

## **JCIHE: Vol 16(1) 2024 Introduction**

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Dear Readers -

With this issue, the *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education* (JCIHE) is starting the 16<sup>th</sup> year of production. JCIHE presents articles and essays on innovative and emerging topics in the fields of comparative education and international higher education. JCIHE is listed in numerous databases including Cabells, Ebscohost, Eric, GoogleScholar, and others. In the last two years, the increased visibility of JCIHE has resulted in more downloads and significantly more citations. The GoogleScholar h5-index and h5-median reported an 85% increase in citations in one year (2022-2023). In 2023, JCIHE published articles from authors representing 26 countries. Please see the JCIHE Annual Report 2023 in this issue for more details on the state of the field. Last year, JCIHE began offering Abstracts in multiple languages to reach and to serve a broader audience as well as to give a written voice to authors in their own languages.

Four years ago, the editorial board of JCIHE did a review of previously published articles and found that JCIHE was publishing few authors representing countries located in the Global South. For example, in 2022, only one percent of authors came from Latin America and Caribbean institutions. Since then, attempts have been made to outreach to authors throughout the world with the purpose of including voices that have largely been invisibilized within comparative and international literature. Our success in publishing more authors from South America and the Caribbean is a point of pride for JCIHE. Yet, it remains clear that there are many other regions of the world that are still not represented and JCIHE is working to ensure better access to all. One strategy that JCIHE used to increase diversity is to invite known scholars to be Guest Editors in geographical and regional focused Special Issues. In 2023, a Special Issue included authors from Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean. In this issue, another Special Issue includes authors from the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico. In 2024, JCIHE will publish a special issue on Ukraine and regions in crisis and in 2025, JCIHE will publish a special issue on the international higher education in the Gulf Region.

In Issue 16(1) 2024, JCIHE is starting the New Year with a special issue on **The Road Towards UNESCO's Sustainable Goals Amidst the Pandemic of Covid -19 in Latin America and the Caribbean Higher Education**. The Guest Editors for the Special Issue are Pilar Mendoza, Associate Professor, University of Missouri, United States and Santiago Castiello-Gutiérrez, Assistant Professor, Seton Hall University, United States. The articles in this issue show support for the UNESCO agenda in selected higher education institutions that are making strides despite the deepening challenges from Covid-19. Inspired by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC), the articles examine higher education challenges and opportunities within the post-COVID era. This Special Issue is unique for JCIHE in that two of the articles are written in Spanish with English and Spanish Abstracts. The editorial decision to publish these articles in a non-English language medium is to expand inclusion for

scholars who read in Spanish. This choice is also a call for JCIHE readership to re-think the role of language in the changing publishing world.

**Volume 16, Issue 1, 2024** also includes nine Independent Empirical Articles, one Essay, a book report, and the JCIHE Annual Report 2023.

In total, Issue 16(1) provides context on comparative and international higher education in nine countries: Canada, China, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States. In addition to the special issue are Six Empirical articles, two Essays, and a book review by Hyungwoo Jo of Stephanie Kim's book: *Constructing student mobility: How universities recruit students and shape pathways between Berkeley and Seoul*.

### **Themes Found in Issue 16(1) 2024**

There are several themes that cross the focus of the various articles in 16(1) 2024.

#### **COVID-19 Impact on International Students**

Two articles focus their studies within the context of COVID-19. **Menglong Cong, Yixiao Dong, & Ruth Chao** examine the stress of Asian international students studying in United States before and after COVID-19. **Barry Fass-Holmes** examines the graduation rate and time to degree for international students in the class of 2019 and the class of 2020 in the context of racism and caste. **Alina Schartner & Yao Wang** examine the impact of stressors on international students studying in the UK.

#### **Barriers to Success**

**Rhoden & Kinchington** identify known barriers to success for international students and examine their relevance for international master's students studying in the UK in terms of language barriers, misunderstandings, anxiety, and clear understanding of academic integrity violations in UK universities as prominent.

#### **Benefits Contributing to Success**

**Yuehua Zhu & Clayton Smith** share the benefits of Chinese international student participation in leadership at a Canadian university. **Snejana Slantcheva-Durst** shows that Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate students in the U.S.A. with more diverse international involvement have stronger perceptions on social responsibility. **Wei Liu** provides a context for increasing international relations and intercultural understanding through small culture observations while studying abroad. **Xin Li & Panchit Longpradit** show that the different levels of intercultural sensitivity are important in designing successful mobility experiences.

#### **HEI Reform as a Response to Crisis**

Six articles wrote about HEI reform as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. **Nanette Archer Svenson, Mariana León, & Debra Psychoyos** detail how streamlined public-private cooperation in Panama facilitated digitalization. **Christian Cortes-Velasco & Alma Maldonado-Maldonado** show how innovations, like virtual internationalization in Mexico can balance the limited study abroad opportunities. Also in Mexico, **Isabel Izquierdo, Argelia Ramírez, & Norma Cárdenas** describe reforms to support international graduate students. **Louis HERNs Marcellin, Toni Cela, Mário da Silva Fidalgo & Christopher Zuraik** show the limited success of change efforts when national development plans in Haiti do not include higher education. Finally, **Denise Blum, Juan P. de Armas Victores, & Amauri Batista Salvado** show how Cuba is linking strategic reforms to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. **Virginia Bunn Guneyli & Jill O'Shea Lane** explore administrative choices towards revenue generation to compensate for funding shortfalls. **Oğuzhan Bozoğlu** shares factors that facilitate or hinder digitalization within a Turkish higher educational institute.

## Independent Empirical Articles

**Snejana Slantcheva-Durst**, University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio. *HESA Graduate Students' International Involvements and Civic Engagement*

This article documents international involvement opportunities available to Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate students in the U.S.A. Using student voices, results show low levels of international exposure and moderate rates of orientation towards civic responsibility which can successfully be predicted by curricular and co-curricular environmental engagements: listening to an international speaker, discussing the ways the U.S. higher education links to the rest of the world, and attending presentations of study abroad students.

**Menglong Cong**, University of Denver, USA, **Yixiao Dong** University of Denver, USA, & **Ruth C. Chao** University of Denver, USA. *Acculturative Stress of Asian International Students before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

This article examines acculturative stress experienced by Asian international students who are studying in the United States before and after COVID-19. The results show that English proficiency and sex predicted the overall acculturative stress, in which higher perceived English proficiency predicted a lower perceived acculturative stress, and female Asian international students experienced higher acculturative stress than males. Sadness was another stress element.

**Barry Fass-Holmes**, San Diego State University, USA. *The graduating international undergraduate class of 2020—Counterintuitive graduation rate and time to degree during onset of the coronavirus pandemic.*

This article examines the graduation rate and time to degree for international undergraduates who would have been expected to graduate during COVID-19's onset in spring 2020 compared to pre-pandemic counterparts of 2019 in the context of racism and caste. Results show that both classes were almost identical. This is indicative of the class of 2020's academic success, resilience, and/or benefit from institutional support.

**Alina Schartner**, Newcastle University, UK & **Yao Wang** Newcastle University, UK. *International Postgraduate Students' Lived Experiences of Academic, Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

This article examines the lived experiences of international student psychological and sociocultural adjustment during COVID-19. COVID-19-related stressors negatively impacted students' psychological adjustment and led to a sense of isolation and detachment from the host environment, with students reporting difficulties in instigating and maintaining social ties. COVID-19 was a barrier or facilitator of adjustment, depending on the students' personal circumstances.

**Virginia Bunn Guneyli**, Maryville University, United States, & **Jill O'Shea Lane** Maryville University, United States. *Siloed in Their Thoughts: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education Leaders' Perceptions of Internationalization in Changing Times*

This article examines higher education leaders' perceptions of internationalization during the initial stages of the COVID-19 shutdown in 2020. Using academic capitalism as a framework, findings show that administrators value internationalization as a process that creates quality educational programming, but are influenced by institutional culture and priorities that emphasize generating revenue to compensate for funding shortfalls.

**Oğuzhan Bozoğlu**, Gebze Technical University, Turkey. *Digital Turn in Higher Education: An Examination of Enablers and Inhibitors in the Turkish Context*

This article examines digitalization in a Turkish Higher Education Institution. The article documents how and to what extent digitalization takes place and what factors facilitate or hinder these efforts. Findings indicate that there have

been both intraorganizational and top-down initiatives towards digitalization, though the latter seems to have failed in addressing intraorganizational needs and priorities. Instructor personal interests and availability of many digital tools leads to successful implementation.

**Xin Li**, University of Finance and Economics, Guangxi, China and Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand and **Panchit Longpradit**, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. *Qualitative Content Analysis for Enhancing Intercultural Sensitivity in Cross-Cultural Management*

This article uses a qualitative content analysis to examine intercultural sensitivity learning in intercultural education resulting from studying abroad. Findings are six categories that include teaching pedagogies (formal, non-formal, and informal education), symptoms of negative feelings, reasons of negative feelings (self and others), motivations, solutions (self and agencies), and results of solutions.

**Yuehua Zhu**, University of Windsor, Canada & **Clayton Smith**, University of Windsor, Canada. *The Impact of Student Leadership on Chinese International Students' Language Proficiency and Belongingness*

This article examines Chinese international students who are underrepresented in leadership roles in Canadian universities. The study shares benefit that Chinese international student participants perceived, based on leadership roles in which they participated on their language development and enhanced their belongingness to the university. However, their participation in student leadership roles did not contribute to their belongingness to Canadian society.

**Maureen Rhoden**, The Open University, UK & **Francia Kinchington**, The Open University, UK. *Hitting the Ground Running: Helping International Master's Students to Succeed in Higher Education*

This article examines potential barriers to the academic success of international master's students studying in the UK to identify university policy and culture and classroom practice to enable this group of students to 'hit the ground running'. Barriers are viewed through the lens of academic shock and academic integrity. Findings show the importance of language barriers, misunderstandings, and anxiety, as well as the importance of providing clear definitions of what constitutes academic integrity violations in UK universities.

## Essays

**Wei Liu**, University of Alberta, Canada. *Knowledge Diplomacy in Small Culture Observations*

This essay argues for the inclusion of students' education abroad programming as an important part of knowledge diplomacy and for improving international relations and intercultural understanding. Important in this process is to guide students in small culture observations as a mechanism to break down cultural stereotyping and to build cultural appreciation.

## Articles in Special Issue

**Nanette Archer Svenson** (Centro de Investigación Educativa (Center for Education Research, CIEDU), Panama); **Mariana León**, Quality Leadership University (QLU), Panama; & **Debra Psychoyos**, Fundación ProEd, Panama. *Higher Education Collaboration for Digital Transformation in Pandemic Panamá*

This article describes how during COVID-19, a period of streamlined public-private cooperation resulted in technological innovations. The article details one HEI-Ministry partnership on digital transformation mobile literacy project and show what future elements are needed for similar successful collaborations.

**Louis Herns Marcelin**, University of Miami, Florida, & USA INURED, Haiti; **Toni Cela**, University of Miami, Florida, & USA INURED, Haiti; **Mário da Silva Fidalgo**, University of Miami, Florida, & USA INURED, Haiti; & **Christopher Zuraik**, USA INURED, Haiti. *Higher Education, Human Development, and Growing Inequality in Pre-and Post Pandemic Haiti*

This article describes the limited success of national development plans in Haiti in response to recent crisis. While revitalization is a focus of these reforms, the higher education sector is largely absent and how an absence of a strategic vision for higher education negatively impacts the professoriate and students.

**Isabel Izquierdo**, Facultad de Estudios Superiores de Cuautla, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos, México; **Argelia Ramírez**, Escuela para Estudiantes Extranjeros, Universidad Veracruzana, México; & **Norma Cárdenas** Facultad de Estudios Superiores de Cuautla, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos, México. *Movilidad Académica Internacional: las Voces del Estudiantado de Posgrado (In)móvil en México*

This article describes the challenges and opportunities faced by international graduate students during COVID-19 in Mexico. Despite a lack of face-to-face internationalization, the students reached out to one another and took advantage of HEI sponsored professional outreach.

**Christian Cortes-Velasco**, Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (DIE) del Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados (Cinvestav), Ciudad de México, México; & **Alma Maldonado-Maldonado**, Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (DIE) del Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados (Cinvestav), Ciudad de México, México. *Movilidad Estudiantil Después del Covid-19: La Percepción de las Personas a Cargo de la Internacionalización en Seis Instituciones de Educación Superior Mexicanas*

This article describes the modifications that were made during the COVID-19 pandemic in a Mexican HEIs to balance traditional student mobility and virtual internationalization strategies. Officials with key involvement in management of student mobility were interviewed at public and private HEIs to get a better understanding of the adaption process.

**Denise Blum**, Social Foundations of Education, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma; **Juan P. de Armas Victores**, Investigador del Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas (CIPS), La Habana, Cuba; & **Amauri Batista Salvado**, Asesor de la Dirección Nacional de Formación del Profesional de Pregrado del Ministerio de Educación Superior (MES), La Habana, Cuba. *Cuba y la Pandemia de 2020: El Rol de la Educación Superior Cubana Respecto al Cumplimiento de los Objetivos del Desarrollo Sostenible*

This report analyzes the context of Cuban higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic and strategic reforms in the post COVID context that aligns with the indicators and goals with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. The context is explored through an examination of the role of the Ministry of Higher Education of Cuba.

## JCIHE

JCIHE is an open access, independent, double-blinded peer-reviewed international journal publishing original contributions to the field of comparative and international higher education. The JCIHE is the official journal of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Higher Education Special Interest Group (HESIG). The mission of the journal is to serve as a place to share new thinking on analysis, theory, policy, and practice, and to encourage reflective and critical thinking on issues that influence comparative and international higher education. JCIHE showcases new and diverse international research that uses rigorous methodology that focuses on theory, policy, practice, critical analysis, and development analysis of issues that influence higher education. JCIHE has as its core principles: a) comparative research; b) engagement with theory; and c) diverse voices in terms of authorship.

## JCIHE Support

JCIHE supports a professional forum for the development, analysis, and dissemination of theory-policy-and practice-related issues that influence higher education. JCIHE publishes a) Empirical Articles; b) Scholarly Research-Based Review/Essays; c) Emerging Scholars Research Summaries; and d) Book Reviews. Please visit for guidelines: <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jcihe/about>

I want to thank several individuals who were instrumental in the publication of this issue. First, I want to thank the Higher Education SIG of the Comparative and International Education Society who continue to support JCIHE throughout the years. I want to draw attention to the HE-SIG and the support they have given to the journal. Special thanks are given to the Past-Chair, Dr. Dante Salto and Current Chair: Dr. Maia Chankseliani.

Second, I want to thank the JCIHE Senior Associate Editors, Dr. Hayes Tang and Dr. Bernhard Streitwieser, who supporting JICHE with their support, insight, and creativity. Third, I want to thank Associate Editor & Managing Editor, Dr. Yovana S. Veerasamy whose insight and attention to detail help the journal maintain currency. JCIHE would not have grown in depth without the support of Dr. Veerasamy. Fourth, I want to thank several individuals on the JCIHE management team who were instrumental in the publication of this issue and for helping to keep the standards and integrity for the journal. It is their dedication that helps keep the standards and integrity for the journal.

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# HESA Graduate Students' International Involvements and Civic Engagement

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## Abstract

This study maps the types of international involvement opportunities available to HESA: Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate students in the U.S.A., as seen through the eyes of the students, and analyzes the impact of these students' diverse international involvements on their orientation towards social responsibility. The study follows a survey research design. The study's results indicate low levels of international exposure amongst HESA graduate students across diverse programs, and moderate rates of orientation towards civic responsibility. HESA students' orientation towards social responsibility can successfully be predicted by a combination of five variables, three of which represent curricular and co-curricular environmental engagements: listening to an international speaker, discussing the ways the U.S. higher education links to the rest of the world, and attending presentations of study abroad students. The findings aim to inform program directors and faculty on existing opportunities for international exposure, on the rate of student involvements in them, as well on the importance of international exposures for their students' future professional preparation.

Keywords: student affairs, graduate education, international engagement

## Introduction

Across U.S. colleges and universities, higher education/student affairs (HESA) professionals play a critical role in shaping students' democratic values and beliefs. Their important influence on student growth increasingly necessitates preparatory HESA graduate programs that can strengthen their graduates' abilities to guide diverse student populations, foster sense of civic engagement, as well as stand up to incivility and injustices in their communities (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). HESA programs increasingly employ a variety of approaches to expose professionals-in-training to other cultures, and to impart the awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions "needed to work with others who are culturally different from oneself, as well as those who are culturally similar in meaningful, relevant, and productive ways" (Pope et al., 2019, p. 37; 40). Exposure to diverse cultures and worldviews not only sharpens graduates' awareness of themselves and their worlds, but also raises their support for diversity, intolerance to injustice, and responsibility to engage in community initiatives.

Ample research has demonstrated that student exposure to international initiatives and their international involvements contribute to the preparation of open-minded and engaged citizens (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; de Wit et al., 2020; Soria & Johnson, 2017). HESA graduate programs across the United States offer opportunities that expose their students to the cultures, socio-political and economic structures, and the higher education systems of other countries. Such opportunities may include study abroad, foreign language and area studies, infusion of non-U.S.-focused issues in the curriculum, faculty with overseas experience or interests, or research projects with global or international focus (ACE, 2022; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Shelton & Yao, 2019; Yao et al., 2022). Studies focusing specifically on graduate students have reported on the strong influence of international exposure on students' critical consciousness, social awareness, personal transformation, gender identity development, and multicultural sensitivity (Haber & Getz, 2011; McDowell et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2014; Slantcheva-Durst, 2018; Squire et al., 2015; Vatalaro et al., 2015).

Research on the rate of internationalization of HESA programs and the influences of international exposure on HESA graduate students has increased. More than a decade ago, Schultz et al. (2007) mapped international opportunities across HESA graduate programs. Other studies have reported on the influences of program internationalization initiatives on HESA graduate students' intercultural competence, self-awareness, and personal and professional growth (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Haber & Getz, 2011; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; Yao et al., 2022). Research on the effects of international involvements on HESA graduate students' democratic attitudes and values, including orientation towards civic engagement, remains scarce.

The present study aims to map the types of international involvement opportunities available to HESA graduate students, as seen through the eyes of the students, and to analyze the impact of these students' diverse international involvements on their orientation towards social responsibility. The study contributes to our understanding of the types and frequencies of international initiatives that graduate students in higher education engage in order to broaden their horizons, as well as to our understanding of how such international exposures influence students' orientation towards civic engagement. The study's contribution also lies in its unique data source: students themselves. The study's results will inform program directors and faculty on existing opportunities for international exposure, on the rate of student involvements in them, as well on the importance of international exposures for their students' future professional preparation. Two research questions guide this study: 1) What are the types and rates of involvement in international activities of HESA graduate students across HESA programs in the United States? and 2) What is the relationship, if any, between types of involvement in international activities and the students' orientation towards social responsibility?

## **Literature Review**

With their campus programming and daily activities, HESA professionals carry growing responsibility to address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and worldviews, educate students, help them form core values, attitudes, and beliefs especially concerning inclusion and multicultural learning, contribute to their intercultural development, and provide an environment that fosters civic engagement (Bell, 2013; Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2017; Major & Mangope, 2014; Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018; Yao et al., 2022). It is critical that higher education professionals embrace democratic values and civic mindedness, and are "culturally sophisticated and globally aware to ensure they, in turn, are able to develop such a capacity within students" (Schultz et al., 2007, p. 617; Mitchell & Maloff, 2016). Sound knowledge of multiculturalism and diversity, and understanding of global developments, are competencies endorsed by professional associations and professionals themselves (Shelton & Yao, 2019; Witkowski & Mendez, 2018; Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018). HESA professional standards, shaped in tandem by the leading professional associations CAS, ACPA, and NASPA, stress the need to develop a broad worldview and global perspectives in all graduates. In their "humanitarianism and civic engagement" domain, CAS's recommendations emphasize "global" competency in direct connection to civic engagement, stating that HESA programs must inculcate "understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences, social responsibility, global perspective, and sense of civic responsibility" (CAS, 2018, p. 6). Similarly, the ACPA/NASPA's (2015) professional competencies list a Social Justice and Inclusion outcome that speaks directly to the importance of



international involvements for “student affairs educators” that foster “a sense of their own agency and social responsibility that includes others, their community, and the larger global context” (p. 14).

Around 20% of new professionals receive their training in master’s HESA programs, and an increasing number of seasoned professionals hold doctoral degrees in higher education (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022; Yakaboski & Perezzi, 2018). HESA graduate programs serve as the main socialization agents for HESA professionals, and provide the formative basis for the development of professional identity (Hirschy et al., 2015). Research on the graduate preparation of HESA professionals (Shelton & Yao, 2019; Shultz et al., 2007; Witkowsky, 2020; Yao et al., 2022) has emphasized the need for increased internationalization of programs. The most recent survey of program internationalization took place more than a decade ago (Schultz et al., 2007) and found that HESA graduate programs offer opportunities for international exposure albeit unevenly, and often rely on or mirror their institution’s offerings. Research (Shelton et al., 2019; Shultz et al., 2007; Witkowski, 2020) also points to a mostly U.S.-centric program curricula and delivery across HESA programs. Yao et al. (2022) reported that the highest exposure to international learning was found in the informal curriculum of graduate programs, including study abroad, practice, and assistantships. Shelton and Yao (2019) reported on the limited preparation available to HESA students to work with international students. The effects of study abroad opportunities, especially short-term, for higher education professionals represent the most studied area (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Haber & Getz, 2011; Mitchell & Maloff, 2016; Slantcheva-Durst & Danowski, 2018; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018; Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2017). Research suggests that graduate student study abroad trips have positive effects on students’ intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive growth, as well as their intercultural competence and promotion, global disposition, professional skills, and career development.

Our understanding of what influence international exposures may have on HESA students’ orientation towards civic action and social engagement – a standard recommendation for HESA graduates - is still limited. Gurin et al. (2002) maintain that incorporating different perspectives into the curriculum makes students more open to a variety of ideas and ready to engage with current social problems. The concept of student social engagement or civic responsibility encompasses student desire to engage in social change, including actions regarding issues of social justice, charity, environmental protection, and public life (Hurtado et al., 2002; Jacoby et al., 2009; Mayhew & Engberg, 2011; O’Leary, 2014). Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2013) defined civic responsibility as “the sense of personal responsibility individuals should feel to uphold their obligation as part of any community” (p. 24). Available research on universities’ influence on the civic education of students comes primarily with respect to undergraduate students. In the last couple of decades, there have been increased pressure on colleges and universities to renew their civic missions and their commitment to preparing informed and engaged citizens. Higher education associations, foundations, government agencies, and the world of business have pushed for strengthening higher education’s focus on developing responsible citizens (Brennan, 2017; Mlyn, 2013; Soria & Johnson, 2017; Torney-Purta et al., 2015; Woolard, 2017). Despite the movement to reinvigorate higher education’s civic mission, many scholars ascertain that colleges and universities have turned away from their traditional commitment to prepare students for democratic citizenship (Flores & Rogers, 2019; Jacoby et al., 2009; Simmons & Lilly, 2010; Woolard, 2017).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Alexander Astin’s (1993) Theory of Student Involvement and his input-environment-output (IEO) model frame the study theoretically. The basic premise of Astin’s theory is that student learning and development is positively impacted by educationally meaningful curricular and co-curricular involvements. Participation in different international opportunities, both in and out of class, represents a high impact practice (Kuh et al., 2010). In order to understand the relationship between international exposure of HESA students and their orientation towards social justice, this study takes into account students’ characteristics and exposure to international initiatives prior to joining their HESA graduate program (inputs), and their involvements in international activities, both curricular and co-curricular, during their HESA graduate studies (environment).

## **Methodology**

## Sources of Data

After receiving approval by the Institutional Review Board (Study 300191-UT; IRB), I collected data through a survey instrument, which gathered information on graduate students' demographics, degree level, type and location of institution, students' exposure to international initiatives prior to and during their graduate studies, and their orientation towards social engagement. I relied on program directors across higher education programs in the United States to distribute the survey to their graduate students. From the 123 programs in the ACPA Directory of Graduate Programs in 2019, I identified 94 program director contacts. I emailed a request to all of them for assistance in distributing the survey instrument, and repeated my request two more times, respectively 10 and 20 days after the initial request.

## Participants

At the end of a two-month-long period, I received 415 student responses from 58 different institutions (61.7% institutional response rate). Of these 415 responses, 367 were complete and entered the dataset for analysis. By region, there were 83 student responses (23%) representing 12 colleges and universities from the North East region (including the states of VT, MA, CT, NY, and PA); 179 responses (49%) representing 25 institutions from the Midwest region (including the states of OH, MI, IN, WI, IL, IA, MO, NE, and ND); 61 (17%) representing 16 institutions from the South region (including VA, WV, KY, NC, TN, GA, FL, MS, AR, and TX); and 44 (12%) representing 5 institutions from the West (MT, CO, CA, and WA). By institutional type, 303 responses (82.6%) were from public institutions.

While this survey's high response rate and representation of institutions, programs, and states (totaling 58 institutions from 28 states) allowed for statistically significant outcomes in the data analysis, caution must be applied to all findings from this study when making generalizations to all institutions with higher education graduate programs in the United States. The chi-square goodness-of-fit tests, used to compare group frequencies, revealed significant differences in the participant representation amongst the Midwest, South, Northeast, and West geographic regions ( $X^2(3, N=367) = 118.96, p < .001$ ) and between public and private institutions ( $X^2(1, N=367) = 155.64, p < .001$ ). Midwestern colleges and universities were over-represented (with 179 responses) while the West region was under-represented (with 44 responses). In addition, the majority of participants came from public institutions (303 responses).

The majority of the respondents were women (268, 73%); of these, 165 (62%) were in the 20-29 age group. Most of the respondents (246, 67%) were White. Of all respondents, 272 (74%) spoke one language, and 83 (23%) spoke two languages; 263 (72%) of the respondents were pursuing a master's degree in higher education, with the remaining 104 (28%) pursuing a PhD or an EdD degree in higher education. The program titles could be grouped in the following categories: "higher education," "higher education administration," "educational leadership and policy," "student affairs in higher education," "college student personnel," "counseling and higher education," "leadership of student affairs in higher education," "higher education: community colleges," "college student development," and "adult learning and higher education." Twenty-five participants (7%) were not employed, while 154 (42%) were employed full-time, and 166 (45%) - employed part-time.

## Measures

To capture students' orientation towards social engagement, I utilized a scaled index of seven items developed by Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, and Landreman (2002) to assess the level of personal responsibility one feels to taking action to improve society. The researchers' exploratory analysis on the measure revealed factor loading scores between 0.55 and 0.69 for the seven items, with Cronback's alpha reliability of 0.83 (p. 173). I titled the variable "Importance of social action engagement" (Appendix 1).

Following the guidance of Astin's theory of involvement, as well as scholarship on the types of international exposure and the benefits for students, I collected data under four main blocks (Table 1). Block 1 included student demographic variables (age, gender, and race) and institutional variables (institution, institutional location, program level, and program name). Block 2 included variables of prior international involvements reflecting the time students had spent on seven kinds of international involvements before starting their graduate program in higher education. The variables in Block 3 focused on the frequency of students' involvements with 13 types of curricular international activities while enrolled in their graduate program in higher education. Block 4 included variables on the frequency of student involvements with eight types of international co-curricular activities while in their higher education program. Finally, Block 5 included two intermediate educational outcomes variables: number of languages that students spoke, and employment status. The intermediate educational outcomes are not necessarily choices that the student made when they enrolled in their graduate program; intermediate outcomes may themselves be the result of early program choices, and may affect the final targeted outcome differently. As their effect is uncertain, Astin and Antonio (2012) suggest to treat them separately and enter them after other environmental influences.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, not all 94 HESA graduate programs were represented amongst student responses, and not all programs that were represented were evenly represented. In this light, this study's findings are not generalizable across all HESA students in the country. In addition, the study's aim was to map student involvements across programs, and not provide in-depth discussion of specific initiatives or student experiences. My interest was in the frequency and variety of involvement, and not on the depth of experience. Future research should aim to increase program representation in the response pool as well as consider providing in-depth exploration of the involvements in select programs. Next, all responses come directly from HESA students and may reflect students' bias towards different questions, their attitudes in the moment, or their overall energy in filling out surveys. Finally, the instrument on orientation towards social engagement measured students' self-reported levels sending a caution that students may not possess an accurate assessment of their orientation (Bowman & Seifert, 2011).

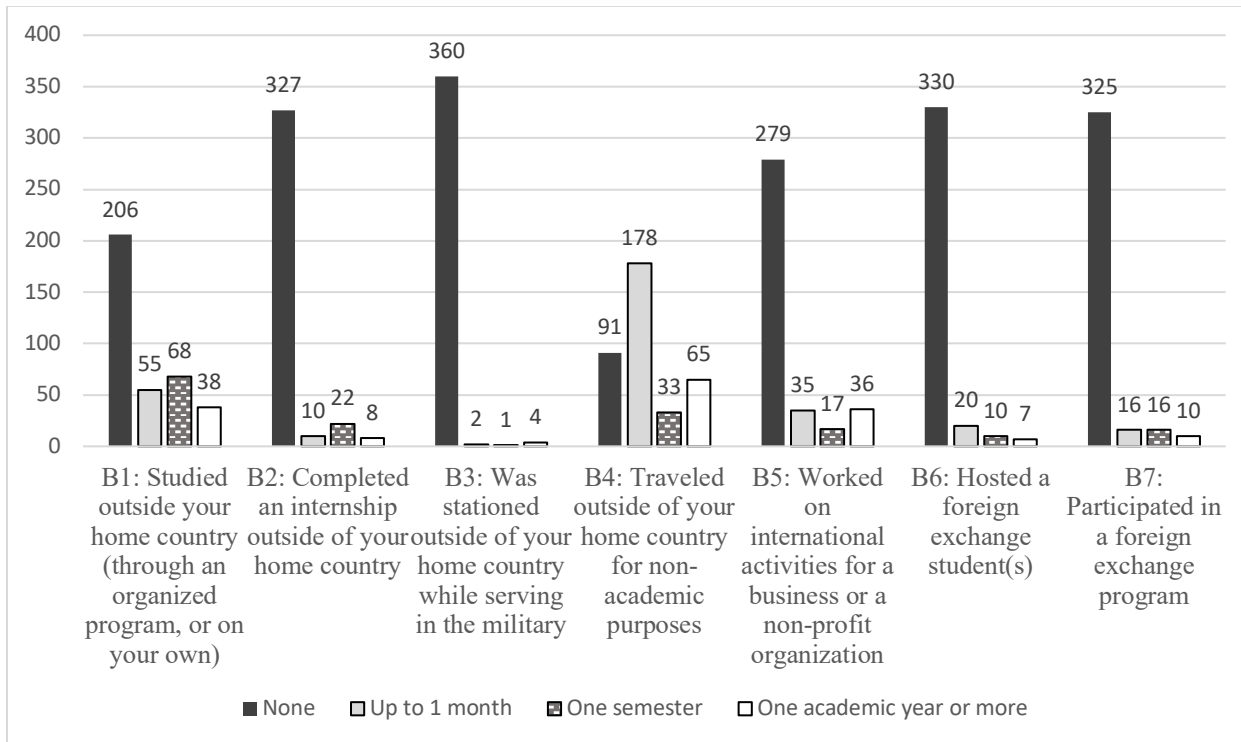
## **Results**

### **Research Question 1: What are the types and rates of involvement in international activities of HESA graduate students across HESA programs the United States?**

Most of the student respondents (75%) indicated no involvement with international activities prior to their HESA graduate studies (Figure 1). The highest rates of involvement amongst the quarter of the students who reported some international involvement across the seven types of activities was travel outside of the U.S. for no academic reasons (75%,  $N=276$ ; B4), of which 49% ( $N=178$ ) reported on some travel for up to a month; 18% ( $N=65$ ) indicated longer periods of travel for a year or more. Close to 44% ( $N=161$ ; B1) of the respondents also indicated involvement in some kind of study abroad ranging from one month to an academic year or longer. Finally, 24% ( $N=88$ ) also reported on work on international activities for a business or organization ranging from one month to an academic year or more (B5).

**Figure 1**

*Involvement in International Initiatives Prior to Enrollment in Higher Education Graduate Program*



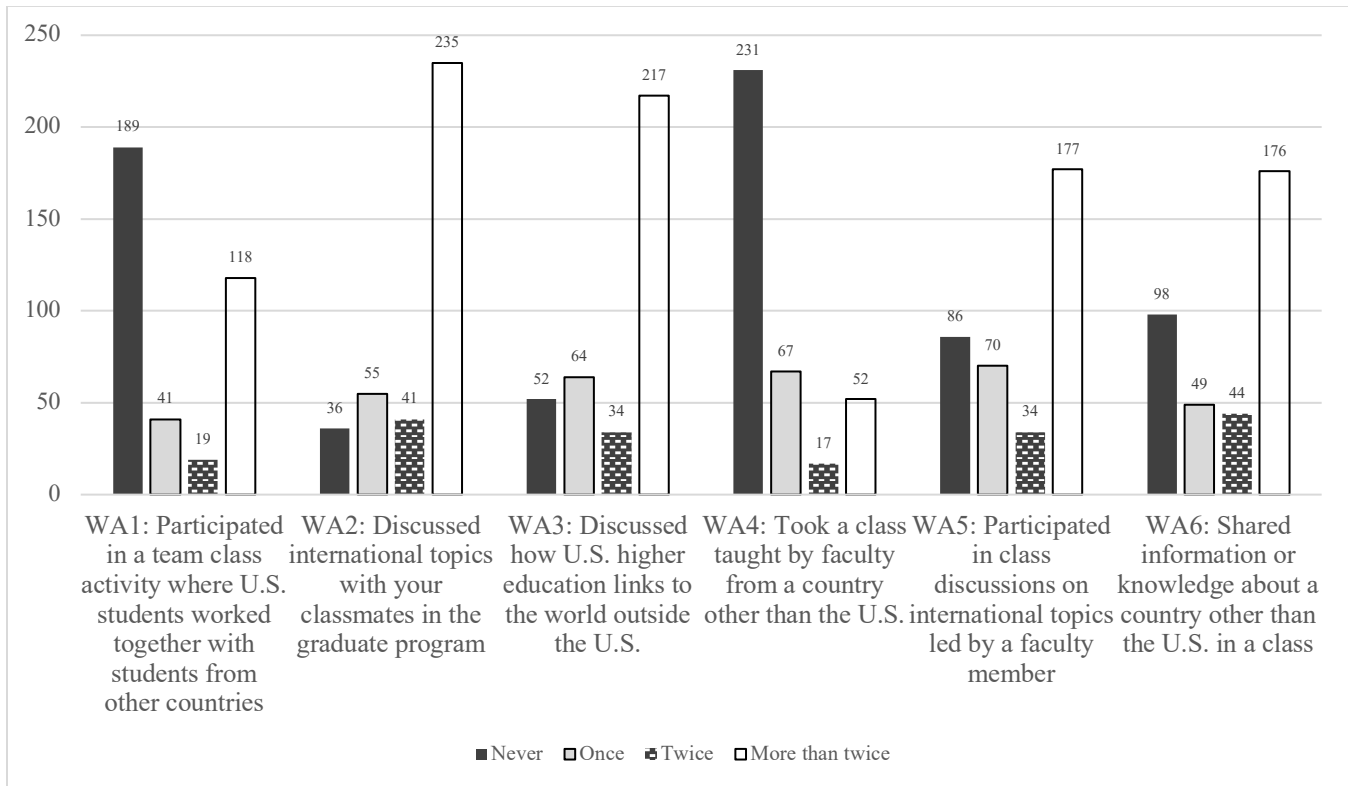
Note. Responses (N=367) to question: "BEFORE attending your graduate program in higher education, how much time have you spent on each of these activities?"

During their HESA graduate program enrollment, students involved themselves in international activities at a higher rate. However, the sum of frequencies from 20 curricular and co-curricular international involvements revealed relatively low rates:  $M=22.7$ ;  $Mdn=22$ ; Range: 0-56. A little over half of the respondents (51%) indicated some level of involvement across 12 kinds of curricular international activities (Figures 2 and 3), while 46% reported some involvement across eight kinds of co-curricular international involvements (Figure 5). Pearson correlations between the combined frequencies of the curricular involvements and the combined frequencies of the co-curricular ones revealed a high statistically significant positive correlation ( $r=0.523$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), which signals that the higher one's involvement in curricular international initiatives, the higher their involvement in co-curricular ones as well.

Regarding curricular involvements (Figures 2 and 3), higher frequencies emerged in the following types: 1) discussed international topics with classmates (WA2, 90% or  $N=331$ ); 2) discussed how U.S. higher education links to the world outside (WA3, 86% or  $N=315$ ); 3) participated in class discussions on international topics led by a faculty member (WA5; 77% or  $N=281$ ); 4) shared information about a country other than the U.S. in class (WA6; 73% or  $N=269$ ); and 5) engaged in meaningful interaction with faculty on international topics (WA8; 69% or  $N=254$ ).

**Figure 2**

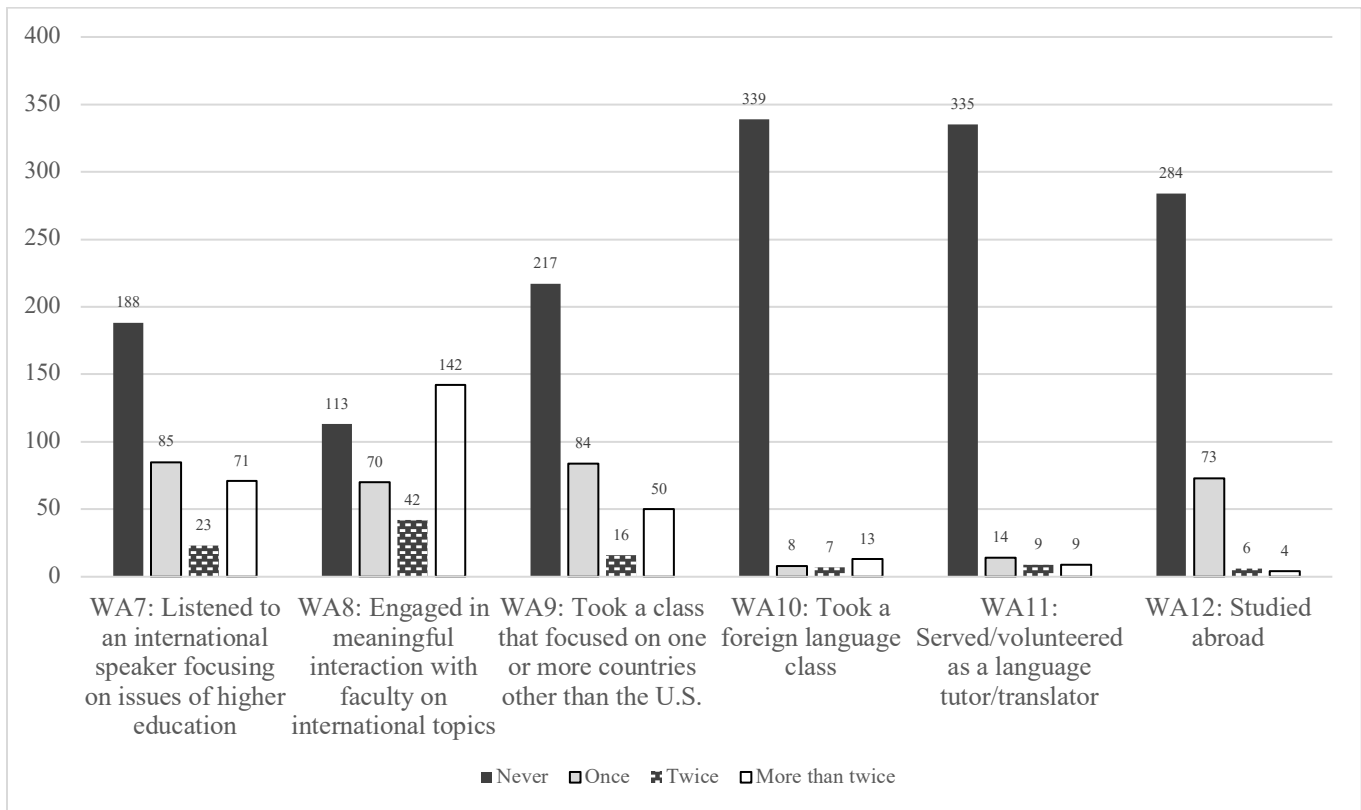
*Curricular International Involvements While Enrolled in HESA Graduate Program*



*Note.* Responses ( $N=367$ ) to question: "WHILE attending your graduate program in higher education, how frequently were you involved in each of the following activities?"

**Figure 3**

*Curricular International Involvements While Enrolled in HESA Graduate Program – Continued*



*Note:*

Responses ( $N=367$ ) to question: "While attending your graduate program in higher education, how frequently were you involved in each of the following activities?"

One-way ANOVA analyses of different levels of involvement with academically-related international activities amongst different groups revealed statistically significant differences amongst groups based on degree level, age, number of languages spoken, and institutional location (region) (Table 1). Along six types of involvements (WA1, WA4, WA5, WA7, WA10, and WA11), there were statistically meaningful differences between at least three groups. For example regarding WA7: Listened to an international speaker focusing on issues of higher education, differences emerged between different degree level groups ( $F(2,364)=3.19, p=0.04$ ), between age groups ( $F(2,364)=3.67, p=0.026$ ), and between institutional regions ( $F(3,363)=4.68, p=0.003$ ). In light of the over-representation of responses in the Midwest region as compared to the other three regions in the country, I further applied independent t-test analyses to the specific regional group pairs with significantly different means. For each of the five types of international involvements where regional group differences emerged (WA5, WA7, WA8, WA9, WA11), the independent t-tests, two-sided and set with the condition of "equal variances not assumed," confirmed that the differences in the means between the group were indeed statistically significant (see Table 1). Overall, across most types of curricular involvements, PhD students were involved at higher rates than master's and EdD students; more engaged were also students of age 40 or above, students who spoke more than one language, and students in Midwestern institutions.

**Table 1**

*Multiple Comparisons with One-Way ANOVA and Post Hoc Tukey Tests, by Graduate Degree, Age Group, Number of Languages, and Region of Institution*

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Mean (M) Difference (A- B)</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
WA1: Participated in a team class activity where U.S. students worked together with students from other countries	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.795**	0.180	0.000
	20-29	40 or above	-0.683**	0.198	0.002
	Speak 1 language	Speak 3 languages	-1.675**	0.451	0.001
	Speak 2 languages	Speak 3 languages	-1.513**	0.467	0.007
WA2: Discussed international topics with your classmates in the grad. program	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.373*	0.143	0.025
WA4: Took a class taught by faculty from a country other than the U.S.	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.871***	0.140	0.000
	Ed.D.	Ph.D.	-0.631**	0.210	0.008
	20-29	40 or above	-0.486**	0.158	0.006
	30-39	40 or above	-0.462*	0.186	0.036
	Speak 1 language	Speak 3 languages	-1.076**	0.361	0.016
	Speak 2 languages	Speak 3 languages	-1.187**	0.374	0.009
WA5: Participated in class discussions on international topics led by a faculty member	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.441*	0.171	0.028
	Speak 1 language	Speak 2 languages	-1.187**	0.374	0.009
	MidWest Region: OH, MI, IN, WI, IL, IO,MO, NE, ND	South Region: VA, WV, KY, NC, TN, GA, FL, MS, AR, TX	0.557**	0.184	0.014 (Two-sided t-test: p=0.003)
	Speak 1 language	Speak 2 languages	-0.472**	0.159	0.016
WA7: Listened to an international speaker focusing on issues of higher education	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.391*	0.158	0.037
	20-29	40 or above	-0.451*	0.172	0.024
	MidWest Region: OH, MI, IN, WI,IL, IO,MO, NE, ND	South Region: VA, WV, KY, NC, TN, GA, FL, MS, AR, TX	0.523**	0.170	0.012 (Two-sided t-test: p=0.001)
	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.435*	0.174	0.035
WA8: Engaged in meaningful interaction with faculty on international topics	South Region: VA, WV, KY, NC, TN, GA, FL, MS, AR, TX	NorthEast Region: VT, MA, CT, NY, PA	-0.558*	0.214	0.047 (Two-sided t-test: p=0.009)
	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.428**	0.143	0.008
	MidWest Region: OH, MI, IN, WI,IL, IO,MO, NE, ND	South Region: VA, WV, KY, NC, TN, GA, FL, MS, AR, TX	0.435*	0.154	0.026 (Two-sided t-test: p=0.002)
	Master's Degree	Ed.D.	-0.303**	0.108	0.015
WA10: Took a foreign language class	20-29	40 or above	-0.347**	0.091	0.001
	Speak 1 language	Speak 3 languages	-0.667**	0.209	0.008
	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.284**	0.100	0.014
WA11: Served/volunteered as a language tutor/translator	Speak 1 language	Speak 2 languages	-0.284***	0.070	0.000
	Speak 1 language	Speak 3 languages	-0.589**	0.189	0.011
	NorthEast Region: VT, MA, CT, NY, PA	MidWest Region: OH, MI, IN, WI, IL, IO,MO, NE, ND	-0.211*	0.076	0.030 (Two-sided t-test: p<0.001)
	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.205**	0.074	0.016
WA12: Studied abroad	Speak 1 language	Speak 3 languages	-0.589*	0.189	0.011
	Speak 2 languages	Speak 3 languages	-0.636**	0.188	0.004
	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.379**	0.110	0.002
WA13: Joined an international study trip organized by the program	Ph.D.	Ed.D.	0.389*	0.164	0.048

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 lev

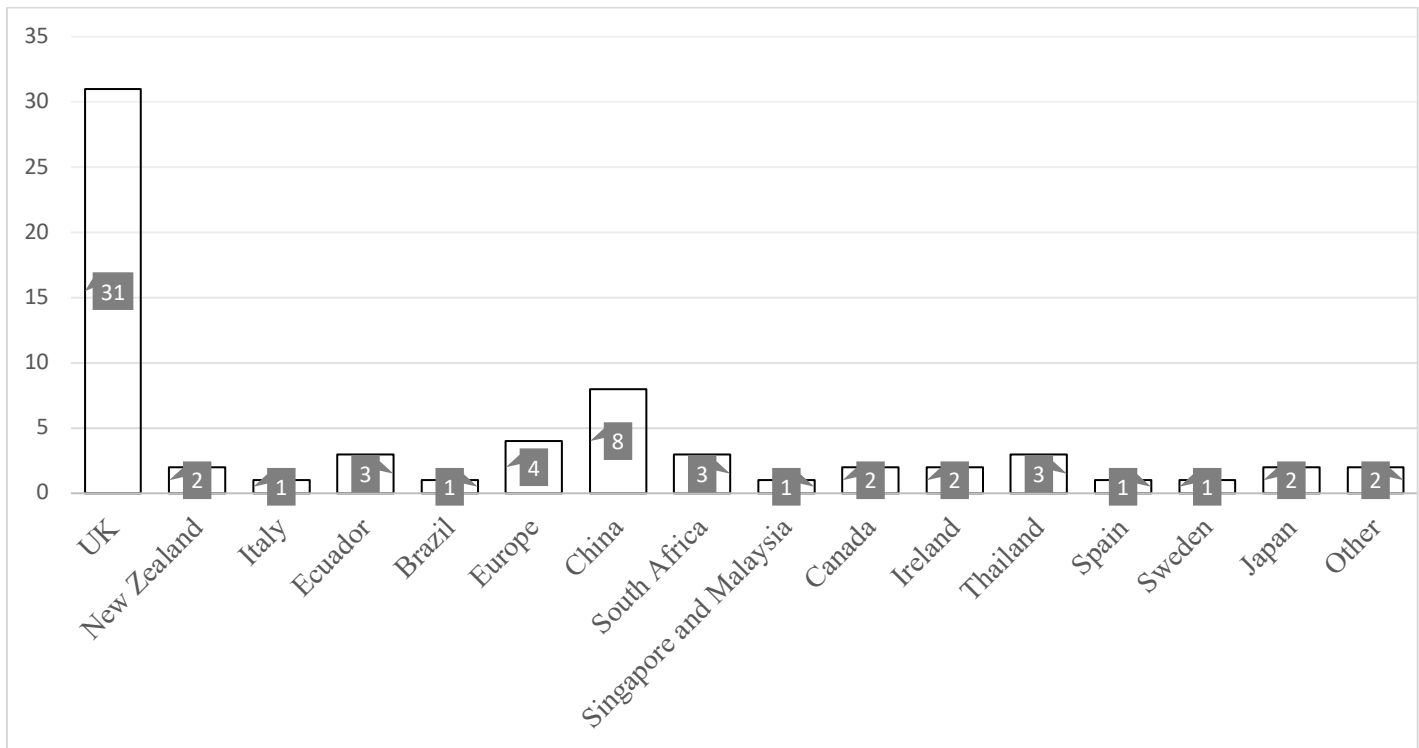
\*\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.01 level;

\*\*\* The mean difference is significant at <0.001 level.

Slightly over 18% ( $N=67$ ) of the responding students indicated participation in a study abroad program organized by their HESA graduate program (Figure 4). Of these 67 students, 60 reported on a 1-to-3-week length study abroad, 2 students traveled for less than that, and the remaining 5 went for a semester or more. The majority of those program organized study abroad trips were to Europe (60% or  $N=40$ ), of which 31 students (46%) went to the United Kingdom.

**Figure 4**

*Destination of the Study Abroad Trip Organized by the HESA Graduate Program (N=67)*



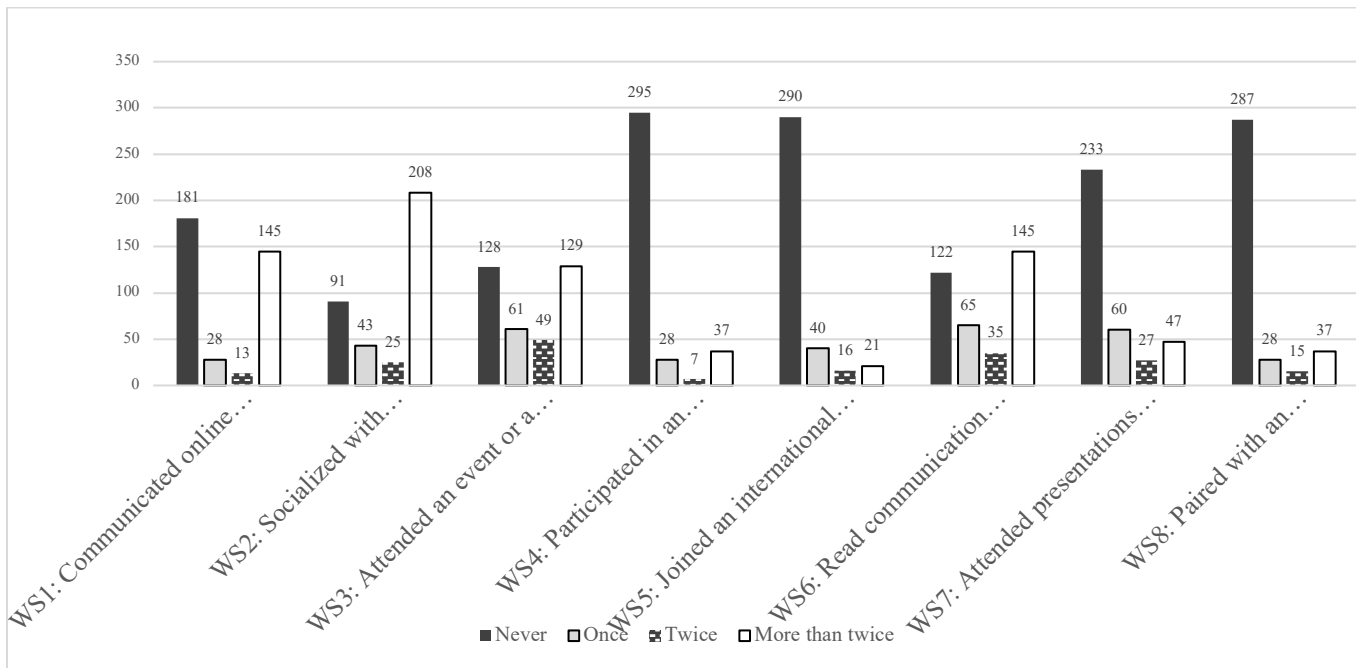
Students from institutions in the Midwest region partook in international study trips organized by their HESA program at a much higher rate than their peers in other regions. The group comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between the means of the Midwest region and the South region student groups ( $M=0.527$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; two-sided t-test, equal variances not assumed:  $p<0.001$ ), and between the Midwest region and the Northeast region student groups ( $M=0.448$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; two-sided t-test, equal variances not assumed:  $p<0.001$ ). In addition, PhD students participated in these trips at a higher rate than master's ( $M=0.379$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and EdD students ( $M=0.389$ ,  $p=0.048$ ). No other group differences based on demographic characteristics (race, gender, age), employment, or number of languages were statistically significant.

Regarding co-curricular international involvements, three quarters of the respondents reported socializing with international students (75% or  $N=276$ , WS2), 69% ( $N=239$ ) attended an event or program on campus that focused on foreign countries (WS3), 68% ( $N=245$ ) read communication from the program on international events (WS6), and 51% ( $N=186$ ) communicated online with people from other countries (WS1) (Figure 5).



**Figure 5**

*Co-Curricular International Involvements While Enrolled in HESA Graduate Program*



*Note.* Responses ( $N=367$ ) to question: "WHILE attending your graduate program in higher education, how frequently were you involved in each of the following activities outside of class?"

Group comparisons, with one-way ANOVA analyses and post hoc Tukey tests, revealed statistically significant differences along six kinds of international activities based on age group, employment status, number of languages, race, and degree level (Table 2). Overall, older students, those not employed, those speaking three languages, those identifying themselves as Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander as well as with the "Other" racial groups, and PhD students were involved at higher rates.

