions, academic workload, mental well-being, perceived stressors, resources, knowledge related to COVID-19, and attitudes toward COVID-19 measures implemented by

the government and relevant educational institutions. However, only partial findings of the study have been published as separate cases for some universities in Cyprus (Solomou et al, 2021), Greece (Stathopoulou et al., 2020), and the Netherlands (Super & van Disseldorp, 2020). Results indicated that most participants reported depressive symptoms associated with academic stress, loneliness, isolation, and restless sleep. An in-depth analysis of the data is currently taking place. A qualitative study in the United States investigated the experiences of eight Chinese doctoral students in a large research university during COVID-19 (Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022). Learning obstacles, health concerns, funding uncertainties, and limited social interactions, as well as the tense political climate and hate speech targeting Chinese people, were among the stressors that impacted the doctoral students.

Likewise, the coverage of the international students' experience in Canada during the pandemic mainly involves news reporting on Canadian universities' responses to the COVID-related developments, travel bans, and life difficulties of separate international students (Anwar, 2020; Coulton, 2020; Ebrahim, 2020; Gomez et al., 2020; Unkule, 2020). Only a limited number of studies have been conducted on how the pandemic affected international students in Canada (Firang, 2020; Ge 2021). For example, Firang (2020) interviewed five international students to initiate a discussion on how social work could mitigate the impact of the pandemic on international students. Ge (2021) inquired about the experiences of 10 Chinese students at a Canadian university in COVID times.

In 2019, Canada hosted nearly 640,000 international students (El-Assal, 2022). Canada introduced travel restrictions at the start of the pandemic in March 2020. Those restrictions affected many prospective students who intended to come to Canada in 2020 and 2021. As a result, the pandemic caused a fall in the number of international students to some 530,000 in 2020. (El-Assal, 2022). With the relief of the travel restrictions in October 2020, Canada's international student population was slowly approaching the pre-pandemic numbers. Currently, nearly 622,000 international students study in Canada (CBIE, n.d.).

International students were struggling with social isolation – lonely, constantly worried about their families overseas, unable to travel back to their home countries and support their families (Gomez et al., 2020). After interviewing several international students from Ontario, Gomez et al. (2020) shared that

[International students] are thousands of miles away from their families, watching from Canada as international borders shut down, airlines cancel flights, and cities and countries announce drastic isolation measures. They are worried about their families as the virus spreads through their countries. And they're worried about how they're going to get through this themselves, isolated in a country where they lack the support networks they would normally have at home (para., 2-3).

Moreover, some international student study permits might not allow for an extra term to cover the missed classes during the pandemic. Students were concerned about whether their application to extend study or work permits would be processed in time for them to have the legal status to stay in Canada (York University, n.d.).

As international students waited out the pandemic, their financial situation deteriorated. Historically, international students had to pay international differential tuition fees, which were much higher than domestic student fees. Many international students found themselves unemployed, as there were fewer on-campus and part-time jobs available during the pandemic. Even with the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit available to international students in financial need, many did not meet the eligibility requirements (Coulton, 2020). In addition, fewer scholarships were available for international students, as they did not qualify for many domestic scholarships (Calder, et al., 2016). There were even fewer funding opportunities for international students during the spring and summer terms. Many international students were also required to move out of student residences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gomez et al., 2020). These students would need to find alternative accommodations in a short period of time. All these circumstances had added to international students' already challenging financial situation. They had to plan their finances carefully, and many of them might not have enough financial means to stay in Canada during the pandemic.

Under these unusual circumstances, most Canadian universities did their best to provide support for international students. The initiatives to support international students differed from university to university. They all aimed to provide emergency financial support, offer emergency housing options, extend services for mental health, and accommodate remote teaching and learning (Anwar, 2020; Ebrahim, 2020; Gomez et al., 2020; University Affairs, n.d.).

However, to what extent these measures were effective or whether they were sufficient remained a question. On the one hand, there were many questions about institutional support for international students: whether the universities were adequately prepared to respond to the needs of those students who could not return to their home countries (Unkule, 2020). On the other hand, Dennis (2020) predicted that the current COVID-19 situation might influence the choice of international students to study closer to home or to look for intra-regional universities as an alternative for post-secondary education. Similarly, there was no definite answer to the question of whether university measures and supports were sufficient to maintain the recruitment of international students at the same or higher level (Dennis, 2020).

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic is commonly recognized as a major disruption of the social and academic life of international students. Social isolation, online learning, scarce job opportunities, and financial hardships became a few of the challenges for international students in the new pandemic reality. Canadian universities offered many services and supports to help their students overcome pandemic-related challenges. However, empirical data is much needed to testify whether these institutional measures in supporting the academic and social needs of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic have been effective and sufficient. This study attempts to address the gap in the existing scholarship and utilizes an inclusive excellence perspective for this purpose.

### **Analytical Framework**

This study adopts an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) lens to understand international students' experience in a Canadian university during the pandemic. In the context of the global pandemic challenges, many post-secondary initiatives and policies, especially those focused on internationalization, require fundamental and comprehensive institutional efforts. Bihn (2019) tied equity, diversity, and inclusion to education quality by outlining critical areas of institutional support for international students. Thus, she suggested that hosting institutions should draw on their commitment to the EDI framework and better attend to the key areas of their work with international students, such as housing, academic programs, academic placement policies, and college progress. To do so, institutions should identify people with proper training and experience to lead the

work with international students, review their policies and practices through the EDI lens, understand the process of second-language acquisition and develop corresponding language policies, educate the entire institution community about cultural competence, support faculty and staff in their work with international students, and engage with and learn from international students (Bihn, 2019). Bihn concluded that developing proper supports and services for international students was an issue of equity and inclusion. As such, institutions should resolve it by providing their students, both international and domestic, “with an equitable educational program that honors their experiences and meets their needs” (Bihn, 2019, para. 16).

In 2017, Canadian universities engaged in developing strategic plans to recognize and reflect the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion in their approaches to teaching and learning, research, governance, and community engagement (Charbonneau, 2019; Universities Canada, 2017). While each university decided on the meaning of inclusive excellence considering its unique campus locality, the main objective connected all their efforts – to comprehensively link equity, diversity, and inclusion to education quality. Williams et al. (2005) differentiated four primary elements of inclusive excellence that should underlie institutional efforts. These elements were (a) a focus on student intellectual and social development, (b) a purposeful development and utilization of organizational resources to enhance student learning, (c) attention to the cultural differences learners bring to the educational experience and that enhance the enterprise, and (d) a welcoming community that engages all of its diversity in the service of student and organizational learning (Williams et al., 2005).

While there is no single way for universities to adopt an inclusive excellence perspective in their work, the universities are to decide how to link equity, diversity, and inclusion to education quality. Canadian universities have committed to developing equity, diversity, and inclusion action plans in consultation broader university community, including students, faculty, staff, administrators, and under-represented groups (Universities Canada, 2017). However, in this regard, the essential component is to listen to students’ needs and ensure that university supports and services meet them.

## Methodology

This study uses a case study approach to understand the social and academic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students in a Canadian research university. The research site is one of the 15 most research-intensive universities in Canada. The university has more than 25,000 students, of whom international students constitute around 12 percent ([University Name], n.d.c). International students come from more than 130 countries around the world, with the top seven countries being China, Nigeria, India, Iran, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. Before the pandemic in fall 2019, the university reported an increase in international student enrollment by 5.5 percent. The pre-pandemic retention rates for the first and second-year international students were at 93.1 percent ([University Name], 2019a, 2019b). As the risk of COVID-19 for the campus community appeared in winter 2020, the university's cross-campus working group was created to follow the COVID-19 situation closely and to develop the university's emergency management plan ([University Name], n.d.a). The university aligned all policies and actions with the restrictions and recommendations of the provincial health authorities ([University Name], n.d.a). The campus stayed closed during the Spring and Summer Terms 2020, and the students and employees were encouraged to study and work from home. In 2020, the enrollment of international students dropped by 6.7 percent, a similar decreasing tendency was evident in international student retention rates, with the lowest at 69.6 percent in 2021 ([University Name], 2021a, 2021b). In comparison, overall retention rates dropped only by four percent since the pre-pandemic times ([University Name], 2019a, 2021b).

The study was reviewed and approved by the [University Name] Behavioural Research Ethics Board (#2159). Data was collected from document analysis and an online survey. With the constantly changing conditions and several waves of the pandemic in Canada since March 2020, university initiatives and student services have evolved to respond to provincial and federal public health policies. We collected documents from the university website aiming at exploring policies and practices that reflected institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. These documents include university policies, news releases, announcements, and updates, as well as other communication materials such as emails and newsletters sent by individual colleges and associations. We collected



these institutional documents from March 2020 to September 2021 and analyzed them to find key initiatives and practices to support international students during the pandemic.