**Table 2**

*Multiple Comparisons with One-Way ANOVA and Post Hoc Tukey Tests, by Age Group, Employment Status, Number of Languages, Race, and Degree Level*

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Mean (M) Difference (A-B)</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
WS1: Communicated online with people from countries other than the U.S.	20-29	30-39	-0.473*	0.183	0.027
	Not employed	Employed full-time	0.900*	0.303	0.016
		Employed part-time	0.865*	0.301	0.022
	Speak language	1 Speak 3 languages	-1.431*	0.474	0.014
WS3: Attended an event or a program on campus that focused on one or more countries other than the U.S.	White	Other	-0.706*	0.243	0.031
WS4: Participated in an international student organization or committee on campus	Speak languages	3 Speak 1 language	1.429***	0.311	<0.001
	Speak languages	3 Speak 2 languages	1.296***	0.323	<0.001
WS5: Joined an international organization related to your career choice	White	Asian American /Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	-0.495**	0.152	0.011
	Speak languages	3 Speak 1 language	1.387***	0.266	<0.001
	Speak languages	3 Speak 2 languages	1.161***	0.276	<0.001
WS6: Read communication from your graduate program	Master's Degree	Ph.D.	-0.484*	0.177	0.018
WS8: Paired with an international student to help them adjust to U.S. culture and college life	Speak languages	3 Speak 1 language	0.914*	0.325	0.027

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level;

\*\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.01 level;

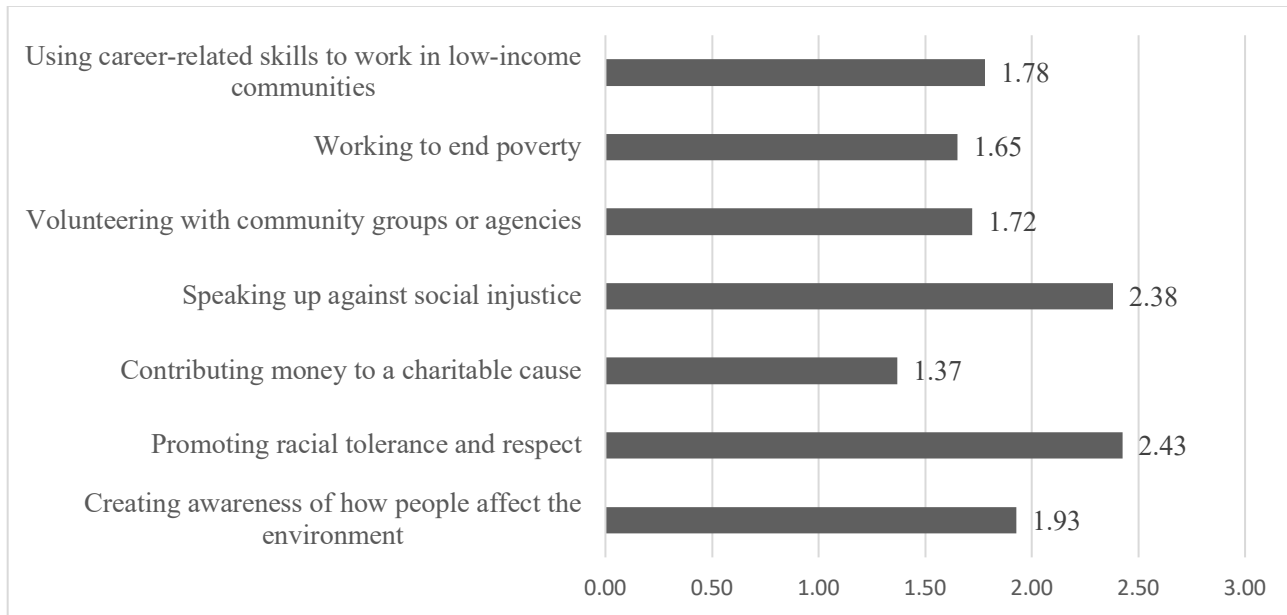
\*\*\* The mean difference is significant at <0.001 level.

### **Research Question 2: What is the relationship, if any, between types of involvement in international activities and the students' orientation towards social responsibility?**

Respondents exhibited moderately high levels of orientation towards social responsibility ( $N=367$ ,  $M=13.25$ ,  $Mdn=14$ ,  $SD=3.77$ , Range 0-21). When taken separately, students' highest scores came in the areas of Promoting racial tolerance and respect and Speaking up against social injustice (Figure 6). Contributing money to a charitable cause received the lowest mean scores.

**Figure 6**

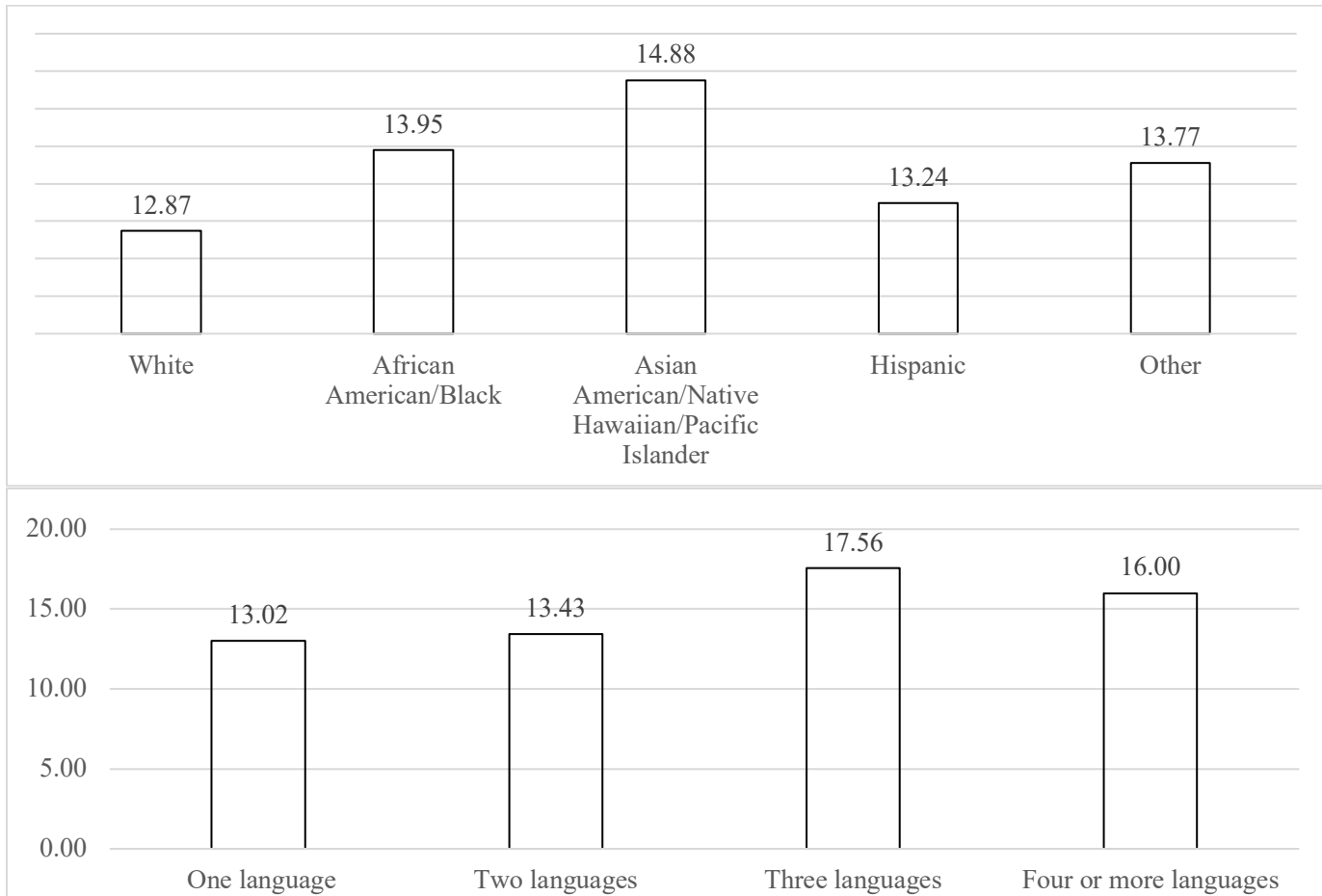
*Respondents' Orientation towards Social Responsibility, Means by Measure Items*



Statistically significant group differences emerged based on two group characteristics: 1) race: the group of White students had a statistically significant lower mean than the group of White and Asian American/Native Hawaiian/PI students ( $p=0.037$ ); and 2) number of languages spoken: those who spoke three languages differed statistically significantly in their mean orientation responsibility scores from those who spoke one ( $p=0.002$ ) or those who spoke two ( $p=0.009$ ) languages (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Respondents' Orientation towards Social Responsibility, Means by Racial Group and Language*



Two-tailed Pearson correlations with the “Orientation towards Social Responsibility” variable revealed a statistically significant relationship with 15 variables, which represented four out of the five variable blocks (Table 3). One of these 15 significant associations was negative (Race,  $r=-0.136$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Based on overall strength, two types of involvements, i.e., WS7: Attended presentations from students who had studied abroad ( $r=0.265$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and WA7: Listened to an international speaker focusing on issues of higher education ( $r=0.208$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), emerged as the strongest correlations with students’ “Orientation towards Social Responsibility.”

**Table 3**

*Bivariate Correlations b/n All Variables and “Orientation towards Social Responsibility”*

Variable Name	R
<b><i>Block 1: Student Characteristics and Institutional Characteristics</i></b>	
C3: Race: Are you White?	-0.136**
<b><i>Block 3: International Academic Involvements WHILE in Higher Education Graduate Program</i></b>	
WA2 - Discussed international topics with your classmates in the graduate program	0.166**
WA3 - Discussed how U.S. higher education links to the world outside the U.S.	0.171**
WA4 - Took a class taught by faculty from a country other than the U.S.	0.103*
WA6 - Shared information or knowledge about a country other than the U.S. in a class	0.138**
WA7 - Listened to an international speaker focusing on issues of higher education	0.208**
WA8 - Engaged in meaningful interaction with faculty on international topics	0.179**
WA11 - Served/volunteered as a language tutor/translator	0.112*
<b><i>Block 4: International Co-Curricular Involvements WHILE in Higher Education Graduate Program</i></b>	
WS2 - Socialized with international students	0.172**
WS3 - Attended an event or a program on campus that focused on one or more countries other than the U.S.	0.168**
WS4 - Participated in an international student organization or committee on campus	0.173**
WS6 - Read communication from your graduate program (email, web page, newsletter, or other) on international programs and events	0.150**
WS7 - Attended presentations from students who had studied abroad	0.265**
WS8 - Paired with an international student to help her or him adjust to U.S. culture and college life	0.125*
<b><i>Block 5: Intermediate Educational Outcomes</i></b>	
I1: Number of languages spoken	0.153**

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

In order to ascertain the combined influence of these 15 statistically significantly correlated variables on students' orientation towards social responsibility, I ran a blocked stepwise regression analysis in SPSS. The “Orientation towards Social Responsibility” variable was the dependent variable that represented the Outcome in Astin’s IEO model; the significantly correlated variable in Block 1 represented Input and entered the regression analysis first; the variables in blocks 3, 4, and 5 represented the Environment, and entered the regression analysis in their block order. The statistically significant variable from Block 5 entered the regression last.

Of the 15 predictor variables that entered the regression analysis, five emerged as significant predictors of HESA graduate students' “Orientation towards Social Responsibility” (*Adjusted R*<sup>2</sup>=0.12;  $p < 0.001$ ). These five variables represented four of the original blocks of variables (Table 4) and together helped explain 12% of the variance. The low strength of the beta weights of the five variables is worth noting. The predictive power of the environment involvement variables summed up to 9% of that portion of explained variance. Of all five variables in the model, students' attendance of presentations of other students who had studied abroad provided the largest portion of the explained variance.

**Table 4***Statistically Significant Variables Impacting HESA Students' Orientation toward Soc. Responsibility*

Variable	Step $\beta$ (variable first entered model) (Standardized Coefficient $\beta$ )	Final Step $\beta$ (Standardized Coefficient $\beta$ )	Portion of Total Variance Explained in Final Model	Variable Represents Block
C3: Race: Are you White?	-0.136***	-0.125**	3%	1 Student Characteristics
WA7: Listened to an international speaker focusing on issues of higher education	0.212***	0.099*	1%	2 International Academic Involvements
WA3: Discussed how U.S. higher education links to the world outside the U.S.	0.130*	0.110*	2%	
WS7: Attended presentations from students who had studied abroad	0.212***	0.208***	4%	3 International Co-Curricular Involvements
II: Number of languages spoken	0.104*	0.104*	2%	4 Intermediate Educational Outcomes

$N=367$ ; Model *Adjusted R*<sup>2</sup>=0.12; \* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*\* $p<0.001$

## Discussion and Implications for Practice

### HESA Students' International Involvements

The study's results suggest that HESA graduate students remain relatively under-involved in international initiatives while enrolled in their HESA programs. Low frequency of involvement across 20 kinds of international activities speaks to low levels of international exposure for students. Due to the nature of the study where data came directly from the HESA graduate students, it is difficult to ascertain whether the reason for such low international exposure is due to limited program opportunities or personal reasons on part of the students. On the one hand, one can conclude that HESA students rely on their programs for international initiatives, as more than half of the students reported some international involvement during their studies in contrast to the respondents' overall limited involvements prior to entering their HESA program (only 25%). In this light, an increased number of students gained opportunities to engage with international issues and activities when they joined their HESA graduate program. On the other hand, the results align with prior research findings documenting uneven levels of internationalization of HESA graduate programs across the United States (Shelton & Yao, 2019; Shultz et al., 2007; Witkowsky, 2020; Yao et al., 2022). Although comparisons with the earlier mapping study (Schulz et al., 2007) are difficult due to the two studies' different methodologies and data points of collection, the present study's major finding of more than a decade later echoes that of Schulz et al., that "Despite a global movement toward internationalization, the student affairs field has not kept adequate pace" (p. 627).

Regarding the variety of international involvements, the study's findings suggest that students engaged with international opportunities most often when such opportunities were integrated directly into the HESA program curricula.

Discussing international topics and considering the ways the U.S. relates to the world outside with classmates in the program, or participating in team activities with students from other countries, or participating in class discussions lead by a faculty member, or sharing information about another country in class, all emerged as frequently attended program features across student responses. In a way, this study's findings align with other studies, which maintain that a large portion of international learning for HESA students appears in class discussions (Shelton & Yao, 2019; Yao et al., 2022). However, Shelton and Yao (2019) and Shultz et al. (2007) also found international opportunities in co-curricular initiatives such as graduate assistantships, internships, practica, and campus involvement. In contrast, in the present study, initiatives involving other educational components beyond classroom discussion and participation, such as foreign language classes, opportunities to serve as language tutor, or study abroad opportunities, attracted very low student participation.

Another indication of uneven distribution of international opportunities across programs comes from group comparisons, as PhD students spoke of higher levels of involvements as compared to master's or EdD students, as did students at programs across the Midwest. Similarly, the low student participation in program-organized study abroad trips (18%) signals limited opportunities. Available study trips also revealed a Euro-centric focus; in fact, most programs targeted English-speaking countries. Limited exposure to non-U.S.-like cultures and countries has also received attention in prior research (Witkowski, 2020; Yao et al., 2022). Students in programs in the Midwest and PhD programs were more likely to offer such study trips. At the same time, no other statistically significant group differences emerged, which signals that if a program organizes study trips, students will very likely participate. Other significant group differences related to involvements beyond the classroom. Non-White students in the groups Other and Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander were more likely to partake in opportunities to attend a campus event or program that focused on other countries and to join a professional international organization. Students who spoke more than one language were also more likely to partake in international initiatives.

The low levels of international exposure of HESA graduate students raises concerns as today, global understanding and awareness is "a fundamental dimension of learning for contemporary graduates"; it has "profound civic dimensions" as it affects not only what students learn but also what they do as a result of it (Jacoby et al., 2009, p. 54). The exposure of graduate students to other cultures and countries, especially ones that are very different from the United States, opens students' perspectives, broadens their horizons, and affects their civic mindedness as they witness diverse ways of life, different social structures and organizations, varied cultural approaches, environmental beauty and destruction, and challenges people face in foreign settings. Experiencing other cultures and worldviews while enrolled in their graduate programs also affects students' professional identities and thinking as they connect the issues of those other worlds to their field of study.

HESA graduate students prepare themselves for occupations that would bring them directly in contact with college students as they assume professional roles as student guides, advisers, success coaches, or program coordinators in diverse areas across campuses. HESA professionals thus play a critical role in shaping students' core values, beliefs, and attitudes, and in instilling in them an orientation towards active lives of civic engagement, commitment to inclusivity, and intolerance of injustice. These professional responsibilities necessitate that HESA professionals themselves have broad worldviews, embrace diversity and inclusion, and practice civic engagement. As Major and Mangope (2014) acknowledge, HESA professionals are key personnel in handling multicultural issues on campuses and must have sound multicultural competencies. HESA programs are a conduit of such skills and international exposure is a key component in their development.

It is critical that HESA graduate programs around the country offer international exposures to their graduate students. Program directors should aim to increase and diversify the available opportunities for international involvements across programs' curricula and co-curricula. Increasing opportunities for HESA students and future professionals is critical in light of the important role they are expected to play in shaping college students' values and beliefs, but also considering the surprisingly low international exposure of HESA students prior to their graduate studies. In addition, the positive impact of study abroad trips suggest not only a need to increase opportunities for students but to also diversify destinations to include non-U.S.-like cultures and higher education systems.

## **HESA Students' Orientation towards Social Responsibility**

The study's findings suggest that HESA graduate students' overall orientation towards social engagement remains moderate ( $M=13.25$ , Max: 21). These findings are concerning especially in light of how critical HESA preparation programs are in the training of effective, inclusive, and ethical future HESA professionals, as well as how influential graduate programs are on the development of their own students. The findings signal high rates of HESA graduate student detachment from the issues that surround them, as well as low interest in engaging with efforts to act on pressing social concerns or contribute to improving communities. Most critically, the moderate levels of orientation towards social responsibility in the HESA graduate students hint of lack of readiness to actively contribute to shaping student civic orientation as future HESA professionals.

As one of the first attempts to gauge this orientation, comparisons with prior research are difficult. As a complex measure, social engagement is comprised of diverse social issues. The high scores under two of the items in the measure, "promoting racial tolerance and respect" and "speaking up against social injustice", testify to HESA program's strong stance in support of diversity and engagement in efforts against racism. Similar strong emphasis needs to also inform HESA program training in the remaining components of social engagement. Program directors should aim to incorporate exposure to social issues related to the under-represented items in the measure including direct contribution to a community, or direct engagement and work in depressed areas. Programs should also increase the opportunities to include discussions around issues of social injustice from other countries, thus increasing student exposure to such issues from diverse cultural contexts.

## **Influence of International Involvements on HESA Students' Social Responsibility**

Despite the moderate rates of reported international involvements, 14 involvement variables significantly correlated with HESA graduate students' orientation towards social responsibility. The involvements that exhibited strongest associations related to engagements with people that are different: "attending presentations from students who studied abroad" and "listening to an international speaker on international issues." As Soria and Johnson (2017) attest, as high-impact practices, international initiatives "increase the likelihood students will interact with peers who are different from themselves," which in turn foster "higher cultural and social awareness" and "a greater sense of empowerment to enact social change" (p. 102).

Even in light of the low overall rate of involvement across many international activities, and the relatively small response rate, the results of the study indicate that HESA graduate students' orientation towards social responsibility can be predicted by a combination of five variables, three of which represent curricular and co-curricular environmental engagements: "listening to an international speaker," "discussing the ways the U.S. higher education links to the rest of the world," and "attending presentations of study abroad students." These three variables share an emphasis on graduate students' direct engagement with persons from other cultures and with issues beyond the boundaries of the United States and their institutions. Program and institutional efforts to incorporate foreign speakers, to encourage HESA students to attend study abroad presentations or meet study abroad students, and to bring non-U.S. perspectives in daily discussions already mark some influences on those students' orientation towards civic engagement. Further emphasizing such initiatives, diversifying them, and ensuring that HESA students partake in them will be critical in these students' growth into effective and socially responsible professionals. Race as a variable showed a statistically meaningful negative association with students' orientation, indicating that the more likely the student identifies as White, the lower their orientation. These results align with other research studies that demonstrate the value of international exposure towards a range of outcomes in graduate students (Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018).



## Conclusion

HESA graduate programs carry the responsibility to prepare culturally-sensitive, caring, ethical, and socially engaged professionals who would in turn impart those values to the students they serve. However, HESA students' exposure to other cultures through involvements in international activities remains low, while their orientation towards civic responsibility is moderate. Increasing international exposure opportunities for HESA students through graduate programs and co-curricular initiatives will not only enhance students' global awareness but also bolster their civic orientation. The study's findings contribute to our understanding of the available opportunities for international involvements for HESA graduate students across graduate programs, the students' rates of engagement with such opportunities, and the influence of such exposure on students' civic responsibility.

This study's findings should be considered in the context of an important limitation related to the survey responses. This limitation concerns generalizations of the findings. Responses to this study's survey did not come from all HESA graduate programs in the country; in addition, the Midwest region and programs at public institutions were over-represented in the response pool. As a result, the study's outcomes cannot be generalized to all HESA graduate students and programs in the United States. Despite this important limitation, the outcomes of this study can offer insights to program faculty and program directors regarding diversity of international exposures, their critical role in developing effective HESA professionals, and the importance of efforts that emphasize student involvement in international initiatives. Considering that HESA graduate student population across the 94 HESA programs in the country is not large, it was encouraging to receive the amount of responses that I did. Students' willingness to spend time and share experiences on this survey signal their interest in international initiatives.

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## Acculturative Stress of Asian International Students before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*Acculturative stress may hamper international students' ability to succeed in the United States of America. This study analyzed the impact of a range of factors noted in the literature and compared the levels of stress they were related to before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We collected three waves of data (total responses = 204) via an online survey from ten universities/colleges across different regions in the United States of America. The results indicated that English proficiency and sex predicted the overall acculturative stress of Asian international students, in which higher perceived English proficiency predicted a lower perceived acculturative stress, and female Asian international students experienced higher acculturative stress than males. Also, Asian international students are experiencing more sadness during the pandemic and their peers are more discriminated against during 2020. Thus, university administrators should promote English language programs and support services (e.g., gender specific student support) to effectively address Asian students' concerns.*

**Keywords:** acculturative stress; covid-19 pandemic; Asian international students; higher education

### Introduction

The Institute of International Education (IIE Open Doors, 2022) revealed that the greatest number of international students (i.e., over 50%) in the U.S. are from Asia (i.e., mainland China, 30.6%; India, 21.0%; South Korea, 4.3%; Vietnam, 2.2%; Taiwan, 2.2%; and Japan, 1.4%) and over 40% of them are from East-Asia. Several adaptive barriers and challenges, such as acculturative stress, have impeded the success of Asian international students' education in the U.S. (Constantine et al., 2004; Han et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2007; Young, 2017).

Acculturative stress is the stress from cultural conflicts when individuals have difficulties adapting to a new culture of the host society (Berry, 1997, 2003). Acculturative stress was found to be associated with Asian International students' academic difficulties (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Melkonian, et al., 2019; Yan & Berliner, 2009), and psychological well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, and sleep quality; Constantine et al., 2004; Hamamura & Laird, 2014;

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Jenny et al., 2003; Li, et al., 2019; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Taušová, et al., 2019; Wang, et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007; Wei, et al., 2012). Moreover, acculturative stress was associated with problems in students' social lives and networks, such as lack of social support or difficulty in making new friends (Bertram et al., 2014; Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Kline & Liu, 2005; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Notably, existing literature about the factors affecting Asian international students' acculturative stress indicates mixed findings, so the present study first re-examines the influences of a range of factors noted in the literature. More importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the acculturative stress of international students, and they now have to face more challenges due to the pandemic. Such as Asian international students being subjected to racist aggression and perceived discrimination and psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chu & Lu, 2021; Li, et al., 2021; King, et al., 2020; Mbous, et al., 2022; Xiong, et al., 2022). Therefore, the present study also aims to explore how Asian international students' acculturative stress levels changes before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Literature Review**

Acculturation is the process of cultural, psychological, and social adaptation to a new culture (Berry, 1994, 2003, 2005). It is thought to produce dichotomous outcomes (Berry, 1992, 1997). In the context of a new culture, either the newcomers find a new behavioral repertoire quickly, or incompatible behaviors impede them. However, if an individual's original behavioral repertoire is not compatible with the new culture, acculturation conflict occurs. Usually, an acculturating person resolves this conflict by yielding to the dominant cultural and behavioral norms. Meanwhile, some people may withdraw from the acculturation process to terminate the conflict. When people experience severe cultural conflict, they experience acculturative stress. The term "culture shock" is also frequently used to describe acculturation stress in the literature (Oberg, 1960; Ward et al., 2005).

### **Factors that Influence the Acculturative Stress of International Students**

According to previous Asian international student acculturative stress studies and related acculturation theories (Bai, 2016a; Berry, 1992, 1997, 2003; Kline & Liu, 2005; Wei et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012), many factors can influence Asian international students' acculturative stress, including age, sex, socioeconomic status (SES), language proficiency, education, and length of time spent in the new culture.

The body of literature on the acculturative stress of Asian students has grown in the past few years, but the findings from these studies are inconsistent. For example, some studies (Kline & Liu, 2005, Wei et al., 2012) indicated that international students' acculturative stress was affected by age, sex, and length of time in the U.S. Also, female international students experienced higher acculturative stress than males (Kline & Liu, 2005; Lowinger et al., 2014) and length of time in the U.S. positively related to international students' acculturative stress (Wei et al., 2012). Additionally, studies (Wei et al., 2012; Li et al., 2013) indicated that younger Asian international students had higher stress levels than their older counterparts. In contrast, other studies (Chae & Foley, 2010; Wei et al., 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003) showed that the aforementioned factors did not relate to acculturative stress. Moreover, factors such as education level and SES have been infrequently investigated by empirical studies, although previous acculturation theories indicated that higher education and SES are associated with less stress in acculturation (Beiser et al., 1988; Berry, 1997).

There is a consensus on the impact of language proficiency on Asian international students' acculturative stress (Bai, 2016; Jin & Liu, 2014; Lowinger et al., 2014; Lueck & Wilson, 2010; Martirosyan et al., 2015). Linguistic factors, such as language proficiency, can predict acculturative stress (Berry, 1992, 1997). A lack of English proficiency is one of the strongest predictors of acculturative stress for Asians (Bai, 2016; Lueck & Wilson, 2010). Additionally, English proficiency is often associated with Asian international students' psychological well-being (Yan & Berliner, 2009; Wei et al. 2012). A number of studies (Yan & Berliner, 2009; Wei et al. 2012) used perceived English proficiency to measure international students' language proficiency and some studies (Bai, 2016a; Wang et al., 2012) asked international students to report their standardized English test scores (e.g., TOEFL). It was found that students' standardized English test scores were not related to acculturative stress among Asian international student (Bai, 2016a; Wang et al., 2012). Although both

studies used outdated test scores (from tests taken before the students came to the U.S.), this contradiction of general trends indicates that students perceived English proficiency or comfort in using English influences on their acculturative stress more than their tested proficiency (Lin, 2006; Zhang & Jung, 2017).

### **Acculturative Stress of Asian International Students during COVID-19**

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian international students has also been studied in recent years. COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan in late December 2019 and spread globally in early 2020, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant health crisis, affecting all nations since the end of 2019 with over 223.02 million cases and over 4.60 million deaths reported to date (WHO, 2021). There have been at least 40.87 million cases in the U.S., and over 656,000 deaths were reported at the beginning of September 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Such widespread outbreaks have adverse mental health consequences (Rajkumar, 2020). Studies revealed that symptoms of anxiety, depression, and self-reported stress are common psychological reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020; Bao et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020). Before COVID-19, psychological depression and anxiety were related to Asian international students' acculturation (Wei et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2012). Given that Asian populations face discrimination and isolation in some countries because they are deemed potential SARS-CoV-2 carriers (Zhai & Du, 2020), acculturation stress and related mental health issues may become more significant.

Experiences of prejudice and discrimination negatively affect individuals' well-being (Cormack et al., 2018; Halpern, 1993; Williams, 2018) and can place people who are exposed to a new culture at risk during acculturation (Beiser et al., 1988; Berry, 1997). For instance, the Asian population reported a much higher prevalence of racial discrimination in many Western countries (Cormack et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2019), especially in the U.S. due to historical stereotypes (Chen et al., 2020; Tessler et al., 2020).

Asian population in the U.S. are often stereotyped and have historically been viewed as perpetual foreigners, regardless of how long they have lived in the country (Chen et al., 2020; Tessler et al., 2020). They are seen as inherently different (Chen et al., 2020; Huynh et al., 2011). As COVID-19 sweeps through the U.S., this reality has become painfully apparent. A study (Tessler et al., 2020) has also shown that negative bias and aggressions against Asian Americans have increased during COVID-19. Since January 2020, the Asian population in the U.S. has reported a surge in racially motivated hate crimes, such as physical violence and harassment (Gover et al., 2020). Many individuals have reported suffering racial slurs because the media and government officials increasingly stigmatize and blame Asians for the spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. (Croucher et al., 2020). Comparing data for the first quarters of 2020 and 2021 across 16 major cities in the U.S., it was seen that there was a 164% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes reported to police (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2021).

### **How are Differences between Asian and U.S. Education System Related to Acculturative Stress of Asian International Students?**

Educational systems grow from cultural expectations and ideologies (Kim, 2005), and the differences are vast between Eastern and Western educational systems due to the cultures they spring from. East Asian educational philosophy emphasizes that a strong work ethic and devotion to learning are more important to achievement than an inherently gifted mind (Kim, 2005). East Asian parents stress the importance of hard work to academic success and believe that good grades come from hard work and effort (Haynes & Chalker, 1998; Park & Kim, 1999). In contrast, American parents ascribe academic success to differences in native ability (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

Culture and the social system are also important components in shaping academic performance and behavior (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015). Asians may not think, feel, and act in a creative manner like Westerners because Asian society is tightly organized, collectivistic, and hierarchical (Rudowicz & Ng, 2003). In the collectivist context of East Asian societies, teachers are highly respected and never contradicted. Students expect the teacher to initiate communication, and

they speak only when their teachers ask (Kim, 2005; Park & Kim, 1999; Yook & Albert, 1998). Hierarchical relationships in the Asian culture (rooted in Confucianism) among East Asian classrooms, such as unequal relationships, gender role expectations, and authoritarian relationships between teachers and students, may inhibit student's learner autonomy and creativity (Kim, 2007). In contrast to most of East Asian education, the American educational system emphasizes learner autonomy and creativity by developing higher order thinking skills and by providing an environment that promotes free and open discussion and de-emphasizes rote memorization (Garkov, 2002; Jiang, et al., 2021; Moosavi, 2020).

Also, the exam-centric Asian education system negatively influences students who view education as nothing more than merely passing examinations (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Lim, 2010). The exam-oriented education system dominates different levels of education among East-Asian countries (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Tan, 2019) and stifles students' imagination, creativity, and sense of self which are crucial qualities for students' success in and out of the classroom (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). Although many Asian countries reform the education system to revolve around improving school systems in the midst of new globalizing conditions, exam-driven culture is still predominant (Tan, 2019).

These differences between East-Asian and Western cultural and educational backgrounds cause Asian international students extra stress and anxiety when adapting to the U.S. classroom. Meanwhile, acculturative stress and the language barrier exacerbate Asian international students' stress and anxiety during the adaption (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2009).

## **The Current Study**

The current study examined the influences of age, sex, education, length of United States residence, SES, and perceived English proficiency on acculturative stress among Asian international students. Further, the study also compared Asian international students' acculturative stress levels before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following research questions express these goals:

First, what factors influence the acculturative stress experiences of Asian international students? The previous literature has yielded inconsistent findings on the factors affecting international students' acculturative stress, such as sex and length of time in the U.S. More importantly, research results (Wei et al., 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003) were inconsistent with some acculturation theories of Berry (1997, 2003). Some studies (Wei et al., 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003) found that sex was not a significant predictor of acculturative stress and age did not correlate with acculturative stress among Asian international students but acculturation theories (Berry, 1997, 2003) indicated these factors would affect acculturative stress. We hypothesized at least one of the following factors (i.e., perceived English proficiency, age, sex, education level, and length of time in the U.S.) would influence Asian international students' acculturative stress experiences.

Second, are there any differences in the overall acculturative stress levels or specific indicators for Asian international students before and during the pandemic? Recent studies also revealed that global emergencies, such as the pandemic, influenced international students' acculturation experiences in the U.S., especially in the case of the Asian population. Asians have faced discrimination and isolation during the pandemic due to the perception that they are potentially carrying SARS-CoV-2 (Zhai & Du, 2020). Therefore, we hypothesized that Asian international students would have different experiences of acculturative stress during the pandemic.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The study surveyed 360 Asian international students from 10 universities and colleges in the United States using convenience sampling and snowball sampling strategies. We excluded 156 participants from the sample because of incomplete survey responses, resulting in a final sample size of 204 (Wave 1 = 76; Wave 2 = 75; Wave 3 = 53) for final analyses. The participants were 24.49 ( $SD = 4.44$ ) years old on average when they responded to the survey, and 126 of

**Table 1***Academic Status of Participants*

Academic Status	N	%
Undergraduate	82	40.2
Master	88	43.1
Ph.D.	16	8.8
Optional Practical Training (OPT)	6	2.9
Language Program	3	1.5
Other	1	0.5
Missing	2	3.9
Total	204	100

**Table 2***Country/Region of Participants*

SES	N	%
Mainland China	172	84.31
Taiwan	9	4.41
Hong Kong	4	1.96
Nepal	1	0.49
Indonesia	1	0.49
Japan	1	0.49
Other	16	7.84
Total	204	100

them were female (61.76%). They had been staying in the U.S. for 3.42 ( $SD = 2.50$ ) years on average. Over half of them ( $n = 110$ , 53.92%) were graduate students (see Table 1). Nearly 47% of them ( $n = 96$ ) reported a mid or upper SES. Most ( $n = 172$ , 84.31%) participants were originally from mainland China (see Table 2).

**Measures**

The Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) measured acculturative stress. Since it was published, ASSIS has been widely and most used scale to measure acculturative stress for international students (e.g., Iorga et al., 2020; Li et al., 2013; Li & Liu, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei, et al., 2007; Wei, et al., 2012). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total possible score ranged from 36 to 180 (36 items) on this scale (attached in Appendix), comprising seven subscales: Perceived Discrimination, Homesickness, Perceived Hate, Fear, Stress due to Culture Shock, Guilt, and Miscellaneous. Besides the total score, subscale scores were calculated. A higher score indicates the subject experienced a greater level of acculturative stress. We provided translated surveys and the original English version to all participants during data collection. They were able to choose the version they preferred. The survey was translated and validated by authors fluent in both languages with lived experiences in both cultures. The scale demonstrated high reliability across the three-wave data collection (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ), similar to previous studies investigating international students, in which the coefficient ranged from .92 to .94 (e.g., Wei et al., 2007). Meanwhile, high reliability was also demonstrated within each wave of the data collection. From Wave 1 to Wave 3, the reliability was .93, .94, and .91, respectively.

Also, a self-reported question, "What is your current level of fluency in English?" was included in the survey. English proficiency was measured by a 4-point Likert scale (1—poor, 2—fair, 3—good, 4—excellent). An average English proficiency score of 2.71 out of 4 ( $S.D. = .82$ ) was reported.



## Procedures

The Institutional Review Board approved the study. The data was collected via the online platform *Qualtrics* during three time periods: before the pandemic (before 2019), the early global pandemic (December 2019–March 2020), and when the pandemic hit U.S. (April 2020–June 2020). The survey was distributed via social media platforms (WeChat, LINE, and Facebook) to students from multiple universities to reach a larger Asian international student population. Additionally, snowball sampling was implemented to maximize survey dissemination within the target population. Notably, Wave 1 data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, prior to 2019; Wave 2 data were collected when the pandemic was occurring widely, but not intensely in the U.S. (World Health Organization, 2020); Wave 3 data were collected upon the outbreak of the pandemic in the U.S. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Most states in the United States began to lock down before the Wave 3 data collection.

## Analysis Overview

We used stepwise multiple regression to examine the factors that influence acculturative stress (Research Question 1). Multiple regression models were constructed to explore whether sex, age, SES, and education level predicted students' acculturative stress. Whether these factors influenced their acculturative stress experiences was also evaluated. The literature indicates mixed findings on the factors affecting students' acculturative stress. Therefore, stepwise regression is an efficient way to manage this situation. Stepwise regression procedures help select the most significant factors predicting Asian international students' acculturative stress.

To address the second research question, Asian international students' acculturative stress levels, patterns, and indicators were compared using t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA). These comparisons explored differences in the acculturative stress experiences of Asian international students across different time points of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. (Waves 1, 2, and 3). In addition, t-tests were conducted to compare acculturative stress indicators before and during the pandemic (Wave 1 vs. Waves 2 and 3). Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Version 24 (IBM Corp., 2016).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Female Asian international students ( $M = 98.60$ ,  $SD = 18.46$ ) reported higher acculturative stress scores than their male counterparts ( $M = 97.38$ ,  $SD = 23.28$ ). Meanwhile, undergraduate Asian international students ( $M = 100.71$ ,  $SD = 17.51$ ) reported higher acculturative stress scores than graduate students ( $M = 95.49$ ,  $SD = 22.16$ ). Additionally, Asian international students with a higher SES were more likely to perceive lower acculturative stress. Moreover, Asian international students' acculturative stress scores were different between the waves of data collection. Wave 1 ( $M = 99.55$ ,  $SD = 20.82$ ) reported the highest acculturative stress, compared to Wave 2 ( $M = 96.88$ ,  $SD = 21.11$ ) and Wave 3 ( $M = 96.40$ ,  $SD = 18.38$ ).

### Correlations Between Variables

We examined relationships between the target variables and tested covariates using Pearson and Spearman correlations. The results (Table 3) show that the targeted influencing factors were significantly related to important patterns; for example, students' sex was significantly related to cultural shock. Education level was significantly related to guilt and various aspects of acculturative stress. Participants' perceived SES was significantly related to their homesickness, cultural shock, and perceived English proficiency. Meanwhile, the region (studying on the West coast of the U.S. or not) of the sample was positively related to their age and years in the U.S. but negatively related to aspects of acculturative stress and perceived English proficiency.

**Table 3***Correlation Matrix of Acculturative Factors and Demographics*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Acculturative Stress Total	1														
2. Discrimination	.827**	1													
3. Homesickness	.617**	.287**	1												
4. Hate	.817**	.742**	.299**	1											
5. Fear	.815**	.567**	.517**	.615**	1										
6. Culture Shock	.686**	.422**	.625**	.379**	.507**	1									
7. Guilt	.682**	.459**	.534**	.485**	.522**	.490**	1								
8. Miscellaneous	.896**	.692**	.409**	.704**	.709**	.510**	.552**	1							
9. Age	-0.08	.034	-.116	-.028	.008	-.041	-.031	-.072	1						
10. Years in the United States	.260	-.044	-.092	-.017	-.015	-.123	-.044	-.0126	.671**	1					
11. Sex	.030	.052	.072	-.037	.002	.142*	-.055	.054	.054	.133	1				
12. Education	.678	-.013	-.054	-.106	-.054	-.08	-.174*	-.189**	.155*	.058	.023	1			
13. SES	-.139	-.096	-.198*	-.045	-.090	-.213*	-.136	-.166	-.001	.107	.023	.089	1		
14. English Proficiency	.067	.105	-.059	.031	-.013	.096	.121	.089	-.218**	-.208**	.078	-.213**	.375**	1	
15. Region (West Coast)	-.125	-.026	-.037	-.04	0	-.129	-.073	-.188*	.656**	.922**	.071	.083	.073	-.361**	1

N = 63 – 204; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Factors that Influence Acculturative Stress**

The results of the stepwise regression revealed two possible significant models as candidates for the final model (Table 4) predicting overall acculturative stress. Model 1,  $F(1, 58) = 9.500, p = .003$ , included only one predictor, English proficiency ( $\beta = -0.375, t = -3.082, p = .003$ ) and explained 14.1% of the total variance in acculturative stress. Model 2 was selected as the final model because of its higher R-square, which explained 19.9% of the total variance of the acculturative stress,  $F(1, 57) = 7.062, p = .002$ . Model 2 included two significant predictors, namely, English proficiency ( $\beta = -0.334, t = -2.773, p = .007$ ) and sex ( $\beta = 0.244, t = 2.028, p = .047$ ). These significant predictors indicated that higher perceived English proficiency predicted lower perceived acculturative stress, and female Asian international students experienced higher acculturative stress than males.

**Table 4.***Regression Model Summary*

Model	Predictor	B	S.E.	Beta	t	Sig	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F	Sig	F Change	Sig. F Change
1							.141	.141	9.500	.003	9.500	.003
	Constant	.961	.360		2.669	.010						
	English Proficiency	-.394	.128	-.375	-3.082	.003						
2							.199	.058	7.062	.002	4.114	0.047
	Constant	.525	.411		1.276	0.207						
	English Proficiency	-.351	.126	-.334	-2.773	0.007						
	Sex	.467	.23	.244	2.028	0.047						

## Time Point Differences Among Acculturative Stress Indicators and Scores

ANOVA and t-tests evaluated differences in overall stress, acculturation patterns, and other indicators between different data collection time points. Acculturative stress patterns, such as cultural shock and homesickness, were compared using ANOVA over three data collection waves.

Asian international students' overall perceived acculturative stress was not significantly different during the various stages before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, ANOVA results show that their acculturation experiences were different during different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported more perceived more sadness when living in unfamiliar surroundings,  $F(2, 201) = 4.87, p = 0.009$ , while the pandemic was prevalent elsewhere (Wave 2;  $M = 2.84, SD = 1.13, p = .043, d = 0.39$ ) and in the USA (Wave 3;  $M = 2.96, SD = 1.02, p = .013, d = 0.53$ ) compared with the pre-pandemic period (Wave 1;  $M = 2.42, SD = 1.02$ ). They also reported they had clearer plans ( $M = 2.80, SD = 1.12$ ) at the time of Wave 3 regarding their future and whether to stay in the U.S. or go back to their home countries,  $F(2, 192) = 3.48, p = 0.03$ , compared with Wave 1 ( $M = 3.40, SD = 1.15, p = .025, d = 0.53$ ). However, the participants reported that they perceived less unequal treatment,  $F(2, 201) = 3.59, p = 0.029$ , during the pandemic in the USA (Wave 3;  $M = 2.40, SD = 0.86, p = .022, d = 0.51$ ) than before the pandemic started (Wave 1;  $M = 2.87, SD = 0.98$ ).

T-test results also showed that the acculturation experiences of students were different prior to (Wave 1) and during the pandemic (Waves 2 and 3). They reported they perceived more sadness when living in unfamiliar surroundings in the United States during the pandemic ( $M = 2.89; SD = 1.08$ ) compared with the pre-pandemic situation ( $M = 2.42; SD = 1.02$ ) at  $p = .003, t = -3.06, df = 202, d = 0.45$ . Meanwhile, they felt that their peers are more discriminated against during the pandemic ( $M = 3.00; SD = 1.01$ ) compared to before it ( $M = 2.65; SD = 1.11$ ) at  $p = .024, t = -2.28, df = 200, d = 0.35$ .

However, they also reported they felt less intimidated about participating in social activities ( $M = 2.78; SD = 1.11, p = .033, t = 2.14, df = 201, d = 0.31$ ), and they perceived being treated less differently in social situations ( $M = 2.79; SD = 0.95, p = .018, t = 2.39, df = 202, d = 0.35$ ) during the pandemic compared with before it ( $M = 3.12, SD = 1.06; M = 3.12, SD = 0.95$ ).

Further, fewer students reported they felt many opportunities are denied to them during ( $M = 2.71; SD = 1.01$ ) at  $p = 0.011, t = 2.57, df = 202, d = 0.38$ , compared with prior to the pandemic ( $M = 3.08; SD = 0.96$ ). Additionally, they reported less unequal treatment during the pandemic ( $M = 2.54; SD = 1.00$ ) at  $p = .023, t = 2.29, df = 202, d = 0.24$ , compared with before it ( $M = 2.87; SD = 0.98$ ) and reported that they relocated less frequently out of fear of others during the pandemic ( $M = 1.84, SD = 0.83, p = .035, t = 2.12, df = 200, d = 0.30$ ), compared with before it ( $M = 2.09; SD = 0.85$ ). In addition, Asian international students reported they had clarified their plans, that is, whether to stay in the U.S. or to go back their countries of origin during the pandemic ( $M = 3.01; SD = 1.25$ ) at  $p = .03, t = 2.19, df = 193, d = 0.32$ , compared with prior to it ( $M = 3.40; SD = 1.15$ ).

## Discussion

### Factors that Influence Acculturative Stress

The first research question concerned factors that influence the acculturative stress experiences of Asian international students, including length of time in the U.S., sex, age, SES, education level, and English proficiency. The regression analyses revealed that English proficiency and sex were significantly associated with international students' acculturative stress. International students who reported higher English proficiency experienced lower acculturative stress, which echoes the findings in previous studies (Bai, 2016; Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Jin & Liu, 2014; Wei et al., 2012).

Moreover, we also found that female Asian international students experienced higher acculturative stress than males, which is consistent with previous studies that state the same (Kline & Liu, 2005; Lowinger et al., 2014). A possible reason for this difference is that females may be more vulnerable than males during acculturation because of variations in social status in different cultures. Women play multiple roles in different social contexts, and these differences can get

them involved in cultural conflict more easily (Beiser et al., 1988; Berry, 1997; Carballo, 1994). Additionally, females have a lower social status than males in traditional Asian cultures (Kim et al., 2001). Therefore, when females attempt to take different roles in new cultures, they may come into conflict with their culture of heritage and causing maladaptation (Berry, 1997; Naidoo, 1992). Besides, females are more efficient than males in expressing and processing their emotions (Collignon, et al., 2010) and females have higher emotional expressivity, particularly for negative emotions (Deng et al., 2016). As a result, female participants were more likely to report their stress.

Other factors, including length of time in the USA, age, SES, and education level, were not related to acculturative stress in this study. The lack of variance among these variables may explain the inconsistencies. For example, the sample's average age was 24.49 years, and almost all participants had received at least undergraduate education. When acculturation begins earlier than primary school age, the process will generally be smooth (Beiser et al., 1988). When acculturation occurs during adolescence or late in life, such as during retirement, people are more likely to experience difficulties (Aronowitz, 1992; Beiser et al., 1988; Berry, 2001; Sam & Berry, 1995). Notably, this study did not include any adolescents or retirees. The lack of variance in age may have resulted in this inconsistency. Several studies (Chae & Foley, 2010; Wei et al., 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003) that surveyed a similar sample yielded results akin to that of the current study, suggesting that age does not influence the acculturative stress of Asian international students. Besides, the current study sample was college-educated, and half were graduate students. Accordingly, a higher level of education may not influence the acculturative stress of Asian international students.

Previous research has suggested that length of acculturation may strongly affect the kind and extent of problems that someone experiences (e.g., Berry, 1997, 2003; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). However, the current study does not support this. The current study sample consisted of students who resided in the U.S. for an average of 3.42 year, rather than long-term immigrants, and none of them had stayed in the U.S. for more than 10 years. Du and Wei's (2015) study showed similar findings (i.e., length of time did not relate to acculturative stress).

Many previous studies have shown that a low level of perceived English proficiency may strongly influence Asian international students' acculturative stress (e.g., Bai, 2016; Han et al., 2017; Lueck & Wilson; 2010). As a linguistic factor, English proficiency may be one of the strongest predictors of acculturative stress for Asians. Notably, other studies (e.g., Bai, 2016a; Wang et al., 2012) showed that students' English standard test scores (e.g., TOEFL) were unrelated to acculturative stress among Asian international students. Current study did not survey the participants' standardized English test scores. One reason is that, most international students' TOEFL scores represent their English level before coming to the U.S. Such test scores are outdated and may not represent their English proficiency at the time of their participation in the survey. Perceived English proficiency also indicates that comfort in using English is important influence on acculturative stress (Lin, 2006; Zhang & Jung, 2017). Therefore, future researchers should prioritize the impact of English proficiency measured by standardized tests on students' acculturative stress and on how their comfort with English affects acculturative stress.

## **Acculturative Stress and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The second research question concerned the differences between Asian international students' acculturative stress levels and indicators before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the overall perceived acculturative stress was not significantly different before and during the pandemic, the participants' specific experiences differed significantly.

First, participants reported they felt more sadness during the pandemic. There are several explanations from the recent literature for this difference. First, Asmundson and Taylor (2020) indicated that symptoms of anxiety and depression are common psychological reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, Asian populations face discrimination and isolation due to being considered potential SARS-CoV-2 carriers (Croucher, et al., 2020; Koo & Nyunt, 2022; Zhai & Du, 2020), and Asians have historically been treated differently (Chen et al., 2020; Huynh et al., 2011). Additionally, homesickness is another challenge that international students may encounter when they leave home and live far away from their families and friends (Billedo et al., 2020). During COVID-19, international students perceived feelings of isolation and loneliness due to limited opportunities for social interactions. Moreover, international student status, being

far from family or having limited connections with domestic peers exacerbated their perceived loneliness (Koo & Nyunt, 2022). Accordingly, international students had more concerns about contact with loved ones and travel compared to domestic students during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were greater barriers to international students' contact with family and friends in their home countries, including travel bans, travel safety, and the need for visas (Hawley, et al., 2021). These factors may explain why they felt more sadness during the pandemic. Asian international students also reported they felt their peers were more frequently discriminated against during 2020. As mentioned earlier, recent studies indicated that xenophobia and hate toward Asians increased during the pandemic in the U.S. (Le et al., 2020), with Asian populations in the U.S. reporting a surge in racially motivated hate crimes, including physical violence and harassment (Gover et al., 2020).

The survey also asked whether they worried about their future for not being able to decide whether to stay here or to go back. Another difference we observed was that participants reported they had clarified their future plans during the pandemic, even though the survey results did not indicate whether they preferred to stay in or leave the United States. According to a recent report (U.S. News & World Report, 2020), overall and new international students' enrollments for the 2020–2021 academic year declined. Overall international student enrollment decreased for the first time since the 2005–2006 academic year. The pandemic could be one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of Asian international students in the U.S.. However, the U.S. News and World Report article (2020) indicated the political climate in the USA might cause concern for Chinese international students, who comprise the United States' largest Asian international student population (IIE, 2020). Therefore, various situations in 2020 caused these students to be firm in their decisions about their future, whether they decided to stay in the U.S. or go back to their home countries.

There were also some positive aspects in the survey results. Asian international students reported fewer discrimination-related experience during the pandemic; for example, they reported they received less unequal treatment in 2020, felt less intimidated about participating in social activities, and were treated less differently in social situations. The reason for this could be that much of the U.S. was in lockdown during this time, and people had to stay at home to quarantine themselves. Therefore, there were fewer opportunities to participate in in-person social activities. Asian international students may have had fewer chances to be involved in in-person discrimination-related experiences. However, they may have received information from social media and news about how the Asian population was experiencing discrimination.

Since January 2020, many Asian Americans or Asians have reported suffering racial slurs, physical violence, and different kinds of discrimination as media and government officials stigmatize and blame Asians for the spread of COVID-19 (Croucher, et al., 2020). The links between prejudice/hate toward Asians and social media are evident, the more a social media user believes their most used daily social media is fair and accurate, the more likely they are to blame Asians for the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 outbreak also gave rise to a worldwide series of discriminatory and racist attacks against Chinese people and people with Asian-appearing features (Devakumar, et al., 2020; Tanaka, et al., 2020). These attacks have not been restricted to physical space but have also extended to social media (e.g., discrimination-related hashtags have been trending on Twitter since January 2020; Li, et al., 2021; Stechemesser et al., 2020).

Further, COVID-19-related media use was a stressor during the U.S. pandemic and lockdown, and perceived hostility from Asian social medias led to stronger psychological distress among U.S.-dwelling Asians (Chu & Lu, 2021). During critical times like the COVID-19 pandemic, being overloaded with information, especially from sometimes contradictory sources, may lead to cognitive dissonance and stress (Case et al., 2005). Because of the widespread pandemic misinformation (e.g., conspiracy theories), heavier media use may lead to more stress (Chu & Lu, 2021). Identifying with their original and U.S. cultures may enhance international students' sense of belonging (Chen, et al., 2008), while exposure to U.S. media coverage on the pandemic may be more detrimental to their psychological well-being and make them more stressed about the pandemic because of stronger personal relevance (Chu & Lu, 2021).

This topic was frequently discussed in the mainstream media and mixed with sometimes contradictory sources and misinformation, explaining why participants reported fewer self-involved discrimination-related experiences. Still, they felt their peers, rather than they themselves, experienced more discrimination during the pandemic.

Asian international students perceived a less discriminatory experience during the pandemic lockdown time. This indicates that Asian international students may have been discriminated against not just because of the pandemic. Racial discrimination against Asians in the U.S. was broadly studied before the pandemic (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Lee & Ahn, 2011; McMurtry et al., 2019) and is a historical issue. Asians in the U.S. experience discrimination interpersonally and across many institutional settings (McMurtry et al., 2019). Perceived racial discrimination contributes to negative mental health outcomes (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Lee & Ahn, 2011; McMurtry et al., 2019), such as higher psychological distress, anxiety, and depression, and perceived racial discrimination may lead to chronic illness (Gee et al., 2007).

Participants in the current study were self-selected rather than randomly selected. Hence, the sample might not adequately represent Asian international students—many previous Asian international acculturation studies did not employ a random sampling (Bai, 2016; Wei et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007).

### **English Proficiency, Acculturative Stress, and Cultural Background**

Although the current study did not directly examine how Asian international students' cultural background influenced their acculturative stress, we demonstrated that the level of English proficiency was a significant predictor of acculturative stress among Asian international students. According to previous studies (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2009), low English proficiency may exacerbate Asian international students' maladaptation and acculturative stress due to different cultural backgrounds and education systems. For example, some East Asian students hesitate to speak in class or initiate communication with professors because of the East Asian education system's influence (Kim, 2005; Park & Kim, 1999). In Asian cultures and classrooms, because of hierarchical relationships between teachers and students, students expect their teacher to initiate communication or ask them to speak vs. students initiating communication with or questioning their teacher (Kim, 2007; Park & Kim, 1999; Yook & Albert, 1998). Moreover, with the language barrier, Asian international students may feel less comfortable talking in class. In these situations, English proficiency is not the only factor affects their adaption and acculturation in the U.S. Their comfort in using and speaking English with others is also an important influence on acculturative stress (Lin, 2006; Zhang & Jung, 2017), and cultural barriers may worsen this maladaptation. Hence, English proficiency, comfort in speaking English, and cultural barriers may impede their communication with teachers.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

In our examination of factors influencing acculturation, one major issue was the lack of diversity and the small sample size. To thoroughly evaluate factors such as age, length of residence, and education on Asian international students' acculturative stress, a more diverse sample is needed. This expansion would increase complexity in the study variables (e.g., adding more age groups and long-term immigrants). Also, a larger sample size would strengthen the examination of the above factors because it would allow for more sophisticated statistical analyses and more robust models. Repeated measures should be considered in future research to better track and compare acculturative stress over time. This method could exclude influences of confounding variables, even though the data collection method may be more challenging to implement, especially when working to accrue a large sample. Besides, convenience and snowball sampling may limit the generalizability of current findings because the sample may not fully represent the Asian international population. Additionally, university administrators should promote English language programs and support services to address Asian students' concerns about acculturative stress. These programs and support services should help Asian international students feel more comfortable speaking English and help them get involved in social activities with local students. More importantly, in terms of comparing international students' educations in the U.S., improving English proficiency is important but by itself does not seem to be enough to ensure that they adapt smoothly to their U.S. lives among Asian international students. Learning and understanding the educational system and cultural background in the U.S. is also essential for Asian international students' adaption and acculturation. Accordingly, university administrators may also consider embedding cultural learning into English language programs and support services.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the status of the Asian population has drawn increased attention from politicians and the general population in the U.S.. As a result, the federal government is addressing hate crimes directed at Asians through legislative actions (Edmondson, 2021). Therefore, post-COVID-19 studies are necessary to follow up on new trends related to this topic.

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# The graduating international undergraduate class of 2020—Counterintuitive graduation rate and time to degree during onset of the coronavirus pandemic

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## Abstract

*What were the graduation rate and time to degree for international undergraduates who would have been expected to graduate during the coronavirus pandemic's onset in spring 2020? The present study addressed this question by testing for intergroup differences in graduation outcomes between an American public university's international undergraduate class of 2020 and its pre-pandemic comparison counterpart of 2019. Controlling for early (pre-pandemic) graduations, the study yielded counterintuitive results; although the literature on the pandemic's educational disruptions, mental health symptoms, xenophobia, and stressors would predict that the class of 2020's graduation rate should have been lower and average time to degree longer than the class of 2019's, the two classes' values were almost identical. These results, together with previous ones on term grade point averages, are indicative of this class of 2020's academic success, resilience, and/or benefit from institutional support. They are discussed in the context of racism and caste.*

Keywords: caste, COVID-19, graduation outcomes, international undergraduates, racism

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## Introduction

International students who attended American postsecondary institutions during spring 2020 (SP20) had to cope with multiple negative conditions in their learning environment coinciding with onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). The negative conditions included disruptions of these students' instructional/learning continuity, graduation plans, interpersonal interactions, and various education-related practices (Dickerson, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020; Krahmer et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2021; Osaze, 2021). Additionally, these students experienced mental health symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, fear of infection, loneliness), social isolation, travel bans, financial hardships, food insecurity, loss of employment, immigration/visa issues, and/or multiple uncertainties during the pandemic's SP20 onset (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Aucejo et al., 2020; Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Chirikov & Soria, 2020; English et al., 2022; Firang, 2020; Hou & Wang, 2021; Liu, 2021; Martirosyan et al., 2022; Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022). The responses of American postsecondary

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institutions (including the one in the present report) to the pandemic consisted of canceling in-person classes and examinations for SP20 and summer 2020, administering final examinations and conducting all classes virtually, and/or campus closures that required students to isolate in or vacate their campus residences (Burke, 2020; Redden, 2020; Smalley, 2020). These learning environment conditions were consistent with the acknowledged characteristics of stressors—arousing, aversive, and unpredictable or uncontrollable conditions (Kim & Diamond, 2002).

The pandemic's educational disruptions of postsecondary learning environments (e.g., Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Hou & Wang, 2021; Liu, 2021) potentially could have been accompanied by negative graduation outcomes for international students at American higher education institutions (Aucejo et al., 2020; LaFee, n.d.). These students could have been particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's educational disruptions accompanied by mental health symptoms (Aucejo et al., 2020; Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022), rising xenophobia/racism (Hou & Wang, 2021; Koo et al., 2021), and preexisting stressors (Fass-Holmes, 2022). They might reasonably be expected to have experienced delays or difficulties in completing degree requirements on time, if at all. For example, 13% of 1,500 students surveyed at one of America's largest public universities delayed their graduation "due to COVID-19" (Aucejo et al. 2020, p. 1).

The present study's purpose, then, was to explore graduation outcomes—rate and time to degree—of international undergraduates who would have been expected to graduate during the SP20 term coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic's onset. Specifically, it explored intergroup differences on these outcomes between the international undergraduate (pandemic) class of 2020 and the comparison (pre-pandemic) class of 2019 at an American West Coast university where the academic year consisted of *three terms (not two semesters)*. This university's international student population was one of America's 10 largest, almost two-thirds of which was from China (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2021). Research on international undergraduates' graduation outcomes during the pandemic's onset had not appeared in the literature by the time of the present report's review. The findings reported here would be the first ones focusing specifically on this research issue, following up on two prior reports about academic performance (grade point averages) in SP20 (Fass-Holmes, 2021, 2022). They inform postsecondary administrators and researchers about the positive educational outcomes and successes that international undergraduates could have experienced during the disruptions, mental health symptoms, rising xenophobia, and stressors accompanying the pandemic's onset.

Relevant events during the university's 2019–2020 academic year (AY) to keep in consideration were the following (Fass-Holmes, 2022): the university first informed its students about the coronavirus on January 22, 2020; winter term's final examinations were administered online beginning March 14, three days after the pandemic's declaration; on March 20, the governor of the university's state issued a stay at home order, and the campus closed except for critical functions; winter term ended on March 21; SP20 began on March 25, *coinciding in its entirety with the pandemic's educational disruptions* (Liu, 2021); March 29 was the deadline for all students who could safely vacate the campus to do so (the number and percentage who did vacate is unknown); and SP20 ended on June 12.

## Literature Review

The following literature review provides context for the racist/casteist idea that international students (especially Chinese ones) should demonstrate poor graduation outcomes, regardless of their learning environment conditions, because of their presumed linguistic (English) inferiority (Zhang-Wu, 2018, 2021). The reason for providing this context is that the present report debunks this idea.

## Racism vs. Caste

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by rising xenophobia in the United States (Allen & Ye, 2021; Koo et al., 2021). Many American politicians and their followers have used the pandemic as an opportunity to advocate for and/or implement immigration restrictions (Loweree et al., 2020), and to stigmatize (Viladrich, 2021) people from other countries, especially China (Hou & Wang, 2021; J. J. Lee, 2020). Anti-China rhetoric has included statements that China cheats and steals (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017), Chinese immigrants are responsible for bringing COVID-19’s virus to the United States (Koo et al., 2021; Salcedo, 2021), and Chinese international students are a threat to America’s national security (J. J. Lee, 2020). These statements have negatively affected their target groups’ well-being (Firang, 2020; Lian & Wallace, 2020), destabilized the two countries’ relations (Allen & Ye, 2021), and jeopardized American postsecondary institutions (Fischer, 2021; Yu, 2021) where China has become the top source country of their international students (IIE, 2020).

In the years following America’s election of its first Black president, the term “racist” has elicited declarations like “I don’t have a racist bone in my body” (Petrella & Gomer, 2019) and “I am the least racist person” (Fisher, 2016). Racism, according to Kendi’s (2019) definition, is a social power construct; it conceptualizes racist policies leading to and normalizing racial inequalities that are defended by invoking racist ideas. Racist policies are defined as plans or strategies that produce or perpetuate inequity between racial groups. Racial inequity is a condition that results in two or more racial groups having unequal status, support, and/or treatment. Racist ideas are thoughts or concepts in which one racial group is deemed to be inferior or superior to another racial group. Racial groups are collections of people who are distinguished from others on the basis of features such as skin color, hair texture, eyelid creases, lip thickness, and/or nasal width.

The above definitions support Kendi’s (2019) advocacy for addressing racism by changing policies rather than by changing individuals; racist policies that serve self-interests result in racial inequities that are defended, justified, and rationalized with racist ideas. In contrast, the historical approach has been to address racism by changing individuals’ ignorance and emotions (e.g., anger, fear, and/or hate) that lead to racist ideas and policies producing racial inequities (Banks & Valentino, 2012; Kendi, 2019; Spanierman & Cabrera, 2014).

The term “caste” has a meaning that differs from and overlaps with “race.” Caste and race can be present together in the same society whereby the former is a transparent hierarchy of dominance versus subordination, while the latter is the physical characteristics (skin color, hair texture, etc.) that have arbitrary significance about an individual’s position in the hierarchy (Wilkerson, 2020). America’s caste system has operated during the country’s entire existence (Berreman, 1960; Wilkerson, 2020), having exhibited the following distinguishing features: inherent inferiority and superiority; endogamy (control of marriage and mating); a basis in religion; a hierarchy of occupations; heritability and permanence; purity vs. pollution; dehumanization and stigma; and enforcement of the hierarchy (Wilkerson, 2020).

### Caste in American History

Caste’s impacts on American society as a whole are exemplified by the country’s history with Chinese people. Beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, immigrant Chinese contract laborers (who reportedly were illiterate, unmarried male peasants) journeyed to America’s western states for dangerous jobs in railroad construction and mining (Brockell, 2021; Holland, 2007; Strohlic, 2020). Once the railroads were completed, however, western states began perceiving Chinese laborers as a threat to White counterparts’ employment opportunities (Holland, 2007). This perceived threat was exemplified by Leland Stanford’s California gubernatorial inauguration address:

To my mind it is clear, that the settlement among us of an inferior race is to be discouraged, by every legitimate means. Asia, with her numberless millions, sends to our shores the dregs of her population.... There can be no doubt but that the presence of numbers among us of a degraded and distinct people must exercise a deleterious influence upon the superior race, and, to a certain extent, repel desirable immigration. It will afford me great pleasure to

concur with the Legislature in any constitutional action, having for its object the repression of the immigration of the Asiatic races. (Stanford, 1862)

The motivation for removing Chinese laborers from western states was based upon self-interest (i.e., job opportunities) which led to legislation and acts of violence that reasonably could be interpreted as a dominant caste's enforcement of its society's hierarchy of perceived human value in which Whites were the superior race and Chinese were an inferior one (Wilkerson, 2020).

America has a history of legislative and violent acts that targeted Chinese immigrants and enforced the dominant caste's hierarchy of superiority vs. inferiority. This history is briefly summarized in the following chronologically ordered list of such acts (Brockell, 2021; Holland, 2007; E. Lee, 2007; J. J. Lee, 2020; Miller, 2018).

- “yellow peril” tropes—dehumanizing/stigmatizing characterization of Chinese immigrants
- Anti-Coolie Act of 1862—imposed a monthly tax on Chinese immigrants doing business in California
- Naturalization Act of 1870—barred Chinese from naturalization because they could not be assimilated into American society
- Chinese massacre of 1871
- Page Act of 1875—prevented Chinese women from entering America
- anti-Chinese riots of 1870s and 1880s
- Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—specifically barred Chinese contract laborers from immigrating to America
- Scott Act of 1888—barred all Chinese people from entering America
- Gresham-Yang Treaty of 1894—totally prohibited Chinese immigration to America
- Asiatic Exclusion League—67 labor unions joined in 1905 to promote laws restricting Asian immigration
- Pacific Coast race riots of 1907—anti-Chinese immigrant sentiments turned violent
- Immigration Act of 1917—created the Asiatic Barred Zone
- Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and Immigration Act of 1924—restricted immigration based upon country of origin

These legislative and violent acts against Chinese immigrants coincided with ones targeting other groups who also were relegated to subordinate castes due to the dominant caste's perceptions of them as inferior races, including (but not limited to) African and Native Americans (Wilkerson, 2020).

## **Caste in International Education**

Racism's impact on international students attending US postsecondary institutions have been covered substantially in the media and research literature (Kanthor, 2021; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Caste's potential impacts on these students, however, have attracted comparatively little attention and they generally could be unrecognized by educators and researchers.

The American dominant caste's enforcement of its society's hierarchy of human value has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and extended to American postsecondary institutions' international students from countries outside Europe. Chinese students, in particular, have been perceived as threatening and therefore subjected to enforcement actions. In light of the burgeoning number of these students attending American postsecondary institutions (from 5 in fall 1964 to 98,235 in fall 2008 coinciding with the great recession, and 317,299 in fall 2020 coinciding with the pandemic [IIE, 2020]), actions that enforce the hierarchy would impact a substantial proportion of America's international student population.

Current events and research findings indicate that international students attending American postsecondary institutions in many cases are subjected to the impacts and consequences of caste in addition to those of racism. Self-interest-based motivations have resulted in enforcement of the caste hierarchy by actions which dehumanize, stigmatize, and/or restrict international students (especially ones from China) attending American universities. These actions are briefly



summarized in (but are not limited to) the following list (Fass-Holmes, 2016, 2022; Feng, 2019; Hussein & Schiffelbein, 2020; J. J. Lee, 2020; Matross Helms & Spreitzer, 2021; Padilla et al., 1991; Viladrich, 2021; Zhang-Wu, 2018).

- promote a deficit view—these students collectively and necessarily have English weakness (linguistic inferiority), choose majors that hide their weakness, and cheat
- rationalize evidence of academic success—grade inflation, leniency, and/or dilution of grade point averages by students’ choice of pass-fail option account for these students’ successes
- assert that international students deprive domestic counterparts of admissions slots
- exclude visas for students with ties to the Chinese Community Party or military
- blame/stigmatize Chinese students for bringing the pandemic’s virus to America

To the extent that international students’ experiences in America are influenced by caste, the present report’s positive findings could be dismissed out of hand by educators and researchers who knowingly or unwittingly are defending the hierarchy.

It turns out that the greatest threat to a caste system is...lower-caste success.... Achievement by those in the lowest caste goes against the script handed down to us all. It undermines the core assumptions upon which a caste system is constructed and to which the identities of people on all rungs of the hierarchy are linked. Achievement by marginalized people who step outside the roles expected of them puts things out of order and triggers primeval and often violent backlash. (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 218)

## Research Method

### Participants

The entire population of international (F-1 or J-1 visa [US Department of State, n.d.]) undergraduates in the class of 2020 (i.e., ones who would be expected to graduate in SP20; pandemic group), plus counterparts in the class of 2019 (i.e., ones who would be expected to graduate in SP19; pre-pandemic comparison group), at an American West Coast public university (where the AY has *three terms rather than two semesters*) comprised the present study’s participant pool. This university afforded the following educationally significant and distinct advantages: 1) it historically has provided a broad range of student support services and programs plus additional ones specifically intended for international undergraduates and enhanced during the pandemic’s onset (e.g., weekly virtual chat sessions with university staff, language conversation tables, “alone together” emotional support sessions, mixers, and Chinese students’ online town hall [Tokify pinboard, 2020]); 2) support services and programs, combined with the university’s strong reputation for academic excellence, have attracted one of America’s 10 largest international student populations (IIE, 2021); 3) the university’s AY consisted of three terms (rather than two semesters) in which the pandemic’s onset coincided with the entire SP20 term; and 4) previous research results on this university’s undergraduate population (Fass-Holmes, 2016, 2021, 2022; Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014, 2015) were available for potential comparison.

### Data Collection

Demographic data plus graduation records for the university’s entire population of international undergraduates in the classes of 2020 and 2019 were extracted from its student information system using structured query language programs (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014, 2015). The resulting records (1,664 for the class of 2020; 1,661 for the comparison class of 2019) contained unique ID, degree awarded and award term/year, applicant type (first-time students [NFRS] vs. transfers [TRAN]), field of study, home country, and visa type. These data were organized in a spreadsheet file with quality controls that precluded double-counting students with multiple records. Records belonging to the class of 2020 in which the degree



award term preceded SP20 (i.e., students unexposed to the pandemic's disruptions) were excluded from the analyses described below; class of 2019 comparison counterparts with degree award term preceding SP19 similarly were excluded. The included records (1,172 for the pandemic class of 2020; 1,243 for the comparison class of 2019) were considered "eligible" for graduation (i.e., ones who could have graduated in their expected term/year). Confidentiality was protected by performing the analyses on a physically locked-down computer, encrypting the records, and using procedures approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

#### Data Analyses

Descriptive statistical analyses consisted of calculating counts, graduation rates for graduation outcomes (graduated on time; graduated late), percentages (did not graduate), time to degree (number of academic terms), and standard deviations (where applicable). These metrics were disaggregated by applicant type and country. In the calculations of percentages, the denominator was a total value appropriate for the data category in question; for example, the denominator for calculating the percentage of the class of 2020's NFRS who did not graduate was the total number of NFRS eligible to graduate in SP20 (i.e., excluded those who graduated prior to the pandemic's onset). These statistics describing international students' graduation outcomes coinciding with the pandemic's onset would be the first of their kind in the education research literature. Inferential statistical analyses of potential intergroup differences between the classes of 2020 and 2019 on graduation rates and times to degree included Z-tests for the significance of difference between two independent proportions (i.e., graduation rates/percentages; [http://vassarstats.net/propdiff\\_ind.html](http://vassarstats.net/propdiff_ind.html)), Mann-Whitney  $U$  ([https://www.statskingdom.com/170median\\_mann\\_whitney.html](https://www.statskingdom.com/170median_mann_whitney.html)), and standardized effect size. These tests of international students' graduation outcomes coinciding with the pandemic's onset also would be the first of their kind and were performed to determine the magnitude and statistical significance of intergroup differences between the pandemic and pre-pandemic groups (statistical determination of cause and effect was beyond this exploratory study's scope).

## Results

### Demographics

The university's international undergraduate class of 2020 comprised 1,664 students, 1,128 having entered as NFRS in FA16 and 536 as TRAN in FA18. After excluding the ones who graduated before the pandemic's onset, 813 NFRS and 359 TRAN remained for this study's analyses. These NFRS' top five home countries were China, India, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The corresponding countries for the TRAN counterparts were China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Taiwan. The percentages of these students from their top five home countries are shown in Table 1.

The international undergraduate comparison class of 2019 comprised 1,661 students, 1,213 having entered as NFRS in FA15 and 448 as TRAN in FA17. After excluding the ones who graduated prior to SP19, 891 NFRS and 352 TRAN remained for comparison purposes in this study's analyses. These NFRS' top five home countries were China, India, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The corresponding countries for the TRAN counterparts were China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Indonesia. The percentages of these students from their top five home countries are shown in Table 1.

### Graduation Rates

Figure 1 shows the counts and percentages of international undergraduates in the classes of 2020 and 2019 who graduated early (before SP), on time (SP), late (after SP), or did not graduate. Almost 30% of the class of 2020 (28% of the NFRS, 33% of the TRAN) graduated early (prior to the pandemic's onset) and consequently were excluded from the study's analyses below. More than a third of the class of 2020 (~40% of the NFRS, 28% of the TRAN) graduated on time,

**Table 1**

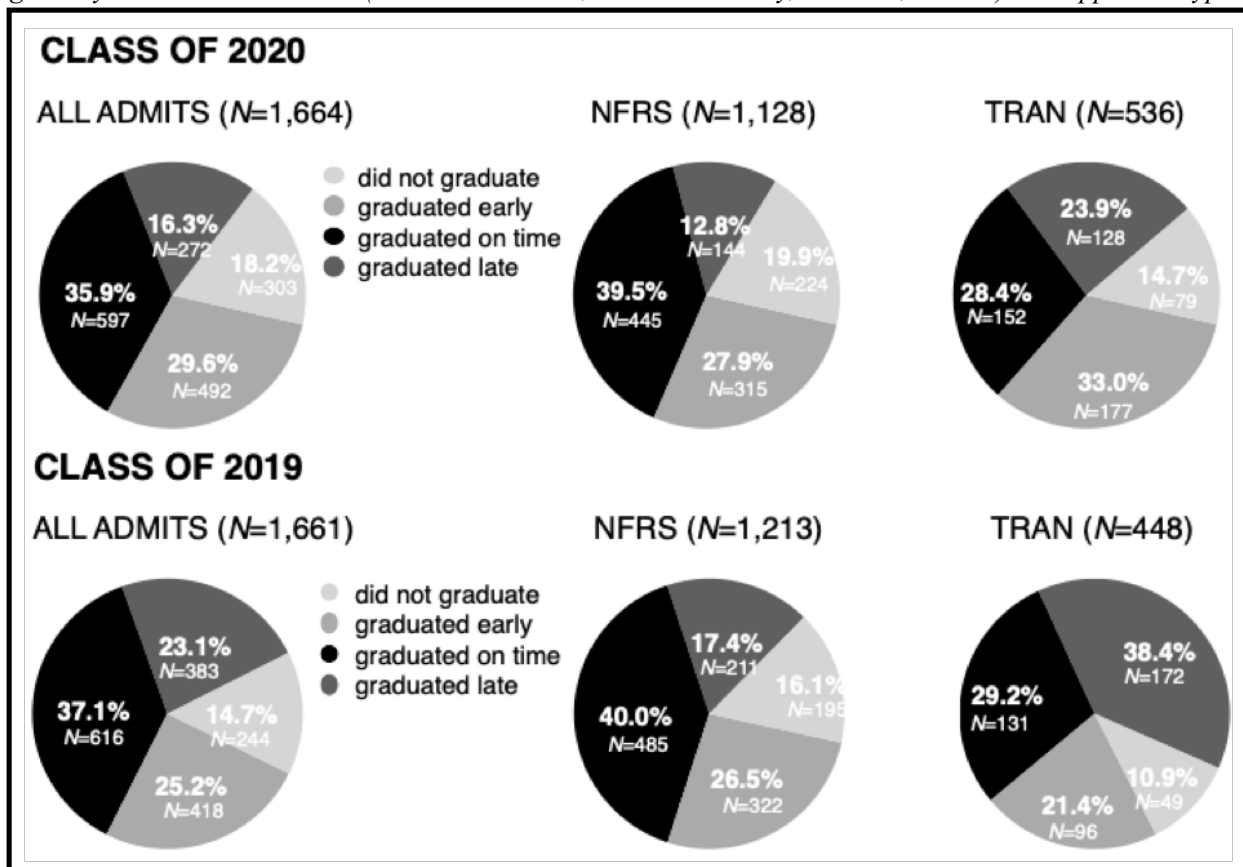
*International Undergraduates' Top Five Home Countries, Disaggregated by Graduating Class and Applicant Type (Percentages)*

Graduating Class	Applicant Type	China	Hong Kong	India	Indonesia	South Korea	Taiwan
2020	NFRS (N=813)	67.2%	1.4%	8.2%	n/a	6.0%	3.8%
	TRAN (N=359)	60.4%	5.6%	n/a	5.6%	10.9%	5.3%
2019	NFRS (N=891)	70.0%	1.3%	5.8%	n/a	5.8%	3.1%
	TRAN (N=352)	55.1%	7.4%	n/a	4.3%	12.5%	4.8%

*Note.* Abbreviations: N=number; n/a=not applicable; NFRS=international undergraduates who entered the university as first-time students; TRAN=international undergraduates who entered the university as transfer students

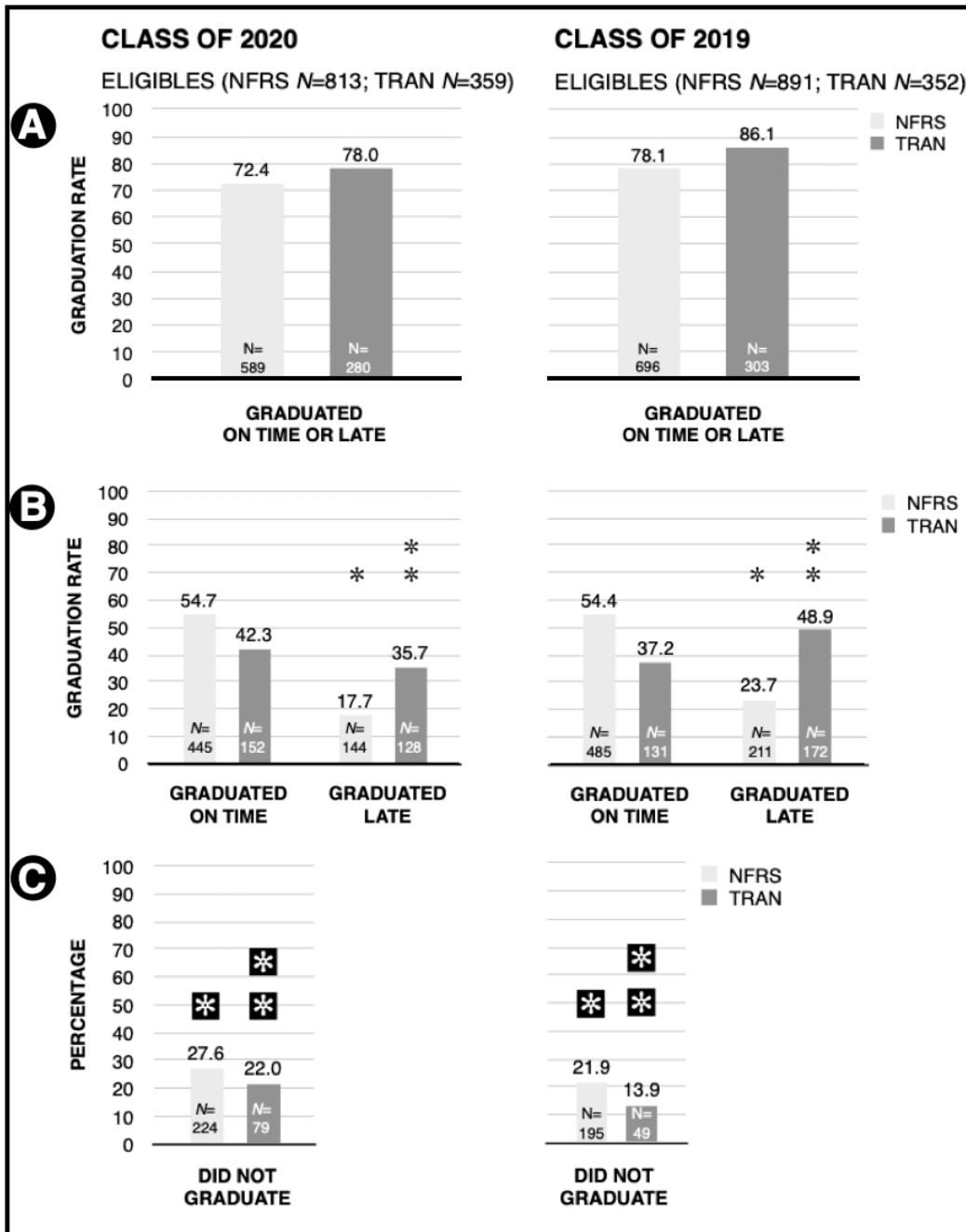
**Figure 1**

*Numbers and Percentages of International Undergraduates in the Classes of 2020 (Pandemic) and 2019 (Prepandemic), Disaggregated by Graduation Outcome (Did Not Graduate; Graduated Early, On Time, or Late) and Applicant Type*



**Figure 2**

*Graduation Outcomes of International Undergraduates in the Classes of 2020 (Pandemic) and 2019 (Prepandemic Comparison). A. Disaggregated by Applicant Type. B. Disaggregated by Applicant Type and Outcome—On Time vs. Late. C. Disaggregated by Applicant Type and Outcome—Did Not Graduate*



*Note.* One asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference (alpha level 0.05) between the class of 2020 NFRS (bar graphs on the figure’s left half) and 2019 counterparts (ones on the right); two asterisks indicate a difference between 2020 TRAN and 2019 counterparts. Values above the bars represent graduation rates in A and B and percentages in C; values at the bottom represent counts. Error bars are standard deviations. Abbreviations are the same as in Figure 1.

about 16% (~13% of the NFRS, 24% of the TRAN) graduated late, and less than 20% (~20% of the NFRS, 15% of the TRAN) did not graduate at all (transferred to another institution; took leave of absence; etc.).

For comparison, the class of 2019's corresponding values were as follows (see Figure 1). Approximately 25% (26.5% of the NFRS, 21.4% of the TRAN) graduated early and were excluded from the analyses. More than a third (40% of the NFRS, ~30% of the TRAN) graduated on time, almost a quarter (~17% of the NFRS, ~38% of the TRAN) graduated late, and less than 15% (~16% of the NFRS, 11% of the TRAN) did not graduate at all.

Graduation rates for the classes of 2020 and 2019 (excluding members of each class who graduated before their respective spring terms), disaggregated by applicant type only, are shown in Figure 2A. Class of 2020 NFRS and TRAN had lower graduation rates than their class of 2019 counterparts—approximately 6 and 8 percentage points, respectively. To determine the degree to which each graduation outcome (on time vs. late) contributed to these differences, the data are disaggregated additionally by graduation outcome in Figure 2B. Contrary to what might have been expected, class of 2020 NFRS and TRAN did not differ significantly from class of 2019 counterparts with regard to on-time four-year graduation rate.

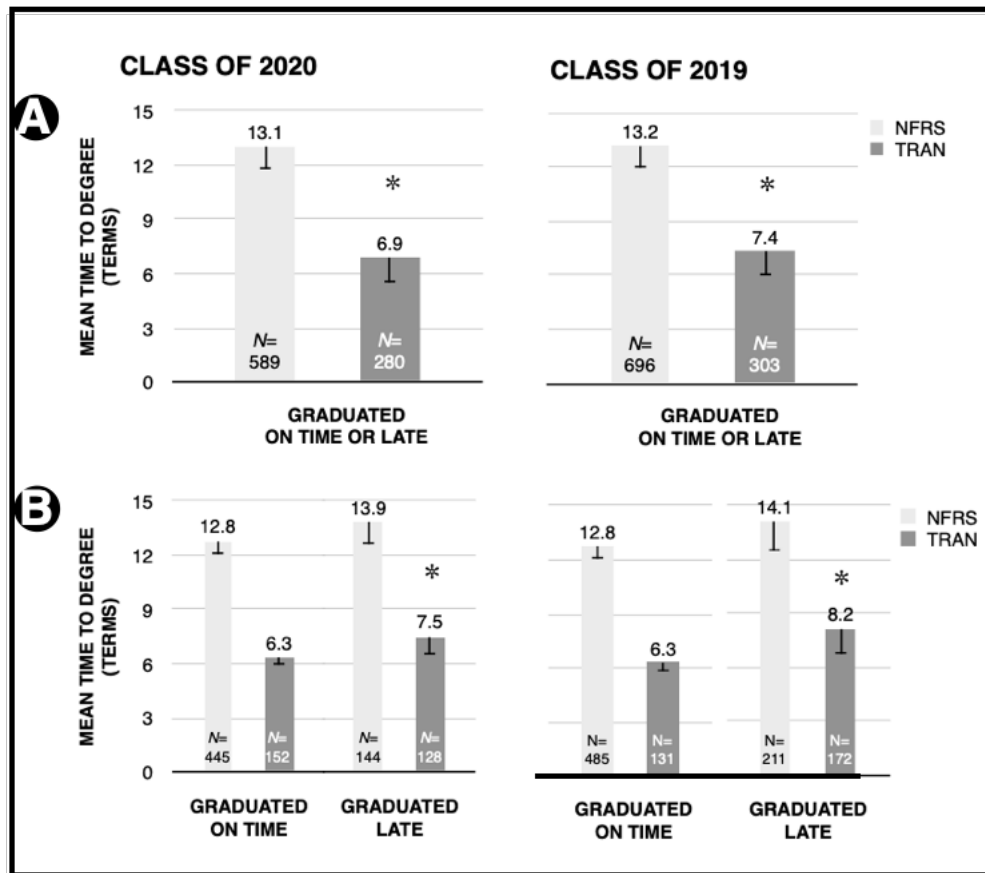
The 2020 NFRS graduation rate (54.7%) was almost identical to the 2019 comparison counterparts' value (54.4%); the magnitude of this difference was not statistically significant ( $Z$  test two-tailed  $p>0.05$ ). The 2020 TRAN on-time graduation rate (42.3%) was about 5 percentage points higher than the 2019 comparison counterparts' value (37.2%), although the magnitude of this difference also was not statistically significant ( $Z$  test two-tailed  $p>0.05$ ). However, the class of 2020's NFRS and TRAN did differ significantly from the class of 2019's comparison counterparts with regard to late graduation rate. The 2020 NFRS value (17.7%) was almost 6 percentage points lower than 2019 counterparts' (23.7%); the magnitude of this difference was statistically significant ( $Z=-3.03$ ; two-tailed  $p=0.002$ ). The 2020 TRAN late graduation rate (35.7%) was about 13 percentage points lower than the 2019 comparison counterparts' (48.9%); the magnitude of this difference also was highly statistically significant ( $Z=-3.566$ ; two-tailed  $p=0.0004$ ). The class of 2020 NFRS and TRAN differed significantly from the class of 2019 comparison counterparts with regard to not graduating (Figure 2C). The 2020 NFRS value (27.6%) was almost 6 percentage points higher than 2019 comparison counterparts' (21.9%); the magnitude of this difference was statistically significant ( $Z=2.713$ ; two-tailed  $p=0.0067$ ). The 2020 TRAN value (22.0%) was about 8 percentage points higher than the 2019 comparison counterparts' (13.9%); the magnitude of this difference also was statistically significant ( $Z=2.805$ ; two-tailed  $p=0.005$ ).

## Times to Degree

Mean times to degree for the classes of 2020 and 2019 (excluding members of each class who graduated before their respective spring terms), disaggregated by applicant type only, are shown in Figure 3. Counterintuitively, the class of 2020 NFRS and class of 2019 comparison counterparts who graduated on time took the exact same number of academic terms (12.8, rounded to one decimal place; 4.27 academic years) to graduate; this comparison was not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney  $U$  two-tailed  $p>0.05$ ). The 2020 TRAN and 2019 comparison counterparts who graduated on time also took the exact same number of academic terms (6.3, rounded to one decimal place; 2.1 academic years); this comparison was not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney  $U$  two-tailed  $p>0.05$ ). Additionally, the 2020 NFRS who graduated late took almost the same number of academic terms (13.9; 4.6 academic years) to graduate as 2019 comparison counterparts (14.1; 4.7 academic years); the magnitude of this difference was not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney  $U$  two-tailed  $p>0.05$ ). The 2020 TRAN who graduated late took fewer academic terms (7.5; 2.5 academic years) to graduate than 2019 comparison counterparts (8.2; 2.7 academic years); the magnitude of this difference was highly statistically significant (Mann-Whitney  $U=8104$ ,  $Z=-3.9425$ ; two-tailed  $p=0.00008$ ), and the effect size was small (0.23).

**Figure 3**

*Mean Time to Degree (Number of Terms) for International Undergraduates in the Classes of 2020 (Pandemic) and 2019 (Prepandemic). A. Disaggregated by Applicant Type. B. Disaggregated by Applicant Type and Graduation Outcome—On Time vs. Late*



*Note.* Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference (alpha level 0.05) between the class of 2020 TRAN (bar graphs on the figure’s left half) and 2019 counterparts (ones on the right). Values above the bars represent mean times to degree, values at the bottom represent counts. Error bars are standard deviations. Abbreviations are the same as in Figures 1 and 2.

## Discussion

No one is completely immune from racist ideas or caste assumptions; anyone can be anti-racist one minute and racist the next (Kendi, 2019), or egalitarian in one situation and hierarchical in another (Wilkerson, 2020). Many racist ideas and casteist assumptions are sweeping generalizations; for example, educators and/or researchers could generalize that international students collectively have a “lack of daily communication skills” (Jin & Schneider, 2019, p. 91) and/or that they “...cannot do writing almost at all” (Hussein & Schifflbein, 2020, p. 67). Alternatively, educators and/or researchers could generalize in describing these students as “cash cows” (Cantwell, 2015), “... having language barriers, linguistically incompetent, or deficient in English” (Zhang-Wu, 2021, p. 11), or being “particularly vulnerable” to cheating (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015, p. 226). These negative/deficit generalizations about international students have been supplemented by recent reports of negative mental health symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, fear of infection, loneliness) that non-randomly selected survey and interview participants experienced during the pandemic’s onset (Aucejo et al., 2020; Bardill Moscaritolo

et al., 2022; Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022); educators and/or researchers might generalize these symptoms to *all* international students.

The extant literature's negative/deficit generalizations about international students would logically lead to the prediction that the educational disruptions (Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Hou & Wang, 2021; Liu, 2021), mental health symptoms (Aucejo et al., 2020; Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022), rising xenophobia (Hou & Wang, 2021; J. J. Lee, 2020), and/or other stressors (e.g., Fass-Holmes, 2022) accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic's onset additionally should have negatively impacted these students' graduation outcomes in SP20. Consequently, the present study was conducted to test whether the university's international undergraduate pandemic class of 2020 would have had poorer graduation outcomes than the pre-pandemic comparison class of 2019 (this study was conducted to test for intergroup differences, not to determine cause and effect).

The present counterintuitive results showed that the university's class of 2020 did *not* have poorer four-year graduation rates and times to degree in SP20 than the comparison class of 2019 had in SP19. Instead, the two classes' outcomes were similar or favored the class of 2020. The observed four-year graduation rates of 72–86%, and time-to-degree values approximating the conventional 4 years for NFRS and 2 years for TRAN markedly contrast with the report that "...only 41% of American college students graduate from college in four years. Further, the majority of colleges and universities in the United States now possess four-year graduation rates below 60%..." (Trivette, 2022).

These results are the first in the research literature to indicate international undergraduates' equivalent or better (rather than worse) graduation outcomes during onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They provide additional evidence of international student success (e.g., Fass-Holmes, 2016, 2021, 2022) and contrast with numerous recent reports emphasizing international students' negative experiences during the pandemic's onset (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Aucejo et al., 2020; Firang, 2020). This is not an interpretation that the pandemic's disruptions (which were neither an educational intervention nor an experimental manipulation in the present study) caused or were responsible for the class of 2020's positive graduation outcomes; only that these outcomes happened during disruptions accompanying the pandemic's onset (Liu, 2021).

The observed positive graduation outcomes extend recent evidence (Fass-Holmes, 2021, 2022) that the university's international undergraduates generally succeeded academically in SP20 despite the pandemic's educational disruptions (Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Hou & Wang, 2021; Liu, 2021), mental health symptoms (Aucejo et al., 2020; Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022; Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022), rising xenophobia (Hou & Wang, 2021; J. J. Lee, 2020), and stressors (English et al., 2022; Fass-Holmes, 2022). These students' positive graduation outcomes might be indicative of their resilience (ability to recover from and adapt to adversities and stress [Robbins et al., 2018]), immigrant advantage (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2016), focus on degree completion (i.e., spent more time studying while sheltered in place [Aucejo et al., 2020]), adaptation to online instruction (Blankstein et al., 2020), and/or benefit from enhanced institutional support (Fass-Holmes, 2022). Further research will be necessary to better understand exactly what factor(s) contributed to these students' successes.

Alternative possible explanations for these counterintuitive results that merit discussion are not supported by circumstantial evidence. They include increased cheating, grade inflation, and/or instructors' sympathetic grading specifically for international students (Fass-Holmes, 2017, 2022) during SP20 compared to SP19. These other explanations would require unreasonable stretching to compellingly account for the present results. For example, faculty and teaching assistants (TAs) would have needed to utilize ineffective and/or insufficient safeguards against cheating (contrary to established policies) to produce the present results' patterns. They also would have needed to expend time and effort determining which students were international, then inflate or sympathetically assign grades accordingly to produce the present findings. These explanations additionally seem improbable because faculty and TAs also had to cope with the pandemic's onset. Although further research would be necessary to conclusively rule out these alternative explanations,

they should be recognized as trivializing these students' successful academic and graduation outcomes during the pandemic's educational disruptions.

Another potential explanation for the present results is that they should be summarily dismissed because the university's international undergraduates were incapable of demonstrating positive graduation outcomes regardless of when they would have been expected to graduate. This negative explanation is based upon the racist idea and casteist assumption that these students, especially Chinese ones who constituted two-thirds of the university's international undergraduate population, were linguistically inferior and consequently could not have shown positive educational outcomes. Their presumed inferiority would be attributed to collective English weaknesses (Zhang-Wu, 2018, 2021). The present findings debunk, rather than support, this negative explanation. If the racist idea and casteist assumption of linguistic inferiority were advocated by a postsecondary institution's administrators, faculty, and/or staff, or by education researchers (such as generalizing international students' "lack of daily communication skills" [Jin & Schneider, 2019, p. 91] and/or referring to them as "cash cows" [Cantwell, 2015]), they would risk stigmatizing and/or alienating their institution's international students (Viladrich, 2021) which could jeopardize the institution's reputation among future international student applicants. American postsecondary institutions instead should identify existing practices and/or policies that produce inequities (e.g., unwelcoming campus climate; financial hardships; lost employment opportunities) for international students and replace them with ones that produce equity (Buckner et al., 2021).

### **Limitations**

One limitation of the present study is its basis upon a single university. As such, the study's findings might not be representative of or generalizable to international undergraduates who were eligible to graduate from other American universities in SP20. Although resolution of this limitation would require replication studies at other institutions, the present results at the very least are consistent with recent findings from the same university showing international undergraduates' SP20 academic successes (Fass-Holmes, 2021, 2022).

Another limitation is that the present study was not designed to conclusively determine what caused the pandemic class of 2020 to show equivalent or better graduation outcomes (rather than poorer ones) compared to the pre-pandemic comparison class of 2019, or what factors limited the magnitude of the observed differences between the two classes. The study instead was expected to provide evidence that the former would show poorer outcomes, consistent with the literature's evidence of international students' negative experiences during the pandemic's onset (Alaklabi et al., 2021; Aucejo et al., 2020; English et al., 2022; Firang, 2020; Martirosyan et al., 2022). Further research with appropriate controls will be necessary to determine what specific disruptions and/or stressors individual students experienced, and how they responded to them.

Lastly, the university's international undergraduate class of 2020 had only one term remaining to graduate, and one term potentially was insufficient for these students to experience a detectable negative impact of the pandemic's disruptions, mental health symptoms, racism/casteism, and/or preexisting stressors on their graduation outcomes. This limitation should be recognized as speculation. The research literature currently does not include any a priori grounds or theory that would predict or hypothesize a "dose-response" curve relating the duration of exposure to the pandemic's educational disruptions,

mental health symptoms, racism/casteism, and/or preexisting stressors versus the magnitude of international undergraduates' graduation outcomes (with all other variables held constant).

## Conclusion

This report contributes the research literature's first evidence of, and acknowledges, international undergraduates' positive graduation outcomes during the educational disruptions, mental health symptoms, rising xenophobia, and stressors accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic's onset. The present unexpected results disconfirm the prediction that the university's international undergraduate class of 2020 should have had poorer outcomes in SP20 than the pre-pandemic comparison class of 2019 would have had in SP19. Additionally, they debunk the racist idea and casteist assumption that these students (regardless of their expected graduation term) should have had poor outcomes associated with their presumed linguistic inferiority (cf. Zhang-Wu, 2021). The observed positive graduation outcomes could be indicative of these students' resilience (Robbins et al., 2018) and/or benefit from enhanced institutional support (Fass-Holmes, 2022; Tokify pinboard, 2020). The implications of this study are that educators and education researchers should 1) not infer from the extant literature that international students had *only* negative experiences during the pandemic's onset, 2) not generalize from some international students who have had verified negative outcomes/experiences during the pandemic to *all* international students, and 3) dismantle existing inequitable policies or practices that are defended by racist ideas or casteist assumptions attributing those outcomes/experiences to the students' presumed inferiority.

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# International Postgraduate Students' Lived Experiences of Academic, Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

This in-depth qualitative study investigated how international students experienced academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst a burgeoning body of research examines the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on international students, few studies foreground students' lived experiences. This study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with 30 international postgraduate students who undertook degree programs at British universities in 20-21. A thematic analysis revealed that COVID-19-related stressors negatively impacted students' psychological adjustment and led to a sense of isolation and detachment from the host environment, with students reporting difficulties in instigating and maintaining social ties. Experiences of academic adjustment were nuanced, with findings suggesting that the pandemic acted as either a barrier or facilitator of adjustment, depending on the students' personal circumstances. With global epidemics increasingly likely, the findings from this study can support higher education institutions in developing institutional policies on how to support their international students in times of global health crises.

Keywords: international students, adjustment, pandemic, COVID-19

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## Introduction

Despite the “seismic impact” (Fischer, 2021, p. i) of the pandemic on international higher education (HE), there are currently more than 6 million internationally mobile students globally, with the most popular destination countries being the United States (US), Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Germany (OECD, 2021). An internationally mobile student is “an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin.” (OECD, 2017, p. 38).

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of adjustment among a sample of international postgraduate students, who undertook degree programs at UK universities in the academic year 2020-21. The impact of the COVID-19

pandemic on the HE sector has been widely documented (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Marinoni et al. 2020; Tilak & Kumar, 2022), but the lived experiences of international students remain relatively underexplored in the academic literature (Mbous et al., 2022).

As researchers have begun to assess the impact of COVID-19 on internationally mobile groups, it is becoming increasingly clear that international students were largely overlooked in the global response to the pandemic (Lai et al., 2020), and that efforts to curb the spread of the virus have hit this group disproportionately hard (Hari et al., 2021). The international student experience is often characterized by precarity, in legal, economic, and personal terms (Gilmartin et al., 2020), and the pandemic is likely to have exacerbated this (Mbous et al., 2022). Studies suggest that international students shared many pandemic-related challenges with their domestic peers, such as the sudden transition to online learning, delayed academic progress, social isolation, and uncertainty about future careers (Wang et al., 2020). However, certain stressors were unique to international students' temporary status as transient migrants (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021), including immigration issues as a result of border closures and travel restrictions, and concerns about the wellbeing and safety of loved ones abroad (Gomes et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2022).

When campuses shut down and teaching was moved online, many international students were left isolated with little access to support in situ (Chen et al., 2020), and in some cases unable to go home (Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2021). As part-time jobs were lost overnight, many international students faced financial hardship (Gallagher et al., 2020) and turned to food banks for help (Burns, 2020), with many also experiencing housing insecurity (Morris et al., 2020).

Students from Asian countries, or of Asian heritage, faced additional difficulties with studies suggesting that public hostility, scapegoating, and racial abuse were exacerbated by the pandemic (Chen et al., 2020; Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020), reflecting a resurgence in Sinophobia in “western” countries more generally (Gao, 2022). Research on Chinese international students found evidence for racial discrimination, stereotyping, and verbal assaults (Nam et al., 2021), as well as microaggressions and stigmatization associated with mask wearing (Ma & Zhan, 2022).

In response, this study seeks to explore how international students made sense of their adjustment experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are international students' lived experiences of academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic? and (2) What challenges and opportunities do they perceive? In order to situate this study in the broader international student literature, a brief overview of relevant research on international student adjustment during COVID-19 is provided in the following section.

## **Literature Review**

Whilst international student adjustment is a fairly well-established research area (Schartner & Young, 2020), relatively little is known about how international students experience adjustment amidst a global public health crisis. A study sojourn abroad is typically conceptualized as a stressful life event (Ward et al. 2001), and the “uncertainty-inducing” (Thorson et al., 2022, p. 667) nature of the coronavirus pandemic has likely intensified this.

An explicit focus on adjustment is largely absent among studies examining the impact of COVID-19 on international students (one of the few studies with a focus on adjustment is Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022), but there is a growing body of research documenting the challenges this group has faced. Many of these studies emanate from the Australian and North American contexts (Morris et al., 2020; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2021), and there is limited published literature on the experiences of international students in the UK. The small existing body of work focuses primarily on the psychological impact of the pandemic (Al-Oraibi et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2020), including mask wearing practices and associated stress (Lai et al., 2021), as well as learning experiences (Khan, 2021), and decision-making around whether to remain or leave the UK (Hu et al., 2022). Although the UK is among the European countries worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2022), a recent report by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) suggests that a majority of international students continue to see the UK as a positive place to study (UCAS, 2021). This is reflected in

recent statistics which show that 605,130 international students chose to study at UK universities in 2020-21 (HESA, 2022).

Beyond the UK context, a number of studies have examined the psychological impact of the pandemic on international students (Lai et al., 2020). Although COVID-19 had a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of university students generally (Zhai & Du, 2020), this was likely heightened for international students who typically have their core support network in their countries of origin (Koo & Nyunt, 2022). Studies across different host countries have reported increased levels of stress and anxiety among international students, and commonly identified pandemic-related stressors include academic challenges such as compromised academic progress, personal challenges linked to social isolation and health concerns, and immigration-related uncertainties (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022).

Comparatively, few studies have been published on the impact of the pandemic on international students' social experiences, and the evidence remains mixed. Some studies suggest that social isolation among international students was exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions (Malet Calvo et al., 2022). In other studies, international students reported that the pandemic brought them closer to friends and family (Thorson et al., 2022). A small number of studies have examined the challenges of remote learning (Sahu, 2020), how host countries' COVID-19 responses have mediated international students' perceptions and experiences (Qi & Ma, 2021), international students' multilingual communication experiences and perceptions of crisis communication (Li et al., 2020), and how the pandemic has impacted student destination choices (Yu, 2021).

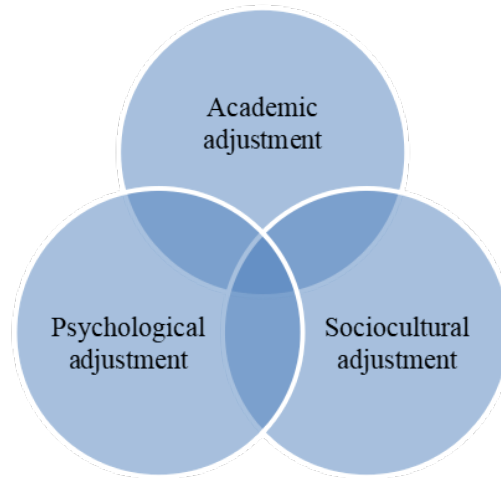
### **Theoretical Framework**

We employed a conceptualization of *adjustment* as a multidimensional, holistic, and complex phenomenon that involves interrelated academic, psychological, and sociocultural processes, depicted here as a Venn diagram (Figure 1). It posits that *adjustment* is a process that can be most usefully explored through qualitative methods of inquiry whereas *adaptation*, a closely related term, can be viewed as an outcome of adjustment that is best captured using measurable indices (Schartner & Young, 2020). The model distinguishes between *psychological* and *sociocultural* adjustment, a common distinction in the sojourner adjustment literature (Ward et al., 2001), where psychological adjustment is understood as affective responses to the experience of transition, and sociocultural adjustment is conceptualized as behavioural factors associated with effective functioning in the host environment. Academic adjustment is defined as “adjustment to the specific demands of academic study” (Schartner & Young, 2016, p. 374). This model allowed us to explore adjustment holistically, recognizing the interconnectedness of the three domains (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013). Many previous studies are conceptually limited in either not recognizing the interrelated nature of different adjustment domains or investigating different adjustment domains separately (Zhou & Todman, 2009).

There were two broader theoretical underpinnings for this conceptualization of adjustment. Firstly, stress and coping approaches that highlight the cognitive appraisal of stressful life transitions and coping strategies employed to deal with these (Ward et al., 2001). Secondly, culture-learning perspectives that emphasise the importance of learning salient characteristics of the new environment (Furnham & Bochner 1982, 1986). Stress and coping approaches are typically used by researchers to study psychological adjustment, while culture-learning approaches are more commonly employed to investigate academic and sociocultural adjustment (Schartner & Young, 2020). We acknowledge that *adjustment* has been a much-debated notion in the HE literature for some time (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Marginson, 2012), and are mindful not to perpetuate a deficit view of international students as “passive” (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). We view this group as active agents that respond to their mobility experiences in rational and intentional ways (Tran & Vu, 2018). Nonetheless, we feel that adjustment can offer a useful conceptual lens for exploring international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schartner, 2023).

**Figure 1**

*Conceptualization of Adjustment*



**Methodology**

The interview data reported here were collected as part of a larger mixed-methods project exploring the experiences of international students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to a quantitative self-report questionnaire aimed at elucidating the impact of COVID-19 stressors on adaptation outcomes (see Schartner, 2023), the project had a strong focus on international students' lived experiences of adjustment. This qualitative strand of the project was underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology foregrounding participant meaning and understanding rather than objective reality (Capper, 2018). This is rooted in the belief that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals interacting with the world” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 3).