An online survey was introduced by means of the Survey Monkey platform and was open for three months from September 2020 to December 2020. To recruit international students as participants of the study, weekly announcements outlining the nature of the study and the contact details were posted on the university web portal. Participants' consent for the online survey was obtained before the survey.

Sixty-seven respondents participated in the survey. Such a small number of participants was reasonably expected given the pandemic time and the challenges international students were undergoing. Considering the purpose of this study, the inclusion criteria for potential participants were the international status of the students and their voluntary participation. The term "international student" is complex to define as international students form a diverse student community of individual social and cultural identities (Gomez et al., 2014; Hardy Cox & Strange, 2016). However, for the purpose of this article, we follow Statistics Canada (n.d.) and define *international students* as "non-Canadian students who do not have "permanent resident" status and have had to obtain the authorization of the Canadian government to enter Canada with the intention of pursuing an education" (para. 1). Given the above considerations, students who could not be considered international or those who did not study at the university were excluded from the study. The respondents were predominantly full-time students (97 percent). 54.6 percent of them were in graduate programs. 74.7 percent of the respondents were international students who had been in Canada for less than two years. 15.3 percent of the international students had lived in Canada for three-four years, and only 10 percent stayed in the country for more than five years.

The survey was built predominantly using a variation of the Likert scale (Krosnick et al., 2018). In our case, a six-point scale allowed international students to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement. We used fixed choice response formats on a continuum from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' with the neutral point being 'Neither Agree nor Disagree.' We also offered the participants an additional option of 'Not Applicable' to allow for degrees of opinion, no opinion at all, and even unprecedented circumstances when

neither of the identified options was applicable. The survey contained 34 questions that focused on four main areas: demographic information about participants, international students' academic and social challenges during the pandemic, institutional supports, and impacts of COVID-19. The area of academic challenges contained questions on academic courses, access to university resources, access to relevant academic-related information, and so forth. The questions on social challenges were built around housing and accommodation, finances, communication with family and friends, health and well-being, and so forth. For example, the international students were asked to identify their degree of agreement with statements as follows: "I have opportunities to engage with my peer students while learning remotely," "I can easily access University resources necessary to support my remote learning," "I have an appropriate home working environment to support remote learning," or "I have sufficient financial resources to pay my tuition and fees during the COVID-19 pandemic." As well, the participants were encouraged to express their opinions on what could be done by the university to better support international students to cope with the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The international students could also communicate their thoughts related to any aspect of their social or academic life during the pandemic.

To identify patterns in the data, we used descriptive statistics. We followed (Jamieson, 2004; McLeod, 2019) and treated the data from the Likert scale survey as 'in-between' ordinal and numerical. As the Likert scale survey allows for the participants to express the range of opinions and even not indicate any opinion at all, such response categories have a rank order, but the intervals between values cannot be presumed equal (Jamieson, 2004). According to Jamieson (2004) and McLeod (2019), the mean and standard deviation are inappropriate for the Likert scale data where the numbers generally represent verbal statements. Thus, we treated the data as not continuous and the intervals between values as not equal. We summarized the results using a mode – the most frequently occurring score in data – as the most suitable for interpreting students' attitudes, opinions, and the extent to which they agree with suggested statements.

## Findings

Our analysis of the institutional documents and the survey results enabled us to identify five main findings. These findings reflected international students' perspectives on their challenges and the institutional support they had received. The findings focus on five themes: academic challenges and supports, financial challenges and supports, health and well-being, socialization opportunities, and housing and accommodation.

### Academic Challenges and Supports

Most of the university supports and programs implemented during the pandemic were related to supporting student academic success. "Support student success" ([University Name], n.d.f, para. 13) was one of the main principles that guided a special response team's planning, decision-making, and implementation. Under this principle, the university "prioritize[d] students' academic progress and supports and [stroke] to minimize adverse impacts to their academic progress" ([University Name], n.d.f, para. 13).

Different supports were offered to navigate students' transition to remote learning. The university created a new section on remote learning on the university website. It provided students tips and strategies for becoming successful distant learners, starting with setting up their workplaces and ordering class materials. Several services were ready to assist students with any remote learning environment issues. Moreover, the university libraries and related centers offered many services to support students' academic progress. For instance, a writing center organized twice-weekly 90-minute virtual write-ins. The university libraries provided free digital course textbooks, initiated safe contactless pickup of ordered materials, and automatically renewed all students' checked-out items.