Individual lived experiences are best captured using semi-structured interviews (Galletta, 2013), thus 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with international students who undertook postgraduate degree programs (at master's or doctoral level) at UK universities in the academic year 2020-21. The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Board and informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study, a commonly used qualitative method aimed at collecting open-ended data about participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, using a flexible interview protocol (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interviews were conducted online on Zoom in May and June 2021 by either the first or the second author. Mindful of implications of potential underlying power dynamics in qualitative interviewing (Edwards & Holland, 2013), the researchers took care that the interviewer had no preexisting relationship with the interviewees.

Most interviews were conducted by the second author, a bilingual English-Mandarin speaking international doctoral student. The second author's positionality as an international student and cultural 'insider' (Ganga & Scott, 2006) was harnessed as a strength that could be utilized to establish rapport with the research participants. Twenty-seven interviews were conducted in English and three in Mandarin Chinese. In line with a researching multilingually approach (Holmes et al., 2013), the Mandarin transcripts were analysed in the original language in order not to lose subtle and nuanced meanings. The interviews varied in length with the shortest lasting 20 minutes and the longest lasting 110 minutes. They were audio

recorded (with participant permission), transcribed verbatim using Zoom transcription<sup>1</sup>, and fully anonymized. Each interviewee was offered the opportunity to review their transcript but most declined and were happy for their verbatim accounts to be used. In response to calls for alternatives to full transcript member-checking (Harvey, 2014), we employed a dialogic approach where the two authors discussed each interview transcript and compared key themes against our theoretical framework (Figure 1). The interview protocol included questions about participant demographics, their academic, psychological, and sociocultural experiences, as well as questions about social ties and support.

Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) through an online survey, part of the larger project, where respondents could express an interest in a follow-up interview, and (2) through a separate call for participation that was distributed via the researchers' professional networks. The interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 51, were predominantly

**Table 1**  
*Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

No.	Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Gender	Age	Degree
1	Ying	China	F	23	MA
2	Mei	China	F	22	MA
3	Laura	USA	F	41	MA
6	Gaby	Romania	F	Late 30s	MA
8	Xuan	China	M	25	MA
10	Rachel	USA	F	22	MA
13	Yiling	China	F	22	MA
14	Feng	China	M	26	MA
15	Yujia	China	F	23	MA
16	Abdullah	Saudi Arabia	M	26	MA
18	Ika	Indonesia	F	23	MA
19	Min	China	F	23	MA
20	Lixin	China	M	26	MA
21	Emma	USA	F	28	MA
30	Hans	The Netherlands	M	31	MA
4	Karolina	Czech Republic	F	23	MSc
5	Liz	USA	F	34	PhD
7	Aya	Pakistan	F	51	PhD
9	Yuwei	China	F	26	PhD
11	Jake	USA	M	29	PhD
12	Ji-woo	South Korea	F	33	PhD
17	Marianna	Costa Rica	F	32	PhD
22	Lars	Sweden	M	26	PhD
23	Olivia	USA	F	25	PhD
24	Aayan	Indonesia	M	40	PhD
25	Amir	Algeria	M	27	PhD
26	Mary	Ireland	F	42	PhD
27	Layla	Algeria	F	26	PhD
28	Daniela	Bulgaria	F	-	PhD
29	Ece	Turkey	F	-	PhD

female (n=21), and were mostly undertaking degrees in the humanities and social sciences. A majority (n=22) were based in the UK at the time of data collection (Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> We compared each transcript against the audio file to ensure accuracy.



## Data Analysis

The data were analysed in NVivo12 using thematic analysis, a process that “involves the identification of themes with relevance specific to the research focus, the research question, the research context and the theoretical framework” (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 1). The second author followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process, a well-established and frequently cited analytical approach of which they had extensive experience. This involved reading through the full set of transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data (1), before coding excerpts of relevance to the research question (2). Next, the initial codes were grouped into potential themes (3) which were then reviewed (4) and assigned labels (5), before selecting compelling data extracts to illustrate each theme (6) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used a “hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 80) with *adjustment* acting as an initial analytical lens in accordance with the framework above (Figure 1) while also letting themes emerge naturally from the data. This ensured that the analysis process remained iterative throughout alternating between theory and emergent findings (Tracy, 2018). To enhance trustworthiness and credibility we used peer debriefing, where the first author acted as a “critical auditor”, reviewing the transcripts, emerging categories and final themes to assess whether any issues were missed or overemphasized (Janesick, 2015).

## Results

### Academic Adjustment

For the vast majority of the students in this study, teaching was being delivered exclusively online at the time of data collection. Although many found joy in their chosen program of study, remote learning presented a range of challenges. There were 89 references in the data to problematic aspects of online delivery, with students describing it as “challenging” (Ika), “boring” (Abdullah), “awkward” (Lixin), and “like something is missing” (Ika). Several students explained that they had difficulties absorbing information, struggled to fully engage with online classes and found themselves easily distracted, becoming “tired” (Ika) and “not really focusing, just looking at the camera” (Abdullah). Hans described this as “Zoom fatigue”. Some were concerned about an apparent lack of digital skills among their lecturers, for example, Hans, who felt that “it seems that professors have more trouble managing time online than they would in front of class.” Similarly, Laura explained that “some of the module leaders are, in my opinion, doing a very poor job of even covering the content that they're supposed to.” Emma recalled instances of technical difficulties as “not all lecturers were equipped or trained in using zoom or IT.”

Online learning was perceived by many interviewees (46.67%) as a barrier to meaningful interaction. Lars felt that an interactive classroom environment was not easily replicated online as “you couldn’t really engage with your classmates in the same way”. This generated a fair amount of frustration for students like Mei who explained that she “didn’t make new friends in real life but I do make friends online but that only happened in group discussion.” Students reported a lack of “personal connection” (Lars) with their lecturers and lamented in particular the absence of incidental conversations such as “knocking a door and quickly ask a question” (Hans) or chatting to fellow students in the corridor. Laura expressed frustration about the lack of opportunity “to have academic discussions outside of class”, and there was a sense that online interactions often ended abruptly with few opportunities to pick up conversations later. As Mei explained, “after that activity ends, you just lost the connection with that person.”

This lack of connection was compounded by technical issues, such as webcams being switched off, or unstable internet connections which some felt impacted the quality of online interactions. Ika explained that “some people are just

with the camera off and make microphone mute and just really don't know if they're really there or not.” This lack of social presence online was also raised by Liz who explained that “I knew their voices, you know I knew their English, but I didn't even know what their faces look like.”

Several interviewees felt that COVID-19 restrictions and the switch to online learning hampered their academic progress. This was especially evident for doctoral students, such as Layla, who had her fieldwork disrupted.

I was not able to go to Algeria and conduct face to face interviews which delayed my data collection process a lot. Until now I'm still conducting interviews but it's not the same as doing them face to face.

A few students, such as Amir, felt that remote learning had made them “more productive” and had accelerated academic progress. Amir explained that due to fewer social distractions as a result of lockdowns there was “no excuse” to not focus on academic study .

Over half of the participants (53.33%) felt that the quality of their degree program suffered because as a consequence of the pandemic. Hans felt that he had missed out on key aspects of the student experience and explained, “I moved to [host city] to experience the academic life of a renowned university and basically all I did was staring at a screen.” Likewise, Mei felt that “my lifestyle is not like real university life”. Some interviewees questioned the value of their degree program. Laura felt that remote delivery meant that she had been offered “reduced content” and had missed out on “the benefits of being on campus” making her ask herself “am I getting my money worth?”. Similarly, Ika commented on the lack of “hands-on experience” and explained, “I still question whether it's actually really worthy.” Yujia felt that “my experience is much lower than the money I have paid.” A sense of dissatisfaction with the value of the program of study was especially palpable among students who were unable to access crucial facilities on campus, such as “labs or equipment” (Emma).

I couldn't get the lab and obviously if you don't do that you are not progressing so I was very stressed out about graduating, how much my study would be compromised and that kind of thing. (Daniela)

However, for some of the participants, online delivery and remote learning was an enabler rather than a barrier. This was especially the case for those who would normally travel to campus from afar, such as Feng, who appreciated having “more time to read, to research, all by my own because I don't have to commute”, and Aayan, who was happy to “be able to reduce the amount of time spent on just going to university and coming back.” Similarly, mature students with family or work commitments like Mary, a mother-of-two from Ireland, described the pandemic as an “opportunity”.

It opened up the door that I needed to go back into study because I couldn't have done it if it wasn't online, if I was going to have to be travelling to [university city] just in terms of the logistics of getting childminders or arranging my husband's schedule around the kids. So, from that perspective it was absolutely brilliant and being able to work from home in front of my computer, I mean to me it's God's gift, I could not have done it without the pandemic.

Ika also commented on positive aspects of remote learning, such as “being flexible” and being able to “take my time to learn”. Recorded lectures also made materials more accessible, as Ying explains, “sometimes the teacher might add subtitles under the video to ensure the accuracy of the content and knowledge.”

## **Psychological Adjustment**

Many interviewees reported feeling “anxious” (Ji-woo, Layla, Ying), “stressed” (Daniela, Gaby), “unhappy” (Yiling), and “depressed” (Laura, Feng) during the pandemic. Sources of stress included media reports on COVID-19 infection rates which prompted Gaby to avoid following the headlines. She noted the “constant stress that comes from the news. I don't watch the news regarding the Covid and how many deaths that the UK have happened or in Romania.” Similarly, Mei explained that she felt unhappy “when I see those news on those social media, like how many cases increase today.” A fear of contracting the virus was also reported by some interviewees, such as Yujia, who explained that “I didn't want to go out because I'm afraid of infection.”

The health and safety of loved ones in their countries of origin was on the mind of some students like Layla who explained that “I was thinking a lot about my family and kind of them get infected.” Similarly, Liz raised the impact of travel restrictions and noted that “you're thinking about, okay well, if somebody gets sick, then you can't see them.” These worries were amplified for students with direct experience of COVID-19 infection. Marianna recalled that she struggled to sleep when her father contracted the virus. “I received a call from my sister that father had Covid...he is a high blood pressure situation, so I was so worried for him.”

A sense of loneliness was evident in many interviews, with several students reporting feeling “isolated” (Laura, Aayan, Jake) and “lonely” (Ying). Several interviewees (33.22%) explicitly highlighted that they struggled with the separation from family and friends in their countries of origin which was compounded by the uncertainty of when they would be able to see them. This was illustrated by Laura:

I haven't been able to go home and visit my family in the United States for much longer, much longer than normal. So just keeping up motivation, being able to focus, I definitely noticed that I'm more I don't know depressed or less able to deal with stress, less resilience.

Eight interviewees highlighted the challenges of studying exclusively from home during lockdown. Lack of physical space or having to share office space with others impacted some students' ability to work efficiently, as described below by Mary, who had to juggle writing her thesis with home-schooling her children.

I have a boy who's nine and he shared my office space with me, and oh my God nightmare, I mean it's impossible even when I think back, I'm like how did I keep sane? Because you know I could be in a meeting with my supervisor and he'd be waving his hand over my camera, he'd be blocking my camera, turning off my camera, showing pictures of some you know dinosaur that he had just drawn.

Study and living spaces easily blurred, as illustrated by Jake, who explained that differentiating “between my home living space and my workspace is a real struggle. It just like everything kind of became the same, and particularly in the middle of lockdowns when there's nowhere else to go.”

Students who had parental commitments were especially impacted by the closure of schools, described by Mary as “awful”. Below, Laura explained how home-schooling and caring for her children added an additional layer of stress and impacted her ability to focus on their academic studies.

So, my kids have been home from school for most of that time. So that's like a logistical thing...I have my kids to interrupt me, or I need to provide lunch, or they need help with their own homework.

Some ethnically Asian interviewees like Ji-woo worried about their security and felt “not safe when I'm walking down the street”, recalling instances of public assaults such as “a few months ago, an Asian guy got physically attacked next to the library, which has to be a very safe place.”

There have also been times when Asian students of [name of university] were attacked by local people, which affected me. When I first came, I would go out for a run or go for a walk after dinner every night. Then after this happens, I won't go out. (Xuan)

The interviewees employed a range of coping mechanisms to deal with heightened levels of stress, including exercise and “trying to sleep well” (Yiling). Yujia explained that reading was an escape for her to “enter another world of imagination”.

Only six interviewees reported accessing university wellbeing centres or counselling services, and whilst students generally appreciated that this help was offered to them, it was not always perceived as useful. Ece commented on a lack of continuity in the support provided, explaining that she “felt like was I was talking to someone different every time, and I have to repeat the same thing to two different people.” Hans highlighted long waiting times and explained that “waiting for that counsellor to be allocated to me already took weeks, if not months.”

## **Sociocultural Adjustment**

With social mixing curtailed, students had few opportunities to socialize and explore their host cities. This made it difficult for newly arrived students, like Karolina, to forge social ties.

When I moved to [host city], it was quite hard because I was alone there, and I had to stay in a quarantine. I didn't know anyone and then I didn't really have a chance to meet anyone because everything was closed and everything was restricted, so it was just me.

Several students reported a lack of engagement with their host environment, for example, Laura noted that “I don't feel like I have really experienced the UK at all. I've experienced British people and some British lectures, but I don't really have any sense of.” Abdullah noted a sense of “disconnection” from British people. A similar sense of disconnect was reported by Gaby who noted that “you get a degree from UK but you don't experience the life”. Students who were undertaking their degree programs from their home country felt especially detached from the host culture. Ying, who remained in China for the duration of her course, noted that “I can't experience the local customs, food, culture.” Similarly, Lixin stated that “talking to the classmates during the seminar, that's the only thing that I can experience about the British culture.”

Many interviewees (63.33%) highlighted that there were fewer or no social activities on offer to them, and a majority (70.00%) discussed the dynamics of virtual socializing. Although some interviewees reported positive experiences such as online study groups and Zoom Christmas celebrations, the students overwhelmingly felt that these could not replace in-person conversations as “online communication is different” (Daniela) and “you don't have more deeper communication” (Min). Feng explained that “I really miss the physical engagement like being able to see that person or giving a hug.” Jake gave an example of a virtual lunch hour, saying “it's just that's not the same when you all eat while Skyping together.” Lars perceived online socializing as “formal” and explained that “you have to put down a time for a meeting...if it was face to face, you might take coffee and sit down and talk.” There was a sense that naturally occurring conversations, especially one-to-one encounters, were not easily replicated in an online setting and that there was a lack of “true friends” (Xuan) and “friends in real life” (Mei).

The interviewees craved intercultural contact but found this difficult to instigate. Mei noted that there was “very little chance to make friends to foreigners.” Several students from China found their social circle largely limited to nationals with whom they were either studying or sharing accommodation. Yujia explained “the whole social life is relatively closed, and then not very open and is very Chinese-centric.” This was similar for Feng who noted “all of us are

Chinese so I find myself in a totally Chinese environment.” Ying felt she had missed out on opportunities to develop her English language abilities, explaining that “my initial aim of studying abroad was to immerse in the English-speaking environment. However, the online learning made this unable to come true.”

Although examples of encounters with people in the local communities were largely limited to brief one-off service interactions such as food shopping, several students recalled instances of kindness and local people were described as “friendly” (Lixin, Xuan) and “kind” (Aayan). This is illustrated by Feng’s example of supermarket staff, “I always talk with the shopping assistance in Tesco or Asda. They’re very patient and they greet with me every time when I went there for food.”

As COVID-19-related restrictions began to ease, the students started to explore their host environment and socialize with local friends, something described as a “highlight” by Hans. Similarly, Jake recalled that “I was able to go to a pub with my friend and just have a drink and chat and that was really nice.”

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the adjustment of international students in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst a growing number of research studies investigate the experiences of international students during the coronavirus pandemic, there is presently a lack of in-depth qualitative research exploring how a global health crisis affects how international students adjust to life and study abroad. Accordingly, we discuss our findings below through the conceptual lens of “adjustment”. With the vast majority of research assessing the impact of COVID-19 on international students conducted in North America and Australia, our data contributes to understanding how those studying at UK universities have fared during the pandemic.

Our data showed that, by and large, the coronavirus pandemic had a negative effect on international students’ academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment, and that COVID-19-specific stressors either caused or heightened adjustment barriers across all three domains. However, in some areas the findings suggest a more nuanced impact as the pandemic also created opportunities for some students, as discussed below.

Findings regarding international students’ academic adjustment were nuanced as the shift to online learning due to the pandemic acted as both a barrier and enabler of academic adjustment. Most interviewees felt that online classes were less effective than present-in-person teaching, particularly for more interactive discussion-based sessions that rely on students’ social presence. Many students missed a sense of connection with their peers and tutors, while others commented on a perceived lack of preparedness of lecturers which resulted in poor time management and disorganized lecture content. This chimes with evidence that major factors for the success and effectiveness of online classes are learner interactivity (Johnson et al., 2008) and the digital skills of teaching staff (Dorfsman & Horenczyk, 2022).

However, whilst many interviewees would have preferred present-in-person teaching, the flexibility and accessibility of online provision reduced barriers for some, including commuter students and those with childcare responsibilities. This links to evidence by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency showing that online learning during the coronavirus pandemic has coincided with a narrowing of access and attainment gaps as it allowed students to study at their own pace, revisit lecture materials, and organize their studies more flexibly around other responsibilities (Universities UK, 2022). Similar mixed perspectives on the effectiveness of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic were also found in other studies (Almahasees et al., 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). This shows that hybrid course delivery could remain an attractive option for universities in future, with several recent student surveys in the UK indicating an appetite for a blended approach (Cook, 2021; Neves & Hewitt, 2021).

It was evident that COVID-19-related stressors hampered international students’ psychological adjustment, and the pandemic was reported by all interviewees to be detrimental to their sense of wellbeing and mental health, albeit in different

ways. Heightened stress and anxiety levels, as well as feelings of isolation and loneliness, were common experiences among the participants, corroborating previous research on the mental health toll of the pandemic on international students (Lai et al., 2020). Students with parental responsibilities faced additional pressures as they tried to juggle their academic studies with lockdown childcare, providing further evidence for the negative impact of the pandemic on parental mental health and wellbeing (Dawes et al., 2021).

Our data showed that international students faced unique psychological challenges during the pandemic, including concerns about the health of loved ones abroad, whom they were unable to see due to travel restrictions, and increased levels of loneliness compounded by not being able to form a new social support network in the UK. For students of Asian ethnicity, worries about COVID-19-related discrimination and hostility, or first-hand experience thereof, caused additional stress and anxiety. This latter finding adds to a growing body of research on the unique challenges faced by students of Asian heritage during the pandemic and serves to illustrate how the racial stereotyping (Madriaga & McCaig, 2019) and collective “othering” of international students (Ladegaard, 2017) may intensify during times of global crisis. It also demonstrates how broader issues such as the portrayal of COVID-19 as a “Chinese virus” in the national media of countries that host international students can have severe implications for individuals (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022).

Despite these challenges to psychological adjustment, it is important to highlight that the students in our sample were resilient and employed a range of coping mechanisms to manage uncertainty and stress, including exercise, hobbies, and talking to loved ones. That said, few students in our sample accessed the wellbeing and mental health support offered by their host universities which is in line with research suggesting that professional counselling services are routinely underused by this group (Boafo-Arthur & Boafo-Arthur, 2016).

More than any other adjustment domain, international students’ sociocultural adjustment suffered possibly the most as a consequence of the pandemic as restrictions on travel and social mixing made it difficult for students to fully immerse themselves in the host environment. There were few opportunities to experience “British culture” and forge friendships with people in the local communities, leaving many to feel detached from the host environment. Whilst this sense of detachment was not uncommon among international students prior to the coronavirus pandemic (Newsome & Cooper, 2016), restrictions on social mixing are likely to have exacerbated this (Zhang & Sustarsic, 2022). There is ample evidence that friendships between international students and local people, especially local students, are rare (Schartner, 2015; Newsome & Cooper, 2016), and our data strongly suggests that COVID-19-related restrictions may have intensified this segregation.

Those who studied abroad during COVID-19 missed out on many aspects of the *international student experience*, but recent surveys suggest that study abroad remains attractive despite the pandemic (Stacey, 2020; Ross, 2022), although there may be a shift in the mobility flow of international students as regional HE hubs may gain in popularity (Mok et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study offers nuanced perspectives on the lived experiences of international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is one of the first studies on this topic to use the conceptual lens of *adjustment* to inform data collection and analysis. The findings strongly suggest that the coronavirus pandemic affected the adjustment of international students in multiple and complex ways. For some individuals, it acted as an enabler and created opportunities that were previously inaccessible to them, but for most, it created barriers to adjustment or heightened challenges that were salient pre-pandemic. The pandemic affected all three adjustment areas under study here and the findings contribute to a burgeoning literature that explores *adjustment* holistically, illustrating the interrelationships of academic, psychological, and sociocultural processes (Schartner & Young, 2020; Schartner, 2023). In particular, a sense of disconnect from others, as a result of the curtailment

of social mixing, affected all areas of international students' adjustment. This has implications for student support and welfare services at universities hosting international students and underpins the following recommendations for HE policy.

As epidemics are increasingly likely (Marani et al., 2021), it is imperative that universities develop clear institutional policies on how to support their international students, and staff working with them, in times of global upheaval. In order to be effective, it is crucial that future emergency response strategies are evidence-based and informed by accounts of lived experiences, such as those emerging from the current study and others (see Schartner, 2023). Insights from qualitative research can help universities to scenario-plan for future challenges and can support the development of a *blueprint* for appropriate student welfare and education continuity strategies. At the core of student welfare responses should be measures aimed at alleviating loneliness and social isolation. It is crucial that, where possible, academic departments work with student integration offices to develop virtual networking opportunities that can be deployed when social mixing is curtailed. Furthermore, given evidence that international students are often unaware of mental health support available to them (Williams et al., 2018) and reluctant to seek out professional help (ICEF, 2022); it is crucial that university wellbeing centres are sufficiently resourced to offer proactive and culturally sensitive support to students in times of crisis. Finally, digital competencies should be a priority in professional development offered to academic staff to support any future transitions to online delivery.

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## **Siloed in Their Thoughts: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education Leaders' Perceptions of Internationalization in Changing Times**

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### **Abstract**

*With academic capitalism as a framework, we conducted a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach to explore higher education leaders' perceptions of internationalization during the initial stages of the Covid-19 shutdown in 2020. The study's findings indicate that, overall, administrators value internationalization as a process that creates quality educational programming. However, leaders are influenced by institutions' cultures and priorities, and they feel isolated as they seek to appeal to constituents to promote internationalization. Aware of the increasing use of commercial models and emphasis on generating revenue to compensate for funding shortfalls, higher education leaders vacillate from emphasizing revenue to promoting educational and social value. Upper-level administrators prioritize articulated institutional commitment and administrative leadership for internationalization over curriculum and faculty policies and practices. Overall, upper-level administrators value internationalization.*

**Keywords:** academic capitalism, administration, internationalization, leaders, perceptions, phenomenology

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### **Introduction**

Comprehensive internationalization has been lauded as one of the most transformative initiatives undertaken in the last two decades (Rumbley et al., 2012). According to ACE's publication, *Mapping Internationalization on US Campuses*, the only comprehensive source of data and analysis on internationalization, the most influential determiners of internationalization efforts are administrators (Helms et al., 2017). However, scholars and critics have criticized higher education leaders for practices motivated by profit rather than education, especially the practice of prioritizing international student recruitment above other areas of internationalization for monetary gain (Altbach, 2006, 2012; Andrews, 2006; Fischer, 2018; Schrecker, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). In 2002 and again in 2011, Hans de Wit posited that higher education institutions (HEIs) approach internationalization to suit their specific purposes, and Altbach (2012) condemned higher education institutions (HEIs) for lowering standards to increase profit from international educational programming. Whether for education or profit and regardless of the effectiveness of the strategies, educational

programs and priorities do not exist in a vacuum—they emerge from the leaders who actualize them, and research is needed to understand higher education leaders’ perceptions of and motivations for or against internationalization (Appe, 2020; McClure, 2016).

Given the recent disruptions in higher education and the global economy because of politics and Covid-19 (Fischer, 2019), many, including the faculty who lead internationalization on U.S. campuses (Deardorff, 2009), will benefit from current studies on higher education leaders’ perceptions of and motivations for internationalization. Therefore, this phenomenological study builds on past studies and continues to describe administrators’ perceptions of internationalization using academic capitalism as a framework. The study was designed to answer the following questions:

What perceptions do upper administrators have of internationalization as a process and of the areas that internationalization involves?

What perceptions do administrators have of their decisions about internationalization?

To conduct this study, we relied on the American Council on Education’s (ACE) 2017 definition of comprehensive internationalization (CI) as a process “that seeks to align and integrate policies, programs, and initiatives to position colleges and universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected.” The ACE 2017 framework for internationalization includes articulated institutional commitment, administrative leadership, curriculum, faculty policies and practices, student mobility, and partnerships.

## **Background**

American higher education leaders’ motivation for what later became known as internationalization was initially influenced by historical, cultural, and economic factors leading to the United States becoming preeminent in the world for international education (Garcia & Villareal, 2014). After the Second World War, federal initiatives emerged to develop inbound and outbound research and education programs, and federal funding supported these programs (Graham & Diamond, 1997). Also, the Nobel Prize gave prestige to American research programs, and federal funding bolstered scientific research during The Cold War to compete with the Soviet Union (Graham & Diamond, 1997; Thelin, 2004). American foreign policy historically drove the U.S. government to support education abroad programming, including the Less Commonly Taught Languages program (Lane-Toomey, 2014). Moreover, globalization and the widespread use of English as the language of commerce further encouraged the proliferation of international education initiatives in the United States (Altbach, 2004; Garcia & Villareal, 2014). Jane Knight (1994) identified and described internationalization as a process for educators to prepare citizens to “work and live in an environment that is both local and global in nature” (p. 1). Different definitions of internationalization exist, and, depending on the stakeholder, some areas of internationalization take priority over others (Trilokekar, 2007; Zolfaghari et al., 2009). The commonly accepted definition of internationalization is the process of “integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service elements of an institution” (Jane Knight & International Association of Universities, 2006).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, internationalization was recognized as a response to increasing globalization (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007). The American Council on Education (ACE, 2017) developed a model that encapsulated the breadth of the field of internationalization and includes the following areas: 1) articulated institutional commitment, 2) administrative leadership, 3) curriculum, 4) faculty policies and practices, 5) student mobility, and/or 6) partnerships. At the same time, funding sources for higher education diminished, and higher education institutions began to utilize practices to fill funding gaps (Manning, 2018). Concerns about misunderstandings and misconceptions of internationalization as a process abounded, including notions that internationalization was achieved by increasing the number of international students, faculty, and agreements (Knight, 2011). Knight (2011) asserted that the success of internationalization cannot be limited to quantifiable outcomes, calling for higher education leaders to “ensure that internationalization is on the right track ... as higher education sectors weather these rather turbulent times where competitiveness, rankings, and commercialism seem to be the driving forces” (p. 15). To contend with funding shortfalls due to federal and state budget cuts and the growing costs of higher education, strategic focus in international education changed, with HEIs prioritizing one aspect of internationalization in particular, international students, themselves. Many institutions focused on admissions because international students oftentimes paid more in tuition than U.S. students, and

whose contributions toward competitive research programs, patents, and other lucrative initiatives helped, HEIs fill funding gaps (Altbach, 2012; Fischer, 2019; Manning, 2018).

In 2017, for the first time in almost two decades, undergraduate student enrollment in the United States began to decline (IIE, 2018). Some blamed poor practices that de-emphasized standards and emphasized profit (Altbach, 2012; Knight, 2012; Rumbley et al., 2012; Taylor, 2004; Zemsky, 2005), while others claimed the nationalistic rhetoric of Donald Trump's administration caused international students to pause and reconsider studying in the United States (Fischer, 2019). However, as Knight and de Wit (2018) assert, nationalism is nothing new. In an article in *The Chronicle of Education*, Fischer (2019) countered the pervasive allegations that the rhetoric and policies of President Donald J. Trump's administration led to the decline in international student enrollment, evoking Altbach's (2012) scathing indictment of HEIs for using commercial institutional practices and touting institutional missions that include global education without aligning resources and strategies to the missions. In addition to reviving Altbach's criticisms, Fischer (2019) asserted that blaming the Trump administration entirely for the downward trends and problems in international education is too simplistic. Faculty members, historically the greatest champions for international education, blamed HEI leadership for compromising the democratic and humanistic ideals that the American academe is bound to protect by creating international branch programs in China and the Middle East (Fischer, 2019). Although international student enrollment had begun to decline, the United States was still the top destination for international students in 2019, according to the IIE Open Doors (2020) annual report. Then, the pandemic, COVID-19 began to spread across the globe. Consequently, Fall enrollment dropped, and the funding crisis in U.S. institutions of higher education worsened in ways that are still unquantifiable (Mitchell, 2020; Smalley, 2020).

Higher education overall, and international educational programs and initiatives, have been irrevocably altered in ways that scholars will undoubtedly spend decades researching. This study was conducted during shutdowns when travel bans designed were implemented to lower the infection rate, and international educators were scrambling to propose redesigning their programs. The participants, higher education leaders, were re-evaluating their priorities for funding and organization. Due to the shutdown, HEIs were unable to use international programming as a means of generating revenue if that was ever the primary motive as Altbach (2012) and others (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) alleged, and the future of international education and its place in HEIs was uncertain. Therefore, participants, all executive-level administrators who determined strategy and resources for international education, offered a perspective stripped of past expectations or assumptions about international education as a profitable or even possible endeavor. With some HEIs still prohibiting education abroad and international travel and many COVID protocols still in place, this study provides insight into the phenomenon of leaders' perceptions of internationalization as a process and the components of internationalization, and of their decisions about internationalization.

## Literature Review

To create a foundation on which to build the current study, the researcher reviewed the literature on internationalization and leaders' influence in creating a culture for internationalization (Adel et al., 2018; de Wit, 2013, 2018; Helms et al., 2017; Hudznik, 2011, 2013; Merckx, 2018; Merckx & Nolan, 2018; Peterson & Helms, 2013), and academic capitalism and internationalization (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009).

### Academic Capitalism, Leadership, and Internationalization

Stafford and Taylor (2016) claim that internationalization is an opportunity for institutions to merge agendas to achieve the public good and raise revenue, but Altbach (2012), Pasque (2007), and de Wit (2013) argue that those agendas are, de facto, conflicts of interest. Using a business model, institutional leaders emphasize student mobility to create international student and faculty exchanges, focusing on lucrative student enrollment in marketable programs rather than on academic integrity and societal good (Manning, 2018). Academic capitalism is a term to describe "a regime" in higher education that uses commercial practices (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Due to funding shortages resulting from the loss of state funding, academic capitalist regimes took action that added revenue generation to the function of the university, leading to commercial systems and practices in higher education (Kauppinen, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) condemned using knowledge as a commodity rather than facilitating knowledge for the

sake of public good and examined practices that emerge from new circuits of knowledge and new markets, including initiatives for internationalization. Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) described an academic capitalist knowledge regime that utilizes short-term international exchange programs with thin educational offerings, distance learning programs with lower success, corporate-style patenting of knowledge, and unethical recruiting methods designed to increase profit from tuition. While pivotal, their study was criticized for being U.S.-centric and for not being focused on one vein of academic capitalism in higher education (Zemsky, 2009), and it was Kauppinen (2012) who built on Slaughter and Rhoades' (2009) study by exploring transnational networks and knowledge as a commodity in a theoretical and mixed-methods study.

Kauppinen (2012) elaborated on the “networks (e.g., new circuits of knowledge, networks that intermediate between the public and private sectors) and practices (e.g., new investment and marketing activities)” associated with internationalization that draw various groups in higher education institutions into a new economy (Kauppinen, 2012, p. 553). Networks are increasingly mobile and fluid and tend to operate increasingly transnationally (de Wit, 2013; Kauppinen, 2012). Nations and systems of interconnected nations, such as those connected through the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University of Students (ERASMUS), (a European Union student exchange program), transcended being knowledge and cultural exchanges and created opportunities for academics and universities to diversify their funding base (Heyl, 2007; Kauppinen, 2012). Academic capitalism leads to practices and new economies within transnational networks, and social good is reduced to a secondary motivation to create transnational education programs and internationalize campuses (Kauppinen, 2012; Rhoades & Szelényi, 2011; Santos, 2006; Schugurensky, 2006).

To ensure the goal of coping with funding shortfalls by utilizing a business model, academic capitalist regimes move away from faculty governance and become top-down (McClure, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). With faculty governance out of the way, higher education leaders are the decision-makers with authority to prioritize not just revenue-generating practices but also cost-saving practices that further commercialize higher education (Appe, 2020; McClure, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). According to Appe (2020), the academic capitalist model is a top-down approach to decision making in which upper-administrators use “frameworks of corporate governance.” The model is also characterized by emphasizing learning, not teaching, utilizing professionals other than faculty members, thereby minimizing faculty control of the curriculum (Appe, 2020; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Also, the academic capitalist model commercializes the curriculum, resulting in practices like emphasizing short-term programs to move students through quickly without writing a dissertation, and online education that is not accessible to diverse populations of students who may have limited access to technological equipment and resources (Appe, 2020; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Top-down leadership fosters networks that connect the state, HEIs, and markets, and more levels of administrators ensure the sustainability of resources and organizational structuring to proliferate the commercialization of higher education (McClure, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Considering the imperative role of upper-administrators to ensure policies, resources, and staffing and the profound effect academic capitalism has on internationalization initiatives at HEIs, it is surprising that more research has not been conducted on upper-administrators' perceptions of higher education (Appe, 2020; McClure, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The researchers used academic capitalism and phenomenology as frameworks for the study. Like internationalization, academic capitalism begins with leaders making decisions based on their perceptions. The theory of academic capitalism asserts that funding shortfalls and competition led to the capitalization of knowledge and widespread use of commercial practices in HEIs (Manning, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). The practice of academic capitalism subsists on the upper-level administrators acting as decision-makers about the budget, hiring, and organizational structure for all programs and initiatives, including internationalization (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004); therefore, academic capitalism provides the contextual framework for this study. Academic administrators are “left with the task of balancing institutional resources, faculty time, expertise, and effort” (Manning, 2018). However, academic capitalism is not just about revenue – academic capitalism is about commercialization, which requires leaders who will effectively manage the commercialization of higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Therefore, academic capitalism results in the growing consolidation of upper-level administrative power, the growing number of non-faculty and administrative roles,

and the decline in the number of faculty hires and faculty governance (McClure, 2016; Schrecker, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). As Slaughter and Rhoades (2014) assert, HEIs cannot engage in academic capitalist practices without upper-level administrative leaders who can create institutional priorities, make decisions about institutional and corporate partnerships, approve and implement the strategic plan, and decide who to hire and appoint to managerial roles to guarantee access to institutional resources and normalize commercial practices.

## Methodology

The qualitative theoretical framework, phenomenology, describes clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994) related to the phenomenon of HEI leaders' perceptions of internationalization and their decisions about internationalization. Phenomenology is an approach to describe the human experience in the context of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2002) – in this case, the phenomenon of higher education leaders' shifting priorities for internationalization as they are confronted with funding shortfalls and HEI's increasing use of the business model (Manning, 2018).

According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research rests on the assumption that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with groups in society, and phenomenology is apt for describing awareness in the context of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To understand the leaders' perceptions of internationalization and their perceptions of themselves as creators of institutional cultures for internationalization, the researcher conducted a phenomenological study to explore the phenomenon of internationalization by describing leaders' approaches to and reasons for internationalization in the context of funding shortfalls. Higher education leaders who employ internationalization as a process are the decision-makers for which areas are promoted as priorities, and they decide if their emphases on different areas of internationalization are aimed to promote opportunities for education, revenue, or both.

## Participants

The researcher sought participants by emailing contacts in listservs for NAFSA Association of International Educators, the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC), the International Educators Council of Missouri and Illinois (IECMI), and by using snowball sampling. The author interviewed eight participants who were decision-makers for internationalization and who had administrative oversight of the senior international officer (SIO). None of the participants were in interim roles and all were over the age of 25 and worked for U.S. accredited institutions of higher education. All the participants were upper-level administrators with Vice President and Provost titles.

The researcher emailed participants to affirm that they met the inclusion criteria. No interviews were conducted without informed consent. The researcher conducted eight 30- to 45-minute semi-structured interviews on Zoom that were digitally recorded with the participants' permission. Utilizing an interview protocol, the researcher asked 12 questions using the American Council on Education's (ACE) (2017) areas of internationalization as a framework for the questions. The questions delved into the concept of internationalization and participants' priorities for specific areas of internationalization. Also, the questions addressed participants' approaches to internationalization. In addition to questioning approaches to internationalization within the context of leaders' priorities within the assumed context of academic capitalism, the questions explore leaders' motivations for internationalization. The questions were:

1. Describe your experience and background in higher education. How is your role related to international education and internationalization at your institution?
2. What is your sense of the importance of internationalization at your institution?
3. How do you define internationalization?
4. What aspect or aspects of internationalization are most important: 1) articulated institutional commitment, 2) administrative leadership, 3) curriculum, 4) faculty policies and practices, 5) student mobility, and/or 6) partnerships?
5. Why are the aspects you mentioned priorities for you?
6. How do you approach establishing those priorities at your institution?
7. Do you feel that you have encouraged an organizational culture toward internationalization at your institution?



8. What are the reasons and motivations for or against internationalization?
9. In your own words, what are the key characteristics of a successful international program?
10. How should leaders prepare their followers to embrace internationalization?
11. How do you identify problem areas that may require a change?
12. What role do administrators or leaders play in the quality of international programs?

The researcher assumes that the higher education leaders being interviewed are at least aware of the shift toward using commercial practices in higher education and that they all contend with challenges due to funding shortfalls and given the timing of the study during the initial phases of the shutdown in 2020, a potential enrollment crisis. Also, the participants could stop or pause the interview without prejudice or penalty and had anonymity.

## **Data Analysis**

The researcher, a practitioner in international education and an administrator, utilized approaches from social sciences, folkloristics, and anthropology, specifically, indigenous concept analysis (emic) and indigenous typologies of participants' transcripts to identify familiar themes and ideas. The researcher created a chart of codes, code descriptions, and subcategories for each code (Privitera & Ghlgrim-Delzell, 2019) to investigate HEI leaders' perceptions. Using member checking and thick description of the transcripts, the researcher then analyzed the chart to determine invariant themes (Privitera & Ghlgrim-Delzell, 2019). To achieve horizontalization, codes helped to analyze the transcripts and discover repeated statements and ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Synthesis emerged after she integrated connected ideas that described the phenomenon of HEI leaders' perceptions of themselves as leaders and of the process of internationalization.

## **Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher performed member checks of interpretations and key concepts and phrases and kept a journal about potential interferences and biases before the interviews and throughout the coding process (Merriam, 2002), eventually achieving what Patton (2015) described as "Epoch," a clear and unbiased mindset. Furthermore, the process of reflexivity was continuously used through the data analysis and research process by writing in a research journal and self-monitoring for biases (Patton, 2015) and recorded ideas in bracketed research notes while analyzing coding to separate personal experience from the participants' experiences (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Results**

### **Theme 1: A Shift in the Function of Internationalization**

The study's findings indicate that upper-level administrators perceive themselves as passionate advocates for internationalization for personal reasons and out of a commitment to societal good; yet, they have become actors whose leadership is affected by the rise of and widespread growth of academic capitalism. The participants expressed that the values they hold as individuals, such as diversity and experiential education, are not priorities to integral stakeholders for internationalization, such as the board of trustees, other upper-level leaders, and the president. Participants used the language of business to explain their passion and business terms to explain their professional accomplishments. Furthermore, participants spoke to different campus constituencies about different priorities, sensing when internationalization would be valued for philosophical or educational reasons and when internationalization was valued for revenue potential. The participants grappled with conflicts of interest between campus constituents and within themselves, so much so that, as Participant Five put it, they became "siloes in their thoughts."

Participants articulated their value of internationalization as a tool to prepare students to compete in a global market and workforce. Participant Five said,



We are sending students out into the world; they are going to act at a global level. It's no longer you're going to go work for a company in Wisconsin and you're only going to deal with the politics and the business within Wisconsin. We are acting across different countries, across the world.

The interviewee discussed internationalization as an integral tool for creating campus diversity, and stated diversity for the sake of intercultural experiential education is their top priority. For others, they explained, they value the revenue potential. As the participant explained:

I think it's easy for people to get bogged down in, for instance, if our CFO is trying to balance a budget, it's very easy to get bogged down into, 'Well, this is what we are experiencing this year ... we need our expenses to be at this level.' So, it's getting pulled down into the weeds and out of the strategy, and where sometimes it's difficult to look out into the future or look up and out and say, 'This is what we need to be doing, because of A, B, and C, versus this is what I am experiencing today. And all I know is that we need to control our expenses.

Participant Seven also explained that the diversity and curricular needs the participant perceived as essential were at odds with what the institution was interested in accomplishing through internationalization, and the awareness of their needs affected her approach to internationalization. Participant Seven said,

Because leaders and Board of Trustees members, when they think of international student enrollment, the first thing they think of is, 'Cha-ching, they're paying cash.' They don't think about what it's doing to help their students evolve.

Later, the participant added,

[The Board members] don't think about what it means to have a diverse student body that celebrates differences and how they're going to be putting out a better product than their competitors. They're just looking at that bottom line ... if we could get 10 international students who paid cash, we would be so much better off next year, and that's not what it should be about.

Therefore, the participant chose to rely on agencies to recruit international students and avoid traveling to recruit, and the participant de-emphasized study abroad programming and conversations about internationalizing the curriculum to focus on co-curricular activities, such as a global food festival.

Participant Eight, an upper-level administrator at an institution with a large international student population, described a passion for international education while also using the language of business. Initially, the interviewee framed professional achievements related to student enrollment numbers and the participant's involvement with recruitment organizations and frequently discussed the return on investment from working with recruitment agents. The participant spoke extensively about using recruitment agents and marketing professionals as "partners" and called the curriculum "our product." They emphasized the importance of the role of administration in giving the faculty a voice and said, "If [faculty] don't have the support of a dean or a vice president or a CFO or someone like that, then everything else falls to the ground," explained Participant Eight. When asked about the importance of internationalization as a process, the participant began to speak more quickly and leaned forward and said that internationalization is integral to creating inclusion and diversity in higher education:

Diversity is the easy part, finding a group of people from different backgrounds, but what I think is really important from an internationalization perspective is it allows us to facilitate conversations around equity and inclusion.

After expressing grief about sending international students' home during the shutdown, the participant explained that quality educational programming is impossible without international students. Then, the participant began to discuss their personal experiences traveling and interacting with intercultural and international friends gained through that travel.

I've learned and gained so much personally and professionally through being a part of internationally diverse experiences, and I'm so passionate about my job and my students, and I want my students to have a good experience ... I want them to have the same benefit that I had in my professional career. That's my big driver, personally.

Like Participant Eight, Participant One had personal reasons motivating them to value internationalization for academic integrity and cultural enrichment while also expressing a sense of duty to be successful within the academic capitalist model as an administrator. Participant One described achievements at recruiting in terms of revenue, saying,

We make somewhere around \$2 million. For an institution this size, that's a major, major [accomplishment]... we're pulling in two to three [million] in international recruitment." The participant finished the question about

the participant's background in higher education and current role related to internationalization by describing different perspectives.

Participant One said, "One of the perspectives professionally is that I went off to college and had never been around people that were different, from different cultures growing up." The participant described the participant's experience of having a roommate from overseas and the influence of international education on the participant's life, saying that their family and career are internationalized and a product of internationalization. The interviewee explained that their purpose was aligned with the institutional mission and described the experience at the institution as "a blessing," saying that the institutional history was "serving and helping bring people here," including African American students before slavery had ended, and women students before women were widely accepted into higher education. "We don't have a large budget," and revenue enables the institution to "prepare students to be able to compete in a global market from an educational, from an emotional, and a social application."

Participant Two said they have different audiences to ensure funding for institutional resources, explaining that the board of trustees and the president want revenue. Like the other participants, they were beholden to a personal purpose and their duty as an administrator to use business practices and generate revenue. The participant, a provost, explained, "I'm an administrator, so it comes back to numbers a lot of the time. I think that we want to increase our international students because, one, it's profitable for the university. Two, it creates multiculturalism on campus." Like the other participants, Participant Seven believed their role as an upper-level administrator involved using internationalization efforts on profitable endeavors.

## **Theme 2: Upper-Level Administrators' Top Priorities for Internationalization Include Articulated Administrative Commitment and Leadership**

The researcher asked interviewees to define internationalization, and then each participant was asked to rank ACE's (2017) six areas of internationalization in order of importance: 1) Articulated institutional commitment, 2) administrative leadership, 3) curriculum, 4) faculty policies and practices, 5) student mobility, and 6) partnerships. Subsequently, the researcher asked interviewees to explain their rationale for the order of importance they chose. Overwhelmingly, participants valued administrative leadership and articulated institutional commitment to internationalization as the top two areas of internationalization. They said that administrative leadership influences the articulated institutional commitment, or vice-versa, and those two areas of internationalization determine what areas will be prioritized within top-down leadership structures.

Participant One also placed leadership as a top priority for areas of internationalization and described the importance of good upper-level administration in both moral and economic terms. Participant One said administrative leadership was a top priority for internationalization and described each institutional leader's connection to the mission, including the participant's own, saying, "So we are a Christian institution. We want students from all over the world and we share that Christian mission." Then, after describing the institution's history of including oppressed members of society as part of the Christian mission, they asserted that leadership was also integral to ensuring that internationalization could be a tool to raise revenue. Savvy upper-level administrators, they explained, should seek diverse international students because "it's like diversifying your assets." Participant One said that some institutions that had emphasized that China would have lost students and revenue in the spring of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutions that prioritized Brazilian students would have slowed their internationalization efforts when the currency was devalued, but their institution did not suffer enrollment losses because they and other leaders at their HEI had strategically recruited for diverse populations.

Participant Four explained they valued administrative leadership because they "are actually leading and creating the vision and willing to roll up their sleeves," and explained that curriculum was the administrators' "product." The participant, an upper-level administrator, discussed the deans' roles in guiding the faculty, and discussed the importance of "curriculum with learning objectives that are properly crafted and properly assessed." They did not discuss teaching or faculty when discussing the curriculum as an integral aspect of internationalization.

Participants asserted a connection between articulated institutional commitment and administrative leadership, noting that leaders are the actors who articulate institutional commitment and make hiring decisions to ensure the proliferation of administrative leadership. Participant One said, "There's some bleed-over in the way [articulated

institutional commitment and administrative leadership] work, but that's definitely the first step." The participant said that the administrative leadership is responsible for writing international student diversity into the strategic plan to ensure revenue from the international student population by ensuring the institution does not become overly reliant on one country for enrollment. "It's like diversifying your assets," they explained. Also, an articulated institutional commitment will ensure that the strategic plan includes priorities to justify hiring more staff members to support the international students from a centralized office.

Participant Five said that articulated administrative commitment was the top priority: "Yeah. It all filters down from there. If we're not committed from leadership and the Board down, then [internationalization's] never going to happen." However, as they noted, "There are realities of higher education right now that are making it difficult to ... especially for some small colleges, for instance ... even stay open. So, there's this fear of the financial aspect and focusing more on that fiscal aspect of revenue versus expenses rather than maybe what we've dealt with in the past that's a little more philosophical."

### **Theme 3: Upper-level Administrators Ranked Curriculum and Faculty Policies and Practices as Low-Priority Areas of Internationalization**

When ranking their priorities for areas of internationalization, the participants ranked curriculum and faculty policies and practices after articulated institutional commitment and administrative leadership. None of the participants discussed teaching when elaborating on their ideas about curriculum and faculty policies and practices as prioritized areas of internationalization. Over the course of the entire study, only one participant mentioned teaching briefly in the context of student mobility, not curriculum and faculty policies and practices. The participants focused on administrative oversight of the faculty to assess the curriculum and create faculty policies and practices to ensure institutional effectiveness. Participant Three explained that articulated institutional commitment to internationalization is a higher priority because that commitment directly influences the curriculum. Participant Four used the same logic for prioritizing administrative leadership to ensure the curriculum for internationalization. "[Administrative leadership and articulated institutional commitment] drive faculty policies and practices," said Participant Three, before adding that articulated institutional commitment would also lead to student mobility and partnerships because the administrative leadership would ensure outcomes connected to articulated priorities. Nothing was possible with the articulated commitment and the administration, and the upper-level administrators were responsible for managing the faculty members to guide the curriculum.

None of the participants alluded to shared governance to ensure the delivery of institutional priorities for internationalization; instead, they focused on connecting departments and administrators to ensure the delivery of internationalized programming and the curriculum. Participants focused on the importance of assessment when discussing curriculum, and they perceived the administration as the leaders of the assessment process. Participant One said,

To ensure institutional effectiveness you need to have assessment. You need to have [global curriculum] in every major instead of just one class called Global Issues. There needs to be something that prepares these young people for the globalized world that they're going to be going into, and it needs to be able to be assessed in the institutional learning outcomes, ILO.

Participant Eight also placed curriculum beneath administrative leadership and articulated institutional commitment because, as they explained, the curriculum is the "product" and administrators lead the process of developing "properly crafted and properly assessed" learning objectives. Participant Four said that faculty policies and practices should be prioritized after administrative leadership because "if you don't have leadership on board, it's very hard to do things, especially because higher ed is very bureaucratic." They said faculty have the most important role at the institution "outside of administration." Pausing, they added, "A lot of people forget that we're serving the administration, we're serving the faculty, and we're serving the students." Then, Participant Four explained that the curriculum was a lower priority because faculty practices and policies and the "leadership support to infuse [the curriculum]" are essential to pursuing internationalization.

While none of the participants discussed teaching when discussing curriculum and faculty policies and procedures, focusing instead on assessment, they did raise the subject of co-curricular programming and education abroad program development. Participant Seven said that they wanted to teach the faculty before endeavoring to internationalize,

and when the researcher asked them to explain, they simply said, “Instruct them to instruct” by modeling “what [internationalization] looks like.” In response to the researcher’s follow-up questions, the participant abandoned the topic of curriculum and faculty policies and practices and discussed international festivals and internationalized dining options.

In addition to assessment and co-curricular programming, participants also discussed education abroad; however, participants prioritized the other areas of internationalization over education abroad, and discussed it in the context of student mobility, not curriculum and faculty policies and practices. Again, the upper-level administrators focused on the co-curricular programming and business aspects of education abroad programming. Participant One said, “We have one group that’s going to do service working in hospitals in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. We have another group that goes to Mexico. Plus, we’re the school of record for a school in Thailand ... plus, we’re doing biodiversity in the Galapagos Islands and Belize, and I actually get money from those because we’re a school of record.”

Participant One explained that education abroad is risky and suggested utilizing consortiums to minimize the risk and cost of outbound programming. They also explained that serving as a school of record can generate revenue.

The participants spoke of the students’ presence on campus and experiences on international campuses as part of the learning experience as much as the curriculum. Each participant discussed the value of intercultural exchanges, but only one participant related the presence of international students to teaching. “International students bring a richness to the campus community,” said Participant Three. “And really [internationalization] is about how we teach our classes. So, there’s a global perspective and a lot of different areas instead of looking at what we do in the Ozarks here.”

## Discussion

Upper-level administrators perceive themselves and other administrators as the leaders of internationalization, and this finding is aligned with research that asserts that internationalization is administrator-driven (Hudzik, 2015; Helms et al., 2017; McClure, 2016; Peterson & Helms, 2013; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Furthermore, administrators are conflicted and isolated as they grapple with reconciling their philosophical investment in internationalization with academic capitalist imperatives. Within themselves and across the campus community, participants are struggling to achieve internationalization for both public good and revenue, as Stafford and Taylor (2016) can be achieved. However, they struggle against internal and external challenges to focus on the public good as HEIs expand their commercial practices and networks (Altbach, 2012; de Wit, 2013; Kauppinen et al., 2016; Pasque, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Also, in alignment with the literature, HEI upper-level administrators focus more on overseeing the assessment and development of the curriculum for revenue-generating programs than on teaching (Appe, 2020; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The leaders who participated in this study disassociated teaching from the curriculum, focusing instead on assessment, and this perception aligns with recent studies that indicate that a symptom of academic capitalism is a tendency to focus on the learning, not the teaching (Appe, 2020; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Administrators in this study, as in recent studies, measure, and value measures of learning to ensure accreditation and increase student retention and graduation rates (Appe, 2020; McClure, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Notably, the findings indicate that leaders care about generating revenue through programming and when revenue is not possible, locating other revenue-generating funding sources. Other recent studies of internationalization indicate similar findings (Appe, 2020).

The timing of the study is relevant, because travel was not possible and the revenue was suspended for the foreseeable future due to the shot-down. The participants were upper-level administrators at institutions leading the struggle at their institutions to establish online programming and function remotely. Without knowing what the future held for international education and higher education, they took the time to participate in anonymous interviews. The study findings indicate that each leader genuinely valued internationalization outside of the potential for revenue it offered.

Genuinely caring and committed leaders face complexities and pressure when they are in leadership positions that require them to work as facilitators for universities that treat international student offices as profit centers (Heyl, 2018). The upper-level administrators who participated in this study perceive the value of internationalization and care about internationalization for ensuring academic integrity and intercultural competencies for a safer, more peaceful, prosperous, and healthy world.

## Implications and Conclusion

The findings indicate that administrators perceive internationalization as an essential aspect of quality educational programming, as well as a source of revenue. The administrators customized a process of implementing different areas of internationalization at their institution based on their perceptions of internationalization as being an administrator-led endeavor with potential and risk, both human and fiscal.

The findings also indicate that upper-level administrators strive to move between many silos at their institutions, communicating to different audiences with different priorities. Also, leaders are isolated and under pressure due to conflicts of interests (their own and others') within internationalization, and the shift in higher education to the academic capitalist model with a top-down leadership structure. Moreover, HEI leaders perceive that administrative leadership and articulated institutional commitment are the most crucial areas of internationalization and affect the chances of successfully pursuing the other areas of internationalization. Notably, participants perceive that leadership and articulated institutional commitment are more imperative than curriculum and faculty policies and practices, for they believe that administrators lead the development of curriculum and faculty policies and practices.

The study is limited by evolving perceptions in a fast-changing world and field, and a limited focus on American universities, not community colleges. Future research is needed to describe administrators' changing perceptions as higher education changes and the academic capitalist networks proliferate. Future research should explore the perceptions of leaders of international institutions, as well as community colleges in the United States.

Internationalization is not the end justified by the means, but the means itself (Knight, 1994), for it is a process to achieve a balanced set of areas of international education at an institution. The process that administrators use depends on institutional culture and priorities. The study implies that internationalization, like higher education, could result in a proliferation of administrators in international education to manage the work of the endeavors, for upper-level administrators see themselves as being responsible in an increasingly top-down structure, not a body of leaders established through shared governance. Furthermore, leaders should be careful not to disconnect the teaching and the faculty from the curriculum. The final implication is that leaders value internationalization as a valuable educational endeavor, not just a source of revenue, and seek to connect across campus to pursue transformative opportunities.

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# Digital Turn in Higher Education: An Examination of Enablers and Inhibitors in the Turkish Context

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## Abstract

*By qualitatively analyzing the case of a higher education unit and reflecting upon its experience of digitalization, the current study attempts to gain insights into how and to what extent digitalization takes place, and what factors facilitate/hinder digitalization efforts in the Turkish context. Data for the present study were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. An inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify emerging themes within the data. The findings indicate that there have been both intraorganizational and top-down initiatives towards digitalization, though the latter seems to have failed in addressing intraorganizational needs and priorities. The findings also suggest that the factors that have contributed positively to digitalization are the instructors' personal interests and availability of many digital tools. However, negative student attitude towards digital tools, problems with online assessments, failure to initiate and maintain a strategic organizational approach towards digitalization and faculty's reluctance to step outside their comfort zone significantly hinder digitalization.*

**Keywords:** digitalization, digital transformation, distance education, digital tools, higher education, organizational management

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## Introduction

Digitalization in education has gained an unprecedented popularity and seems to have been legitimized and institutionalized over the last decades. It is obvious that the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has also contributed substantially to the widespread adoption of digital education (D'Ambra et al., 2022; Teräs et al., 2020; Trout & Yildirim, 2022) through heavy reliance upon emergency distance education platforms and tools and accelerated the integration of digital technologies into educational settings. Some scholars refer to the digitalization process as digital disruption

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(Crittenden & Peterson, 2019; Skog et al., 2018), which is often associated with the notions of change and transformation (Brennan et al., 2018). Similarly, others employ the term ‘digital turn’ both “*as an analytical strategy to discuss the digitalization process affecting society, and as a description of the digitalization process itself*” (Kergel & Heidcamp, 2018, p. 15). It is evident that what is coined as digital disruption or digital turn has both theoretical and practical implications for educational institutions. Challenging the traditional and orthodox understanding of education, digitalization, through its many manifestations and diverse discourses, has brought about a paradigm shift in education. To explain, the emergence of digital technologies and their adoption by educational institutions challenges traditional education centered around the classroom. The rise of online education allows students to access educational resources and expands their educational opportunities. This paradigm shift, which is often referred as ‘digital turn’, digital transformation’ or ‘digital disruption’, in education also impacts the way educators approach teaching and learning, enabling them to incorporate a variety of tools into teaching. Another aspect of digitalization of education is the changing nature of assessment. Today, educators make more use of such digital tools as online assessments, AI-powered grading systems and simulations. While it is acknowledged that the overall digitalization process brings many opportunities and new prospects, it is also noteworthy to mention the inherent risks, challenges, and problems.

Higher education institutions and their experience of digitalization deserve particular scholarly interest. Given the prominent and pivotal role universities play in the knowledge economy, these institutions are expected not only to integrate digitalization into their practices but also critically analyze the social impacts of digital turn and react accordingly (Kergel & Heidcamp, 2018). Considering the fact that universities are also responsible for equipping their graduates with required skills for employment and fostering critical thinking, these institutions can be claimed to be acting as drivers of innovation in the digital age and experimenting with unorthodox means of teaching and learning. An overview of the relevant literature in Turkey makes it clear that the same global trends of digitalization are also gaining prevalence in the Turkish context. The higher education landscape is changing, and universities are under more pressure to adopt and successfully integrate digital technologies into their organizational structures and daily practices (Gümüšoğlu, 2017; Kır, 2020; Taşkıran, 2017).

By qualitatively analyzing the case of a higher education unit and reflecting upon its experience of digitalization over a five-year period (from 2017 to 2022), the current study attempts to gain insights into how and to what extent digitalization takes place and what factors facilitate/hinder digitalization the Turkish context. More specifically, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What internal and/or external factors interplay with digitalization processes?
- (2) What are the enablers/inhibitors of digitalization in the higher education context?

## **Literature Review**

Digital transformation in the higher education context encompasses overall digital processes that are intended to enable individuals to utilize digital technologies effectively. Digital transformation in the higher education context refers to organizational and technological shifts resulting from the advancements in digital technologies (Menendez et al., 2016). Accordingly, digital transformation requires higher education institutions to consider many organizational aspects while developing their digitalization strategies in line with their needs and capabilities. Many scholars acknowledge that digital transformation requires substantial work that is related to all components of higher education including processes, purposes, and infrastructure (Jakoet-Salie & Ramalobe, 2022).

### **External Dynamics of Digitalization**

One significant challenge that universities face is that they need to consider not only internal stakeholders but also external ones while designing and implementing digitalization processes. Considering the complexity and rapid transformation of stakeholder expectations, higher education institutions should try to maintain the balance between their internal dynamics and external expectations (Füzi et al., 2022). Grover (2015) asserts that digital technologies are so pervasive that higher education institutions have to deploy and use these to survive. However, the author also questions whether digital technologies improve social interactions, cognitive ability and economic impact. In order to be able to successfully integrate new technologies into organizational activities, universities should be aware of their readiness for

digital transformation and identify elements that can support or hinder their strategic transformation processes (Hinings et al., 2018). Addressing universities' failure to achieve digital transformation, Bygstad et al., (2022) suggest the term *dual digitalization*, which stands for two different streams of digitalization: namely, educational solutions and digital subjects. While educational solutions refer to strategically conducted top-down initiatives, digital subjects are produced bottom-up and based on knowledge, pedagogy and autonomy. The authors claim that these separate conflicting and unintegrated processes lead to problems regarding their governance, discourse and technologies. Therefore, it is suggested that universities embrace a learning-centric approach and establish a shared learning space as well as integrating relevant elements and redefining roles. Similarly, Tømte et al. (2019) compared the digitalization processes in Denmark and Norway. The authors found that digitalization processes within higher education institutions followed two paths: one external, top-down process initiated and shaped by governmental bodies and one internal both in the form of top-down and bottom-up initiatives. This research shows that digitalization can happen differently in different settings and be influenced by different stakeholders.

### **Internal Dynamics of Digitalization**

As for the intraorganizational aspects, there are several critical issues to be addressed in designing and implementing digitalization processes. To begin with, universities must consider students' digital readiness, digital literacy and willingness to adopt digital technologies. Student response to digitalization and digital contexts may critically affect teaching and learning processes. Recent research conducted by Reinhold et al. (2021) found that while students are willing to benefit from online courses, their attitude towards ICT and self-regulation skills are influential factors determining their learning experiences. Irvin and Berge (2006) indicate that anxiety and feelings of isolation are not uncommon in online classrooms. Another major issue to consider is that digital transformation requires organizations to have relevant human resources or digital talents with key digital competencies that will trigger, enable, facilitate and maintain digital transformation (Gilch & Sieweke, 2021). Within the higher education context, it means that universities must have academic and non-academic staff that are familiar with digital technologies and opportunities that can be utilized for teaching and research purposes. From (2017) highlights the significance of pedagogical digital competence, which relates to "knowledge, skills, attitudes and approaches in relation to digital technology, learning theory, subject, context, and the relationships between these" (p. 48), and indicates that those who have pedagogical digital competence can effectively and pedagogically incorporate ICT into the course content and enhance students' learning experience. Addressing the major challenges faculty face when implementing digital technologies is also critical to be able to enable a digitalization process in which new opportunities are utilized. Guri-Rozenblit (2009) presents the most demanding challenges as distributed teaching responsibilities (assuming new roles and working together in a team contrary to the sole role in traditional classroom environments), time consumption and lack of incentives, lack of technological literacy and support systems, burnout, and concerns about intellectual property rights. Johnson and Shaulskiy (2013) indicate that another challenge to be considered is digital distractions in the classroom such as cell phone use, social networking and other non-learning activities, and how to deal with these digital distractions.

The relevant literature review above clearly shows that (1) digitalization in the higher education context is quite comprehensive and requires consideration of many organizational aspects, and (2) higher education institutions' digitalization processes can be substantially influenced by internal and external factors. For example, Bekele (2021) states that a methodical consideration of factors can contribute to the success of digital integration. Therefore, the author suggests a comprehensive model of success in online learning in higher education which encompasses human factors, course factors, leadership factors, technology factors and pedagogic factors. An overview of the recent literature also makes it clear that new insights into digital transformation in Turkish higher education are needed. More specifically, a thorough understanding of changing roles of academics and their digital capabilities (Kır, 2020), organizational experiences and strategies regarding digital transformation (Taşkıran, 2017), and shifts in learner profiles is critical to digitalization efforts. Accordingly, the current study aims to critically examine the five-year-long digitalization experience of a higher education unit before, during and after Covid-19 and contribute to the existing literature by providing evidence from Turkey.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Given that the current research is intended to explore the digitalization process in a higher education unit and reflect upon the participants' experience with digitalization (before, during, and after Covid-19 pandemic), qualitative case study approach was considered the most appropriate. The reason why I adopted a qualitative approach was that it allowed me to gain deeper insights into the process through the instructors' account of their digitalization experience. Even though I also intended to make use of some quantitative evidence such as student grades, attendance reports and exam results and further support the research findings, I was not able to use them for personal data protection concerns. That is, my access to such data was not granted by the administration.

## Context and Participants

The foreign languages department of a leading research-intensive higher education institution located in a competition-intensive part of Turkey was analyzed in the current study. There were several reasons why this particular department and the university was selected. First, the university has been long trying to attract top performing students and involved in a fierce competition to gain better positions in national and international rankings. Its striving for better quality and performance reflects upon teaching and research and acts as a driver for innovation and improvement. I have had the chance to observe how the university administration has raised its expectations from staff over the recent years to increase performance. Second, foreign languages departments and schools are often associated with enhanced technology use due to many educational applications and websites available. Additionally, as a result of the widespread use of books/materials published by leading publishers and their provision of relevant software, these institutions receive digital content and materials. Another reason is that digitalization initiatives in this higher education unit started before the outbreak of Covid-19. It gave me a unique opportunity to observe how digitalization took place when it was initiated or driven by the organization itself contrary to rapid and forced digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since data collection lasted approximately for five years and covered post-covid period when a hybrid model for teaching was adopted, the case also provided me with the opportunity to explore the post-covid period.

When I first began collecting data, the total number of staff employed was 30 and the study group of the current research consisted of 12 instructors employed in the department. Only those key informants that could provide rich

**Table 1**  
*Information About the Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Tenure (years)	Additional Responsibility	Education Level	Number of Interviews
Nilay	Female	20	Testing	Bachelor	2
Fatma	Female	6	Testing	Master's	1
Yusuf	Male	5	Administrative	Master's	3
Canan	Female	8	Student Affairs	Master's	3
Kenan	Male	10	-	Bachelor	2
Yamaç	Male	10	-	Bachelor	1
Defne	Female	10	Administrative	Bachelor	1
Ebru	Female	8	-	Bachelor	2
Bülent	Male	6	Material Office	Master's	3
Kerem	Male	12	-	Master's	3
Samet	Male	11	-	Master's	3
Ozan	Male	15	Student Affairs	Master's	1
Derya	Female	14	-	Bachelor	2
İlayda	Female	9	Material Office	Master's	3
Yasemin	Female	8	-	Bachelor	1
Erkan	Male	10	Administrative	Bachelor	2
Tuğçe	Female	10	-	Master's	3
Didem	Female	10	-	Master's	2
Hale	Female	14	Administrative	Master's	1
Miray	Female	5	-	PhD	1

information about the processes were included in the study. Therefore, I selected those who showed willingness to participate in the research and had some other key roles as well as teaching. The first study group included department coordinators, testing and assessment staff and others who were responsible for integration of digital technologies. I also included instructors whose main roles were mostly teaching to be able to reflect upon their in-class teaching experiences. Over the years, some of these individuals had to leave the institution as a result of changing jobs or retirement while new ones were hired due to the rapid massification of higher education and increasing number of students. Therefore, I replaced those who left with the newly employed ones. Overall, the number of the participants involved in the research is 20. Further information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

## Data Collection

Data for the present study were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In total, I interviewed 20 instructors, 13 of whom were interviewed more than once from 2017 to 2022. In total, I organized 40 interviews. First, the interview questions were prepared with the guidance and feedback from two experts from the field. A pilot study was conducted with two instructors to reflect upon the appropriateness of the questions. Following that, the potential participants were determined and those who showed willingness to participate were involved in the study. However, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was completely unexpected at the time, some modifications were made to the interview questions. While keeping the main interview questions (since they were directly related to the general issues regarding digitalization), new drilling questions were asked to reflect upon their pandemic-specific experiences. Some interviews were held online during the pandemic. Digital voice recording was used when the participants granted permission. Data were transcribed verbatim, and the participants were assigned pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity.

## Data Analysis

I employed an inductive thematic analysis to identify emerging themes within the data. Data analysis started with subsequent readings of the transcripts so that the researcher could gain a holistic account of the data available. An open coding approach was employed, and based on the coding framework codes and categories were derived. Following that, the main themes were identified. In order to be able to ensure reliability and validity and avoid any bias, analysis results were checked by two colleagues not involved in the study. Additionally, emerging codes and categories with their transcribed interviews and researcher notes were shared with the participants.

## Findings

Following the detailed analysis of the data, three themes were identified, and they were labelled as (1) drivers of digitalization, (2) enablers of digitalization, and (3) inhibitors of digitalization. Under each theme, several categories were also identified. In the first theme, I tried to address the first research question while the second and third themes deal with the second research question.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Categories*

Themes	Categories
Drivers of digitalization	Intraorganizational initiatives Top-down initiatives
Enablers of digitalization	Digital tools Personal Interest
Inhibitors of digitalization	Student approach Organizational problems Comfort zone

## Drivers of Digitalization

The first theme ‘drivers of digitalization’ refers to how digitalization initiatives occurred. My analysis reveals that there are two different drivers of digitalization in this organization. It seems that there have been both intraorganizational and top-down initiatives towards digitalization. The first realistic and systematic steps towards the integration of digitalization came from the foreign languages department staff as a response to the needs having emerged in the process long before the outbreak of pandemic. The participants clearly indicated that there were inherent problems arising from the lack of a system to keep record of student grades and attendance. The overall system used by the university was not compatible with the foreign languages department’s needs. Therefore, the staff had to experiment with other external learning management systems (LMS), and according to some participant responses found a viable solution through the use of an LMS for the first time.

*We were using Excel spreadsheets to keep track of attendance and student grades. Some of us were using files on which we wrote down the number of missing hours. There were many problems. Sometimes, the documents were lost. (Yusuf)*

*The university’s student information system was not designed to be used in our department. This was a big problem. When there was not a system, human error was common. (Ozan)*

*The LMS was a substantial change towards digitalization of organizational work. Now, we can configure almost everything. We also use it to communicate with students, deliver online exams, share files and run discussion session. (Defne)*

During the same period, there was another major step towards digitalization. Instead of using CD players and paperback coursebooks, the department began to use classroom presentation software that was provided by the publisher of the coursebooks that students were required to purchase for their preparatory school education. The participant responses revealed that it substantially enhanced in-class experience by enabling instructors to present the course material more effectively and interact with the digital content. As the instructors had access to all course content including interactive student books, self-study books, additional exercises and videos, the software received positive comments from all the instructors. In addition to the use of LMS and classroom presentation tool, access to the internet all the time was also claimed to benefit teaching and learning experience.

*When students have access to course content all the time, they seem more engaged. Before the classroom presentation tool, writing down the answers and playing audio files was quite difficult and a burden for all of us. (Yasemin)*

*I believe one significant contribution is that thanks to the software, visual learners have an advantage. Also, I can slow down the audio, show the transcripts when needed, and present extra materials easily. (Canan)*

In an attempt to encourage students to engage in self-study and meet the expectations from the university administration for better student performance, an online practice module provided by the publisher company was also utilized in the same period. When students bought the original books, they were provided by a digital code through which students could access to extra online materials compatible with what they learnt in the class. Through a school account, the administration could set up online classes, assign content and monitor student progress. Though it first seemed a valuable opportunity to increase student engagement, the participant responses revealed that there were two major problems with the widespread use of this system. First, only those students who could afford the original books were granted access. Second, the grading system did not work properly, and a great deal of effort was required to calculate students’ final grades. Despite improvements in the online platform in the coming years, negative experiences and complaints by students led the department to give up using the module before the pandemic.

*We expect the online module will benefit our students. One challenge here is to motivate students to engage in self-study. Now, we can submit content, monitor their progress and since it is graded, they will finally find the motivation to study at home. (Ebru)*

*Those who did not buy the original books are now at a disadvantage. Through our scholarship program, we tried to help some but apparently, many students did not want to pay much. (Kerem)*

*I was responsible for the grading part, and it did not work properly. For each class, I had to configure many settings, yet the grading did not work properly. Plus, the system is slow and not compatible with mobile devices. (Didem)*

The LMS was also used extensively by the department for file sharing and communication. However, the LMS was the free version and the owner company decided to charge a certain sum of money for each student annually. This led the staff to find an alternative as it was financially impossible for students to pay for it. The participants that had administrative roles said that they immediately began to look for solutions before the beginning of the next academic years. First, they contacted the university administration to find a permanent solution with the integration of schoolwide academic software to cover the foreign languages department. When it was rejected, they went through all other free LMSs and ran comprehensive tests to check whether what was provided without a charge could meet the demands by the department. One LMS, which was intensively used until the schoolwide transition to online teaching during the pandemic, was found to be compatible. The new LMS, which according to the participants had some problems regarding marking student attendance, received positive feedback from all the instructors and solved many inherent issues. It even allowed the department to carry out online assessments with its extra features, which was said to be a substitute for the online self-study system for which students had to pay.

*When I saw the message coming from the owner company, I was shocked. We wouldn't afford it or demand students to pay for it. (Defne)*

*We worked really hard to figure out how to integrate the new LMS into the system. It was unlearning and relearning everything in a very short time. Somehow, we managed to do it. (Samet)*

*The assessment feature is a great contribution. Now, we can provide our students with self-study material, monitor their progress and receive results immediately. And all that is free. (Bülent)*

As well as these major ones, the staff have also experimented with many digital tools and websites available for use in language classes. From mobile applications to presentations tools, a wide range of tools have been used extensively. However, the participant responses clearly reveal that there has never been an orchestrated, strategic and organization-wide effort to make use of these digital tools. Instead, it has so far been dependent on individual efforts and preferences, which limits its use to specific classes.

*I make use of many websites and applications. Students particularly enjoy mobile quizzes and gamification tools. (Didem)*

*The problem here is that without a community approach, the use of digital tools is at the instructors' discretion and limited to certain classes. We sometimes come together and share experiences, but it is rare. It is also difficult to produce content on my own as it is time consuming. (Canan)*

When it comes to top-down digitalization initiatives, the participant responses made it very clear that the involvement of university management into digitalization initiatives came with the emergency distance education during the pandemic. When the university decided to cease all face-to-face teaching activities in March 2020, it was a shock to everyone according to the participants. Within a few weeks, the university administration informed all the academics about the distance education platform that would be used. From the participant responses, it was obvious that the immediate

transition to online education was a painful one as there were lack of experience and many concerns regarding its use in language classes and assessment. However, the participants also revealed that they learnt fast and adapted to the distance education much more easily and quickly than many other departments.

*I do not want to remember those terrible days. In two weeks' time, we had to learn how to use the program. (Canan)*

*I guess before the distance education, the university was not involved in our digitalization, which is understandable as they do not work in our field. Distance education was the first attempt, but it was obligatory, not something strategically implemented. (Yamaç)*

The emergent and unplanned transition to online education also led to major problems. According to the participants, the introduction of online education led to critical issues regarding the use of existing LMS, student attendance, examination and copyright issues. The new department head wanted the staff not to use the LMS and instead run all the operations through the online platform or other internal tools. For grading and attendance, each instructor was asked to keep their own records and submit them regularly to the coordinators. Therefore, the students couldn't access information regarding their attendance and grades. Use and sharing of digital content was also abandoned due to concerns over copyright issues. The staff was also asked to video record all their online classes and store them in their own computers or devices. According to the participant responses, the abandonment of the use of LMS was problematic and without a system that would replace it, it was not a reasonable decision.

*I understand some of the concerns over using external systems. Before our transition to distance education, we had the freedom to use whatever tools we wanted. Distance education brought many issues regarding copyright, privacy and data protection. However, we could not convince the department head that these were common tools and platforms and there were not repercussions. (Derya)*

*Without a substitute for what we gave up, the whole experience was negative. The platform we used for distance education was a comprehensive one involving many features. However, it did not have all the necessary tools we needed. (Yamaç)*

Online examination was another major issue. The participants repeatedly stated that online exams led the students to engage in the online classes less and less and encouraged them to cheat. Additionally, many exams in the forms of quizzes, presentations and speaking and writing exams were replaced by three major exams including two midterms and a final. Acknowledging that it was impossible for the staff to prevent cheating, the participants also stated their discontent with the form of the exams delivered. They particularly questioned the necessity of open-ended questions as it was apparent that the students would copy and paste content from the Internet or cheat from others.

*If there is one thing that really bothers me, it is the online exams. We have never been able to prevent students from cheating. We already gave up many assessment types which were agreed upon after many staff meetings to help students learn better. (Nilay)*

In the post pandemic period, the university opted for a hybrid model in which students came to the school for three days while they had online classes for two days. The participant responses revealed that they did not enjoy online sessions at all due to lack of attendance by the students. Not being able to encourage students to join online sessions and without sanctions to get students to participate, the staff was discouraged.

*This academic year was the worst I had ever had. Students only attended classes in order not to fail due to absenteeism. We did everything to motivate them yet failed to encourage them. (Ebru)*

One significant development in the post-pandemic period was the integration of the official student management system. The school administration finally provided a system for student registration, attendance and grading. With the



introduction of the new system and distance education platform, the gap caused by the lack of an LMS seems to have been filled. However, the participants clearly indicated that the attendance system was not functional as it wasn't in line with the foreign languages department's attendance system. The biggest criticism was that it took quite a while to take attendance. According to the participants, taking the attendance became a real burden when there were a lot of students not attending the online classes.

*Taking attendance is a big problem. It is time-consuming and repetitive. However, it is nice to have such a tool again. It is definitely not an LMS but at least saved us from the burden of taking attendance and keeping record of student grades. (Derya)*

A final point noteworthy to mention is that at the very beginning of the new academic year, the university administration informed all the academics that a new distance education system developed by the school itself would be used. From the participant responses, it was obvious that it led to a lot of anxiety and confusion among the staff. It was unexpected at the time and the new system was not ready and obviously not as useful as the existing one. However, after a few weeks, university administration gave up using the new system.

*When I heard that, I was frustrated. I mean, what's the point of abandoning a fully functioning system? (Fatma)*

Based on the findings regarding the internal drivers of digitalization, it seems that intraorganizational digitalization initiatives were prevalent before the outbreak of the pandemic and integrated by the staff itself to provide solutions to the existing problems. From the findings presented above, it can be claimed that digitalization initiatives undertaken by the staff bottom-up seem to have been more effective and in line with the objectives of the department. However, top-down digitalization initiatives seem to have ignored the realities and internal dynamics. During the pandemic, emergency transition to distance education may partially explain the incompatibility between the intraorganizational elements and top-down efforts. Yet, the following participant responses also reveal some key insights into the problematic gap and discrepancy. First, the department heads, assigned outside the department and with no expertise and background in language education, seem to have overlooked the internal dynamics. Second, the university administration was often unaware of the difference between other departments and foreign languages department.

*When the staff decides to integrate digital tools, it is a response to a need or an attempt to enhance student learning. We are the experts in the field and through our external networks, we learn about the best practices and experiment with them. However, when it is top-down, they often overlook whether what is imposed can work. (Ozan)*

*It is a vicious cycle. With no expertise and little understanding, they offer solutions. Yet, without being aware of our needs and priorities, it doesn't work. Then, we give feedback and eventually things change, but at the cost of what? (İlayda)*

## **Enablers of Digitalization**

The second theme 'enablers of digitalization' refers to those factors that have interplayed with digitalization efforts positively. The participant responses clearly showed that the most influential factor that enhanced digitalization of teaching was the instructors' individual interests and efforts. It was obvious from the participant statements that when there were not sufficient and strategic organizational efforts towards digitalization, whether and to what extent digital tools were employed was based on each instructor's motivation to do so. While the LMS and online learning content was integrated to the curriculum before the pandemic, the use of other digital tools was at the instructors' discretion. While some instructors utilized many different tools available on the internet, others did not bother to do so. According to the participants, this led to substantial differences among different classes regarding student in-class experience.

*What really makes it possible to utilize digital tools is the teachers' willingness to use them. (Ebru)*

*Organizational change requires a communal approach. Ours is just incidental use of digital tools. It may work but without a system or framework to base our efforts on, its use is limited. (Defne)*

One interesting finding of the study was that while there were participant instructors who were in favor of technology-assisted teaching and even flipped classrooms where online assessments, self-regulated and active learning were prevalent, others were not aware of the existence of such things or seemed indifferent. Due to the pandemic and limited interaction among the staff, such ideas failed to be adopted by the others. The outsider department head seem to have maintained the status quo. According to the participant responses, lack of support and understanding from the administration and failed interaction among the staff prevented these individual efforts and experiences from evolving into common organizational practices. The participant responses also revealed that the staff had valuable qualifications, educational backgrounds and experience with digital tools, yet the top-down decision-making process hindered contributions from these instructors.

*Education is evolving. The paradigm is shifting. We have instructors that have the expertise. We need to keep up with the changes and reshape our understanding. The content and how you present the content matters a lot. (Yasemin)*

*Before the pandemic, even the small talks that we had during intervals inspired new ideas and practices. During the distance education, we missed that opportunity. Additionally, the highly hierarchical structure is another problem. Everyone would like to contribute and acts with gold will, which is apparent. However, good intentions do not always result in positive experiences. (Erkan)*

Another enabler of digitalization is that there are numerous digital tools available to be used in language classes. From language learning and vocabulary practice applications to online reading platforms and YouTube channels, there are hundreds of digital tools and contents waiting to be utilized. When the instructors had personal interest into digitalization and had a positive attitude towards digital tools to support student experience and learning, these digital tools indeed contributed positively to in-class teaching, according to the participants.

*As language teachers, we are so lucky. Out there, there are hundreds of digital tools and content. All you need to do is to know where you will look and have the time and motivation to integrate them. (Hale)*

However, generating content on different digital tools and platforms and encouraging students to download or create account on many different applications were claimed to be tiresome processes adding to the burden. The participants stated that acting as a team to generate content would be the solution as the distribution of tasks would ease the burden and help them produce more.

*On the negative side, each application, website or tool requires learning and experimentation. You also need to guide the students to do so. Generating content also requires great time and effort if you would like to systematically utilize digital tools. As an individual, it is not something that you can achieve given that we have many classes to attend, papers to grade and paperwork to handle. (Hale)*

## **Inhibitors of digitalization**

Three main factors that inhibited digitalization efforts were identified. The first and most influential factor was the negative student approach towards digital contents provided. According to the participants, students often failed to engage effectively with digital content and showed reluctance. Regardless of on what platform digital contents were presented (distance education platform, coursebook online study module, LMS, other digital tools), the majority of students failed to use self-study materials. When online assignments were not graded, they tended to ignore them. According to one participant response, only five percent of the class did the exercises on a free reading comprehension platform though all the content was specifically designed in line with students' favorite topics and their areas of study. When the assignments were graded,

they tended to cheat. The participant responses revealed that it became a chronic problem to which no viable solution was offered.

*I have been experimenting with digital tools for years and there is one challenge I have never overcome: students' lack of interest in digital content. Even the pandemic did not change their perception. (Didem)*

*Cheating and copying are really common. When we provide content and do not grade it, they ignore it. When we grade it, they would like to get all the points and cheat. It seems that they do not understand the fact that language learning is a process and leads to the acquisition of a qualification. They just see it as a course to pass, just like those in high school. (Hale)*

*I wanted my students to do reading practice and created content on an online digital reading platform. I chose texts relevant to their departments. The result? The majority of them did not do the activities even though they repeatedly stated that it was an excellent source. (Tuğçe)*

During the pandemic, online assessment was claimed to be the worst. When the students were informed that there wouldn't be face-to-face exams, almost all gave up attending the classes. The participant instructors asserted that the overall distance education experience was spoilt due to students' lack of interest and motivation to attend classes or interact with the content presented.

*I have clearly understood that our students are not ready for home exams. (Kerem)*

The second inhibitor of digitalization, as implied above, seems to be the failure of the administration to organize intellectual capital and orchestrate efforts towards digitalization. According to the participants, failure to involve them into decision making processes led those in charge to act based on their own assumptions since there was no one in the university administration who had expertise or qualifications in language teaching. Some participants claimed that long and tiring weeks of instruction without evaluation meetings that would reveal reflections and feedback and reduced interaction during the distance and hybrid education also contributed negatively.

*We often underestimate the fact that digitalization requires substantial change and organization work. It is similar to sustainability or quality work. In the absence of collaborative effort and organizational arrangement, it is just pretending. (Nilay)*

*We have a team consisting of instructors with great qualifications, educational background and valuable assets. Only when these people are coordinated, can we achieve our targets. (Yamaç)*

The final factor that inhibited digitalization was that both the organization as a whole and individual instructors were anxious to be involved in a change process in which conventional and orthodox understanding of teaching would be replaced by a technology assisted and digitalized version. At the organizational level, the hierarchical structure which heavily relies on top-down decision making seems to be hindering substantial change. From an individual standpoint, the participant responses revealed that some instructors had concerns over such arrangements as flipped classrooms or partial distance education. That being said, the pandemic seems to have changed the instructors' attitude slightly in that they seem more optimistic towards such arrangements though they specifically stated that they were not ready to undertake such a large-scale change.

*I have concerns over abandoning our well-established routines and initiating a major change. I agree that flipped classroom and integration of active learning can solve many issues and bring new opportunities. However, I believe that neither our team nor our students are ready for this. (Ozan)*

*Before the pandemic, distance education was not on the agenda. Now, we are doing it and hybrid models are open to negotiation. It seems that it changed our perspectives. Of course, we are still not ready and anxious for such a large-scale change, but we are more optimistic. (Canan)*

## **Discussion**

Reflecting upon the five-year digitalization experience of the participants, in the current study I focused on two major issues regarding digitalization in a higher education unit in Turkey. The findings indicate that digitalization initiated internally by the staff is more relevant to the needs and expectations while top-down digitalization is coercive, often limited to the integration of digital tools for administrative issues and distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic, and fails to align with internal dynamics. The incompatibility between these two streams of digitalization seems to result in negative outcomes. Therefore, as indicated by Bygstad et al. (2022) and Tømte et al. (2019), a more integrated approach is needed. Encouraging the staff to participate in decision making processes, making use of intellectual capacity, and fostering collaboration among staff can help higher education institutions make informed choices. It is obvious that digitalization has become pervasive in the higher education setting, and higher education institutions attempt to conform to the institutional environment and what is legitimized. However, not being able to address the intraorganizational aspects may prevent them from effectively managing digital transformation and lead to ceremonial conformity. Given that the success of digitalization efforts also depends on human factors, leadership factors and course factors (Bekele, 2021), bottom-up strategies that will encourage staff to participate in digitalization efforts may work better.

Regarding the enablers and inhibitors of digitalization, the findings clearly show that availability of a wide range of digital tools for use in language classes and willingness to integrate them into teaching positively influence digitalization processes while it is evident from the analysis that students' limited engagement with digital content, tendency to cheat in online assessments, lack of strategic and comprehensive organizational arrangement to enhance collaborative work towards digitalization, and the staff's lack of motivation to step outside the comfort zone are the main inhibitors. On the barriers to adoption of digital technologies, Arbaugh (2000) claims that belief and attitudes towards usefulness and ease of use are influential. Crittenden et al. (2019) suggest that student involvement can be enhanced through the integration of technologically based pedagogical tools and digital subject matters. Koh and Kan (2021) suggest that student-centered digital learning experiences can be fostered through infrastructural improvements and faculty preparation. As well as behavioral, cognitive and emotional components of engagement (Fredrick et al., 2004), socio-cultural factors should be taken into consideration and perhaps a holistic engagement that refers to all of the above must be considered (Tai et al., 2019). In line with the previous research, it can be suggested that student engagement may be the primary determinant of success of digitalization initiatives and a holistic approach that encompasses all aspects of student engagement should be adopted. For example, faculty can conduct surveys and discussions with students in order to reveal their digital competencies, preparedness and expectations regarding digital tools, and identify issues that negatively interact with student experience. As digital transformation in higher education is often referred as a substantial process, a holistic and comprehensive organizational approach that encompasses issues regarding educators, students and the system is highly needed for the success of the process.

Online education brings many learning opportunities and grants access to those at a disadvantage (Duria & Ibrahim, 2020). However, credibility might be undermined if prospective employers question the reliability of diplomas and certificates due to academic dishonesty in online assessment (Chuang et al., 2017). Considering online assessment, the current study clearly shows that students' tendency to cheat and copy content from other sources is a major problem. It seems that the instructors' objectives to help students engage in self-study is not in line with students' understanding of online assessment. Khan and Khan (2019) suggest that students need to be convinced of the appropriateness of the transition to online assessment. The authors also state that a gradual transition reinforced by effective feedback, individualized interaction and technological training for both students and faculty can increase student acceptance. Contrary to summative assessment, formative assessment is often seen valuable and aims to enhance student learning by providing feedback and suggestions (Einig, 2013). In the current research, it was found that students had limited interaction with the digital content regardless of its being graded or not. One explanation for such an attitude can be that the content provided may not have attracted students and when it was designed as formative assessment, feedback might not have been provided properly to encourage deep learning. In that regard, a comprehensive analysis of the reasons that lead to limited engagement and

academic dishonesty in online assessment must be carried out to be able to address emerging issues and act accordingly. Additionally, culture may be playing a role in students' attitude towards online assessment. Therefore, further research focused on student attitude towards online assessment in different cultures can also contribute to the relevant literature.

Another significant barrier to digitalization in the higher education context was the lack of a strategic and comprehensive organizational initiative in the current study. It seems that faculty's personal interest and motivation to integrate digital tools plays a positive role yet fails to achieve digital transformation outlined by Kopp et al. (2019). Through establishing digitalization units, organizing in-service trainings, workshops and faculty meetings and distributing tasks among the staff, a common understanding may be developed, and peer learning can be encouraged. Similarly, the reluctance shown by the staff to experiment with digitalization and use of various digital education alternatives can also be reduced through increased interaction among the staff.

## Conclusion

Given that the higher education landscape has been witnessing a paradigm shift in which our traditional understanding of teaching and learning is replaced by digital alternatives, it is critical to acknowledge that digital transformation is a substantial change management process. Therefore, a thorough understanding of both internal and external dimensions of this process can help higher education institutions better integrate digital technologies into their teaching and learning routines. Decision makers' awareness of the inhibitors and enablers of successful digital transformation can help them address their strengths and weaknesses in their organizations and guide them to design learning environments accordingly. The current research clearly indicates that what is referred as digital transformation or digital turn in higher education requires a comprehensive and strategic organizational approach. Without such an approach, individual efforts towards digitalization seem to fail to produce intended outcomes.

Digital transformation requires substantial organizational change and a leadership perspective in line with such a large-scale change. Though it is a relatively new leadership paradigm, digital leadership may help organizations better manage their digitalization journey. Digital leadership is often associated with transformational leadership and change management while the proposed definitions also include a digital aspect that encompasses leaders' digital literacy, knowledge, skills and competencies (Jäckli & Meier, 2020; Kane et al., 2019). More specifically, digital leaders are the ones that can predict the need for digitalization, set a clear vision and communicate it across the organization and act accordingly to address these needs and guide and direct organization members to attain digitalization goals. In that sense, digital leadership skills encompass digital literacy and knowledge, agility, network building, effective change management, agility, flexibility, effective communication and proactiveness (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Promsri, 2019; Sheninger, 2019). Building and fostering a digital leadership perspective can contribute positively to organization-wide digital transformation. The current research clearly indicates that without strategic and orchestrated efforts, individual desires and initiatives for digitalization do not evolve into something bigger. Digital leaders can foresee new tendencies and developments, build networks, initiate organizational digital transformation through a strategic organizational vision and channeling human capital and resources strategically.

Based on the implications and findings of the current research, future research can be carried out to explore the factors that interplay with digitalization in the higher education. In the current research, I have attempted to explore the digitalization experience through the faculty's perception. Studies that are intended to explore students' account of digitalization would contribute a lot to our understanding of their experiences and reasons for lack of engagement and address the research gap.

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# Qualitative Content Analysis for Enhancing Intercultural Sensitivity in Cross-Cultural Management

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## Abstract

*This article presents the intercultural sensitivity improvement in cross-cultural management by qualitative content analysis, by collecting journals published during the year 2016-2021, to sort out the contents of cross-cultural management in the area of intercultural sensitivity of intercultural education. Findings indicate that six categories with thirteen sub-categories of collected materials, which consisted of teaching pedagogies (formal, non-formal, and informal education), symptoms of negative feelings, reasons of negative feelings (self and others), motivations, solutions (self and agencies), and results of solutions. The guideline proposed emphasizes for the process based on these findings, suggests management to assess teaching environments, recognize and approve students' requirements, narrow cultural gaps, and judge the final objectives fulfillments. With this discovery, future literature reviews can utilize it as reference in the field of cross-cultural management.*

Keywords: Cross-cultural management, guideline, intercultural sensitivity, qualitative content analysis

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## Introduction

As the increasing trend in international education, exchange programs that send students to study abroad have been launched in many universities worldwide. Language learning is a common curriculum for international students getting in touch with host country's culture. In addition to the development of language skills, students also learn the host country's culture. In most language programs, most curricular are often mixed teaching with knowledge and other cultural aspects (Kim, 2020). However, many international students face difficulties when they study abroad, such as cultural adaptation or cultural misunderstandings that are caused by unfamiliar about others' cultures (Lee, 2016). These are significant issues in cross-cultural management. Language education is not an isolation in language teaching and learning, it relates to the host country's knowledge learning about cultures, and to shape attitudes towards host country as well. To

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measure students' cultural adaptation in different cultures and how they react, intercultural sensitivity is used to evaluate these abilities. Intercultural sensitivity pertains to the knowledge and awareness of cultural differences (Dias et al, 2020). Apart from the knowledge and cultural awareness, scholars also focus on managing the learning process of international students in complex, culturally diverse situations. The circle of David Livermore et al. (2022)'s "cultural intelligence (CQ)" outlines the process of cultural development, stemming from their emotion to actions.

Regarding comparative studies in higher education, international students may compare their own cultures with the one where they study and they may experience cultural shock which results in stress, anxiety, and depression (Dailey-Strand et al, 2021). Additionally, international students may feel more about intangible gaps from the host country's explicit culture and implicit cultures through formal, non-formal and informal ways in different environments consciously and unconsciously. To illustrate this phenomenon, cultures in learning environments can be described as an iceberg, where the tip above the waterline is explicit culture whereas the large base hidden under the waterline reflects implicit culture (Hall, 1976; Rogers, 2014). To make full use of the learning environments in formal, non-formal and informal learning, scholars have explored teaching pedagogies that combined with environments as cultural immersion, which means to a cultural environment that better improve students' intercultural sensitivity. Teaching pedagogies are various and gain different levels in enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity, which are worth investigating their effectiveness, to offer a guideline based on the findings of qualitative content analysis for educational managers and teachers in cross-cultural management and highlight the future researchers in relate field.

As concluded from the situations about cross-cultural management in education, this research reviews how educational management enhances international students' intercultural sensitivity and aims to propose a guideline to assist educational managers, teachers, and international students in international higher education. The research question is: How to improve international students' intercultural sensitivity through formal, non-formal and informal education in cross-cultural management?

## Literature Review

Intercultural sensitivity refers to the underlying worldview that informs a person who experiences different cultures, and how the person performs in different cultural situations (Bennett, 2004). To illustrate the process of improving intercultural sensitivity, Bennett (2004) also develops Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which includes six continuums: denial, defense and minimization, known as ethnocentrism, whereas acceptance, adaptation and integration known as ethnorelativism, which is the general ways in developing culture recognitions from one to another.

Culture is an abstract concept. Hall (1976) outlines culture as an iceberg model. Rogers (2014) explains the explicit part of the culture as the tip of the iceberg which upon the waterline, whereas the implicit part is under the waterline and seems like a larger part that cannot be easily recognized. The implicit culture can influence international students' worldviews about host country's culture unconsciously. To help international students recognize explicit and implicit cultures and then improve students' intercultural sensitivity, scholars focus on creating a cultural atmosphere where students totally immerse themselves in the situations. According to the study of Halpern & Aydin (2021), creating cultural atmosphere requires campus assistances such as programs and course curricula that fulfill international students' cultural needs. In their study, international students comment campus infuses curricula with intercultural sensitivity, which helps campus becomes interculturally competent and culturally sensitive to their diverse students.

Despite creating cultural atmosphere, scholars also have begun to realize the significance of environments in formal, non-formal and informal education, to support their teaching pedagogies as supplements. In the international teaching program, each teaching pedagogy has proved its own advantages in cultural learning. Paired study in the formal classroom learning helps international students realize their values in intercultural learning (Haas, 2019). Other scholars believe that some non-formal educational pedagogies such as storytelling, endogenous cooperation, and competition can sufficiently convey cultural content (Thomas, 2020). Advisors outside classroom support is necessary and helpful for the success of international students in non-formal learning (Perry, 2016). In terms of informal education, Yang (2020) reports informal communications help international students bond with local residents and their culture. Moreover, Çelik et al (2021) outline three key points in informal learning: resources, motivations, and barriers in the learning process. According to Çelik et al (2021), resources can be divided as interactive and personal resources. In detail, interactive resources are actively learned by students or passively received from the environments, while personal resources are individual activities learned by students themselves; motivations are divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations,

which are motivated by rewards or punishment for intrinsic motivation, and utility/value oriented for extrinsic motivation; barriers are caused by personal, school-related, work-related, and central policies. As a matter of fact, Çelik et al (2021) conclude that interaction with people who share with similar values could be an effective informal learning resource. In addition, beneficial to individuals would be a motivation for learners, and school management is supposed to tear down barriers while they are learning. Thus, it is worth noting to investigate the environments in education and to develop proper teaching pedagogies and curricula.

CQ is another term to describe how a person react in diverse cultural situations. According to David Livermore et al. (2022), CQ is composed of four capabilities. The first begins with CQ drive, namely interest, persistence, and confidence when a person interact in multicultural environments; then CQ knowledge is essential understanding about how cultures are similar and different; the third one is CQ strategy, to develop the awareness in planning multicultural interactions; and the final capacity is CQ action, to act effectively in multicultural interaction. To improve CQ, scholars explore various teaching pedagogies as well. Cultural exposure such as short-term study abroad experiences and similar culture backgrounds effectively contribute to fostering a high level of CQ (Marina et al. 2021). However, insufficient time of cultural learning limits the effectiveness of CQ improvements. Results suggest that a semester-long cultural development course would better improve their CQ than a short-term study abroad program (Chang et al., 2022). Meanwhile, scholars also study the effectiveness of daily interactions when international students study abroad. Studies proved that informal contacts play vital role in improving international students' CQ. Compared with formal contacts, informal contacts not only have great effects on students' CQ, but also mediate their anxiety when they are in multicultural settings (Lin &Shen, 2020). Within this scope, it is possible to combine the intercultural sensitivity development with the framework of CQ theory.

Overall, existing literature indicates that international students' intercultural sensitivity can manifest in certain areas through formal, non-formal and informal education. However, it is still not certain how many components improving international students' intercultural sensitivity systematically through formal, non-formal and informal education. To better understand the ways in improving intercultural sensitivity, the researcher employed qualitative content analysis with the CQ theory, then to develop a guideline in cross-cultural management.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study focuses on the intercultural sensitivity improvement of international students who study in study abroad program. In this research, study abroad refers to an international exchange program that allows international students sojourn in the host country to experience the culture. International students refer to the students who are studying outside their home country in the collecting materials of following research by qualitative content analysis. Intercultural sensitivity refers to the ability of international students adapting to cultural environments when they study abroad. The theoretical framework combines the iceberg model (Hall, 1974) with DMIS (Bennett, 2004) to investigate the development process of intercultural sensitivity in the cultural environments. Additionally, David Livermore's CQ theory (2022) also implies to explore a guideline for further development in cross-cultural management.

### **Methodology**

#### **Methods**

Qualitative content analysis is one of qualitative methods for interpreting basic meanings from massive paragraphs, sentences, texts, and data. To interpret basic meanings, massive information needs to be analyzed, sorted out, coded, and finally to constructing a coding frame. The coding frame as an output of the qualitative content analysis that helps researcher get a blueprint for conclusions. Guided by this clue, this study adopts qualitative content analysis to sort out how authors investigate cross-cultural management about enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity, and proposes a guideline based on these findings. According to Schreier (2012), key steps in conducting qualitative content analysis include identifying research questions, selecting materials, building coding frame, categorizing materials into units of coding, trying out the coding frame, evaluating, analyzing, and interpreting. Based on these steps, the present study synthesized as a four-step procedure, which contained 1) to collect research material, 2) to build a coding frame, 3) to verify the coding frame, and 4) to develop a guideline by the coding frame.

In the first step, to collect research material in the first step, a search of literature was conducted from 2016 to 2021 to collect published articles in intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural education in the search engine of via EBSCO host

as support database. “Intercultural sensitivity”, “linguistic and language”, “cross-cultural management”, and “cultural intelligence” were typed in the search engine of the e-database, set time from 2016 to 2021 and chose “full text” option.

### ***Data Analysis & Coding***

The results illustrated 1987 articles. Due to the huge numbers, the researcher selected suitable journals that related to this field. The journals were: Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education (3 articles), Journal of International Students (56 articles), International Journal of Multicultural Education (13 articles), International Journal of Higher Education (19 articles) and International Education Studies (14 articles). The results of literature research is presented in Table 1:

**Table 1**  
*Statistics of Literature Research*

Items	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education	0	0	0	0	1	2
International Education Studies	2	2	3	2	2	3
International Journal of Higher Education	3	2	3	4	2	5
International Journal of Multicultural Education	2	3	3	3	0	2
Journal of International Students	14	4	14	10	5	9
Total	21	11	23	19	10	26

In the second step, data and information collected from the literature were in the form of text, paragraphs, and long sentences. Three coders who worked as assistants took a data-driven, inductive strategy to simplify the original data and information as phrases and words, namely “units of coding”. Units of coding then were clustered into groups and labeled as categories or subcategories by coders’ judgements. Once the categories and subcategories determined, a trial coding frame was completed.

In the third step, to ensure the reliability of the coding frame, a comparative coding sheet was applied to test the trial coding frame twice between a three-day interval. Those three coders reviewed the articles and reallocate the units into the comparative coding sheet to verify. If the units were not in the categories and sub-categories as they previously did, the researcher would discuss with them then merged, deleted, or collapsed inappropriate units.

In the fourth step, concluded from the previous findings a guideline was developed.

## **Results**

After two rounds of coding frame identification, six categories are summited as follows:

### **Teaching Pedagogies in Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Education**

In the units of coding, workshop, role play, group discussion, and presentation, pair study were mostly popular teaching pedagogies, which were conducted through media, photography, and drama. For formal education, authors believed that a well-organized schedule was a key point in planning. Thus, a well-organized schedule can be manifested in the form of seminar, meetings, and so on. All of these pedagogies were categorized as organized schedules, which occurred in eighteen articles of total forty-three times. For non-formal education, organized activities such as site visit and field trips were mentioned eight times in four articles. As for non-formal education, teachers acted as an organizer who guided students’ learning without formal schedules, objectives, and other strict rules. These pedagogies focused on unconscious learning by cultural immersion. For informal education, daily interactions were mostly mentioned, which occupied ten articles mentioned eleven times. The second highest in the frequency was media, which occupied four articles mentioned nine times. Other pedagogies such as clubs appeared in about two or three articles around three times. These pedagogies are mostly interrelated with not many obvious gaps among these three kinds of educations.

## **Symptoms of Negative Feelings**

Students manifest their negative emotions, noticed by authors. Among these negative feelings, anxiety mostly occurred with cultural shock when students just arrived in a new environment for the first time. According to Oberg (1960), cultural shock refers to occupational disease that people have suddenly transplant abroad. After a period of living, students' characteristics such as shyness or nervousness might result in homesickness and loneliness. The statistics showed that anxiety and fear, loneliness and homesickness were mostly present, which occurred in seven articles, nine times, seven articles, seven times and seven articles, seven times respectively.

## **Reasons of Negative Feelings from Self and Others**

To explain the negative feelings, coders traced the reasons of what caused them to be upset. Two sub-categories summited from these articles: reasons from student themselves and reasons from others.

In the part of reasons of negative feelings from self, the main reasons were cultural differences, which accounted for sixteen articles and occurred thirty-six times in total. Moreover, language barriers were the second most reported part of negative feelings from self, which were referenced in twelve articles with twenty-nine times reported. Then lack of knowledge and skills (five articles, six times) made them unable to communicate in an unfamiliar environment (seven articles, fourteen times) and resulted in isolation and unfamiliar relationships (seven articles, nine times). Feeling exhausted with high living costs (seven articles with seven times) also made students suffer more when they studied abroad.

Another sub-category that negative feelings from others were important for educational management to notice as well. Unsupported from the agencies occupied the most significant numbers among this part, which occurred in eleven articles, twenty-three times. In this research, agency refers to organizations that provide services to international students based on the discipline of cross-cultural management. Unsupported phenomena included lack of information supported from schools, lack of teachers' expertise, lack of practicing opportunities, and lack of support in terms of social integration. Other reasons of negative feelings initiated from religious issues (two articles, four times), political conflict (two articles, four times,) and unprofessional teachers (four articles, twelve times), which required administration to guide students how to deal with such situations.

## **Motivations**

Students' motivations in learning are mostly fueled by personal development and interests. Curiosity, enriched experiences, and career were most important motivations for students, which accounted for six articles, nine times, four articles, nine times, and four articles, eight times respectively. Other motivations were mentioned less than two times but also held value for educational managers and teachers.

## **Solutions from Self and the Agencies**

Coders identified solutions to solve this dilemma, having support from the agencies being most suggested. Analyzing collecting articles from 2016 to 2021, it is recommended that agencies, teachers, and educators were supposed to take part in the administration proactively, aiding in the release of negative feelings, distractions, and aid in the guidance of students. Meanwhile students should also make efforts in improving their skills and knowledge with positive attitudes, which helped them rid of this dilemma.

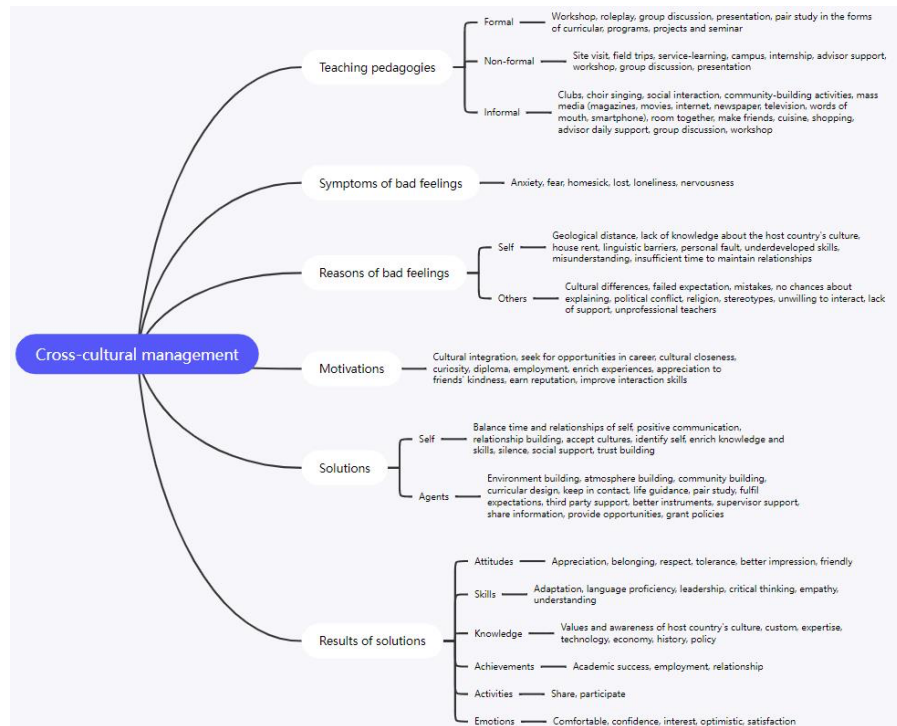
Specially, coders realized that due to the large amount of supports from the agencies, they decided to create a new sub-category and label it as "Solutions from the Agencies". In regards to environment, the atmosphere accounted for eleven articles, twenty times, which indicated that managers and teachers should act as an icebreaker for creating a comfortable environment and atmosphere. Providing opportunities was the also mentioned, which had ten articles, fifteen times, and it indicated that managers and teachers should create more chances for practicing in gaining experiences. Designing proper curricular, programs that fulfilled students' requirements were mentioned as well, which was accounted for in seven articles, thirteen times and eight articles, twelve times.