In addition to different academically-oriented supports, the university academic policies changed correspondently to accommodate for the uncertainty of the COVID-19 situation. The guidelines regarding students' enrollment in and withdrawals from the classes became more flexible. The enrollment/withdrawal deadlines were extended to give students more time to decide upon their 2020 Fall and Winter Terms workload.

While international students faced some academic challenges, the data indicated that they could successfully continue their studies. For example, while

learning remotely, 51.6 percent of students could be fully engaged in the course content; 67.8 percent could complete course assignments; 90.3 percent could get in touch with a course instructor or supervisor if needed. Around 55.7 percent of students could easily access university resources (library, learning technologies, etc.) necessary to support my remote learning. Moreover, 72.1 percent of respondents specified that they had access to tools and technologies they needed to learn remotely.

At the same time, international students expressed two significant concerns associated with their academic life during the pandemic. First, a few students felt that online learning did not provide them with the same learning opportunities as in-person. For example, remote learning put a strain on their communication with professors and peers in the program. 30.6 percent of the respondents struggled to engage with their peer students while learning remotely. As one of the students explained, “We don’t have labs for that course, and since the lectures are asynchronous[,] there’s no way you are WITH the professor unless you have doubts. I mean, professors need to engage more” (From an open-ended question #33). Second, while over half of the students found the help they needed from the university services to move to remote learning, 19.7 percent felt they were not satisfied with the university academic supports. Some suggested that they would benefit from more asynchronous classes. Many international students continued studies from their home countries, and the time differences made attending live lectures very difficult.

As mentioned in the survey, graduate students might have additional challenges completing their programs, mainly when completing their theses depended on the accessibility to special equipment. An international student described such struggles as follows:

Graduate students are pressured to complete their program within certain time limits. However, when stumbling blocks arise [...], it makes it even more difficult for students whose entire thesis is based on lab[-]based (pre-clinical/ clinical) and hands[-]on research with chemicals/ materials of all sorts. Such students not only do literature search-based research but also labor-intensive research. [...] Therefore, students who don’t have the luxury of completing their thesis work by just having access to computer-

based e-resources are under extra pressure and time constraints. (From an open-ended question #33)

Overall, the survey results showed that COVID-19 greatly impacted students' progress in the program. 82.8 percent of the respondents indicated that the pandemic had impeded their advancement towards completing their programs.

### **Financial Challenges and Supports**

Given the COVID-19 impact on students' financial resources and work opportunities, the university considered mitigating those financial hardships for students. Apart from informing students on federal and provincial financial support programs, such as the Canada Emergency Student Benefit and others, the university undertook several local initiatives. First, the university revisited its original tuition plans for the 2020/21 academic year and implemented a tuition freeze for most programs. According to this tuition freeze, students would pay their tuition at rates similar to the previous years. Moreover, the university would not charge for late fees and overdue student tuition. Students would not pay for the services that are no longer available. For example, as the university closed all recreational programming and physical activity areas, the corresponding athletics and recreation fee was reduced.

Second, the university created a university crisis financial aid ([University Name], n.d.h). The crisis financial aid was designed as student loans to help students through unexpected and temporary financial hardships. Finally, the university redistributed some emergency funds to offer graduate students remote employment opportunities. The university created additional student teaching assistant opportunities in partnership with different colleges and centers for the 2020/21 academic year.

The campus community established an emergency student trust to support the students in financial and personal hardships due to COVID-19. Quickly available to students, this fund is aimed to meet the "variety of crisis needs, such as groceries, rent, medications, household needs, damage deposits, moving costs, emergency travel, car[,] and computer repairs, and computer equipment to adapt to online learning" (University Relations, 2020). In addition, faculty and staff could choose to support students by reallocating some finances from their

professional development funds to emergency student grants or graduate student support funds ([University Name], n.d.g).

While the university created multiple opportunities to support its students financially, the survey data showed that international students did experience various financial challenges. For example, 31.1 percent of participants could not pay for their living accommodations during the pandemic. 44.3 percent could not pay their student tuition and fees. 46.7 percent of the respondents could not find a part-time job to cover their expenses. Moreover, 75.9 percent of international students felt that the pandemic had significantly reduced their prospects to find employment. Therefore, most open-ended responses to the question “What could be done by the university to support international students during the COVID-19 pandemic better?” identified that international students would benefit from more financial support and job opportunities. Some students expressed disappointment that they had to pay the same amount for online courses as they used to pay for in-person course delivery. Many suggested that the university should eliminate international tuition differential and recreation fees for the time of the pandemic. As one of the participants wrote,

International students pay double the amount of tuition compared to locals, but the support/ guidance they receive is the same as the locals. As an example[,] even though there is a vast difference in student expenses ([e.g.,] university fees and living expenses), both local and international students receive the same amount of financial support through scholarships (if awarded/ selected as a recipient). International students are a means of gaining a good source of income for universities in general. International students were still paying university fees during the university closure for months. (From an open-ended question #33)

Considering all these, a meager percentage of the international student (only 13.6 percent) used university financial aid. 42.4 percent did not even apply for financial support opportunities to cope with their financial challenges. It became evident from the open-ended responses that some were not aware of all the university’s financial opportunities.

## Health and Well-Being

The third main area of the university support during the pandemic was student well-being. Like all other university centers, a student health center continued offering its services remotely, including mental health supports. The students could access its virtual health care or receive counseling by phone. If required, the center could arrange in-person appointments off-campus. A seasonal influenza immunization program was offered as usual on campus for all students. Due to COVID-19 pressures, several new programs were launched to contribute to a resilient and healthy university community. All graduate students and their families could find assistance through special counseling services, available by telephone, video, or e-counseling. The university constantly kept students informed on provincial and federal health services, technological tools, and the COVID Alert mobile app. In October, the university reopened a fitness center. Indoor fitness classes became available with limited capacity for students to maintain their well-being.

Notwithstanding the university's support for students' health and well-being, 34.4 percent of respondents admitted that they could not maintain good physical and mental health during the pandemic. The primary reasons for such claims were relative isolation when learning remotely and the concerns about students' families being safe. As one international student indicated,

Being confined in Canada and not being able to visit my home country, working from home alone, and not being able to see friends or family has had a significant negative impact on my life. Luckily, I am at a point in my degree where this is not impacting my overall learning. (From an open-ended question #34)

Another participant wrote that travel restrictions had impacts on international students and family relationships. She was constantly worried "whether the family is "intact" and can mitigate some stress or if not, how this influences the situation, as the latter has much more severe repercussions" (From an open-ended question #34). Moreover, when international students needed family support, travel to their home country was heavily strained by travel restrictions. With all the physical and mental strains associated with COVID-19, only a few international students accessed and used respective university services. For example, only 25.9 percent of respondents sought help through the university

health center; even less (8.6 percent) asked for assistance in supporting their mental health.

### **Socialization Opportunities**

While academic, financial, and health and well-being services were abundant, student socializing opportunities were also available. Various university centers for Indigenous, international, undergraduate, and graduate students continued supporting diverse student groups. In times of need or crisis, an association of graduate students actively resumed its services and organized several social support activities for graduate students. For instance, during Fall Term 2020, all graduate students were welcomed to join bi-weekly online coffee afternoons to connect, socialize, and communicate with the association representatives. For Christmas, the association organized a virtual holiday hangout. In addition, the association delivered free meals for graduate students right to the doorstep to support those who would spend the holidays away from their families and friends. As well, the association collaborated with the center for international students and several other centers to offer the opportunity for international students and members of the university community “to connect with each other over a virtual dinner and share in the holiday spirit” ([Association of Graduate Students], 2020, p. 2).

To support international students in the current circumstances of the global pandemic, the center for international students initiated distant services of international students advising ([International Student Centre], 2020). The center specifically designed many events for international students to socialize during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from various sessions on work permit applications, permanent residency, and taxes, the center offered regular opportunities for international students to meet and connect ([University Name], n.d.k). For instance, virtual tea chats, book discussions, board games, various virtual events, such as virtual adventures, celebrations, story-telling, and home parties were held weekly or bi-weekly.

As the survey data showed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominant number of international students (81.7 percent) stayed connected with my family and friends outside of the university. While the family was the prime source of support (82.8 percent), many international students also sought



communication with friends outside of the university (64.9 percent). In contrast, only 29.3 percent stayed connected with peer students since the COVID-19 pandemic, while local communities were the last resort for students to connect (12 percent). As was evident from the international students' responses, they lacked opportunities for socializing. The COVID-19 pandemic, the campus closure, and the transfer to remote learning greatly impacted students' social networking (79.3 percent). For this reason, one student remarked that international students would benefit from more services available for social engagement during the pandemic. She suggested that the university should let international students "know of the services available and have some sort of social engagement if possible" (From an open-ended question #33). However, there were no comments on whether the students were aware of all the social engagement opportunities offered by the university.