## Results of Solutions

At the end of the coding, coders concluded what they had found. Twenty-six positive outcomes proved the results fulfilling authors' expectations. Despite of the traditional definition of intercultural sensitivity in the three domains of attitudes, skills, and knowledge, coders categorized three more sub-categories based on the collected materials: achievements, activities, and emotions. As the objectives in the collected materials are international students, achievements refer to students' academic success or the status they earn in the collected materials; activities refer to students participation in organized activities voluntarily in the collected materials; emotions refer to students' resolution of negative feelings have been removed or not in the collected materials. As a result, all coding are presented as follows in Figure 1.

Upon the summarized coding frame, a guideline was proposed based on previous coding frame, to improve students' intercultural sensitivity through cross-cultural management, of which composes of five domains: Assessing Environments, Recognizing Requirements, Approving Requirements, Narrowing Gaps, and Judging Objectives. To make them easier to comprehend, the research rearranged the order as ARJAN, which means "teacher" in Thai. Combining with the framework of cultural intelligence, the guideline can be sorted out three phases: pre-teaching, teaching in process, and pro-teaching. In the pre-teaching phase, educational managers and teachers shall assess the advantages and disadvantages in formal, non-formal, and informal learning, launch investigations to recognize students' requirements that combine with environments about fulfilling them. All of these activities are in line with identifying international students' CQ drive. During the teaching process, educational managers and teachers keep practice-originated teaching to narrow the gaps among students and fulfill their requirements in mental and psychological ways. Essential CQ knowledge and CQ strategy are cultivated during this phase, to motivate international students' desire in learning and practicing in routine lives. Finally, in the pro-teaching phase, educational managers and teachers are supposed to judge the objectives and evaluate effectiveness how international students conduct CQ action through consistent contact, and then modify and improve the teaching.

**Figure 1**  
Coding Frame from Qualitative Content Analysis



Assessing environments can be allocated in the three sub-categories of teaching pedagogies, which are options for educational managers and teachers to consider. As can be seen from the coding frame, formal education mostly occurred inside classroom in the forms of curricular, programs, projects, and seminar. It seems more likely that teacher-centered

teaching pedagogies aid to shape students' worldview towards the host country's culture. Non-formal education is more loosely organized by teachers outside classroom teaching, where educational managers and teachers can utilize it as supplements to explain the abstract culture of the host country. Comparing with other two teaching pedagogies, informal education has the most pedagogies, most of which are student-centered. To manage the best cost-effective teaching pedagogies, management shall cultivate students' interests when they enjoy their leisure time, and create a suitable environment for cultural immersion. In short, management shall assess the advantages and disadvantages of the environment in formal, non-formal, and informal learning to adopt the most appropriate teaching pedagogies in each one according to the environment.

The second point in the phase of pre-teaching is Recognizing Requirements. To prevent or avoid dilemmas during the teaching process, educational managers and teachers can investigate students' mental and psychological needs in advance, which reflect in students' reasons and symptoms of their negative feelings and motivation in the coding frame. To recognize students' requirements, at the beginning of designing a schedule, educational managers and teachers are recommended to launch an interview or deliver some kinds of questionnaires for collecting students' requirements or expectations. In the daily interactions, educational managers and teachers shall keep constant contact to notice the symptoms of negative feelings. Symptoms once discovered can be addressed, they can try to find the roots of issues, where to identify whether they are caused by self and others. Detecting the reasons help management about how to motivate students from personal inspiration or external environment stimulation.

Approving requirements is about how to assist students in the teaching process. From the coding frame, solutions from self and the agencies are two main ways dealing with these issues. To solve these issues, assistance from the agencies proved most effective in comparison amongst all solutions because the individual efforts are limited. Therefore, management is supposed to share more information about cultures in order to create environments for cultural immersions. Narrowing gaps is the second point in the teaching process. This is more in the domain of psychology from personal perspective. Because of personal characters such as shyness, nervousness and more, the coding frame suggests a good relationship can release their negative feelings. For instance, teachers encouraging students to share their personal experiences, offer more opportunities to share valuable information, show compassion, and give aid to students' dealing with life troubles which then allows to build trust and narrow cultural gaps.

Judging objectives can be referred to comparing students' status pre and post learning. Results of the solutions in the coding frame offer five domains, to help management judge their teaching effectiveness. The judging criteria can be subjective and objective, by educational managers and teachers' observation, interaction, and academic grade reports. For example, students' attitudes toward the host country's culture can manifest in daily life chat, either positive or negative. The management is supposed to guide them into the right way, help students criticize right or wrong by themselves. Skills and knowledge can be judged by oral or paper test. These previous three domains belong to the intercultural sensitivity, and the achievements, activities, and emotions are categorized from the collecting articles, which can be evaluated subjectively and objectively as well. Achievements manifest students' academic grade report, or students' informal chat or activities. Activities and emotions can be reflected in the feedbacks of the interactions. For example, by launching some informal activities such as clubs, students can earn extra credits, which encourage them to take part in, and help them release negative feelings.

## **Discussion**

In the current qualitative content analysis, the scope and contents of articles concentrate on curricular and teaching pedagogies in practice that impart knowledge and skills of host country's culture. Even through the research key words are "cross-cultural management", "intercultural sensitivity", "linguistic and language" and "cultural intelligence", results reveal that most articles rarely appear such terms rather than focusing more on practice-oriented curricular and pedagogies. Instead, the results of qualitative content analysis reveal more details in the management process, analysis of the causes of students' physiological requirements, and how to deal with these issues. Compared with the viewpoints of Kim (2020), language issue is often mixed with other cultural issues in the cross-cultural management. More significant contents deserve noticing rather than language issues, that means international students in the collected materials have to face "intangible gaps" due to cultural differences (Dailey-Strand et al, 2021).

There are no distinctive gaps among teaching pedagogies in the forms of formal, non-formal, and informal education, of which are overlapped since authors pay much more attention on the teaching process. Combined with the solutions from self and agencies, educational management can offer more assistance in the environment where students

experience the atmosphere for cultural immersions. In the teaching environment, mass media as a convey of cultural contents through various platforms such as television, internet, magazines, newspapers, and more that support the views of Thomas (2020). Even though students get in touch with these cultural contents every day, they still need support from others, guiding them to shape positive attitudes with others to maintain relationships (Perry, 2016). Following Yang (2020), informal communications helps international students comprehend host country's culture, but some negative feelings come from the local residents when international students interact with them. Educational managers and teachers should pay more attention to this phenomenon even through students learning more from outside classroom. Students' motivations, reasons of negative feelings, and resources support in the coding frame are similar to the idea of Çelik et al. (2021) with the key points of motivations, barriers, and resources in the informal learning, but this research indicates students' motivations, reasons of negative feelings, and resources can also be applied in the other two kinds of learning (formal and non-formal learning), providing significant considerations for cross-cultural management as a whole process. Çelik et al. (2021) divided resources as interactive and personal, whereas this study emphasizes more on the resources provided via school agencies. This is due to the limitations of information gained from individual students, especially who first come to the host country without accepting the culture. Motivations divided into student-self and others, which are not quite the same with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. In this study, students' motivations are mostly fueled by personal interests, or these can be paraphrased as personal rewards. Barriers are divided as four domains, namely personal, school-related, work-related, and central policies. Regarding this study, because of the practice-oriented in cross-cultural management, the coding frame concentrates more about personal and school-related domains, where they are manifest in self-improvement and school-related environment building about cultural immersion.

After a period of education, international students change the stereotypes of the host country that gaining from the mass media, and gradually accept the host country's culture or even shape new positive attitudes towards the host country. This is in line with the continuum of DMIS (Bennet, 2013). Additionally, the coding frame follow the theory of David Livermore (2022) as well. Even through CQ drive have focused on triggering learners' interest, investigating the source of interest such as negative feelings would be better to explain the reasons of their actions. Cultural exposure is one of the mostly used teaching method and international students tend to group together by similar cultural backgrounds (Marina et al., 2021), but no evidences suggest that how much long time is enough for a sojourn to improve CQ (Chang et al., 2022). Lin and Shen (2020) report that informal contacts can meditate international students' negative feelings. Results in this study have expanded the supports especially from agencies and educators.

Some units of coding are beyond the range of cultural contents and the capacity of the management. For example, personal characters cannot easily change and it is not much related to cultural content. Another example is geological distance that makes students upset, which is beyond the capacity of the management. Even though they are not cultural aspects in this case, the management cannot ignore these issues that mentioned by authors in their articles.

Regarding the guideline, five domains of ARJAN can be allocated as pre-teaching, teaching in process and pro-teaching phases. However, each domain does not isolate in each phase. For example, Recognizing Requirements can also be conducted in the teaching in process by teachers' observation or pro-teaching phase by feedback from students' interview, to improve teaching effectiveness. Another point is how to combine learning environments with teaching pedagogies outside classroom, where cultural immersion is easier for students.

The strength of this research outlines six categories in presenting from how international students' negative feelings caused to exploring solutions solving these issues. Additionally, learning environment and pedagogies such as formal, non-formal and informal education play critical roles in enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity. The guideline abbreviates as ARJAN highlights educational management into three phases in pre-teaching, teaching in process and pro-teaching that combined with learning environment and pedagogies, helping educational stakeholders behave in intercultural learning.

The limitations of this research are the number of collected materials and subjective judging criteria. More articles collected from journals may enrich teaching pedagogies, offer more options in formal, non-formal, and informal education. On the other side, judging criteria are setting down by coders, who have different views in categorizing even when they are sorting out the same message.

As a whole, the result of qualitative content analysis releases the profile of cross-cultural management in the area of education, which outlines some main issues in the management process. The guideline followed the coding frame aimed to provide steps in regards to pre-teaching, teaching in process and pro-teaching.

## Implications and Conclusion

This present study was carried out to investigate the published articles during 2016-2021 in the field of education, to find out about the most researched topics of cross-cultural management. To enhance students' intercultural sensitivity, a proposed guideline was utilized which emphasized pre-teaching, teaching in process and pro-teaching phases. The findings seem to be more practical in regard to solutions to these topics that what was purposed in the literature review. Six categories in coding presents the main issues that international students faced and how to solve these issues. As a guideline, ARJAN helps educational management consider how to make full use of all kinds of teaching resources in formal, non-formal, and informal education, and predict trends in cultural education

With detail investigation, further studies might extend such research settings and participants of the thesis, which might make contributions aiding cross-cultural management researchers on how to find out more specific gaps in the field. For instance, education management can consider how to design a schedule with more cost-effective teaching pedagogies in learning and teaching through formal, non-formal, and informal education. Furthermore, to narrow cultural gaps, the coding frame outlines why international students become upset, outline symptoms as references for managers, and offers solutions.

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# The Impact of Student Leadership on Chinese International Students' Language Proficiency and Belongingness

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## Abstract

*International students, especially Chinese international students, are underrepresented in leadership roles in Canadian universities. A review of the related literature indicates that low language proficiency, lack of belongingness, and cultural difference inhibited Chinese international students' leadership opportunities. This study adopted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to investigate the benefits that five Chinese international student participants perceived, based on leadership roles in which they participated. The results suggest that taking student leadership roles facilitated participants' language development at one Canadian university and enhanced their belongingness to the university. However, their participation in student leadership roles did not contribute to their belongingness to Canadian society.*

Keywords: belongingness, Chinese international students, language proficiency, leadership

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## Introduction

In the 2017-2018 academic year, Chinese students comprised the largest group of international students at Canadian public colleges and universities: 83,011 out of 296,469 international students studying in Canada, and Chinese-origin students accounted for almost one-third (28%) of all international students in Canada attending post-secondary educational institutions (Statistics Canada, 2020). However, their representation in leadership roles within student governments is underwhelmingly disproportionate compared to their actual numbers. In fact, a randomly selected five out of 24 post-secondary universities in Ontario showed that no Chinese international students took on leadership roles in student governments in the 2017-2018 academic year. According to Astin (1984), student involvement in extra-curricular activities, especially taking a leadership role in student government associations, improves students' sense of belonging and reinforces overall self-development. However, previous research mainly illustrated the obstacles that Chinese international students had in their involvement in on-campus activities and their overall social integration. For example,

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low language proficiency, cultural differences, and lack of belongingness are often cited as factors that inhibit school involvement among international students and minimized their confidence when communicating with their domestic peers and instructors. Further, no studies have explored this population's leadership status in Canada, and there is limited research on how to facilitate their English language development and belongingness through an extra-curriculum setting. Moreover, no studies highlight the benefits international Chinese students perceive to be associated with engagement in student leadership roles. This article seeks to advance leadership roles as an important pathway to facilitate Chinese-origin students' social integration and self-development at post-secondary educational institutions.

## **Literature Review**

To frame the current study and understand the importance of conducting this research in the Canadian context, it is important to identify what previous research has been established about Chinese international students and their engagement in leadership roles in Canadian post-secondary institutions. This necessitates an overview of Chinese international students' enrollment in Canadian post-secondary institutions, and an outline of the obstacles they encounter when integrating into Canadian academic and social contexts. Likewise, it is important to identify how the leadership roles they have embraced have facilitated international students' belongingness.

### **The Enrollment of Chinese International Students in Canada**

As of 2020, China was the second top source country after India, for international students in Canada, with 22% of the whole Canadian international student population (CBIE, 2022). For the first time since 2006, China had a decline (0.5%) in the number of students coming to Canada, but it remains firmly in second place, with 116,700 students in 2020 (CBIE, 2022). Due to the Ontario government's announcement of a required 10% reduction in domestic tuition fees for all programs, many universities decided to address the \$10 million shortfall, by expanding the enrollment of international students (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2019). With international student numbers growing by 25% annually, Canada has already surpassed its International Education Strategy, launched under the Harper government in 2011, which aimed to increase international student enrollment to 450,000 by 2022. Chinese students constitute, and are projected to exceed, one-third of Canada's international student population (Luedi, 2019).

### **Obstacles of Academic and Social Integration**

The large enrollment numbers of Chinese international students in Canadian post-secondary institutions do not guarantee their successful integration into the Canadian context. In fact, Chinese international students report many obstacles, in terms of their assimilation and acculturation, low language proficiency, and lacking sense of belonging, which are significant difficulties Chinese students encounter in Canada.

Su and Harrison (2016) found that language emerged as a highly meaningful factor in determining Chinese international students' ability to navigate both academic and social challenges. However, they present overall low English-language competence. Likewise, Jiao (2006) indicates that language deficiency obstructs Chinese international students' integration in daily communication and interactions with other students. For example, one Chinese international student reported that language barriers affected his social networking, which made him feel lonely (Weber, 2011).

Integration and academic success can be impacted by a lack of belonging, cultural and linguistic isolation, and contrasting individual and campus characteristics (Chen, 2018); however, for Chinese international students, the situation is more complicated. For example, while a new sociocultural environment can lead to social isolation (Yan & Sendall,

2016), this population often views themselves as temporary visitors, and therefore are not interested in forming meaningful social bonds in the host country (Yao, 2016). Furthermore, Chen (2017) notes that cultural differences are often regarded as irreconcilable contradictions, which further limits the integration of immigrant students of Chinese-origin. His study illustrates that in the process of integration of Chinese immigrants, Chinese international students must adopt certain aspects of the host culture and abandon certain aspects of Chinese culture. Chinese international students often react by maintaining, and remaining in, a comfort zone, and seeking social support from co-national peers from their native culture (Cao et al., 2017; Du & Wei, 2015), which can exacerbate their status of social disconnection with the host country.

### **Taking Leadership Roles and Having a Sense of Belonging**

Following the influx of international students who have enrolled in North American post-secondary institutions, several recent studies have explored international students' belongingness. For example, a significant amount of research has examined how obstacles impede international students' acculturation and pathways that can enhance their collective sense of belonging (Johnson, 2019; Jones et al., 2018; Van Horne et al., 2018; Yao, 2016). Astin (1999) concluded that involvement in student government can improve their political participation and satisfaction towards friendships, and the peer-group effect generated, which may enhance students' sense of belonging. The impact of academic and social integration on student persistence has also been confirmed by Tinto (2012). Likewise, Glass and Westmont's (2014) quantitative study, which included 1,398 international participants, found that cultural events, leadership programs, and community service collectively enhanced students' collective sense of belongingness. A critical literature review found that Chinese international students experience lack of social and academic integration that contributes to their mental health challenges and attrition from their host institutions (Chen & Zhou, 2019).

### **Literature Gaps**

Though previous studies uncovered some of the barriers to the overall integration and development of students of Chinese-origin in Canada, there are at least four gaps that need to be addressed. Firstly, research has not investigated the leadership roles of students of Chinese-origin at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Secondly, there is an absence of studies on the benefits that international students perceived by taking on leadership roles at their host institutions. Thirdly, previous literature has failed to identify potential links between taking leadership roles and the development of language proficiency. Lastly, there is a research gap regarding the correlations between taking leadership roles and developing a sense of belonging for students of Chinese-origin.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is guided by two leading theories: Astin's (1984) input-environment-output (IEO) model of student development theory and Hogg's (2001) social identity theory of leadership. Astin is a prominent student development theorist who advocated for increasing involvement during the student experience at post-secondary educational institutions. The IEO concept first came from Astin's work titled, *Productivity of Undergraduate Institutions* (Astin, 1962). Since then, the IEO model has guided Astin's research and facilitated the development of his theory on student involvement. While there have been refinements over the years, the basic elements have remained the same:

Input refers to the characteristics of the students at the time of initial entry to the institution; environment refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and outcomes refers to the student's characteristics after exposure to the environment (Astin, 1993, p. 7).

Alternatively, Hogg (2001) suggests that leadership is about how some individuals or micro-social groups, colloquially known as 'cliques,' have disproportionate power and influence to set agendas, define identities, and mobilize people to achieve collective goals. The differential ability of some people to influence or shape attitudes, practices, decisions, and actions is endemic to most social groups (e.g., nations, communities, organizations, committees, cliques, and families). Leaders are people who have disproportionate influence through the possession of prestige and/or power, real or perceived over the attitudes, behaviors, and futures of group members. Hogg (2001) also supports Chemers (2001) and Platow et al. (2015), who suggests that leadership is inherently a group process.

## **Methodology**

According to Yin (2009), whether for the purpose of developing or testing a theory, it is vital to adopt a case study that complements a study's theoretical framework. This study seeks to examine students' experiences through the lens of student development theory, with multiple case studies used for developing a detailed understanding of international and visible minority students' development in Canadian post-secondary universities. As an academic group that often goes unnoticed, the self-development and political involvement of Chinese international students merits further research. Considering that the interviews are active interactions where the role of interviewers involves clarifying or expanding upon questions instead of simply asking and recording, a semi-structured, one-on-one interview was designed to explore participants' experiences. Research was designed into the following steps: signing consent forms, filling in the demographic information sheet, engaging in the ice-breaker phase, answering two sets of specific questions, and ending the interview. The demographic information sheet included questions such as nationality, program of study, level of study, and length of stay in Canada. Each one-on-one interview took about 60-90 minutes. As the study was conducted within the naturalistic inquiry paradigm, researchers took steps to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

## **Participants**

The researchers used three approaches when recruiting potential participants: sending interview invitation emails to all international students with the permission of the institutional international student center, sending request-for-help emails to staff and professors who may know potential participants, and snowballing by asking the participants to recommend other eligible students. This was done to ensure that selected participants credibly represented the perspectives of Chinese-origin students attending the university.

Five Chinese international students from a mid-sized, comprehensive, public university in Ontario, Canada were recruited to participate in the research. The number of participants was set, based on Yin's (2009) suggestion that "multiple-case designs may be preferred over single-case designs" (p. 60), and Small's (2009) argument that one case works for in-depth qualitative interview research. This research included one undergraduate student and four graduate students, with their ages ranging from 25 to 44. Their length of stay in Canada ranged from nine months to five years. To protect the students' privacy, each participant was given a pseudonym: Kerry, Charlie, Wayson, Lisa, and Carol. To further preserve their anonymity, the research does not identify their specific leadership position in case they could be easily identified by a bystander. Other than Charlie, all the participants had experience taking leadership roles, or being

**Table 1***General Information of Participants*

Item	Participants				
Name	Wayson	Charlie	Kerry	Lisa	Carol
Gender	M	M	M	F	F
Age duration	25-29	25-29	25-29	40-44	24-29
Country of origin	China	China	China PR in Canada	China	China
Level of study	Master's	Under-graduate	Master's	Master's	Master's
Faculty	Science	Engineering	Business	Business	Education
Length of stay in Canada	17 months	5 years	2 years	9 months	2 years
Previous experience with political participation	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Report to (having guidance from)	Staffs of Chinese origin	Staffs of Chinese origin	Instructors, faculty council, program administrator	Student experience coordinator	Director of inter-national student center
Language used while responding to questions in the interview	Mandarin	Mandarin	English	English	Mandarin

student representative, before entering the research site institution, while some of them took multiple leadership positions in one academic year. Table 1 provides demographic details.

Wayson was a leader of a student club, whose members were mostly composed of international Chinese students. His duties were hosting meetings, developing regulations, announcing news, building team cohesion, and cultivating leaders. When he needed guidance or advice, he would turn to two Chinese-origin university staff for help. He mainly used Mandarin as his working language.

Kerry was a class representative, the head of a student society, a leader of a student club, a student representative in the faculty council, and a founder of a mentor program. She also took an active part in social activities and voluntary work. Her duties included scheduling and hosting meetings, organizing student activities, and recruiting volunteers. She used English during her work time.

Charlie was the head of a Chinese-origin student club. He organized student activities, enriched Chinese students' extracurricular life, helped students adapt to their life in university, and addressed students' needs. His working language is Mandarin.

Lisa was the leader of a mentorship program, a coordinator in a conference committee at the university, and a volunteer who helped organize a leadership conference at the university. Her work was to frame the workflow, compose organizational maps, schedule timelines, and support mentor training. She used English as her working language.

Carol was a leader in a learning group, a student representative at the faculty level and a campaign volunteer. She helped to lobby community members to vote for a political campaign. She worked with the local staff, so her working language was English.

## **Instrumentation**

The instrument adopted in this research is a self-designed questionnaire. To guide participants' responses toward specific questions in an economic way, the researchers organized the interview questions using the following themes: participants' experiences with specific leadership positions, participants' perception and self-evaluation of language

proficiency, participants' perception of belongingness, peer review of language proficiency, and participants' suggestions regarding social integration.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In this study, data is more contextual and descriptive since it is primarily about individual experiences. Based on the interview instructions, in accordance with the regulations set in the consent form and the confirmation from the researchers' research ethics board, all participants' interview transcripts were eligible and used in the data analysis.

Creswell (2015) suggests researchers should interpret information provided by each participant of the research during, or immediately after, data collection. Thus, the interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim within one day after the interview to create thick descriptions and an audit trail to guide the thematic analysis. Bowling (2005) suggests that the mode of questionnaire administration has serious effects on data quality. As a result, designing the questionnaire with themes helped the researchers to seek the heterogeneous or homogeneous responses of participants towards specific questions, and some unexpected descriptions of their experiences. Researchers used triangulation to compare comments made by research participants. They also conducted member checks to ensure that interview transcripts were consistent with participant understandings of interview discussions and engaged in peer debriefing with other members of the research group.

## **Results**

In general, participants experienced the connection between taking leadership and sense of belonging. Taking leadership roles also helped to expand their social networks, their understanding of local norms, and engagement with local communities/people. All the participants reported that they developed management skills and confidence. Overall, they perceived the development of English-language proficiency through their pragmatic practices, while leading activities and organizations. They all admitted that taking leadership roles enhanced their belongingness; however, their belongingness was associated more with the university and student organizations and less with Canadian society. The findings also support the application of Astin's student development theory in the Canadian post-secondary environment.

### **Leadership Roles and Language Proficiency**

According to the participants, English-language barriers, among students of Chinese-origin, prevent students from understanding Canadian culture, local rules, and norms embedded in conversations, due to their low involvement in social life and limited participation in local organizations. The researchers sought to explore, through interview questions, how taking leadership roles improves language proficiency. To obtain the findings on language proficiency, in multi-dimension, the researchers employed modularized reporting processes, including self-evaluation on language proficiency in academic and social usage, confirmation of changes in language development, and direction and mechanism of language development.

#### ***Self-Evaluation on Language Proficiency***

To determine participants' self-evaluation of their language proficiency in academic learning, as well as in a social context, the researchers consulted the participants about their perceived levels of their language proficiency for academic learning and social usage.

Kerry, Lisa, and Carol all demonstrated confidence in their English language proficiency, both in academic learning and social usage, during their interviews. However, there was something unexpected. Charlie, who has the longest length of stay in Canada and was the only participant at the undergraduate level of study, displayed the lowest self-evaluation in his language proficiency. He initially tried to answer questions in English, but he switched to Mandarin soon after. Charlie's perceptions were like Kerry's. Kerry took his undergraduate program in the United States. When Kerry finished his undergraduate program, he thought his English was insufficient to communicate with local people. With a passion to improve his language proficiency, Kerry forced himself to communicate with local people by taking leadership roles on campus, and engaging in social works in the local community, when he began his master's program in Canada. Wayson reported that his spoken English was relatively weak, which restricted his ability to communicate with local students and international students from outside of China.

### ***Confirmations of the Changes in Language Development***

Overall, participants reported that the English-language competence helped them conduct their leadership roles, and they perceived a difference of language proficiency after taking their leadership roles. They, likewise, experienced the social norms/rules that were embedded in the usage of political language. All participants agreed that a leader's language proficiency is vital to conducting a leadership role in a Canadian university; however, the efficiency of using the English language was dependent on the role requirements of the position, and the leader's language ability. Charlie said:

I think good English language proficiency can surely help me to execute work more effectively, but the efficiency/frequency of using English in taking leadership roles still depends on an individual's level. Because my English is not that good, it did not contribute to my president's work.

Kerry believes that language proficiency is everything, and he indicated that language skills impact "the level of communication and the extent of interpersonal interaction in the Canadian context." Carol also offered her thoughts: "If I can't express the learning material clearly, it will be difficult for me to get the outcomes of my teaching practice." However, when asked, Carol said that she perceived a difference of language proficiency after taking her leadership role:

To be honest, there was almost no improvement after taking this leadership role. Mainly, I was using my acquired English skills during the teaching practice. There is less chance that I can learn something new. Thus, I don't think there was progress in my English proficiency.

### ***Directions and Mechanisms of Language Development***

The findings on the direction and mechanisms of language development were generated through participants' answers to multiple-choice questions administered by the researchers (outlined in Table 2). In these questions, participants were given several options, and could choose whichever option, or options, applied to them. Participants' responses and explanations provide various perspectives.

About 'direction,' the participants offered different responses. Both Wayson and Carol reported that they perceived "no difference" after taking their leadership roles. Wayson offered an explanation: "If we can recruit Canadian-born Chinese students to our club in the future, then the work in this position may improve my English language by having the opportunity to communicate with them." In contrast, although Carol indicated that there was "almost no" difference in her English-language proficiency after taking the leadership role, her explanations suggested otherwise. She thought the benefits of language proficiency from taking leadership meant being more confident when speaking in public.



**Table 2***Directions and Mechanisms of Language Development through Leadership Participation*

Interview questions	What does the difference actually refer to if you perceived a difference of language proficiency after taking a leadership role or being a student representative?	What kind of activities helped to improve your language proficiency in your political experience?
Wayson	None	None
Charlie	Vocabulary expanded, more slang and cultural background understanding	Reading working emails, on-sites presentation/comments, reading working documents, collaborating with peers
Kerry	Vocabulary expanded, more slang and cultural background understanding	Reading working emails, on-sites presentation/comments, writing working emails to convey ideas
Lisa	Vocabulary expanded, more slang and cultural background understanding	Reading working emails, on-sites presentation/comments, writing working emails to convey ideas, collaborating with peers
Carol	Almost none	On-sites presentation/comments

In addition, she noted that she did learn a native expression and developed a better understanding of local English grammar rules through her leadership participation. The remaining three participants all reported that their language proficiency was improved, with respect to expanding their vocabularies, developing a deeper understanding of language context, and understanding the cultural background within a conversation.

Participants chose “on-site presentation/comments” most frequently as a factor that facilitated language development. In addition to “reading working emails,” “on-site presentation comments,” “writing working emails to convey ideas,” and “collaborating with peers,” Lisa and Carol mentioned some other circumstances that also facilitated language development through political participation, which included “the preparation of an organization plan” and “the person [to whom] I report gave [sic] me [a] chance to improve English, since she is a native speaker.”

### **Leadership Roles and Belongingness**

The researchers also investigated how taking on leadership can enhance the sense of belonging. In this section, belongingness is explored in three different dimensions: the exploration of participants’ sense of belonging to the university, their sense of belonging to Canadian society, and the mechanism of enhancing belongingness that they perceived through taking leadership roles.

#### ***Belongingness to the University***

The findings on the participants’ sense of belonging at the university were quite positive overall. Participants reported that they felt as though they belong at the university and that their leadership roles enhanced their belongingness. Wayson stated that he loves his university very much. He was satisfied with the facilities on campus and with the people he met at this university. Both Wayson and Kerry indicated that even though they will be leaving the university after graduation, they will always see themselves as alumni of the institution. Kerry offered specific details: “I feel [that] my soul and spirit will always be here. It’s about my effort and contribution to this community. Sometimes, you work hard for

something, or getting something [that] makes you part of it.” Charlie added that his length of stay at this university impacted his sense of belonging.

However, Carol expressed a unique perception of her sense of belonging to the university, which was “half, half,” in her original description. She stressed how physically attending and participating impacted her sense of belonging at the university:

When I am taking classes, I feel I belong at this university. When I am participating in university activities, I also think I belong to it. The moment I left the classes or go [sic] off-duty from my on-campus work, I do [sic] not think [that] I have a sense of belonging to the university. This [sic] is demonstrated by the Celebration of Nations. I knew there was such an activity, but since I didn’t participate in it, it made no sense to me. Maybe my graduate program is too short, and my length of stay is not long enough to generate this sense of belonging.

Overall, the interview showed that all five participants agreed that their pragmatic leading practices facilitated their belongingness to the university.

### ***Belongingness to Canadian Society***

The findings on the participants’ perceptions of belongingness to Canadian society are more negative, compared to their responses to their belongingness at the university. The most unexpected response came from Charlie’s statement but may represent a general perception from students of Chinese-origin in Canada. Charlie has five-years’ life experience in Ontario. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that the extent of his acculturation would be relatively more advanced than the other participants, however, he expressed a different sentiment:

If it is me, I will give a negative answer. Whether from the level of my exposure to Canada, my cultural identity, or my circle of life, there are difficulties. Perhaps it’s not just the accumulation of time that makes me feel like I can integrate into the Canadian society: it requires an opportunity...I admire those Chinese people who have stayed here for ten or more years, because their life here is not easy. My sense of belonging and cultural identity in this society is too low. The influence of Chinese people and the reputation of Chinese communities are not proportional, compared with what they have contributed to this society. I feel powerless, actually, despair.

Carol also mentioned feeling helpless:

I also realize that the voices from people of Chinese-origin in Canada are rarely heard...because [the] Chinese group do[es] not participate politically, the government’s decision-making cannot/will not represent their interest in turn. As a result, the government supposes that they can ignore the voice from the Chinese people when they are making decisions. It’s a vicious circle.

Kerry is the only one who indicated a positive attitude about his belongingness to Canadian society. He admits the ID (identity document) paper maintains his belongingness in Canada, but this is largely because he wants to be here. He participates in local communities, and the communities equivalently welcome him to the local society. He suggested that “the Canadian[s] do not really care about where you come from. They care about whether you can make contributions.”

## ***Mechanisms of Enhancing a Sense of Belonging***

Since all participants reported that taking leadership roles facilitated their overall sense of belonging, the researchers sought to investigate the mechanisms of leadership that enhanced their belongingness. Carol concluded that leadership facilitated belongingness physically and emotionally. The data collected from the interview questions (outlined in Table 3) suggests that participants acknowledged a physical attachment to a group or an organization which enhanced their belongingness. Moreover, the confidence and familiarity that was generated through their pragmatic leadership practices also facilitated their sense of belonging.

During the last part of the interview, researchers asked participants to provide some suggestions to their Chinese peers, who want to facilitate their social integration in Canada. The phrase “comfort zone” and the word “participate” are highly repeated in their suggestions, and they also gave advice on setting long-term goals.

### **Participants’ Suggestions**

#### ***Stepping Outside the Comfort Zone and Participating***

Three out of five participants suggested that students of Chinese-origin should step outside their comfort zone, and all participants advised their peers to participate in student groups, or become involved in local communities, to facilitate social integration. For example, Lisa stated that her peers “stay in their comfort zone” and “should stretch themselves out of the comfort zone and force themselves to participate in various events.” Wayson recommends that people of Chinese-origin should participate multidimensionally in Canadian society:

They only live in their social circle and comfort zone...Since they are in Canada, don't be a 'geek.' They'd better move their feet and enjoy the social life in Canada. Participation is a Chinese societal-wide problem but does not exist individually.

With six years of life experience in North America, Kerry experienced self-development by forcing himself to take on challenges:

If you only sit at home with a group from your own origin and always stay in your comfort zone, there is less chance for you to learn new norms or get extra information. If you choose to [get] involve[d] in the local community, you can integrate into this society in a more effective way and have more opportunities. That's my suggestion.

#### ***Long-Term Orientation***

Except for Lisa, all the participants were born in either 1993 or 1994, which means that they were between the ages of 24 and 26, while participating in this research study. However, they present a psychological maturity, with respect to making a long-term life plan, which is quite like Lisa, who is an experienced professional and homeowner with a family at age 40. They suggest that students of Chinese-origin should not focus on achieving quick results but instead to consider the development of long-term goals before making decisions, specifically, with respect to taking part-time jobs, getting involved in social activities, and engaging in volunteer work.

Carol also indicated that taking a part-time job for a brief period of time might not be that advantageous. She suggested that part-time jobs should meet students' long-term orientation goals or offer chances to work with western peers to facilitate their social integration. Moreover, Wayson noted that, as an international student in Canada, there are

**Table 3***Mechanisms Perceived that Improved Sense of Belonging through Student Leadership Roles' Participation*

Interview questions	How does your participation enhance your sense of belonging?	What kind of activities help to improve your sense of belonging in your leadership roles?
Wayson	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, name included in the email group, on-site decision voting/making comments
Charlie	Confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, on-site decision voting/making comments
Kerry	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, on-site decision voting/making comments
Lisa	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, name included in the email group, on-site decision voting/making comments
Carol	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	On-site decision voting/making comments

too many norms, rules, and cultural differences to learn. He said that though they may not like it, it is a duty to adapt to the new culture and overcome the challenges associated with it, especially if they want to integrate into Canadian society.

### **Discussion**

The research findings suggest that involvement in extra-curricular activities at one Canadian university leads to student success, which supports Astin's (1999) conclusions. It also demonstrates the assumed theoretical foundation that students' leadership roles benefits students' sense of belonging and social integration. Further, it indicates that taking leadership roles helps international students develop their language proficiency. Here are a few important insights that warrant further discussion.

#### **The Language and Cultural Paradox**

The language and cultural paradox refers to the relationship between language and culture when understanding barriers to social integration among Chinese student groups in the Canadian context. Even though Chinese international students learned English at all levels of study in mainland China, and often possess sufficient language competency, they learned the language outside of its cultural context.

Further, the language and cultural barriers are easy to misinterpret in some circumstances. The silent culture is repeatedly illustrated in current research on Chinese international students (Liu, 2002; Xiang, 2017; Zhou et al., 2005). However, Cheng (2000) notes that it is dangerous to over-generalize about East-Asian students' reticence and passivity, while evaluating their engagement or general participation on campus. A study conducted by Wang and Moskal (2019) also illustrated that "silence" is often misinterpreted, and linguistic and cultural factors affected classroom reticence.

The findings of this study display the significance of practicing the English language through involvement in Canada's cultural environments. Proactively using language in specific cultural environments can help overcome language barriers and enhance social integration; however, many students of Chinese-origin often overlook the value of this practice, which is reflected in their limited participation in various on- and off-campus activities.

## **Sense of Belonging and Social Integration**

Sense of belonging is a construct which influences students' success in post-secondary education. When relating sense of belonging, it always comes with social integration. But does being socially integrated equal with having a sense of belonging? Yao (2019) raised an issue that seeking to increase students' sense of belonging is more important than their integration to campus. She holds the view that integration may result in the dominant peer group wielding the highest level and bring pressure on international students.

In this study, most of the participants reported that taking leadership roles can help them learn the social norms and rules embedded in the language people used, leadership roles facilitated both student development and social integration. The findings are consistent with the study's theoretical framework. It also demonstrates the premise of Habermas' theory of social integration (Habermas, 1981). According to Møller (2002), Habermas' theory of social integration regards people's ability to secure cultural meanings, solidarity, social norms, and personal identities as an accomplishment of social integration.

As a result, taking leadership roles is an ideal way for international students to both gain a sense of belonging and acculturate themselves to the new environment without feeling stressed. However, it is also salient for institutions to understand the nuances of belongingness of students from different cultural backgrounds.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

Leadership roles, as a pathway to facilitate Chinese-origin students' social integration and self-development is effective. However, to achieve students' development, students of Chinese-origin, the post-secondary institutions, and the local communities should take collaborative actions.

### **Students' Actions**

Based on the resources offered by the university, there are extra pathways that could enhance student development at Canadian universities. This includes participating in president/vice-president elections, running a student government association, taking on- and off-campus part-time jobs with a long-term setting, and making friends with local students, staff, and community members. Moreover, participation in these organizations and activities helps build local networks, which is vital for finding employment after graduation.

### **Institutional Actions**

The post-secondary institutions are recommended to take a leading role in administering the services referring to international students' social integration, due to their long-standing engagement and frequent interaction with the international student population. In addition to adjusting the program settings, there are much more vital actions that post-secondary institutions should take to facilitate student development and social integration. Both micro-level actions and macro-level actions in the post-secondary institutions should be taken. On the micro-level, workshops and learning groups should be considered. On the macro-level, changes to resource allocation and governance structure should be contemplated because it is at the institutional level that the real processes of integration take place.

## Local Community's Actions

The role of the local community with respect to facilitating international students' belongingness to Canadian society is vital. However, its efficiency requires collaboration between the local community and post-secondary institutions. The local community includes both local employers and municipal government. The suggestions on facilitating international students' belongingness into local society are centered on an institution and its collaboration with local employers and municipal government.

The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. Based on the current findings and literature review, the researchers have identified three key shareholders: students of Chinese-origin, post-secondary institutions, and local communities, which includes local employers and municipal government. Students should consider becoming involved in campus politics and communities and look for employment opportunities on- and off-campus. In addition, post-secondary institutions should consider how to support international students by changing resource allocation and governance structures. Lastly, the local community should collaborate and support institutions to build a win-win model of local development.

Future research should aim to perform three key tasks with larger sample sizes: identifying and understanding the experiences of Canadian-born Chinese students, establishing the benefits of and barriers to political participation through quantitative research, and determining the leadership competencies of Canadian-educated employees of Chinese-origin.

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# Hitting the Ground Running: Helping International Master's Students to Succeed in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay examines potential barriers to the academic success of international master's students studying in higher education in the UK and identifies key elements that draw together university policy and culture and classroom practice to enable this group of students to 'hit the ground running'. These barriers are viewed through the lens of academic shock and academic integrity. Key themes are discussed including the importance of factors such as language barriers, misunderstandings, and anxiety, as well as the importance of providing clear definitions of what constitutes academic integrity violations in UK universities. The timeframe of one academic year, in which full-time international master's students are required to acquire new knowledge and skills often impedes the successful completion of early assignments set during their first term. Solutions for addressing these barriers are proposed and aimed at supporting the achievement of international master's students.*

**Keywords:** International master's students, academic integrity, academic shock, academic integrity violations, plagiarism

## Introduction

Universities UK International (UUKi, 2021) report states that in 2019/20 the UK was the second most popular destination for international students with 538,615 international students studying at UK higher education (HE) institutions and accounting for 27.5% of the total UK student population. International students are defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016) as students who have travelled overseas to study and who are not permanent or typical citizens of the host country. Within the European Union, Italy, France, and Germany were the top sending countries with 142,990 students between them in 2019/20, of which just 29.6% were master's students. In contrast, China, India, the USA, and Hong Kong sent a majority of international students, a total of 395,630 international students of which 52.7% were master's students.

Although the UUKi (2021) report states that the UK remains a popular destination for international master's students, the academic cultural shocks that these students face should be acknowledged. Unlike international undergraduate students, who have three or four years to adapt to their host country, international full-time master's



students are normally required to complete their program of study within one academic year. They must navigate language-related, social, and academic complexities, often with a minimal period of induction. After that they are expected to rapidly comprehend the UK university culture, especially regarding expectations, learning practices, and what constitutes academic integrity, and successfully complete their studies within the set timeframe. This is compounded by the need for international master's students to gain a rapid understanding of the nuanced academic language they must use in assessments and on which their work will be assessed during their first term. HE institutions in countries such as the UK require that international master's students complete English language tests that demonstrate language proficiency before commencing their studies overseas.

This essay is framed by 24 years' experience of coordinating international master's degrees in a UK university and responding to issues of concern that have been raised at academic boards and reviews. It seeks to examine the literature related to the known and sometimes hidden challenges that influence the academic success of international master's students. This essay uses the lens of academic shock to explore how both unintentional and intentional plagiarism challenges academic integrity and ultimately, the academic effect of these decisions on international master's students. The term 'academic shock' is used to describe the intense impact of having to rapidly adjust to an unfamiliar UK academic culture whilst successfully completing a master's degree within one academic year. Finally, the essay provides guidance for institutional staff in working with international master's students to enable them to prepare students so that they can 'hit the ground running'.

### **Academic Integrity and Its Importance for International Master's Students Studying in HE**

Academic integrity is a multifaceted and complicated issue not only because of the way in which it is described, but also because of how it occurs and what is included. Some studies have reported that international students found that academic integrity tends to differ in HE institutions in different countries, which may cause confusion regarding the appropriate methods that international students should use during their academic studies in the UK (Mangue & Gonondo, 2021; Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021). In addition, while the International Center of Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2021) focuses on commitment to the values of trust, responsibility, honesty, respect, courage, and fairness, the U.S. government agency, Office of Research Integrity (ORI, 2022), focuses on research integrity and conceptualizes academic integrity violations such as plagiarizing, fabricating, and falsifying when proposing, conducting, reviewing, or reporting research findings, as disreputable acts. The core values of academic integrity consist of trustworthiness, fairness, and the support of staff and students so that these core values provide frameworks for the academic culture of HE institutions (Park, 2004). This approach is preferable to the alternative that often exists in HE that relies on punitive actions and is predominantly focused on disciplinary processes (Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021). Given the punitive focus of the majority of HE institutions, many international students have indicated that they felt dread, bewilderment, shock, incredulity, shame, and embarrassment when they learned about the expectations of their new university or when they were accused of plagiarism (Isbell et al., 2018).

A critical starting point from the university's perspective is that of academic freedom, which is seen as "essential to top-quality teaching and research, which are themselves essential to national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy" (Kinzelbach et al., 2021, p. 17). Given the importance of this, intentional and unintentional plagiarism can have a profound impact on the standing of a university. It is therefore incumbent on universities to understand the prior learning experiences of international master's students so that the university can provide appropriate support and effective learning.

Unintentional plagiarism arises when students are unfamiliar with citation and quotation rules or use inappropriate paraphrasing styles such as patchwriting (Park, 2003; Rogerson & McCarthy, 2017; Vij et al., 2009). The *Oxford English Dictionary's* (2021) definition of plagiarism that is, "the action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own" and is generally accepted by many academic institutions. Similarly, the description of intentional plagiarism as stealing the words, reflections, and ideas of others and presenting them as one's own is also commonly accepted within UK HE (Barrett & Cox, 2005; Helgesson & Eriksson, 2015; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Park, 2003; Pecorari

& Petrić, 2014). This definition is deemed by most institutions to include cutting and pasting from online electronic documents (Morgan et al., 2004) and paying for custom-made assignments (Evans, 2000).

Only one review was found that focused on international students, plagiarism, and pedagogical analysis (Adhikari, 2018) which concluded that academic staff should consider implementing pedagogical solutions that investigate the students' academic skills and other external factors such as the limited timeframe they are given to adjust to their new educational context before submitting their first assignments. Plagiarism is perceived by Payne and Nantz (1994) as a social construction that is based on the academic behaviour of students. It is acknowledged that plagiarism is also intentionally or unintentionally committed by many UK students and that although the use of plagiarism may currently be perceived as a vice in HE institutions in the West, this was not always the case as historically it was viewed as a virtue in some sectors such as the arts in the West (Thomas, 2000). DiPietro (2010) and Kaur (2019) argue that in some cultures incorporating another writer's work into one's own is still perceived as showing respect for other writers, and it is not deemed necessary to include any acknowledgment. Intentional or unintentional plagiarism may occur for a number of reasons such as having different cultural attitudes toward the ownership of works; being taught via practices that utilize copying and memorizing texts as learning styles and therefore seeing these methods as acceptable; and having difficulties expressing ideas and critiquing text at master's level because of language barriers (Bai & Wang, 2022). Adhikari (2018) warns against adopting deficit models of international students and advises caution against using such traditional cultural perspectives as they can lead to stereotyping. Adhikari argues instead that intentional or unintentional plagiarism should be perceived by HE institutions in the West simply as students encountering a new academic practice and that this can be addressed by utilizing the varied pedagogical approaches used in advanced levels of education and the diverse approaches to learning that exist within different disciplines, and by clearly explaining the specific course-related expectations.

### **Academic Shock**

While many international students indicate that they are happy with their educational experiences in host countries (Bird, 2017), there is evidence that a large number also experience academic anxiety (Wu & Hammond, 2011). Academic anxiety encompasses encountering new academic cultural, linguistics, teaching, and learning styles (Oyeniya, et al., 2021) that can be difficult to assimilate and overcome, resulting in academic shock (Bai & Wang, 2022). The adaptation process of some international students is likely to be affected by unfamiliar teaching and learning styles prevalent in the host country. These differences could include variances in what their respective home countries and the UK may classify as academic knowledge (Garwood, 2022).

Decades of research on the learning experiences of international students has resulted in a shift in focus from a deficit model portraying the intense challenges that they face, to looking at how educational institutions support these students (Tran & Vu, 2018). For instance, Ryan's (2005) academic shock framework posits that some students may be challenged by the different academic approaches and expectations of the host country such as the approach used in academic discussions and analyses where adversarial approaches to questioning and critiquing are used in universities in the West. For some international master's students who are studying in the UK for the first time, this academic shock may include having to swiftly acquire new ways of learning, adjust to different teaching styles, and to adapt to new academic approaches in the host country so that they can successfully complete their studies within the allocated academic year; they often have to complete their first assignments within weeks of their arrival. Ryan (2005) argues that some international students may initially understand just 10% of what they hear in the classroom, given that English is spoken in a variety of accents and because of the speed of delivery (Ramachandran, 2011). However, despite these apparent academic challenges, many international master's students discuss the joy they experience from studying overseas and how they are personally transformed by their learning experiences (Rhoden & Kinchington 2021). It is important that academic staff understand the agency and adaptability skills that international master's students bring with them and how they should be supported appropriately during their studies (Ryan, 2005). A number of studies support the need for academic staff to be culturally aware. Significantly, Hofstede (1986) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) found that social interactions, including within educational institutions, are culturally mediated as they are naturally contradictory. Their study claims that this inherent

conflict combined with intercultural social contacts adds to the potential for additional conflicts. Hofstede (1986; 1991) identified four cultural dimensions, comprising masculinity, power distance, uncertainty-avoidance, and individualism that helped to shape behaviours generally, including that of students in educational settings. Short-term orientation versus long-term orientation which are based on differing approaches toward social obligations, avoiding shame, and respecting traditions were added later to address alleged cultural biases in earlier studies (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). It is therefore essential that international students are not discussed in terms of a homogenous group (Montgomery, 2010), and importantly, Kim's (2001) concept of 'preparedness of change', reinforces the notion that the disposition of each international student ultimately determines the level of agency and adaptability that each of them possesses.

International master's students studying in the UK face additional issues such as stress and social/cultural problems (Adhikari, 2018) and in the case of mature female students, accessing affordable childcare for preschool children while studying (Rhoden & Kinchington, 2021). These issues can have a detrimental impact on the ability of many international students, especially master's students, to adjust quickly and settle in their new location so that they can focus on their studies (Bista, 2011). As a result, these students may develop negative psychological reactions such as feeling homesick, isolated, and powerless and suffering from depression and academic shock (Bai & Wang 2022).

### **Academic Integrity Violations: Repercussions and Sanctions**

Identifying students' academic integrity violations (AIVs) and the subsequent application of sanctions by UK HE institutions are based on a commitment to deterring and preventing intentional or unintentional plagiarism. However, the individual approach that is used by each institution is influenced by the academic learning cultures and contexts of that institution. The level of seriousness with which a university treats intentional and unintentional plagiarism should be clearly conveyed to all students and faculty staff in a transparent manner, including what is classified as intentional and unintentional plagiarism, and the sanctions that will be applied if it is discovered. Studies by Macdonald and Carroll (2006) and Sutherland-Smith (2011), for instance, demonstrated that generally, international students were expected to take personal responsibility for identifying and rectifying problems relating to AIVs, while the role of HE institutions was to ensure that appropriate levels of disincentives and sanctions were in place.

The consequent application of formal sanctions to individual students committing AIVs has a negative effect on their ability to quickly overcome any academic challenges, to engage with their studies, to gain satisfaction from their learning experience, and to successfully graduate. Research by Larkham and Manns (2002) suggests that the most common sanction that was imposed for AIVs was being given a mark of zero for the relevant assignment. The second most frequent punishment was to require that the student resubmit their work, with the highest mark available for the new submission often being capped at the institution's pass mark. Other institutions may apply a mark of zero for the unit of study and the student may not be permitted to resubmit the work. Some universities, however, may penalize the student by reducing the classification of the degree that is awarded by one class or requiring them to repeat the year of study. Fass-Holmes' (2017) study in the USA indicated that while students who were reported for AIVs had a high likelihood of being suspended or expelled, almost half to three-quarters of those that were suspended were ultimately allowed to return and eventually graduated.

Supportive and developmental learning tools that replace a focus on sanctions include, for example, providing all students with extracts and graded exemplars of practice and grade criteria to support their completion of assignments and examinations and giving them detailed formative and summative feedback on assignments and learning in a timely manner to ensure that they can apply any recommendations to future submissions. Stappenbelt (2012) explored the impact that the cultural background of international students had on their responses to intentional and unintentional plagiarism and how to avoid it. The study demonstrated that all HE institutions need to focus less on sanctions and should develop instead an understanding of students' behaviours in their new context barriers as they encounter substantial obstacles such as academic language barriers. An awareness of perceived cultural practice in the home countries of international students (Bai & Wang, 2022; Adhikari, 2018) by academic staff, would provide a useful starting point for discussions about what constitutes plagiarism as part of the academic preparation for their study and would serve to address potential academic

challenges. Hernandez Lopez (2020) and Ward et al. (2001) found through their culture shock framework that international students experienced most stress and shock during the initial stages of their relocation due in part to their unfamiliarity with local educational and cultural norms. Other studies (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; George et al., 2013; Haitch, 2016; Pennycock, 2016) have suggested that it would be better for students if HE institutions, instead of focusing on sanctions, to focus on educating students so that they did not commit AIVs. Kaktins (2014) argues that university plagiarism policies are now more inclined to focus on offering a clearer education regarding plagiarism and AIVs rather than focusing on sanctions, which they did in the past.

There is limited research on how international students compare to home students in their understanding of AIVs (Tan & Carnegie, 2020). However, a study by Fass-Holmes (2017) found that the steady growth in the number of international students studying overseas has resulted in a similar growth in the number of international students being involved in intentional or unintentional AIVs. Studies have also found that having an international student status may place some of those students at a higher risk of being guilty of AIVs and that they were twice as likely to be involved in AIVs than home students (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015; Newton et al., 2014; Walker, 2010).

Research has identified that successful academic writing depends on students demonstrating two aspects of knowledge in relation to AIVs. Critically, they should be able to recognize that plagiarism has occurred (declarative knowledge) and, secondly, they ought to be able to demonstrate how the AIVs can be resolved (procedural knowledge); the application of procedural knowledge requires a deeper level of understanding by the student (Pecorari, 2003; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). Interestingly, a recent study by Tan and Carnegie (2020) found that while the international students in their research outperformed the home students regarding their declarative knowledge of academic writing, their procedural knowledge was equal to that of the home students. Examining the role of declarative and procedural knowledge in the academic writing of international master's students offers a potential area for further research.

### **Guidance for Best Practice**

The ICAI (2021, p.11-12) offers guidance at both the institutional level and the student level. Although international students (like all students) are personally responsible for the relevant AIVs, responsibility should also be placed on academic staff and the number and timing of assignments that master's students are required to complete. The requirement to submit assignments during their first term after arriving in the UK, when they are likely to be experiencing academic shock (Ryan, 2005) and still adjusting to their new location, should be reviewed.

The following list is based on the extensive academic experience of co-ordinating international master's student's programmes in HE by the authors, cited earlier, and informed by the collective research carried out for this essay. It is proposed that these examples of best practice adopted by all staff to support international master's students during the early stages of their move overseas, could also benefit UK master's students. Specific points that directly impact university policy and the academic learning culture and that can be translated into classroom practice include the following:

i. **Understanding academic expectations:** All master's students, including international students should be educated about standards concerning academic integrity during the early weeks of the academic year, at the outset of their program of study and prior to the setting of any assignments. In addition, academic staff should attend regular staff development and training sessions to ensure that they are reminded of the likely impact on academic integrity standards and international master's students of setting assignments if there is insufficient support and guidance about academic integrity during the students' early weeks and months in the UK. This will ensure that all members of the community are familiar with the current academic expectations of the university in which the students will be studying and are able to recognize how these integrate with the overall educational culture that exists in UK HE institutions.

ii. **Clarity and transparency:** An easy way to ensure that all master's students comprehend academic integrity in the classroom and when completing assignments is to develop and publicize clear and fair policies, procedures, and statements that use plain English. This guidance should be easily accessible online for students and academic staff. Written procedures should also be easy to follow, and all students should be able to see that when AIVs occur, the procedures used for dealing with them are applied transparently and consistently by academic staff.

iii. **Solutions, not sanctions:** Identifying the root of a problem that gives rise to intentional or unintentional plagiarism and AIVs is central to their solution. Where part of the underlying problem lies in the application of pedagogy by staff unfamiliar with best practice in course design, the pedagogy should be re-envisioned. Reviewing the competencies an assignment is testing and the learning outcomes that enable the students to practice, make errors, and learn from constructive feedback that they receive is key to developing students' academic confidence. Importantly, staff should ensure that all master's students, including international students are provided with sufficient time at the beginning of their studies to develop appropriate academic writing confidence and should consider staggering course assignment submission dates to avoid unintentional or intentional AIVs that could arise because assignments are 'bottlenecked' within a period of two or three weeks, especially during their first term.

iv. **Developing communities of practice:** The formation of on-campus partnerships and collaborations between academic staff and all master's students including international students, are valuable because they allow the production of pedagogical environments that are positive and promote academic integrity in the classroom. However, academics can never be certain that all students fully comprehend what the developing pedagogical setting is attempting to achieve, especially if it differs from that which they are accustomed to or if the particular discussion involved is not clearly explained in a manner that enables the master's student, for whom English may be a second language, to easily and quickly understand and apply to their assignments.

v. **University policy and practice:** In course and program reviews and reports to external examiners, academic staff should examine and review whether academic integrity policies and procedures are fit for purpose to ensure that they remain current, transparent, impartial, consistent, and understood by all master's students (including international students) and all staff that use the procedures. Regular reviews also ensure that any changes in the types of intentional and unintentional AIVs that occur and any changes in new technologies such as plagiarism detection systems that are used when assignments are submitted by students can be addressed and the outcomes or changes can be communicated to students and staff.

vi. **Accessibility of student support services dedicated to international master's students:** The provision of support services that are aimed at international students will encourage the students to feel confident about achieving their aims. Provisions could include accessibility and counselling services, academic writing tutorials, and individual personal tutoring sessions. Although the development and promotion of such services should be available to all students, having services that are dedicated to the needs of international master's students is strongly advocated. International master's students, unlike international undergraduate students, need additional support to overcome any academic challenges and enable rapid transition and adaptation to a new learning environment to complete their studies within the constraint of one academic year. It should be acknowledged, however, that the resources of UK HE institutions are limited and that important decisions often must be made about which resources have to be reduced or even eliminated. It is therefore important that, given the fees that international master's students pay for their programs of study, these institutions ensure that dedicated resources for international master's students are ring-fenced and employed, allowing them to remain achievable and future-proof.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to explore how unintentional and intentional plagiarism challenges academic integrity and to examine the elements that influence and have an impact on the decisions made by international master's students. The issue of the completion of assignments during the early weeks and months of the master's students' arrival in the UK, is of concern since it which does not allow sufficient time to address any initial academic challenges or adjustment to the academic culture of their new educational setting. The timely acquisition of this new 'skill-set' does not support successful submission of compulsory assignments in the first term of their study.

The importance of factors such as academic language barriers, academic protocols and misunderstandings are recognized and addressed, as is the significance of providing clear and transparent definitions of what constitutes AIVs in UK HE institutions. Having supportive and developmental learning tools regarding academic integrity instead of focusing

on sanctions may be the lynchpin of the success of international master's students. Although developing and publicizing academic integrity policies, procedures, and statements are important, for the international master's student, these are abstract constructs unless they are demonstrated in practice from the outset so that they are clear about how these impact on their work and progress. Factors such as forming communities of practice, regular reviewing of courses and programs, and the provision of dedicated international master's student support services play equally important roles in students' success. Consequently, researchers may benefit more from looking at how universities can rapidly integrate and teach the academic integrity culture of the university prior to the submission of assignments instead of focusing on the deficit model that concerns why and how international master's students commit AIVs.

Overall, there is scant evidence to indicate that best practice is applied consistently within UK HE institutions, as the general viewpoint is that student-centred learning is essential in the pedagogy of HE, and that academic freedom is an essential part of this teaching and learning approach. We suggest that academic integrity is a key factor in providing consistency of understanding between academic staff and international master's students and is central to enabling high-level pedagogical outcomes for all students. This should be combined with the associated elements that relate directly to course objectives and assessment criteria which should be clearly explained to master's students and easily accessible online. These are key elements that underpin academic integrity and are critical in facilitating a transparent university academic university culture.

We acknowledge that there are wider and deeper debates in the literature regarding the essential factors that enable international master's students to succeed; however, the elements discussed in this essay offers an opportunity to focus on and address the experience of international master's students at the outset of their study at UK HE institutions.

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## Knowledge Diplomacy in Small Culture Observations

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### Abstract

*Knowledge diplomacy has gained increasing traction as a goal for global higher education. Given its current construction, knowledge diplomacy has a focus on the role of higher education institutions in building formal global connectivity for common global good. This position paper argues for the inclusion of students' education abroad programming as an important part of knowledge diplomacy for its individual and informal contribution to improving international relations and intercultural understanding. To achieve knowledge diplomacy through education abroad experiences, international educators need to guide students in small culture observations overseas as a mechanism to break down cultural stereotyping and to build cultural appreciation.*

Keywords: humanistic, international education, goal, knowledge diplomacy, small cultures

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Knowledge diplomacy has been increasingly promoted as a goal of higher education internationalization to improve international relations and world peace. This essay draws attention to the importance of student-level knowledge diplomacy in the form of education abroad programming. It will first discuss the origins and meanings of knowledge diplomacy, followed by a review on how knowledge diplomacy is situated within the larger context of global higher education. In addition to existing literature on the benefits of education abroad programs as a form of knowledge diplomacy, the paper draws on data from two cases of education abroad programs between Canada and China to argue that, to achieve knowledge diplomacy, international education programs need to disrupt essentialized "big culture" stereotypes and focus on nuanced "small culture" observations.

### Knowledge Diplomacy

The concept of knowledge diplomacy has been around for over two decades. It was first used in the context of protecting a country's intellectual property (i.e. knowledge) through trade agreements (i.e. diplomacy) (Ryan, 1998). When applied to higher education, knowledge diplomacy is seen as higher education's role to advance a country's soft

power in international relations (Ogunnubi & Shawa, 2017). Soft power is a concept developed in the late 1980s to refer to one country's ability to secure national self-interest by influencing the behavior of other countries through attraction and persuasion rather than military action or economic coercion (Nye, 2004). To advance a country's national interest, higher education in Western countries has been increasingly used as a way to enhance a country's economic advantage and political influence through its global operations (Lomer, 2017).

However, the adverse effects of unchecked and unrestrained pursuit of national interests seem to have reached a critical tipping point today, as indicated by global warming, a global pandemic, refugee crises, and Trumpism (Liu, 2021a). To help address these common global challenges that threaten our very existence, there needs to be an ethical turn for global higher education practices (e.g. de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Liu, 2022; Liu, 2023). In this context, knowledge diplomacy has been redefined and re-advocated by scholars in international higher education, no longer as a nationalistic and competitive construct, but as a collaborative and mutually beneficial goal that higher education institutions should pursue. As Knight (2020) wrote,

Knowledge diplomacy is a new approach to understanding the role of international higher education in strengthening relations among countries and addressing common global challenges (p 38).

Higher education internationalization can serve many different goals (Stier, 2004). At the individual level, it can serve the goal of preparing students with intercultural competences to function in the global workplace. At the national level, it is often taken as a means to compete and succeed in the knowledge economy. At the global level, international education can be seen as a force for social transformation and equitable development. However, the three goals are not generally pursued in a balanced manner. All countries attach importance to the individual educational goal for student training, but after that, the national competitive goal has often taken priority over the global transformational goal. The international activities of higher education have been increasingly motivated by economic profits rather than by either government policy or goodwill (Yang, 2002). Some more important values such as cooperation, peace and mutual understanding have been pushed to the side for the purpose of competition, revenue, and reputational gain (de Wit, 2020). For this reason, knowledge diplomacy has captured people's attention and imagination as an idealistic and global transformative construct in global higher education that aims to improve international relations, to address common global issues, to narrow the gap of rich and poor, and to contribute to peaceful and equitable development (Knight, 2019; 2020).

### **Education Abroad as Knowledge Diplomacy**

The current definition of knowledge diplomacy has a clear focus on the role of higher education institutions in developing formal global networks and partnerships for mutual benefits and global public good. The international mobility of individual students and scholars is not believed to "necessarily constitute knowledge diplomacy" (Knight, 2020, p. 38). It is understandable to have high expectations out of higher education institutions for their role in promoting diplomatic relations, as they are large organizations with tremendous resources and the potential to develop and nurture global partnerships and networks. Education abroad has been indeed seen traditionally as an activity in international education to fulfill students' global learning goals, such as academic outcomes, cultural competence, and employability development (Tran et al., 2021). However, many scholars in international education have paid attention to the role of informal, individual-level outcomes in education abroad contexts as a contribution to knowledge diplomacy.

Parsons (2010) finds that students who participate in education abroad programs demonstrate a decrease in xenophobia, fear, or ethnic distance. Jones (2014) observes that study abroad experiences contribute to students' feeling of enlightened nationalism and appreciation for differences. Kitamura (2015) sees knowledge diplomacy as a result of individuals developing a better understanding of the world and then undertaking leadership roles in political, economic

and cultural arenas later on in their lives. Asada (2018) believes in knowledge diplomacy as individuals' improved intercultural competences and improved understanding of their roles in the world. Wu and Zha (2018) note that knowledge diplomacy is a result of all citizens moving from a narrow view focusing on their home countries to reflecting upon how they may contribute to the wider world and international community. Tran, Bui & Nguyen's (2021) study delineates four main forms of youth agency in relation to knowledge diplomacy during education abroad: fostering regional understandings, people-to-people connections, people-to-opportunities connections, and country-to-country connections. Based on an evaluation of the long-term impact of education abroad experiences (over 50 years), Asada (2021) finds that study abroad activities increase connectivity between countries and regions, and thus contribute to knowledge diplomacy.

Knowledge diplomacy should be considered a goal-oriented construct, not an actor-focused or an activity-focused construct, so that it becomes an inclusive notion, recognizing all actors and activities' contributions, big and small, short-term and long-term. Students' education abroad experiences have a dualist role when informal individual-level outcomes connect to the macro level of social good (Asada, 2021). For this reason, instead of only relying on institutions of higher education to foster relations between countries, individual students and scholars in mobility programs should be purposefully mobilized as an instrument to achieve knowledge diplomacy and mutual appreciation (Varpahovskis, 2021). It is important to see students and scholars in international mobility as global citizens and leaders, and to recognize their grassroots people-to-people diplomatic engagement in contributing to international relations.

### **Small Culture Observations**

Based on the above review of literature, we can see the connection between students' education abroad experiences and knowledge diplomacy, but the mechanism that enables this connection to happen has not been explicitly discussed. Bacon famously stated that knowledge is power, either hard power or soft power, and Foucault (1980) forcibly pointed out that power is often used to control and define knowledge. Knowledge and power are two highly interwoven constructs, so much so that neutral, uncommitted, and apolitical knowledge does not exist (Freire, 1970). It is an undisputed fact that we are living in a highly unequal world structure where a few Western industrialized countries in the global north dominate the global knowledge system (Altbach, 2015). The Anglo-Western hegemony of knowledge gives dominant power to countries in the global north (Heleta, 2022) and the postcolonial pattern of power defines knowledge production in countries in the global south (Stein et al., 2020). Knowledge has been used as a tool to gain hegemonic power, leading to imbalanced development between nations in the first place. Therefore, one could reasonably ask: how knowledge can be mobilized as a politically and ideologically neutral tool for strengthening relations among countries and addressing common global challenges in the context of education abroad experiences?

A search for a theoretical framing that connects education abroad and knowledge diplomacy in this project has landed on the concept of small cultures put forward by interculturalist Adrian Holiday (1999), to contrast with the concept of large culture. Based on this distinction, the large culture, the default notion of culture, refers to national or ethnic cultures. A good example of the large culture is Hofstede's (1982) cultural dimensions used to characterize different national cultures along a number of binary lines, such as individualistic vs collectivistic, ambiguity tolerance vs uncertainty avoidance, low social hierarchy vs high social hierarchy, task orientation vs people orientation, and indulgent vs restraint. According to these binary dimensions, Canada would be an individualistic country, China a collective one; Canadians would be more ambiguity tolerant, and Chinese folks would tend to avoid uncertainty; Canada would have a weaker social hierarchy, while Chinese social hierarchy would be stronger; Canadians are more task oriented, while the Chinese more people orientated; and the Canadians are more indulgent and take life easy, while the Chinese show more restraint and just can't seem to relax and take it easy.

These generalized cultural patterns are not necessarily wrong, and they are rather important to people who are very new to cross-cultural experiences. But these binary divisions of cultures in big culture thinking have major limitations. In the first place, the handful of cultural dimensions used to characterize different national cultures are not able to give credit to the complexity and depth within each. Each national culture is complex and nuanced enough to defy the characterization of these few indicators. A more important and more dangerous limitation with the handful of cultural dimensions is that they tend to carry hidden value judgments, with qualities associated with one's own culture often covertly considered to be "better" qualities. For instance, some people in the Western world may be led to believe that individualism is better than collectivism, as it drives creation and innovation; low hierarchy between people is better than high power distance, as it gives rise to democracy; and ambiguity tolerance is better, as it gives people the opportunity to discover new knowledge. As such, these national cultural dimensions have been used as convenient tools to construct a postcolonial power structure that otherizes and even cancels knowledge, wisdom and discourses of the global south.

Global higher education is obligated to uncover the unequal power dynamics and work to transform them in order to serve the larger purpose of restoring global racial justice and indigenous knowledge systems (Yosso, 2005). To correct the limitations of big culture thinking, Holiday (1999) believes that it is beneficial to focus more on small cultures within each national/ethnic culture. Small cultures refer to small social groupings and activities wherever there is cohesive pattern of behavior (Holiday, 1999) and the focus on small cultures can best embrace cultural complexity and avoid cultural stereotyping. With regard to international learning, it would be more important for students to realize the complexity within each large culture, to avoid sweeping cultural stereotypes, and to acquire the ability to detect, define and demystify nuanced small cultures within a large ethnic culture (Liu et al., 2022). Small culture observations are the mechanism to achieve knowledge diplomacy in the education abroad context, as they can penetrate through ideologically inclined big culture differences to focus on common humanistic experiences. In other words, knowledge diplomacy can be achieved at the people-people level by nuancing students' prior and potentially biased perceptions through small culture observations.

### **Kneeling Buses, Friendly Greetings, and the Normal People**

To explore the value of small culture observations as a theoretical lens for knowledge diplomacy in education abroad contexts, we re-examined the data of two international mobility programs between Canada and China. One of the two programs is the Global Academic Leadership Development (GALD) Program, a three-month long professional development program for mid-level Chinese university leaders in Canada (Liu, 2021b). Since 2012, over 900 participants from about 300 universities have completed this program. Reversing the direction of mobility, the second program is called the Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC), a consortium of 12 top Canadian research-intensive universities formed to increase Canadian students' participation in study abroad in Chinese partner universities (Huang & Liu, 2023). The program has supported over 850 Canadian students to pursue their study abroad opportunities in China since 2016. Both programs are large-scale high-profile programs, involving a big number of students and scholars from both countries. Due to some major ideological differences and occasional political tensions between the two countries, the experiences of students in Sino-Canadian two-way mobility programs are especially relevant for understanding the potential of knowledge diplomacy. We asked the following questions: To what extent have students' education abroad experiences in these two programs strengthened the understanding and relationship between the two countries at the people-to-people level? Have small culture observations enabled the participants of these two programs to develop a more positive attitude toward their host countries and their host countries' people?

While in Canada, the Chinese visitors in the GALD leadership program observed the humanistic and caring culture in Canada beyond the university campus, including:

(...) kneeling buses to provide accessibility of public facilities to the disabled; people talking more quietly in public; holding doors for people coming behind; saying hi to strangers; standing to the right on escalators; saying thanks to bus drivers; and saying “sorry” all the time (Liu, 2019, p 317).

They would even feel guilty when Canadian drivers stopped their cars to let them cross the road, as one visitor wrote:

I would run to save the driver’s time. If cars do this in China, they won’t go anywhere for a whole day, as there are so many people. [...] And Canadians are so friendly. They always smile and say hi. Again in China, you won’t be able to do that. There are just too many people on the street (Liu, 2021 b, p 623).

While studying in China, young Canadian students in the CLIC program, still with many language barriers, bravely ventured off campus to explore the country. One student wrote:

I never felt uncomfortable going out by myself, even when I left the big cities and went to explore China’s rural areas. I went to Shanghai. I went camping on the Great Wall. I went hiking. As a young woman from a Western country, I never dreaded traveling on my own. I never felt insecure or came across issues I couldn’t deal with. I didn’t lose my calm even when I missed my train back to Beijing. With the help of Tik Tok and a translation app, I purchased my ticket for the next train (Huang & Liu, 2023, p 7).

Their positive experiences in China made them reflect on some of the negative portraits of China in the media before they went:

I notice the negative images of China perpetuated by Western media, but I encountered people with the same dreams and aspirations as anyone else. In China, I met normal people trying to earn a degree, hold down a job, and raise a family (Huang & Liu, 2023, p 11).

These observations are small but powerful, as they serve as good evidence of knowledge diplomacy taking place. These small observations based on lived experiences overseas show students/scholars’ increased awareness of the demographic, economic and cultural contexts of both countries. These small observations help promote cultural understanding, instill an enlightened sense of nationalism, and reduce ethnic distance and apprehension. These small observations also give students and scholars a deeper appreciation of each other’s people with a focus on similarities and common destinies instead of differences and competition. These person-to-person, people-to-people level of knowledge diplomacy, reflected in cultural understanding of each other and humanist fondness toward each other, is the immediate impact of education abroad experiences, with the potential for long-term benefits of increased international and inter-regional connectivity, as found in Asada's (2021) longitudinal study.

## **Discussion**

The global transformative goal of international higher education, as expressed in the concept of knowledge diplomacy, is to strengthen international relations, promote world peace, and solve common world problems (Knight 2019; 2020). In this paper, I have discussed how education abroad programming can be mobilized to contribute to knowledge diplomacy. Education abroad is not always a rosy picture. There is a danger of shallow experiences and even strengthened cultural stereotypes for students if it is not done properly (Liu et al., 2022). Universities’ neoliberal internationalization policies can also reinforce cultural racism and Western supremacy, and thus reproduce existing

inequities (Changamire et al., 2022). For these reasons, carefully planned activities, meaningful interactions, and scaffolded reflections need to be done to increase chances of intercultural learning (Williams, 2005). More importantly, serious considerations need to be given to what theoretical framing we should adopt to help develop students' awareness of the postcolonial world condition, equitable values, and empathetic actions (Liu, 2022). The ultimate goal is to turn them into global citizens and global leaders with a strong dedication to contribute to knowledge diplomacy and make a positive change in the world.

Physically immersive experiences overseas help individuals perceive the richness, sophistication, and nuance of another culture, and thus shake and deconstruct the previously held cultural stereotypes that tend to otherize alien cultures (Liu et al., 2022). Therefore, I have argued in this essay that small culture observations beyond the established big cultural dimensions serve as the mechanism for knowledge diplomacy in the context of education abroad programs. In other words, small culture observations are the best tools to achieve knowledge diplomacy during education abroad. To achieve the goal of knowledge diplomacy, small culture observations need to be based on people's first-hand lived experiences overseas. To achieve knowledge diplomacy, international education programs need to guide students in moving beyond large culture categories and focusing on small culture observations that reflect people's common humanistic experiences. Such observations need to avoid a simplistic interpretation through normative categories. Students need to hold a humble attitude toward each culture, refraining from a quick value judgment. They need to take each culture as a legitimate system in its own right. They need to demonstrate a willingness to immerse themselves in a new culture, to go beyond what is visible, and to research the structural reasons behind observable cultural practices and behaviors.

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## Introduction to the JCIHE Special Issue

***The Pandemic of Covid-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean Higher Education: An Invitation to Remember and Reflect into the Future****Guest Editors*Pilar Mendoza<sup>a\*</sup> and Santiago Castiello-Gutiérrez<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Missouri-Columbia<sup>b</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development, Culture, and Media, Seton Hall University\*Corresponding author: Pilar Mendoza: Email: [mendozamp@missouri.edu](mailto:mendozamp@missouri.edu)  
Address: 303 Townsend Hall, University of Missouri. Columbia, Missouri, USA**Introducción**

Dear Readers,

On January 11, 2020, China reported the first death from a novel coronavirus virus, and by January 23, Wuhan was placed under lockdown to contain the outbreak (CDC, 2023). In the following month, more than 1,000 deaths were reported by the new and fast-spreading disease caused by the virus, named COVID-19. Not even science fiction could get close to what the world went through in the coming months, including a worldwide lockdown and almost seven million deaths to this day (WHO, 2024). Four years have passed, but the COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on societies worldwide, necessitating innovative responses from all sectors, particularly education.

However, amidst the turmoil, COVID-19 was also a time when humanity unprecedentedly rose to the occasion and showed its genuine resilience, altruism and potential for working together for a common cause. It is this resilience and the lessons learned from the shared experience that deserve our reflection as we confront both new and enduring challenges. In times of crisis, humanity exhibited a remarkable ability to unite for the greater good, transcending borders and cultural differences. Some examples of this unity emerged in China, where a 1,000-bed hospital was built in 10 days. In terms of global collaboration, mankind has never seen such a rapid, effective, and monumental scientific advancement and deployment in creating and distributing vaccines against COVID-19. Even while politicians were pointing fingers at other countries blaming them for their (mis)handling of the pandemic, scholars proved that science does not know geographical borders and transnational cooperation among China and the United States increased (Lee and Haupt, 2020).

Education, too, underwent a radical transformation during this period. Educators, at all levels, around the world shifted to fully online instructions within days. Within weeks, the world managed to operate virtually and with minimal contact. However, as we now return to life post-Covid, we are still figuring out the impact of those pandemic years. Despite some positive distinguishable outcomes such as new medical breakthroughs, telework flexibility, and better technology integration in our lives and education, reality is that COVID-19 also contributed to widen the gap among



countries and among individuals. Not everyone was able to swiftly transition to remote learning; technology, despite its democratic spirit, is still not reachable to all. As we have seen many times, when challenges hit, the most vulnerable individuals get hit hardest (UNESCO, 2022).

In terms of World Regions, Latin America and the Caribbean is among those vulnerable regions that got hit hard by COVID-19. A recent report by UNESCO-IESALC (2022) highlights some of the particular challenges faced by this region: 1) The shift to online teaching and learning was rapid but impacted instructional quality. 2) While opportunities for innovation arose, challenges in adapting to virtual environments were more pronounced in regions with a significant digital divide. 3) In terms of research, COVID-19 brought about changes in research capacity, funding, and collaboration, with increased focus on pandemic-related research. However, resource reallocation raised concerns about underfunding in other crucial fields, disrupting fieldwork and disproportionately affecting female academics, early career researchers, and PhD students.

Heads of State and Government, senior UN officials, and representatives of civil society who gathered in September 2015, as part of the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could not predict a Pandemic with such a far-reaching impact. The SDGs goals were created as a set of universal goals to meet the urgent environmental, social, and economic challenges facing our world, which begs the question, to what degree did we depart from these goals due to COVID-19? What did we gain from this experience getting us closer to achieving the SDGs? It will take us years to answer these questions, but we should start by reflecting on what happened and how we responded as a reminder of what we are capable of doing in times of crises, especially as we embraced the global climate crisis upon us. In this spirit, this special issue contributes to the growing literature on lessons learned during the global crisis of Covid-19 (e.g. Castiello-Gutierrez et al., 2022; Liu & Shirley, 2021; Oleksiyenko et al., 2023; Ordorika, 2020; Reimers, 2021).

In the summer of 2022, JCIHE released a two-part special issue edited by Ghosh and DeMartino (2022a) and Gosh (2022b) examining the impact of COVID-19 on institutions of education around the world. Of these multiple articles, only one study included data from Latin America as part of a comparative study including data from other six countries in the Global North (Schiffecker et al., 2022). This special issue takes a deeper dive into the effects of Covid-19 in this region with two essays and three empirical studies documenting different aspects related to higher education at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced in Cuba, Haiti, Panama, and Mexico with reflections into the future. To break with the hegemony of English as the imperial tongue in academia (Altbach, 2007; Mendoza, et al., in press), we are pleased to offer three of these articles in Spanish, the second most spoken language in the world after Chinese. In particular, the article by Blum, de Armas Victores and Batista Salvado provides a detailed account of the various responses initiated by the Cuban government during the pandemic of Covid-19 with a focus on the critical role that universities played at that time. This article represents a unique opportunity for readers to learn about Cuba's government efforts to address UNESCO's sustainable development goals amidst the crisis brought by Covid-19. One of the highlights of these efforts is the critical role of Cuban higher education in responding to the crisis, including the active role of college students in brigades of faculty, medical personnel, and staff attending to the specific needs of the population during the crisis and participating in the development of vaccines. The second essay by Severson, León and Psychoyos documents how the crisis allowed for an unusual but highly productive collaboration between the Ministry of Education and higher education in Panamá as a testimony of *si se puede*.

Two empirical articles of this special issue investigated different aspects of internationalization in Mexico as a result of Covid-19. Cortes-Velasco and Maldonado-Maldonado in their study interrogate the notion of "virtual mobility" in internationalization, which is a question still relevant post-pandemic time as we embrace the potential of technology in instruction. Izquierdo, Ramírez and Cárdenas present an empirical study about the challenges faced by international students from Latin America and the Caribbean while obtaining their graduate degrees in Mexican universities during Covid-19. This article presents a unique contribution to the scarce literature on South-to-South mobility of international student as well as the strategies these students used still relevant for international students in the post-pandemic world. Drawing from a large study, Marcelin, et al., present an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 in Haiti, a country devastated by political, economic, and natural disasters turmoil. They emphasize the neglect of Haitian higher education in national debates to address the multitude of crises that continue to affect Haiti as a call for officials in this country to utilize higher education the way other countries did it such as the case of Cuba documented in this special issue.

Although we focused on one region of the world, the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic was universal and all on the planet can relate to these articles in one way or another. In an effort for all of us to rescue the good lessons and heal the global trauma we all endured, we offer these articles as a way for us to remember and honor those difficult times as well as rescue lessons for the challenges ahead of us.

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## Higher Education Collaboration for Digital Transformation in Pandemic Panamá

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### Abstract

*Panama's Ministry of Education unnecessarily complicates its work with non-governmental entities, even when the entities are noted higher education institutions (HEIs). Bureaucratic impediments, lack of transparency and payment terms all present obstacles. During COVID-19, however, the crisis conditions and limited resources available propelled a period of streamlined public-private cooperation, resulting in some unparalleled innovation. This article presents a case study of one such HEI-ministry partnership on a digital transformation mobile literacy project, detailing its components and achievements and providing insights on specific success factors. Situating this discussion within the discourse on collaboration during crisis, the authors conclude that replicating and promoting this type of productive effort beyond periods of crisis will depend on public reform in two areas: (1) streamlining and professionalizing ministry-HEI interactions, and (2) increasing support for research and development, particularly in education. This discussion is relevant for Panama and most of Latin America as well as much of the developing world.*

Keywords: digital transformation, higher education, institutional collaboration, Panamá, pandemic

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### Resumen

*El Ministerio de Educación de Panamá complica innecesariamente su trabajo con entidades no gubernamentales, incluso cuando las entidades son instituciones de educación superior (IES). Los impedimentos burocráticos, la falta de transparencia y las condiciones de pago son todos obstáculos. Sin embargo, durante la COVID-19, las condiciones de crisis y los recursos limitados disponibles impulsaron un período de cooperación público-privada racionalizada, que dio como resultado algunas innovaciones sin precedentes. Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso de una de esas asociaciones entre IES y un ministerio en un proyecto de alfabetización móvil de transformación digital, detallando sus componentes y logros y brindando información sobre factores de éxito específicos. Situando esta discusión dentro del discurso sobre la colaboración durante la crisis, los autores concluyen que replicar y promover este tipo de esfuerzo productivo más allá de los períodos de crisis dependerá de la reforma pública en dos áreas: (1) racionalizar y*

*profesionalizar las interacciones entre el ministerio y las IES, y (2) aumentar el apoyo a la investigación y el desarrollo, especialmente en educación. Esta discusión es relevante para Panamá y la mayor parte de América Latina, así como para gran parte del mundo en desarrollo.*

Palabras clave: transformación digital, educación superior, colaboración institucional, Panamá, pandemia

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## Introduction

Education in Latin America and the Caribbean was hit hard by Covid-19 with various countries in the region topping global charts for time out of class. The crisis also posed a direct threat, globally and regionally, especially to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, Ensuring Quality Education for All. The pandemic compounded previously existing challenges, particularly with regard to targets for universal education and literacy, effective learning environments, and supplies of qualified teachers.

The role of higher education (HE) in these areas is crucial, as numerous experts have emphasized (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; EUA, 2018; Goncalves Serafini et al., 2022; Owens, 2017), especially since HE is a vital driver of human training, knowledge production, and innovation (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Hence, HE has an important role to play in mitigating the fallout from the pandemic and in furthering the SDGs, particularly SDG 4. This role goes beyond increasing enrolments and requires higher education institutions (HEIs) to focus on fully developing all three of their educational missions: teaching and learning, scientific research, and community service (Pinheiro et al., 2015). And for HEIs to be true catalysts of innovation, they must work with and be supported by governments and international development actors, above all with regard to research (Owens, 2017). During the pandemic, HEI leadership in areas related to the SDG targets assumed even greater importance; it also faced exceptional challenges.

The Republic of Panama, where all schools at primary, secondary and tertiary levels were closed for the most consecutive days worldwide, suffered even more than most countries. The negative impact on education across grades was unprecedented, taking a disproportionate toll on the most vulnerable and those with less access to remote learning (Svenson, 2021). Ironically, the chaotic conditions of the pandemic also allowed for more innovative and productive collaborations among HE actors dedicated to improving educational equity. Such was the case for a group of Panamanian educators who came together in 2020 to design, implement, research, and document a nationwide pandemic mobile literacy program for teachers and students in public primary schools. The HEI collaboration behind this globally recognized program forms the basis for the case study described in this article.

This case serves as a useful reference in several ways. It demonstrates how crisis can propel innovative HEI collaboration that combines the three HE missions of teaching, research, and community engagement, even within a system that typically offers little incentive for such cooperative efforts. It highlights the importance of and potential for the HE role in advancing universal education through innovations that target teacher training and digital learning. And it describes a HEI-generated model for digital transformation in teacher training and mobile literacy that enabled primary school educators to produce statistically significant reading gains for participating student during the COVID-19 quarantine.

This article details the components and achievements of this unusual pandemic HEI collaboration with the Panamanian Ministry of Education (MEDUCA). It provides insights on the success factors associated with the HE alliance and the project; how HE can push innovative initiatives to propel digital transformation and educational equity; and how such collaboration between the government and diverse HE actors may be promoted and replicated during and beyond periods of crisis.

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## Higher Education as a Driver for Equitable Digital Learning

Technology has the power to both widen the educational gap between higher and lower SES households and students or, conversely, bridge it to further educational equity worldwide. The *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery* project produced in the collaborative HEI initiative described in this article is an example of the latter. This project is also an example of how HEIs can serve as important drivers of this for propelling equitable digital learning. HEIs are logical proponents in the expansion of equitable digital learning at all levels for several reasons.

Many scholars have described the ways in which HE has been an early adopter of technology for application to learning in multiple areas (Armstrong, 2019; Bennett, 2014; Dale et al., 2021). As an early adopter, HE now has more experience with integrating and experimenting with education oriented technological tools. Covid-19 highlighted and accelerated this HE pioneering of digital learning. The pandemic also demonstrated how HEIs are uniquely positioned to take emergency adoption of online learning and make it more inclusive, working toward broader-based, longer-term visions for digital learning that stress collaboration over profit or individual gain (Laufer et al., 2021). Additionally, HE has been at the forefront of teaching, research and publishing on digital learning and education technology (edtech) for years, especially in the United States and Europe.

Springer Publishing claims to have the first and only scholarly journal in the field of education that focuses entirely on research and development in educational technology, *Educational Technology Research and Development*, which it launched decades ago (Springer, 2022); but there are also now many other academic journals dedicated to the topic of education technology (Lynch, 2018). Moreover, numerous academic journals in the field of education have been publishing increasingly on edtech related themes in recent years. The growth in edtech publishing reflects the growing importance of edtech to HEI schools of education and research centers. Programming from several top universities in the United States and Europe illustrates this point clearly, though many other universities worldwide are also beginning to follow suit with comparable initiatives.

For example, regarding the incorporation of edtech learning into the degree offer, Columbia Teachers College now has an extensive Communication, Media, and Learning Technologies Design program with graduate degree concentrations that include Communication and Education, Design and Development of Digital Games, Instructional Technology and Media, K-12 Educational Technology, and Computing in Education. These courses of study prepare students for leadership in the fields of information and communication technologies within educational systems at different levels (Teachers College, 2022). This trend is mirrored by other US and European university schools of education as well.

With respect to inclusion of edtech themes in universities' research and development centers, Stanford University offers an inspiring example that is directly focused on educational equity. The Technology for Equity in Learning Opportunities (TELOS), an initiative of the Stanford Graduate School of Education begun in 2015, has as its mission the advancement of equity by creating and researching ways that technology can increase learning opportunities for PreK-12 learners, families, and educators. The assumption underlying TELOS is that technology has the potential to increase access to high quality learning opportunities for all levels of society, but that intentional design and study of technologies, learning environments, and policies is necessary for this vision to become a reality. The collective efforts from multiple stakeholders in the TELOS initiative are structured to advance this agenda (Stanford University, 2022).

Similarly, but without the explicit emphasis on equity, the Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE), a free and open website created by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education's Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE), aims to provide educators and researchers with information about the strength of the evidence supporting a variety of programs available for K-12 students. Much of the material included in the BEE repository now involves edtech (BEE, 2022). At Harvard University, the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, within its mandate to explore and understand cyberspace, has dedicated a significant portion of its programming over the past decade toward researching and evaluating multiple aspects of edtech. This center also actively innovates with an in-house team of developers that works to convert research into practical tools, platforms, and organizations (Harvard University, 2022). At Oxford University, the Oxford X-Reality Hub sponsored by Dell and other tech partners works to harness the power of immersive

technologies, mainly virtual and augmented reality. The Hub dedicates two of its six portfolio areas to teaching and edtech (Oxford University, 2022a). Also, in Europe, Spain's University of Alcala is home to the relatively new Innovation and Education Technology for Human Development Research Group with research lines that include educational gaming, XXI century technological skill sets, education innovation, education technology, and commercial videogames, among others (University of Alcala, 2022). These examples are only several of the more pioneering projects and programs available in this realm, but they serve to highlight the increasing importance of edtech in HEI research.

Within university research centers and schools of education, edtech programming is expanding to target education of the public at large, as well as of those on campus. Oxford University's "Frontiers in Educational Technology," for instance, is a free online seminar series open to the public that offers sessions led by experts in the field on topics such as responsible and sustainable edtech, the roles of public and private players in the sector, and the challenges facing mobile learning in low resource settings, among many others (Oxford University, 2022b). The Harvard EdCast also explores many of the same edtech themes in its weekly podcast about ideas currently shaping education globally. The hosts interview educators, researchers and policymakers in the US and around the world looking for positive approaches to confronting education challenges and inequities.

These tendencies are less evident in Latin America, but the SUMMA Laboratory of Education Research and Innovation for Latin America and the Caribbean offers an interesting exception of HE collaboration for equitable learning. Based in Chile and launched in 2016 by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) with the support of the Ministries of Education in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, SUMMA is the first non-profit Research and Innovation Laboratory in Education for Latin America and the Caribbean. Since 2018, the governments of Guatemala, Honduras and Panama have also joined the effort. The SUMMA Board of Directors and professional team are multinational, multicultural, and multidisciplinary and both include highly credentialed scientists and teachers from across the region. Much of SUMMA's work over the past two years is tied to edtech, particularly through its *Concurso de Innovación para la Justicia Educativa* (Innovation for Educational Justice Invitational) (SUMMA, 2022).

In Panama, there is minimal evidence of HE edtech programming and research or of the sector serving as a driver for equitable digital learning, though it does have the potential to do so. Most Panamanian HEI edtech efforts have been largely limited to institutions' adapting their existing programming to virtual modalities. Exceptions to this generalization, however, include the public UTP and the private QLU, both of which have begun to expand teacher training and edtech programming and research (QLU, 2023; UTP, 2023).

### **Panama's Higher Education Structure**

The Republic of Panama has quite a few universities for the size of its population of four million inhabitants, most of which have been established in the past several decades. The Public Registry lists over 100 higher education institutions but the National University Evaluation and Accreditation Council (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria de Panamá, CONEAUPA) recognizes far fewer. The CONEAUPA list of accredited institutions includes five public universities, 23 private universities and 13 international university programs established in the capital's City of Knowledge, a higher education free zone that operates under a special decree passed in 1998 outside of the jurisdiction of MEDUCA (CONEAUPA, 2023). These public and private institutions offer degrees at technical, bachelor's, master's and doctorate levels across a wide range of disciplines, though PhD programs are few.

There are currently about 160,000 undergraduate and graduate students studying in the country, the majority of whom (slightly over 80%) attend public institutions. Pre-pandemic, the ratio between public and private university attendance was closer to 2:1 (INEC, 2023). Public institutions tend to serve students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) because of the low tuition fees. Estimates indicate that less than 20% of all Panamanian university students graduate with degrees (Svenson and De Gracia, forthcoming).

The University of Panama (UP) is the largest public institution and educates roughly half of all university students in the country. The Technological University (Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá, UTP) is the second largest public institution and enrolls about 15% of the country's university students (INEC, 2023). The UTP is the most highly regarded

of Panama's public universities and, indeed, of nearly all the universities in Panama (QS University Rankings, 2023). Universities granting dual degrees with other international institutions also tend to be held in higher regard by the productive sector with regard to labor market recruitment (Svenson and De Gracia, 2017).

## **Oversight**

As mentioned above, CONEAUPA, established in 2006, is the official national body for university evaluation and accreditation. Interestingly, Article 99 of the Constitution grants Panama's public universities official oversight over all programs and degrees offered by all private universities operating in the country and over the validation (or revalidation) of foreign university degrees within certain disciplines. This oversight is carried out through CONEAUPA's Technical Audit Commission, which conducts the monitoring and evaluation of all private university programming and reports in turn to MEDUCA. This Commission is chaired by the rector of the UP and the rectors of the rest of Panama's public universities also hold seats there (Pacheco, 2019; CONEAUPA, 2023).

This normative situation, in effect, subjugates all private universities in Panama to public university authority. It assumes that the public universities are (1) technically superior to the private universities and (2) have the knowledge and capacity to adequately perform this supervisory function. These assumptions are not necessarily true, however. With regard to the second, the public institutions have neither capacity nor resources to provide appropriate supervision of even their own departments, much less external entities. And regarding their technical superiority, there is significant debate on the issue. At the start of CONEAUPA's quality assurance activity, many low-quality private universities were exposed and some were closed. But now, private universities have established themselves as a viable HE alternative and a number of them have reputations that surpass those of most of the public universities. The private university investments in infrastructure, technology and operations often exceed those of their public counterparts and their academic programming tends to be more in line with productive sector demand. Thus, the logic behind the quality assurance norms seems shaky and has caused considerable distrust and animosity among HEIs. It also limits development and innovation in the HE sector by implicitly setting the current (and not very defensible) public university model as the standard (Pacheco, 2019).

## **Teacher Training**

National legislation determines that non-university teacher training and certification be conducted by MEDUCA in association with the public universities and the Juan Demóstenes Arosemena Pedagogical Institute (formerly the Normal School), although presently this has been expanded to include certain private universities. At present, the UP and the Pedagogical Institute educate and certify the majority of Panama's K-12 teachers. MEDUCA takes responsibility for providing the majority of the continuing education courses available for public school teachers, working through pre-approved national and international service providers.

Numerous reports and articles cite the need for strengthening Panamanian teacher training as a means to improving the student outcomes associated with it (De Leon et al, 2022; Elacqua et al, 2022; González de Núñez & Salcedo Estrada, 2017; Svenson, 2018). A recent law passed in April 2023 lays the foundation for the establishment of the Institute for Continuing Education and Well-being of Educators (Instituto de Perfeccionamiento y Bienestar Docente), which seeks to mitigate and improve the existing teacher training situation. This is a welcome advancement, though implementation will take place during a national election year (2024) and could be complicated by the campaign and administration transition process.

## **Research**

Panama invests very little in scientific research, in spite of the country's relative economic stability and success. In the past decade, the Republic has dedicated between 0.1% and 0.15% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to scientific research. This represents more than four times less than the regional average and about 20 times less than the average for

North American and European countries (UNESCO, 2022). And unlike other countries where the private sector is responsible for up to three quarters of research investment, Panama's private sector participation has been negligible (SENACYT, 2019). Furthermore, the number of researchers per million inhabitants is only 39, a number which also figures among the lowest in the world (World Bank, 2022).

For these reasons, in addition to the fact that Panamanian HE has been primarily dedicated to teaching since its inception, it has been difficult to cultivate a research culture within the universities. The founding of the National Secretariat for Science, Innovation and Technology (SENACYT, for its acronym in Spanish) in 1997 and its establishment of the National Research System along with a small but constant annual public budget for research projects has helped considerably to advance the national research agenda. The subsequent creation and legislation in 2006 and 2010 of the Public Interest Associations (AIPs for their acronym in Spanish), Panama's organizational mechanism for public-private research entities, has also contributed to this end. One of these AIPs, the Center for Education Research (CIEDU for its acronym in Spanish), led the pandemic project described in this article.

### **The Pandemic Context**

Panama is a small country but an international transit hub and, as such, was struck early on in 2020 with a record number of cases of Covid-19. The government quickly moved to enact a national quarantine and school closure in March of 2020. A year later, Panama headed the list of countries worldwide with the most consecutive days out of the classroom (De Hoyos & Saavedra, 2021; Svenson, 2021). This extended shut-down affected every level of schooling from pre-kinder to university and it was not until March of 2022 that the return to classroom learning was fully re-implemented.

### **Effects on HE**

The Covid-19 school closures took a major toll on the Panamanian HE system and highlighted many of the existing weaknesses and inequities as institutions were forced to abruptly switch their programming to virtual formats. Online learning options grew quickly, but with different results in the public and private university systems.

Overall, the private universities with ties to international programs, like Florida State University-Panama and Quality Leadership University (QLU), and others like the Universidad del Istmos, which had started to offer online courses years before, were in a better position to confront the crisis. The Private University Association of Panama (AUPPA, for its acronym in Spanish) reported that its member institutions started the pandemic with a total of almost 200 virtual programs for undergraduate and graduate courses officially approved and accredited. Also, 80% of the AUPPA professors had already received considerable training in online education (Svenson & De Gracia, 2020). Among the public universities, only the UTP was in a similar situation; the UP and the rest of the public institutions faced serious difficulties switching from in-person to online learning. They made available a number of digital tools ranging from official emails to Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp platforms, but most professors struggled to adapt and many of the students lacked adequate access to connectivity, both in terms of internet and devices. Added to this, the migration of students from private to public universities, due to financial constraints brought on by the pandemic, put pressure on both systems to achieve more with diminished resources (Svenson & De Gracia, 2020).

Finally, HE-led research nearly ground to a halt during the pandemic as SENACYT public funding was frozen for most of 2020. Interestingly, it was the AIP public-private research entities described above that were able to continue at least a portion of their work throughout, largely as a result of their ability to raise private funding (Svenson & De Gracia, 2020).



## **Effects on K-12 education**

Among the hardest hit by the pandemic educationally were Panama's more than 400,000 primary school students, around 85% of whom attend public school and are of lower SES. These children were homebound for months and most had little access to learning materials of any kind. The government demanded an official return to classes through distance learning beginning July 20, 2020, but schools remained closed through December 2020, the end of the Panamanian school year, and throughout the subsequent three-month summer vacation period, January-March of 2021.

This extended school absence prompted concerns about major academic setbacks, especially for children in lower grades beginning to explore the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, since it has a marked, negative effect on primary school attainments, especially with reading (Carroll, 2010; Gottfried, 2014). As subsequent learning in nearly all areas depends on early reading comprehension, obstacles to literacy attainment at the early stages bode poorly for future educational outcomes (National Institute for Literacy, 2008).

These concerns were amplified given the country's poor pre-pandemic showing on national and international education evaluations. Recent standardized tests measuring reading, math, and science learning in third and sixth graders reported that half of third graders and nearly a third of sixth graders tested at low or very low levels in both literacy and mathematics (MEDUCA, 2019). UNESCO-led evaluations produced similar results (UNESCO, 2021). In both tests, private school and higher SES students tended to obtain significantly higher scores than their public school and lower SES counterparts. Thus, the combination of prolonged pandemic school closure and students' chronic underperformance in foundational subjects posed a grave threat to Panamanian primary school students' future achievement across multiple subjects. The effects of this are now readily evident in the post-pandemic return to the classroom (Samaniego, 2023).

## **Digital Learning as an Alternative**

Digital learning introduces a promising means for continued education even with school closures (Yang et al., 2018) and was widely employed in Panama during the pandemic, especial at the university level as discussed above. For this to be a realistic alternative, students and families must be able to rely on accessible connectivity. Low SES households everywhere without the means to access connectivity and digital devices were disproportionately marginalized by the pandemic, propelling existing inequities related to education quality (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). In Panama, only around 40% of public school students have access to the internet at home and less than 30% have access to computers (INEC, 2017). Cellular access, however, is far more prevalent with 2020 market data reporting nearly five million mobile connections countrywide. This translates to more than one cell phone per person, which suggests that most families, on average, have access to at least one mobile telephone. This connectivity differs dramatically across regions, and families in indigenous and other non-urban areas often have more difficulty obtaining access (De Leon, 2020; INEC, 2017). Nevertheless, cellular connectivity appears to offer the most immediate promise for delivering digital learning to lower SES households and learners, though the quality of this medium of instruction tends to vary considerably, in Panama and many other developing regions around the world (West & Chew, 2014; UNICEF/ITU, 2020).

## **Crisis as a Driver for Collaboration**

Educational innovation often originates outside government since corporate and non-governmental organizations are typically less constrained bureaucratically, better positioned for pursuing research and development, and freer to pursue collaborative partnerships (IDB, 2014). And crisis can actually provide a catalyst to propel such collaboration. Many times, organizations take advantage of disasters to further self-interested agendas that would not normally be feasible or acceptable (Klein, 2005). This happens in the education sector, as well, as players use catastrophe and uncertainty to jockey for power and influence public policy to their advantage (Saltman, 2007). But it also happens that crisis can be used to propel initiatives to advance public good, and that is what happened in Panama with regard to digital transformation for educator capacity development, at least temporarily.

It has always been complicated in Panama for HEIs and non-governmental entities to work directly with MEDUCA on educational program design and implementation. Beyond the conflicts of interest mentioned earlier that often exist between private universities and state actors, the bureaucratic impediments, lack of transparency in partner selection, and payment terms associated with MEDUCA all present additional obstacles. However, the pandemic crisis-level circumstances and limited resources available to address accompanying urgencies propelled a period of streamlined cooperation among public sector, HEIs and civil society organizations, which resulted in unparalleled innovation in certain areas. MEDUCA involvement with HEIs and non-governmental entities (non-profits and for-profits), which under normal circumstances would have required navigation through excessive bureaucracy, was streamlined dramatically during the pandemic in an effort to develop and implement the necessary technological capacity development of public school teachers nationwide to prepare them for remote teaching (Svenson et al., 2022).

The simplification of bureaucratic process and MEDUCA's immediate need to utilize all available knowledge and capacity allowed for a number of innovative public-private pandemic programs. This led to the establishment of the Gran Alianza Educativa (Great Education Alliance), a coalition of education non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to supporting MEDUCA and transforming Panamanian education (Gran Alianza Educativa, 2022). This pandemic coalition was critical for developing and implementing much of the technological retraining of public school teachers necessary for pivoting toward remote learning. MEDUCA's willingness to work with these NGOs offered a more flexible, less bureaucratic space within which state and non-state actors could collaborate to launch and scale innovative educational projects far more rapidly than would normally have been possible pre-pandemic (Svenson et al., 2022; Svenson & Leon, forthcoming).

When schools closed in March 2020, HE professors and researchers in Panama came together for the initiative described in this article from three local institutions: CIEDU, Panama's recently established public-private think tank for education research; QLU, a nationally and internationally accredited private university with extensive experience in education technology; and the ProEd Foundation, a UNESCO prize-winning non-governmental organization dedicated to teacher training and continuing education for educators. The leaders of these organizations (who are also the authors of this article) worked with MEDUCA to design and implement a nationwide mobile literacy program, *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery*, to reach families and children without access to instruction or educational materials. These leaders also researched, quantitatively and qualitatively, the effectiveness of this program for reading promotion. Results indicated statistically significant gains in participants' literacy levels and confirmed the feasibility of using WhatsApp and mobile phones to promote supplemental or complementary learning (Leon et al, 2022).

The *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery* project described above was one of many similarly inspired digital education programs to come out of this collaborative effort. At the same time and in the same vein, the Panamanian government and local telecommunications groups united during the pandemic to launch Internet para Todos (Internet for All), which deployed 85 internet hubs to impoverished communities nationwide in an effort to provide free wireless internet access to help students attend classes remotely as they dealt with the effects of Covid-19. In the end, however, little was actually achieved for the affected communities despite the well-intentioned agreements (Samaniego, 2020). Likewise, with the education NGOs, as the scare of the pandemic has receded and students and educators have returned to school in person, much of the pandemic induced collaborative spirit has diminished, and MEDUCA has returned to its previous highly bureaucratized state—with even more stringent and cumbersome requirements for partnering than were in place before the pandemic. The WhatsApp project described here was not picked up or continued in any way by MEDUCA after 2020. Nevertheless, some of the creative alliance-building that took place during Covid-19 has been retained and propelled by certain non-governmental actors. Also, importantly, a process of state and non-state collaboration has been established as a precedent in response to dealing with emergency conditions.

If these types of collaborative creativity uniting state and non-state actors were properly supported and evolved, they could enable the education sector to leapfrog technologically and substantively. Unfortunately, Panama's record with sustaining and expanding this type of collaboration is dubious. In the case of technological education advancements, this is largely due to political economy constraints at the national level that impede expanded internet connectivity and device accessibility, along with the incentives in place to maintain these constraints. The technology, knowledge, and experience

to enable digital transformation for education at all levels are readily available. More often, however, the political will is not (Svenson & Leon, forthcoming).

### Conclusion and Considerations for the Future

The Covid-19 pandemic immediately raised awareness worldwide about the potential of digital learning—and its accompanying inequities. Digital learning embodies the promise technology holds for bridging gaps in knowledge attainment, yet it also represents the means to exacerbate those gaps, principally between richer and poorer communities and learners (Jones, 2019; Williamson et al., 2020). Dissemination of high-quality digital learning materials and instruction to the simplest electronic screens, as was done with *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery*, presents a way to take knowledge previously reserved for only those with computers and internet connections and transmit it to a broader audience. This, in turn, offers direct support for SDG 4 and many of its targets. As argued above, HEIs have huge potential for driving this type of effort because of their cumulative experience with digital learning, research, extended academic networks, and capacity to influence the global education sector. But to achieve successful collaborative endeavor for digital transformation and equitable learning requires commitment from a variety of academic and non-academic actors. Often, the incentives to facilitate such collaboration are lacking, especially in Latin America.

In Panama, the pandemic created an emergency situation that enabled considerable collaborative effort between government and HEIs that otherwise would have been difficult to bring forth. This crisis scenario set the stage for the *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery* project and the successful alliance between its HE designers and implementers: CIEDU, QLU, the ProEd Foundation, and MEDUCA. The project and the collaboration itself—between a public-private research center, a local private university, an NGO, and a ministry of education—generated valuable lessons on both the potential power of digital learning at the bottom of the pyramid and the power of HE partnerships to impact digital learning across all three HE missions of teaching, research and community outreach. The project introduces scientific evidence for literacy progress utilizing the simplest of mobile edtech. It also provides a replicable process for teacher training, daily instruction, and research on mobile literacy that can be implemented almost anywhere. And it shows how HE can be a potent driver of equitable digital learning. For these reasons, the *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery* project and the HE collaboration behind it led to international recognition as well as various academic presentations and publications (CIEDU, 2022; Leon et al., 2022; Svenson et al., 2022; Svenson & Leon, forthcoming). Nevertheless, none of this success has led to any national support, public or private, past the initial pandemic involvement with MEDUCA.