### **Housing and Accommodation**

To prevent the spread of the COVID pandemic, the university closed on-campus residences in March 2020 and urged all students to return home within three days (Anwar, 2020). International students and other students who could not return home had to move to the university's other residence buildings with more possibilities for self-isolation, "[a]t this time, we have international and domestic students who do not have the ability to return home. If they were displaced from residence, we are uncertain if and how they would find accommodations" (as cited in Anwar, 2020, n.p.). Concerned about students' safety, the university also enforced other changes in students' accommodation services, such as changes closure of the university meal plan cafeteria (Anwar, 2020, n.p.).

Regarding international students' accommodation during the pandemic, the data showed that 11.5 percent of the respondents did not have appropriate housing/accommodation during the COVID-19 outbreak. Approximately 1/3 indicated that they did not have sufficient financial resources to pay for their current living accommodations. Moreover, 31.2 percent did not have an appropriate home working environment to maintain their learning at the same level as before the pandemic. One student exemplified that reducing the cost for living in residences and maintaining meal plans open would have been very helpful for international students during the pandemic,

On-campus residence prices could have been lowered. Most of my friends and I had to move out after April because [the name of a university residence] room I was assigned to was too expensive for us[,] and off-campus options were much more affordable. I also believe the University should have kept the meal plan going for students in [a university residence]. It was very difficult for us[,] who were used to living on campus[,] to buy kitchenware and start cooking for ourselves right before the finals. The meal plan could have been transformed into a pick[-]up/delivery service like several other universities have done. (From an open-ended question #33)

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic had an immense social and academic impact on the international students in the research site. The document analysis and the online survey showed that international students faced academic and financial challenges. The pandemic not only impacted students' progress in the program but also hindered their ability to pay for their living accommodations, student tuition, and fees. Many students did not have an appropriate home working environment and could not maintain their learning at the same level as before the pandemic. The majority of the participants also admitted that they could not maintain good physical and mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic and the campus closure impacted students' social networking and reduced opportunities for socializing. The university offered various supports to mitigate the COVID-19 impact on students; however, only fewer participants used those institutional supports.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study showed that there were obvious gaps between international students' academic and social needs during the pandemic and the institutional support provided by the university. First, while international students faced both academic and social challenges during the first year of the pandemic, the majority of the students identified social challenges as more significant. Lack of in-person communication with family and friends and limited opportunities to socialize with student peers and professors contributed greatly to international students' feeling of social isolation. Without a comprehensive system of support,

international students struggled most to cope financially and maintain their physical and mental well-being.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the university formed a Pandemic Response and Recovery Team (PRT), which was responsible for developing policies and initiatives responding to the pandemic. The PRT was composed of representatives from various academic and administrative units on campus, such as teaching and learning, research, finance and resources, communications, and stakeholder relations. The PRT worked with the university community members including students and faculty, to plan, coordinate, and monitor the university's operation during the pandemic. Our analysis of the university policies and practices during the pandemic showed that the university intended to support students through measures in four main directions: facilitating students' academic progress, assisting them in financial hardships, sustaining their well-being, and providing opportunities for safe socialization.

In practice, most institutional responses were aimed at providing academic supports during the pandemic. The university's COVID-related policies and actions were primarily oriented at "ensuring the health and safety of [its] campus community, while minimizing disruptions for students and staff" ([University Name], n.d.d, para. 2). When the university implemented a working/studying remotely policy, all university supports continued offering their services remotely through web conferencing, phone, or email. Among the university supports and services to navigate remote learning/working, university libraries (48.3 percent), IT services (27.6 percent), and learning services (around 19 percent) were the most frequently accessed. Still, 1/3 of the respondents indicated they did not use any university service for remote learning/working.

Second, it became evident from the study that there were gaps in communicating institutional support to students. The university declared that its priority was to ensure its community's health and safety, including keeping the university students, faculty, and staff informed of the latest pandemic-related developments ([University Name], n.d.a). The university continued to provide updates on any changes or new policies online. Moreover, it initiated the COVID-19 Update as regular announcements sent to students and faculty through the university email platform. The COVID-19 updates became a weekly recap of the latest university actions impacting the community ([University Name], n.d.a).

Additionally, colleges and various university associations sent weekly or biweekly newsletters. Regularly, conversations with the university professionals were organized. All students could attend WebEx sessions and communicate on various issues with university professionals from different centers. Nevertheless, some students were not aware of the spectrum of institutional supports and services. This lack of communication might lead to many students not finding necessary university services, even though such services and supports were in place. For instance, having significant financial difficulties, a strikingly low percentage of international students used university financial aid. While 1/3 of the respondents felt they had not received sufficient institutional support, the same number of students had not accessed University services to navigate remote learning/working nor other supports to cope with different challenges. Predominantly, international students sought family support, support from friends outside the university rather than from their peer students or university services.

Finally, the university claimed to convey the equity, diversity, and inclusion policy to strengthen the community and enhance excellence and innovation ([University Name], n.d.b). Moreover, the university recognized the importance of seeking the balance between inclusive practices and healthy academic discourse. Thus, the individual academic colleges and units were encouraged to critically review their structures, systems, and procedures and develop approaches that support equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. The supports and services were to provide physical and virtual environments, which would be not only accessible but also welcoming regarding social and cultural diversity ([University Name], n.d.b). Still, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university services were predominantly aimed to support the general university student population. Notwithstanding such a university's commitment, there was a need for more targeted support for international students. Only 46.6 percent of international students pointed out that they had received sufficient institutional support since the university closure. The survey also revealed that the center for international students and the health services were among the widely used university services. There was also the opinion that international students did not receive sufficient support, considering their unique needs during the pandemic. One of the students phrased it like this,

It is important to note that international students who are visible minorities ([e.g.,] darker skin tone, physical traits, accent), sexual ([e.g.,] LGBTQ) minorities ([e.g.,] students who come from countries/ cultures that discriminate/ persecute such individuals), and other minorities ([e.g.,] cultural practices, food options) face additional and unique difficulties as well. As a person who has experienced and witnessed others who have faced such difficulties, and tried to get support from relevant university personnel and failed; I'm not sure if the university wants to provide better support for international students. (From an open-ended question #33)

The set of principles guided the university's planning, decision-making, and implementation of the post-pandemic responses. Among these principles were: value, protect and support people; deliver the academic, research, and service missions of the university; support student success; ensure the university's long-term excellence and financial sustainability; contribute to the province's recovery; communicate and consult with the community; and acknowledge the impact on external communities ([University Name], n.d.f). At the same time, these principles provided little evidence in support of the EDI policy in action. Apart from a brief referral to the university mission and engagement with internal and external communities, the principles contained no explicit mention of international students or a diverse student population. We found that the Pandemic Response and Recovery Team did not even include any representatives from the international student service unit.

### **Implications**

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic became an example of how traditional internationalization practices of higher education were disrupted. In the new pandemic reality, universities suspended the usual in-person instruction and prioritized remote teaching and learning. Traditional recruitment and admission practices gave way to online outreach to prospective international students (Dennis, 2020). Student mobility takes different forms. Online mobility and virtual exchanges became more thriving under the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). All these shifts in the internationalization of higher education require universities to adapt their

institutional policies and practices to accommodate new challenges and demands to support international students.

Since February 2022, many Canadian universities have been returning to in-person teaching and learning. However, there is an ongoing discussion on the challenges and implications of the post-pandemic new normal for higher education. This paper addresses the gap in the existing scholarship on international students' academic and social needs in Canadian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from this study contribute to gaining an accurate picture of the proper institutional supports during campus closures and transition to online education. This study informs university administrators to develop plans to balance emergency measures and student well-being to ensure the best possible learning experiences for international students during the pandemic. Moreover, it contributes to the discussion on revisiting the post-pandemic policies in higher education with an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens.

### **Conclusion**

The current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic calls for post-secondary institutions to connect their inclusive excellence policies with educational quality and with fundamental and comprehensive actions to support their diverse student population. An inclusive approach is needed to understand international students' challenges and the corresponding institutional supports during these unprecedented circumstances. The insights from the study will contribute to developing such institutional policies and practices. The study potentially will shed light on future research that explores a more comprehensive approach to internationalization instead of relying on international student enrolment as the leading revenue-generating strategy in most Canadian universities. Integrating institutional diversity and quality efforts with the pandemic response and recovery initiatives should be at the core of institutional functioning. Such an approach will inevitably benefit both the diverse student population and institutions.

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