In part, this lack of support is an indication of how post-crisis, the dynamics of global and local politics and economics worldwide tend to revert back to their previously established modalities (Andrews et al., 2021). Additionally, for digital transformation and learning to reach broader, and often more remote and vulnerable populations, thorny and potentially expensive connectivity issues must be addressed. As Jones (2019) discusses in his edtech political economy exploration, redirecting the global and local power dynamics linked to education reform and digital transformation will require strategic action on the part of the state to incentivize the necessary multisectoral collaboration involved. This suggests that technological change and academic efforts alone will not suffice.

For post-pandemic Panama to leverage and further some of the learning, collaboration, and innovation developed in projects like *WhatsApp Remote Reading Recovery* and other pandemic HEI initiatives, immediate public sector change in two key areas is urgently necessary. The first is the bureaucracy surrounding external actors' involvement with MEDUCA. If this cannot be substantially streamlined and simplified, collaborative efforts of the kind witnessed during Covid-19 will be virtually impossible. The second area is public support for research and development. Latin America as a region is notoriously inadequate in this regard, and Panama is among the worst of the region. Whereas OECD countries devote, on average, about 3% of their gross domestic product (GDP) to research and development, Latin America and the Caribbean as a region averages less than 1% of GDP. Panama over the past decade averages about a tenth of the regional average (UNESCO, 2023). The combined effect of paralyzing bureaucracy and negligible financial investment assures the country of minimal HE knowledge production.

Panama can be proud of its economy, its level of globalization, and multicultural productive capacity—all of which contribute to the type of collaborative HE effort described in this article. What it should be ashamed of is that the country does nothing to support this effort and much to thwart it. Without serious state reform in this regard, digital transformation and learning will continue to be the privilege of the few that can afford to obtain it on their own.

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## Higher Education, Human Development, and Growing Inequality in Pre-and Post Pandemic Haiti

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### Abstract

*For almost four decades, Haiti has been engaged in the tenuous process of democratization, exacerbated by political, economic, social, climate, and more recently the COVID-19 crises. With each crisis, efforts are made to reimagine national development and revitalize the public sphere, with limited success. Yet, largely absent from these debates is the higher education sector. We argue that the neglect of higher education since Haiti's transition from dictatorship to democracy is a result of the nation's failure to articulate a clear vision for the sector. In this article, we ask: How has the failure to articulate a clear purpose for the higher education sector in Haiti exacerbated the country's systemic crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic? In order to answer this question, we provide a sociohistorical examination of the role of power and politics in Haitian higher education beginning in its founding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century culminating at the time of the pandemic. We explore how the absence of a strategic vision for higher education institutions in Haiti and ad-hoc neoliberal policies have impacted the professoriate and students while impeding the sector's potential contributions to society in a time characterized by systemic and uninterrupted crises including the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Haitian youth, higher education, human development, inequality

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### Resumen

*Durante casi cuatro décadas, Haití ha estado inmerso en un tenue proceso de democratización, exacerbado por las crisis política, económica, social, climática y, más recientemente, por la crisis del COVID-19. Con cada crisis, se realizan esfuerzos para re-imaginar el desarrollo nacional y revitalizar la esfera pública, con un éxito limitado. Sin embargo, en gran medida ausente de estos debates está el sector de la educación superior. Argumentamos que el abandono de la educación superior desde la transición de Haití de la dictadura a la democracia es resultado de la incapacidad del país para articular una visión clara para el sector. En este artículo nos preguntamos: ¿Cómo ha exacerbado la crisis sistémica del país en medio de la pandemia de COVID-19 la falta de articulación de un propósito claro para el sector de la educación superior en Haití? Para responder a esta pregunta, proporcionamos un examen sociohistórico del papel del poder y la*

*política en la educación superior haitiana desde su fundación en el siglo XIX y culminando en el momento de la pandemia. Exploramos cómo la ausencia de una visión estratégica para las instituciones de educación superior en Haití y las políticas neoliberales ad hoc han impactado al profesorado y a los estudiantes al tiempo que han impedido las contribuciones potenciales del sector a la sociedad en una época caracterizada por crisis sistémicas e ininterrumpidas, incluida la pandemia de COVID-19.*

Palabras claves: COVID-19, juventud haitiana, educación superior, desarrollo humano, desigualdad

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## Introduction

In this article, we provide an analysis that centers around the following research question: *How has the failure to articulate a clear purpose for the higher education sector in Haiti exacerbated the country's systemic crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic?* Given that Haiti's higher education sector has been relatively understudied and, in many regards, remains opaque, this article draws on document analysis to examine its history and two ongoing studies that focus on the state of higher education after the 2010 earthquake, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We intentionally draw from the sector's history in moments of crisis culminating with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic as we deem it necessary to contextualize the sector's current challenges with respect to its past development and ongoing evolution.

The article is divided into two sections. Section One examines the sociohistorical and political contexts of the sector's evolution. Section Two draws on a national study of the higher education sector conducted by the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED) between 2013 and 2022. It uses transdisciplinary theoretical constructs to frame the challenges inherent to institution-building and governance in countries such as Haiti and analyzes the sector's failure to contribute to positive societal change. We highlight the higher education sector as a case study, interrogating its role in a Haitian reality characterized by systemic and uninterrupted crises and how Haiti's failure to establish a clear purpose for higher education has contributed to insufficient investments in the sector, poor governance, and a vacuum in leadership and accountability that has perpetuated societal inequalities particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as higher education can contribute to development, this article demonstrates how a higher education system disconnected from a society in crisis can perpetuate longstanding social inequities.

## Higher Education Institutions: Purpose, Vision, and Policy Frameworks

Historically, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been critical to national development as they produce wealth by enhancing physical capital through knowledge. In addition to providing skills-based training, higher education should advance and disseminate knowledge that fosters innovation and promotes civic education necessary for any healthy democracy (Bowen et al., 2005). According to Chantler (2016), HEIs have three fundamental mandates: 1) producing a well-educated workforce, 2) knowledge production through research, and 3) community engagement. Articulating the purpose of higher education in any society is a challenging and contentious matter. Since the mid-twentieth century, human capital theory has informed much of higher education policy. Yet, beliefs regarding the value of higher education vary among stakeholders with some privileging the production of new knowledge for knowledge's sake, others seeking to foster (civic, political, and/or religious) leadership, some emphasizing its role in facilitating economic growth, while other stakeholders see higher education as serving a complementary role to the state by providing a public good that benefits all of society (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). For example, Arthur and Bohlin (2005) contend that universities should serve as a public good by promoting a "citizenship culture" among its students (p. 2). Shapiro (2005) is more definitive declaring that "all higher education institutions [...] serve a public purpose" (p. 13). He argues that as societies face or are transformed by crises, educational institutions are compelled to "question many existing ideas regarding central issues of knowledge, culture and society" and, in so doing, revisit their own values and commitments (Shapiro, 2005, p. 16-18). As critical actors in society, these institutions may serve democratic processes, acknowledge

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the challenges associated with them or even undermine them (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). As universities produce and disseminate knowledge, they can serve as the institutional space where democratic policies are enacted through discussions about public affairs (Pusser et al., 2012). It is precisely its role as a site of reflection and critique that positions these institutions to generate public goods that promote public welfare (ibid). In this manner, HEIs can play a critical role in challenging dominant institutions just as they may reinforce status quo arrangements that destabilize democratic processes (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). And in the absence of any public contribution, HEIs run the risk of becoming irrelevant to society (Marginson, 2012).

It is our contention that Haiti's history provides clear indications of the role higher education should play in society. Building on Haiti's revolutionary legacy and the nation's founding on the fundamental principle of equality of all "man"<sup>1</sup> as well as its more recent transition from dictatorship to democracy, the higher education sector should serve as a public good that promotes equality within Haitian society through civic engagement as well as economic and human development. In this article, we argue that the neglect of higher education since Haiti's transition from dictatorship to democracy is a result of the nation's failure to articulate a clear vision for the sector, the consequences of which were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Crisis of Governance and Proliferation of Higher Education Institutions in Haiti**

Haiti's higher education sector remains an enigma to many, including Haitians. As very little is known about the sector and the institutions that comprise it, we deem it necessary to provide a brief overview of its founding and evolution in order to appreciate the sector's functioning during and after the pandemic. From its inception in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sector was dedicated to the country's elite, reproducing French-inspired curricula, with no focus on either Haiti's human development needs nor its sociopolitical, economic, or security issues (GTEF, 2010; INURED, 2010; Pamphile, 2008; Pierre-Charles, 1988). The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the sector's rapid expansion. François Duvalier would strategically use the public university system, the State University of Haiti (State University), to create a relatively loyal black middle-class while placing supporters in positions of leadership, a practice that continued under Jean-Claude Duvalier (Bernard, 1989; Pierre-Charles, 1988). In 1983, the State University became an independent entity, though the President retained the right to nominate its Rector (Romain, 1987). Three years later, the sector further expanded to include the State University's 11 schools and 5 institutes/centers and 8 private HEIs (ibid).

Post-dictatorship expansion of the sector would grant access to segments of the urban working class and poor converting the public university into a site of struggle over political control through student resistance and protests (Bernard, 1989; GTEF, 2010; Pierre-Charles, 1988; Romain, 1987). In 1987, a new constitution was introduced with reforms primarily aimed at thwarting future authoritarian control while failing to articulate the relationship between the sector and Haitian society. The State University was granted autonomy and given sector governance authority, the parameters of which were unclear (GTEF, 2010; INURED, 2010; Romain, 1987). With the adoption of the new constitution, the State University claimed autonomy with no accountability to any entity including the state which funded it. The State University also claimed sole responsibility for sector governance, a position that has been contested (INURED, 2010; Jacob, 2020). The constitution also reflected the neoliberal policies adopted throughout the region during that time which encouraged competition through the establishment of private institutions (GTEF, 2010; Romain, 1987). Haiti has a largely symbolic process through which private institutions obtain government recognition to operate, however failure to obtain it rarely results in sanctions of any kind (INURED, 2010). As a result, weak regulatory measures due to disputes regarding governance authority and increased demand have given rise to the unwieldy expansion of institutions of varying, generally poor, quality (Cela, 2021; GTEF, 2010; INURED, 2010; Jacob, 2020). Between 1985 to 2015, Haiti experienced a more than tenfold increase in the number of tertiary institutions (USAID, 2018).

While massification responds to demand, it often comes at the expense of quality (Pierre et al., 2018; Torres & Schugurensky, 2002; Urzúa, 2002). In the Global South, where resources are often limited, budget allocations are not on par with increased enrollments. The 1990s and 2000s saw increased funding of higher education globally, yet stark differences can be seen in how these resources have been allocated. Additional funds in the Global South have supported

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that despite Haiti's role in advancing the cause of equality, women were not considered equal.

sector expansion through increased capacity and access whereas in the Global North, these resources represent additional investments per student, exacerbating the North-South quality gap in higher education (ibid).

## **Health, Higher Education, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Haiti**

Haiti's health indicators reveal the failure of HEIs to create knowledge-based preventive interventions in health and agricultural production that can promote health and well-being. While in the post-Duvalier context, Haiti's human development index showed steady increases through 2019, since then it has progressively fallen, ranking 163 out of 191 countries in 2021 (UNDP, 2022). With only one doctor or nurse per 3,000 individuals (Gage et al., 2017), Haiti lags behind its regional neighbors in most health indicators (Cela et al., 2022). Some estimates suggest that there are only 2,000 physicians in Haiti, 90% of whom work in Port-au-Prince, contributing to the scarcity of medical services in provincial and rural areas (Kirk, 2015). At birth, life expectancy is 65 years (Gage et al., 2017) well behind its regional neighbors (Fene et al., 2020). A 2013 national study found that less than one-quarter (23%) of the population had access to good quality healthcare (Gage et al., 2017). In addition, Haiti has some of the lowest improved water source access rates, at 73% and 47% in urban and rural settings, respectively (WHO & UNICEF, 2014), with decreasing levels of access to improved sanitation over the last several decades (Gelting et al., 2013). Further, Haiti's health indicators have only worsened in the context of its most recent disasters (ASFC, 2019; Gelting et al., 2013; Marcelin & Cela, 2017).

Despite being an agrarian society, Haitian investments in agriculture and extension services have been modest (Goertz, 2016). Haiti's meager agricultural production and high level of food insecurity attest to this fact. Agricultural production has been in sharp decline for several decades due to unfavorable national and international policies (Goertz, 2016) such as the disruptive effects of food aid on local markets (USG, 2011) and adverse environmental degradation (USG, 2011). Haiti's hunger index is described as "serious," ranking in at 116 out of 121 countries (Global Hunger Index, 2022). The country is experiencing a severe food crisis with nearly half the population (4.7 million) facing acute hunger. Food insecurity is exacerbated by year-on-year inflation at 63%, the price of petrol doubling (FAO, 2022), below average rainfall, and the 2021 earthquake (UN News, 2022). In addition to these factors, Haiti's low levels of agricultural production can be linked to the higher education sector's fragility. One study of agricultural researchers in the LAC region found that smaller countries are largely dependent upon foreign researchers' agricultural expertise (Stads & Beintema, 2009). In Haiti specifically, low investments, the absence of a curricular focus on extension methods (Pierre et al., 2018) and sustainable agricultural development (Pierre, 2015) and the disconnect between employment opportunities and training (Alford et al., 2020) are evidence of the sector's neglect of the agricultural needs of the country. This suggests that the sector has remained on the margins of solving the nation's agricultural production and food security issues (Pierre et al., 2018) rendering the population even more vulnerable during health crises. To address these, and other challenges, the international community has stepped in to fill the void.

Serial, complex crises have increased the nation's dependence on international and humanitarian aid (Klarreich & Polman, 2012). To provide basic healthcare, Haiti relies on foreign entities such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Médecins sans Frontières*, and Partners in Health. Notably, the Cuban Medical Brigade, which began operations in Haiti in 1998, has been providing free, quality healthcare to underserved and impoverished communities in urban and rural areas, providing more than 300,000 operations and training nearly 900 Haitian physicians (Grogg, 2013; Kirk, 2015). According to official reports, the Cuban Medical Brigade has served over 18 million patients in Haiti filling a deep void in access to quality care among its most impoverished and marginalized populations (Grogg, 2013).

The higher education sector's limited impact on health and agriculture may be attributed to the sector's fragility, limited resources, and the overly centralized system that reinforces health inequities (Cela, 2021; Cela et al., 2022). We argue that it is the absence of a clear purpose for higher education that has fostered societal indifference toward the needs of the majority of Haiti's population which has exacerbated inequalities during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged after months of civil protests against government corruption and political violence (INURED, 2020). Faced with its newest public health emergency in the context of ongoing sociopolitical unrest, Haitian universities remained largely absent in discussions regarding the pandemic, the structural violence that limited access to healthcare, and the sociopolitical context that exacerbated government mistrust while compromising public health campaigns. By February 25, 2023, the Ministry of Health reported 860 deaths, 5,685 hospitalizations, and 34,214 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (MSPP, 2023). Of note is that the Ministry reported that only 230,000 tests had been administered

(ibid). Yet, by mid-November 2022, Haiti's neighbor, the Dominican Republic, reported just under 650,000 confirmed cases, and over 4,300 deaths (WHO, 2022b) despite having a more robust healthcare system than Haiti. Haiti's surprisingly low COVID-19 numbers are more indicative of its lack of healthcare infrastructure, insufficient testing, and the paucity of reliable data. These are issues a robust higher education sector should be highlighting and reflecting upon to prepare for the certainty of future health crises such as the reemergence of cholera (WHO, 2022a) which, after declarations of its eradication in 2019, has now become endemic in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic unveiled longstanding and entrenched health inequalities and inequities across many societies, offering the possibility for reflection and reevaluation of public health and healthcare access. In Haiti, the pandemic "serve[d] as both an indicator and magnifier of existing marginalization and structural violence in the country" (INURED, 2020, p. 5). In fact, during the pandemic HEIs and research centers were largely absent from the public discourse, with few exceptions (INURED, 2020; Lumarque, 2020), producing limited knowledge and homegrown solutions. In fact, most public health publications and research on COVID-19 in Haiti have been produced outside of its own universities and research centers (e.g., Cenat, 2020; DeGennaro et al., 2021; Faure et al., 2022; Price et al., 2022; Tagliamonte et al., 2022). The absence of local institutional engagement in public health campaigns allowed misinformation to prevail. From the onset, COVID-19 deniers dismissed the virus as one introduced by and only affecting foreigners, others viewed the government shutdown as a political stunt to distract from the government's PetroCaribe scandal (Nugent, 2019), while scientific examinations of immediate threats to human security (e.g., poverty, hunger, violence, etc.) in the context of the pandemic remained few and far between (INURED, 2020; Rouzier et al., 2020).

## Methods

The data presented in this section are drawn from a multidisciplinary study, National Study of Higher Education (NSHE), implemented in Haiti from 2013-2017 and 2019-2022. The NSHE consisted of integrated quantitative and ethnographic approaches whereby data were obtained from a variety of methodological tools at different time points. Implemented by the Interuniversity Institute on Research and Development (INURED), this national study of the higher education sector in Haiti included document analysis, multiple national surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, GIS mapping of HEIs, and ethnographic observations. As data on Haiti's higher education sector remain sparse, our study aimed to a) identify the public and private institutions that form part of this sector, an aspect of the study that remains ongoing as the sector continues to expand, b) provide general characterizations of its main stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty and business leaders) through surveys that were implemented prior to the pandemic and c) capture stakeholder perceptions of the sector through pre- and post-pandemic ethnographic interviews. This article draws exclusively from GIS mapping of HEIs and survey data.

To select professors and students, the study used a three-stage random sampling strategy. Of more than 180 known higher education institutions operating in Haiti at the time of the survey, a sample of 75 institutions were selected using the following criteria: year of founding; geographic location; number of students; institutional status (public or private); and legal status (government authorization). The national survey of 982 enrolled university students intended to capture their perceptions of the quality of instruction and learning and the role HEIs play in Haiti's long-term development and reconstruction. The survey of 94 members of the professoriate aimed to capture faculty members' perceptions of higher education in Haiti, their working conditions and level of satisfaction, as well as the sector's role in reconstruction and development. The survey included full- and part-time faculty from public and private institutions.

As the link between higher education and the economy requires collaboration with the private sector, we also surveyed 155 business leaders to understand their perceptions of the workforce the sector produces. To select businesses, they were segmented into the following categories: hotels, restaurants, financial organizations, services, and industries. The categories were then stratified by region to be selected using snowball sampling within each stratum.

Quantitative data were analyzed using univariate descriptive statistics (IBM SPSS Statistics for Mac Version 23.0). Multiple response questions are indicated and allow the individual to select more than one answer to each question. For multiple-response questions, percentages are shown as the proportion of total respondents relative to each category. Survey

tools were developed in French and Haitian Creole and tested for clarity. Study protocols were reviewed and approved by INURED's Institutional Review Board<sup>2</sup>.

## Findings

### Higher Education in Haiti Today: A View from the Ground Up

Poor governance continues to impact every aspect of the sector, the quality of higher learning institutions, instructor credentials, the quality of training, institutional infrastructure, as well as the sector's impact on and relevance for Haitian society. Geographic information system mapping of HEIs operating in Haiti between 2013 and 2022 yielded 337 results ranging from universities to tertiary professional training programs. However, there are two caveats to be made here: 1) not all operating institutions have secured (or sought) government recognition and 2) due to Haiti's multiple crises, including the pandemic, some of these institutions may no longer exist. However, the Ministry of Education acknowledges that a number of institutions are currently operating without government recognition<sup>3</sup>.

### *Characterizing the Professoriate: Teaching for Supplemental Income*

Haiti's professoriate is predominantly male at 82.8%, which is consistent with gender disparities across Haiti's institutions (INURED, 2017b). Almost half (48.3%) of participants were full-time employees, working at least 9 months during the year. Most (47%) instructors hold a bachelor's degree, followed by 42% with a master's degree, and only 11% possess a terminal degree. Whereas 86.1% of undergraduate diplomas were earned in Haiti, only 30% of master's and no terminal degrees were completed in Haiti. Outside of coursework, only 19% of instructors reported conducting research. The data revealed that monthly earnings varied greatly with 10.8% of participants (full-time and part-time) receiving less than USD \$200, one-fifth receiving between USD \$200 and \$399, 9.5% reporting between USD \$400 and \$599, 8.1% between USD \$600 and \$799, 2.8% ranging from USD \$800 to \$999, 13.5% USD \$1,000 or more, and almost one-quarter (23%) refusing to respond to the question.

More than half (55.8%) of all instructors reported teaching 21 or more hours per month and almost one-third (32.4%) between 9 and 16 hours. Class lecturing was the most frequently used method of instruction, followed by group projects. Half of the respondents spent 1 to 8 hours per month advising and mentoring students; 26.4% 9 to 16 hours; 11.8% 17 or more hours, and 2.9%, none. Further, 53.1% of respondents spent 1 to 8 hours per month on research and scientific writing, 18.8% 9 to 16 hours, 12.5% 17 or more hours, and 3.1%, none. Slightly more than two-fifths (43.8%) of part-time instructors held full-time positions elsewhere. When asked about their preferences in terms of employment status, 39.2% did not want full-time university employment, 37.3% would prefer full-time status, 15.7% were unsure, and 7.8% refused to answer. The study data revealed that compensation in higher education is not competitive with more than half (54%) of professors reporting that they were unsatisfied or only somewhat satisfied with their salaries and only one-in-five reporting satisfaction with their benefits package. They also reported limited opportunities for full-time employment. Therefore, many instructors view their positions as part-time employment through which they can earn supplemental income.

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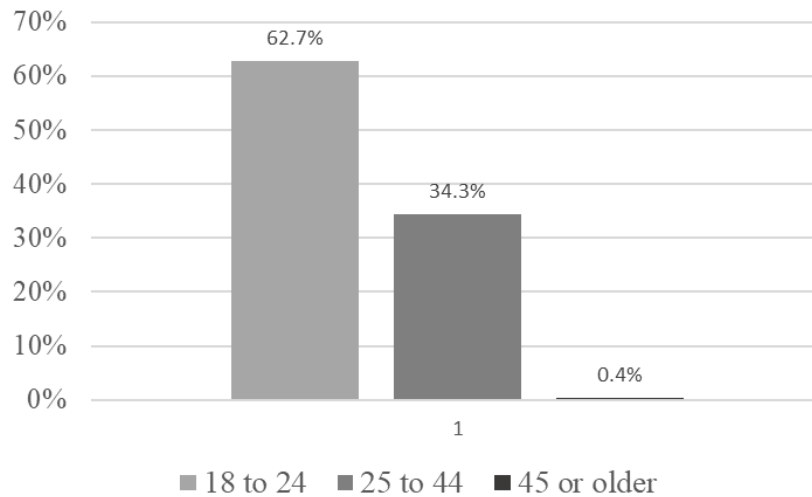
<sup>2</sup> Study protocol # HE 2014 007

<sup>3</sup> By August 2023, the Ministry of Education (MENFP) had officially recognized 40 public institutions and 138 private institutions.

However, conceding that this number did not reflect all HEIs operating within the country they noted their expectation that "all other Higher Education Institutions [apply for regularization]." Announcing that "[a] general census is planned for the first quarter of the academic year 2023-2024 to update this list" (MENFP, 2023).

**Figure 1**

*Reported Age of Sampled Students*



***Haitian University Students' Perceptions of Higher Education***

The gender distribution of university students surveyed was as follows: 54.1% male, 45.3% female, 0.4% did not declare. Further, 62.7% of participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, 34.3% between 25 and 34, 1.8% between 35 and 44; and 0.4% were 45 or older. Most (91.5%) were single, with only 5.1% reporting being married. Most student participants, 72.7%, were pursuing an undergraduate degree, 19.1% a certificate, 3.2% doctoral degrees, and 2.1% master's degrees. With regards to their chosen major or discipline, 23.4% were studying social sciences, 23.3% medical sciences; 21.8% business, marketing, or accounting, 7.1% agronomy, environmental sciences, or natural sciences, 6.3% architecture or civil engineering, 2.5% Information Technology, and 14.2% selected other.

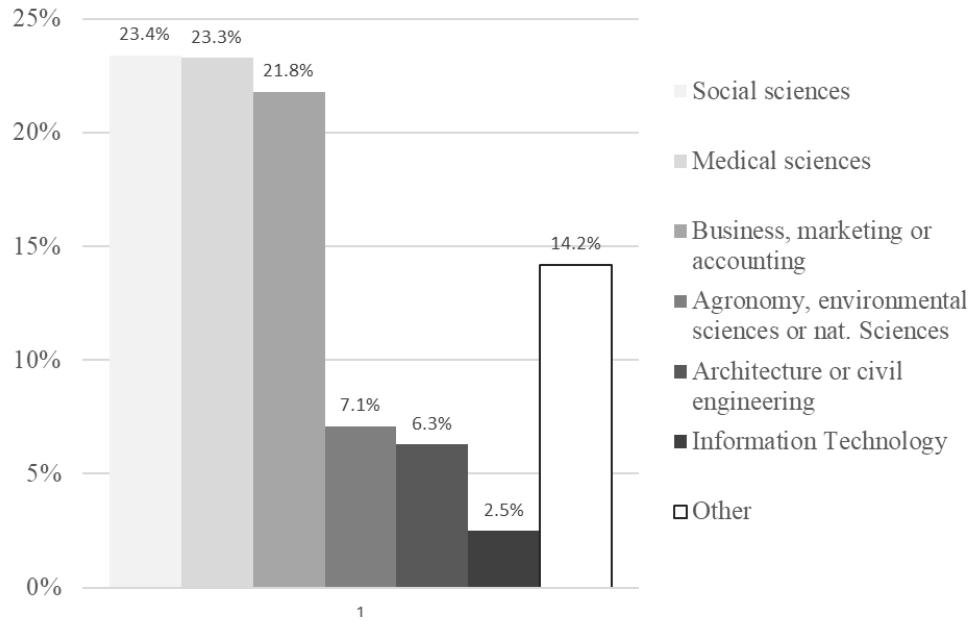
In terms of having sufficient information regarding college selection, 20.2% of respondents strongly agreed that they possessed sufficient information, 25.3% agreed, 29.4% disagreed, 20.2% strongly disagreed, 5.0% were unsure, and 10.6% were neutral. The data revealed that 30.5% of respondents strongly agreed that independent reports on institutional and program quality would help students select their institutions, 39.8% agreed, 7.9% disagreed, 1.5% strongly disagreed, 7.0% were unsure, and 8.9% were neutral. Furthermore, 37.1% of respondents strongly agreed that university and program performance rankings would help students select a university, 39.3% agreed, 6.8% disagreed, 3.3% strongly disagreed, 4.9% were unsure, and 7.3% were neutral.

The existence of student services varied by institution but suggested that there was a paucity of services. Just over one-quarter (26.5%) of students indicated that their university offered career services while 31.9% reported that no such services were provided, and 33.2% were unsure. Additional services reported included internships (46.5%), professional training opportunities (14.4%), assistance with summer employment (9.5%), and employment assistance (6.9%), while more than one-quarter (27.1%) reported that no additional services or assistance were provided. The study revealed that 52.8% of students were very confident in securing employment after receiving their diplomas, 22.0% were confident, 10.2% had little confidence, 3.1% were not confident at all, 2.4% were unsure, and 4.7% were neutral. More than three-quarters (76.7%) of students expressed a desire to study abroad.

Students were asked about the role of higher education in Haiti's development. The overwhelming majority (92.6%) of students agreed that quality HEIs are necessary for Haiti's economic and social development (91.7%), post-earthquake reconstruction (89.8%), and political development (85.8%), while 90.2% attributed Haiti's underdevelopment to the poor management of HEIs. Almost all students (99.8%) believe it is important that HEIs promote civic education, specifically developing a critical spirit and promoting an active citizenry. Eighty-eight percent (88%) believe higher education should provide students with the competencies needed to succeed in the labor market, and 77.7% believe HEIs

**Figure 3**

*Reported Chosen Major/Discipline of Sampled Students*



should facilitate students' personal development. Students were asked to identify all non-academic factors that influenced university grading. The question allowed them to select multiple responses including one response which stated that grades were not influenced by non-academic factors. The most common response selected among the 477 who reported that non-academic factors influenced grades was sexual favors at 45.9% (219 of 477), followed by payments or gifts to professors at 44.7% (213), and social class at 39.8% (190). Notably, only 7% (33) of student participants reported that grades were not influenced by non-academic factors.

### ***The Private Sector and Higher Education in Haiti***

Most enterprises included in the survey operate in the areas of retail, hotel, restaurant, and marketing services. When asked how businesses identify and recruit employees, 81.6% of respondents recruited through personal networks (e.g., family, friends, and colleagues), with only 4.6% recruiting directly from HEIs. Many managers in the private sector had some formal higher education training, with 62.3% of respondents revealing that most of their managers had attended a local vocational school, 29.8% local public university, and 29.8% local private university.

When evaluating the relationship between the private sector and HEIs, 83% of participants revealed that their business had no direct relationship with any HEI. Among the few that did, one had commissioned research, 4 participated in advanced training programs, 8 recruited employees, 3 provided student scholarships, and 9 offered internships. In one multiple-response question regarding what HEIs should offer students, 55.6% believed they should provide skills and training to prepare them for the workforce, 54.6% believed students should be encouraged to engage in internships or apprenticeships while studying, 48% advocated for continuing education courses for established professionals and 40.1% endorsed establishing short courses to meet market needs. More than one-third (36.2%) believed HEIs should consult private

sector representatives when developing curricula. However, 7.9% agreed that the two entities should operate autonomously. When asked if HEIs generally respond to the needs of the private sector, only 31.8% responded in the affirmative.

Unlike the GIS mapping data which was collected over a period of almost a decade, the survey data presented herein were collected prior to the pandemic. However, there have not been significant changes in the sector- investments or otherwise- over the past decade. Therefore, we conclude that by and large, the articulated challenges persist in the sector.

## Discussion

According to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, higher education is vital to a nation's long-term development (HESI, 2021). Historically, countries in the Global North have injected significant resources into higher education to promote industrialization, incentivize research, and facilitate extension in agriculture and the applied sciences. In these countries, higher education was transformed by re-orienting its purpose from theoretical to applied knowledge while making it accessible to the masses (Altbach et al., 2011; Collins, 2011; 2012). For many countries in the Global South, however, such investments have been marginal despite unprecedented expansion (MacGregor, 2022). Between 2006 and 2018, the number of HEIs in the Global North remained constant at 20,000 as enrollments steadily declined while the number of HEIs in the Global South rose from over 40,000 to 70,000, mirroring student enrollments which nearly doubled (ibid).

In times of economic decline, private sector expansion has been the solution put forth to increase access (massification) while responding to individual demand for training that would lead to gainful employment, particularly in the Global South. Yet despite private institution expansion, public institutions continue to maintain higher absorption capacity. Unprecedented growth in student enrollments introduced quality control issues, particularly at newly established private institutions, that many states in the Latin America region have aimed to address through various regulatory models that implicate the state, universities and, in varying degrees, local markets (Espinoza Diaz, 2010; Jarvis, 2014; Jordana, 2021). Haiti, however, has increased access to a sector that has been in steady decline over the past several decades due to governance failure (INURED, 2010). That Haiti has been unable to revise its higher education policy since 1987, despite facing innumerable political, economic, social and environmental crises suggests that there are entrenched, powerful interests resistant to reforming a sector critical to the nation's development and the establishment of democracy.

Haiti has neither made the transition from its elitist origins to an applied model that is relevant to bringing about its social, political, or economic transformation. We contend that this is the result of the failure to articulate a clear vision for the sector. Does the sector exist to promote economic development, individual social mobility, a combination of both, or is its mandate to bring about social transformation by being an engine of democracy and development? At present, there is no articulated vision and requisite governance structure to orient the various institutions and stakeholders in the sector around it. The private sector's reluctance to recruit employees from Haiti's universities and perceptions of universities as irrelevant call into question the training and preparation of students. However, we must also factor in the phenomenon of brain drain which has drained Haiti of much of its human resources (e.g., doctors, nurses, engineers, policymakers, etc.), particularly in times of crisis. Instructors are poorly compensated and teach many hours that more than likely preclude them from engaging in research while drawing qualified instructors to more competitive employment such as international aid work (Lemay-Hébert et al., 2020). It is no surprise, then, that instructor credentials are not on par with international standards. More broadly, Haiti's poor development outcomes, health indicators, and struggling agricultural sector are an indictment of a sector with over 300 institutions of higher learning, only 178 of which are officially recognized by the Haitian government. Based on these factors, we can conclude that Haiti's higher education sector is not contributing to economic growth, nor is it producing new (endogenous) knowledge through research, engaging communities or producing the leadership that Haiti so desperately needs.

In light of these factors, we must consider what role higher education has played in Haiti? The inaccessibility of HEIs in Haiti reinforces historic inequalities that have socially, economically and politically excluded the vast majority of Haitian citizens and relegated them to a life of poverty. Higher education remains largely inaccessible to the vast majority of Haiti's youth due to the limited absorptive capacity of public institutions, exorbitant fees charged by private institutions and the absence of student financial aid schemes. In this manner, HEIs play a limited role in serving democratic processes while poor governance and lack of transparency in the sector destabilize such processes. Given these realities, university education in Haiti provides training to a small segment of the population who remain disconnected from society and its

needs. Its limited contributions to Haitian society have HEIs to the brink of irrelevance, making it a product of consumption with potential individual benefits that exacerbate inequalities rather than position the sector as a steward of development for the country. In fact, as this and other studies have found (INURED, 2010; Lemay-Hébert et al., 2020; OECD & INURED, 2017) as Haitian youth obtain higher levels of education, their desire to migrate- whether for further study or employment-increases facilitating the migration of Haiti's most educated (Lemay-Hébert et al., 2020; OECD & INURED, 2017) while exacerbating the conditions of poverty in the homeland. This is evident from the low ratio of health professionals available to the population.

The lack of leadership connecting higher education to the private sector could be felt prior to, during and even after COVID-19. Failed governance has contributed to severe mismatches between sectoral and human resource needs. In the absence of any efforts to identify sectoral needs and ensure that Haiti's higher learning institutions are meeting them by providing quality training to a sufficient number of young talent in specific domains, Haiti's downward spiral accelerates. The failure to incentivize certain areas of training, such as health and agronomy exacerbates vulnerability in Haiti.

In the absence of a vision and clear leadership, the higher education sector largely exists as an entity unto itself, in furtherance of its own existence and as a training ground for other nations seeking to recruit professionals from abroad. During COVID-19, as the population rejected government guidance on the pandemic, HEIs remained marginal to discussions of the health crisis. As rumors regarding the virus' origins, transmission, and impacts circulated among the general population, HEIs were largely silent. COVID-19 was an opportunity; to question issues of healthcare access, health disparities, healthcare infrastructure, and the data regarding infection, testing and mortality rates. It was an opportunity to act; to engage in health campaigns, encourage testing, and advocate for equitable access to health services. And, as debates regarding the many forms of structural and physical violence faced by Haitians raged on, there were few institutions to help society examine the intersectional vulnerabilities of poverty, urban population density, the cultural configurations of family homes, lack of access to water, sanitation, food that rendered the average Haitian extremely vulnerable to infection. The opportunity to find an alternative model of health care that was more accessible to most Haitians, in light of the pandemic, emerged and dissipated further vulnerabilizing the poor and those living on the margins. During the pandemic, Haitian citizens were largely left to fend for themselves as they navigated information about an unknown virus in the midst of much social, political and economic turbulence.

We argue that in order to reform the sector, higher education's purpose in Haiti must be clearly articulated. Until a clear vision for the sector is developed and there is the political will to shepherd the sector toward the realization of that vision, higher education will remain unresponsive to societal needs exacerbating the suffering of Haitians in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Haitian context, the role of a higher education sector concerned with public welfare would be to educate the public, maintain transparency, report what is known and encourage the adoption of precautionary measures in spite of the unusually low infection and mortality rates. In fact, the higher education sector should position itself to increase access by bringing health information and encourage testing among Haitians in underserved areas. As always, Haiti's most vulnerable are most affected, and as they are "Othered" in times of normalcy, they are often ignored in times of crisis. As a result, many of Haiti's poor have or will perish undiagnosed, with no official cause of death and without any public outcry, as happened during the cholera epidemic (ASFC, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Haitian higher education's viability as a sector requires that it become locally relevant before it can be outwardly facing. The contextual factors and descriptive findings presented herein reflect the sector's fragility as elucidated by various stakeholders. The failure to articulate a clear purpose for higher education has contributed to its tenuous link to the real-life challenges faced by Haitian society. University students believe that quality higher education should be linked to economic, social, and political development and that it should promote civic engagement. Yet, the sector's exclusivity and lack of community engagement allow these institutions to function outside the reality of average, impoverished citizens thereby reproducing social inequalities in Haiti.

Haiti's failure to establish a clear purpose for higher education has contributed to insufficient investments in the sector, poor governance, and a vacuum in leadership that has limited accountability and perpetuated societal inequalities. This has contributed to widespread disillusionment among youths whose dominant aspiration is to leave the country. Just



as higher education can contribute to development, this article demonstrates how a higher education system disconnected from a society in crisis can perpetuate existing social inequities. Nowhere is this more evident than during a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we question the contribution of the higher education sector to public welfare in Haiti, we do so not to challenge its existence but as a call for stakeholders to reflect on what the sector must become if Haiti is to emerge from these perpetual crises. Haiti's deteriorating sociopolitical situation, continued economic stagnation, and the increased frequency and ferocity of disaster events alert us to the need for a vibrant and engaged higher education sector. Haiti can no longer afford to neglect higher education; it is an investment in the nation's future- its youth; it is an investment necessary for rebuilding and to address longstanding inequalities that have plagued Haitian society since independence.

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## **Movilidad Académica Internacional: las Voces del Estudiantado de Posgrado (In)móvil en México**

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### **Abstract**

*The objective of the study was to know the tensions faced by international graduate students in the context of a pandemic in Mexico, we analyze the strategies or actions they implemented as well as the challenges they envision in their future. The exploratory study was qualitative, we used the life stories, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a group of graduate students from Latin America and the Caribbean. The most important tensions the students presented was the impossibility of living a face-to-face internationalization. Among the strategies they implemented, there is the conditioning of spaces to work, the self-organization of family life, the creation of networks, and the practices of self-care of health. The greatest concern of all of them is their academic and work future, both challenges, with or without a pandemic, are latent. Due to the pandemic times, the virtuality was identified as a possibility and strategy that international graduate students can take advantage of to generate new opportunities both academically and professionally, wherever they are.*

Keywords: Pandemic, postgraduate students, international academic mobility, Mexico

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### **Resumen**

*El objetivo del estudio fue conocer las tensiones que enfrenta el estudiantado de posgrado internacional en contexto de pandemia en México, analizando las estrategias o acciones que pusieron en marcha, así como algunos desafíos. Se realizó un estudio exploratorio de corte cualitativo. Se usaron los relatos de vida y se realizaron entrevistas semi estructuradas a un grupo de estudiantes de posgrado provenientes de América Latina y el Caribe. Se destaca como tensión, la imposibilidad de vivir una internacionalización presencial. Entre las estrategias que implementaron, se encuentra el acondicionamiento de espacios para trabajar, la autoorganización de la vida familiar, la creación de redes y las prácticas de autocuidado de la salud. Se identificó que la mayor preocupación de todos es su futuro académico y laboral, ambos desafíos, con o sin pandemia, están latentes. Debido a la pandemia, se advierte a la virtualidad como una*

*posibilidad que los/as estudiantes internacionales pueden aprovechar para generar nuevas oportunidades tanto en lo académico como en lo profesional, en donde quiera que se encuentren.*

Palabras claves: Pandemia, estudiantes, posgrado, movilidad académica internacional, México

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## Introducción

La pandemia por el SARS-CoV-2 nos ha afectado a todos/as en los diferentes contextos, interacciones y espacios. En el ámbito educativo, esas experiencias están atravesadas no solo por el confinamiento social, sino también por una manera diferente de enfrentar el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje: la migración digital de la escuela, también conocida como Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia (ERE), la cual fue una respuesta urgente a la situación, caracterizada por ser intempestiva, sin planificación didáctica y uso intensivo de la tecnología (Area-Moreira, 2021). En América Latina y el Caribe, ese cierre afectó “a unos 23,4 millones de estudiantes de educación superior y a 1,4 millones de docentes [...]”; esto representa, aproximadamente, más del 98% de la población de estudiantes y profesores de educación superior de la región” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 12). En México se suspendieron las clases de manera presencial en las instituciones del Sistema Educativo Nacional, dependientes de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, desde marzo del 2020, y tal y como lo enunció la UNESCO, “de la noche a la mañana”, se pasó de una modalidad presencial de la docencia a la virtual, para lo cual la mayoría de las IES y su personal no estaban capacitados, no tenían la experiencia o el conocimiento para llevar a cabo esta transición, situación compartida con instituciones de América Latina (Pedró y Torres, 2022; Salto, 2020).

Lo anterior implicó un cambio drástico en la replanificación de contenidos con base en una modalidad presencial para adaptarlos a un ambiente digital, en ese sentido, el estudiantado se tuvo que adecuar a una nueva forma de aprendizaje, en la que quizá no había socializado antes (Barrón, 2020; Hernández y Valencia, 2021), con ello vivenció una serie de tensiones no solo relacionadas con la conectividad y el uso de las tecnologías, sino también en cuestiones que tienen que ver con su salud física y mental, que se agravó aún más en el caso del estudiantado de posgrado en movilidad académica internacional en el país, que de pronto, con la pandemia, se vio varado e inmóvil entre cuatro paredes, desde un espacio en el que, se suponía, le brindaría una experiencia académica y cultural internacional.

Las tensiones se entienden como puntos de crisis que no evitan ni frenan a los sujetos para la acción, sino que las pueden promover (Dubar, 2005), así como las estrategias de afrontamiento que se implementan en dicho contexto y se definen como “esfuerzos cognitivos y conductuales constantemente cambiantes que se desarrollan para manejar las demandas específicas externas y/o internas que son evaluadas como excedentes o desbordantes de los recursos del individuo” (Lazarus y Faulkman, 1984, p. 141). Es desde esos puntos de tensión en donde también se puede incluir la percepción de las personas sobre posibles desafíos en su futuro que les puede implicar preocupaciones ante situaciones de difícil resolución (Raimundi et al., 2014).

## Método

El objetivo del estudio fue conocer las tensiones que enfrenta el estudiantado de posgrado internacional, analizando las maneras en que las gestionan, asimismo se mencionan algunos desafíos que perciben. Las preguntas que se intentaron responder fueron ¿Cómo están viviendo las y los estudiantes de posgrado en movilidad académica internacional la pandemia y el confinamiento social? ¿De qué manera lo enfrentan? ¿Cuáles son los desafíos? ¿Qué estrategias desarrollan?

El estudio exploratorio fue de corte cualitativo descriptivo, se usaron los relatos de vida (Bertaux, 2005), entrevistando a un total de 16 estudiantes, la mayoría mujeres (10) y 6 hombres (agradecemos a Ixba Martínez Luna, su valioso trabajo en la transcripción). Los criterios que se tomaron en cuenta para su participación en el estudio fueron principalmente tres: estudiantes nacidos/as en algún país de América Latina y el Caribe. Decidimos centrarnos en dicho grupo para visibilizar la movilidad estudiantil internacional Sur-Sur, realizando sus estudios completos de posgrado (maestría o doctorado) en IES mexicanas y becarios/as del Consejo Nacional de Ciencias y Tecnología (CONACyT), lo

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**Tabla 1.***Las y los Participantes en el Estudio*

País de nacimiento	Sexo	Posgrado que estudia en México	Semestre cursando en el posgrado	IES
Cuba	Mujer	Doctorado en Modelación Computacional	8vo.	Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM)
Cuba	Mujer	Doctorado en Ciencias Sociales	4to.	Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM)
Cuba	Hombre	Maestría en Atención a la Diversidad	1er.	Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM)
Perú	Hombre	Doctorado en Estudios Críticos de Género	3er.	Universidad Iberoamericana
Argentina	Mujer	Doctorado en Antropología Social	3er. año	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)
República Dominicana	Hombre	Doctorado en Geografía	6to.	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)
Chile	Hombre	Doctorado en Antropología Social	3er. año	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)
Ecuador	Mujer	Doctorado en Antropología Social	3er. año	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)
Honduras	Hombre	Doctorado en Educación	8vo.	Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM)
Colombia	Mujer	Maestría en Relaciones Internacionales	En proceso de titulación	Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM)
Cuba	Mujer	Maestría en Atención a la Diversidad	En proceso de titulación	Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM)
Colombia	Mujer	Maestría en Antropología Social	3er.	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)
Argentina	Mujer	Doctorado en Pedagogía	En proceso de titulación	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)
Venezuela	Mujer	Doctorado en Ciencias Biomédicas	8vo.	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)
Colombia	Mujer	Doctorado en Ciencias Sociales	2do. año	Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO)
Venezuela	Hombre	Maestría en Antropología Social	1er. año	Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)

Fuente: elaboración propia, con base en el trabajo de campo.

que significa que son estudiantes de alto rendimiento académico y dedicados de tiempo completo a sus estudios. Nos centramos particularmente en posgrados de las Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades. La investigación se interesó en estudiantes de movilidad en el posgrado debido a que son escasos los estudios sobre ellos (Ramírez, 2018).

Tal y como se pudo apreciar en la Tabla 1, debido al contexto de pandemia en que nos encontramos, las 16 entrevistas se realizaron por medio de video llamadas desde plataformas digitales como Skype y Google Meet. Apoyándonos de nuestras redes académicas para la aplicación de la técnica de bola de nieve –las y los primeros estudiantes a quienes contactamos nos facilitaron el acceso a otros/as. El protocolo a seguir fue contactarles, en la mayoría de los casos, a través de un correo electrónico para solicitarles la entrevista, compartirles el objetivo de la investigación, así como el consentimiento informado para su posible participación.

Se realizaron entrevistas semi estructuradas (Vela, 2013) e invitamos a los/as estudiantes en movilidad académica internacional a que nos compartieran sus vivencias en torno a la pandemia y el confinamiento social. Trabajamos a partir de un análisis del discurso temático (Kvale, 2011), el cual nos permitió identificar ejes principales de análisis, así como categorías emergentes que brindamos en cada uno de los apartados que se presentan en los resultados. El artículo integra dos partes principales: en el primero se exploró la movilidad académica internacional de estudiantes durante la pandemia, y en el segundo se comparten los resultados del estudio.

### **La (In)movilidad Internacional de Estudiantes de Posgrado en Tiempos de Pandemia**

Cada vez es más común usar el término “internacionalización” en las IES, tanto a nivel licenciatura como en posgrado. Aunque es necesario aclarar que dicho concepto posee varios significados, lo que dependerá de la región y de cada IES, ya que algunos lo relacionan con la movilidad estudiantil, otros con el currículum o la enseñanza de idiomas (de Wit, 2015; Rodríguez y Ruíz, 2015; Schugurensky, 2012). En este caso, se retomará la definición clásica de Knight (2001), que define la internacionalización como “el proceso de integrar la dimensión internacional/intercultural en la enseñanza, la investigación y el servicio de la institución” (p. 22), siendo la movilidad académica internacional, la actividad que más ha impulsado dicho proceso.

La movilidad académica internacional se entiende como “el desplazamiento de investigadores, docentes y alumnos entre instituciones educativas nacionales y extranjeras con el objetivo de participar en programas formativos y proyectos de investigación particulares” (García, 2013, p. 62). Para el objetivo de este estudio, a la movilidad académica internacional la entendemos como un proceso en el que los/as estudiantes tienen la posibilidad de ampliar sus conocimientos y obtener una formación académica a través del desarrollo de un posgrado en un país distinto al de origen, así como para realizar estancias de investigación en proyectos específicos, como la realización de una tesis, ya sea de maestría y/o de doctorado. La movilidad académica internacional por razones de estudio de posgrado tiene distintas motivaciones (Castillo et al., 2017; Izquierdo y Cárdenas, 2019), por un lado, están las oportunidades que brinda el país de destino a los/as estudiantes extranjeros/as y, por otro, se encuentra la institución formadora, la cual, además de ser un espacio físico, es también un lugar de encuentro y socialización, que posibilita la diversidad cultural y construcción de vínculos internacionales que les beneficiará en su futuro profesional (Teichler, 2015).

En América Latina y el Caribe, el número de estudiantes que salen de sus países de origen para estudiar en diferentes partes del mundo aumentó de 258 mil en 2012 a 312 mil en 2017 (UNESCO, 2019), y van principalmente a América del Norte y Europa, pero también existe un impulso de la internacionalización de la Educación Superior y un aumento en la movilidad académica en el Sur Global tendientes a “mejorar la regionalización y la cooperación Sur-Sur” (Fairlie et al., 2021, p. 92).

En ese sentido, hay varios países en América Latina y el Caribe que reciben estudiantes para realizar estudios de licenciatura y posgrado. Por ejemplo, Brasil cuenta en sus espacios universitarios con el 51.5% de estudiantes que provienen de países como Portugal, Estados Unidos, España y en menor porcentaje proceden de la región (UNESCO, 2019). Otro país es Argentina, cuyo estudiantado extranjero proviene de Bolivia, Paraguay, Brasil, Chile y Ecuador (Pedone, 2018). En el caso de México, los datos de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación la Ciencia y la Cultura arrojaron que en el 2017 se recibieron a 25,125 estudiantes extranjeros. Se identificó (García, 2013; Rodríguez, 2005) que la mayoría del estudiantado internacional que llega al país proviene de América Latina y del Caribe, principalmente de Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador y Chile.

Antes de la pandemia, la movilidad académica internacional era considerada el prototipo ideal para generar un intercambio y circulación de conocimientos, y resultaba ser una riqueza tanto para los investigadores/as y estudiantes de posgrado, así como para el país de destino y de origen (Bermúdez, 2015). Sin embargo, con la llegada de la pandemia todo eso cambió, pasamos de una modalidad presencial a la instauración de una modalidad educativa no presencial emergente. La pandemia estimuló también un cambio dramático en el entorno externo del que también dependen los recursos de las IES (Whatley y Castiello, 2022).

Algunos de los desafíos a los que se enfrenta la Educación Superior con ese cambio es el déficit en los aprendizajes, la reducción de la inequidad por la brecha tecnológica, el mantenimiento de los/as estudiantes motivados/as e involucrados/as, la evaluación el aprendizaje y la reducción en el financiamiento que vendrá con esta crisis pandémica (Marmolejo, 2020). Además de afectar a la movilidad académica internacional, la pandemia trajo retos particularmente en cinco aspectos:



- 1.- Restricciones en la concesión de visados a favor de aquellos nacionales provenientes de países que acusen altas tasas de prevalencia de la enfermedad;
- 2.- secuelas psicoemocionales que aminoran el atractivo de continuar la movilidad internacional interrumpida o de emprender una nueva experiencia de similar naturaleza;
- 3.- astringencia financiera global que mermará fondos públicos y privados a favor de la movilidad internacional;
- 4.- incremento del 54% en el costo de boletos aéreos por la implementación del distanciamiento social en el transporte aéreo de pasajeros; e
- 5.- incremento de la oferta de la educación virtual transfronteriza (Quintero, 2020).

En el caso mexicano, aunque las autoridades de las IES brindaron una serie de acciones, planes y herramientas para enfrentar la contingencia por la pandemia (ANUIES, 2020), la mayoría de ellas estuvo centrada en las campañas de prevención e información sobre el Covid-19. Otras brindaron protocolos de continuidad virtual del aprendizaje, estrategias digitales, herramientas, recursos educativos y las Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación (TIC) para la comunidad universitaria; sin duda todo eso fue importante, aunque hay estudios (Contreras et al., 2020; Dussel, 2020) que estiman que las IES mexicanas no estaban preparadas con la infraestructura para una contingencia de ese tipo, por lo que se implementó una Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia o ERE (Area-Moreira, 2021), que conllevó acciones emergentes tardías, desorganizadas y poco eficientes. Todo lo anterior lo enfrentaron las y los estudiantes, en particular los/as estudiantes internacionales que se encontraban realizando un posgrado en el país. El futuro de la internacionalización en México en contextos pandémicos, en voz de una de las especialistas en la materia, “se presenta adverso, y sus condiciones de desarrollo, hartamente complejas” (Gacel, 2020, p. 40).

Esa adversidad se hizo presente y ocurrió, tal y como lo advirtió Ruíz (2020), de manera repentina, y confrontó al estudiantado internacional de posgrado a una nueva experiencia y a un cambio drástico en todas las esferas de su vida, en particular en la dimensión educativa internacional. En ese sentido, el estudiantado se tuvo que adaptar a una nueva modalidad educativa dictada por la ERE (Area-Moreira, 2021), muchas veces sin contar con las herramientas, las condiciones y el equipo de cómputo adecuado para ello y con la expectativa truncada de experimentar una internacionalización en sus estudios de posgrado.

Las tensiones que se identificaron en los y las estudiantes en general fueron diversas y en torno al uso del tiempo, a la distribución de los espacios físicos para su trabajo, a las tecnologías, al acceso al Internet, al equipo de cómputo y a las afectaciones a su salud tanto física como mental (Gutiérrez et al., 2021). Y otras que corresponden particularmente a las características de las y los estudiantes que estudian en un país distinto al de origen, “sobre todo la movilidad física de estudiantes, profesores e investigadores, será una de las actividades universitarias más afectadas debido a la pandemia” (Gacel, 2020, p. 38). En ese sentido, se identificó que el estudiantado tuvo que “cancelar, suspender o reprogramar las estancias que tenían en otros países, especialmente en México” (Gómez, 2020, p. 7). Asimismo, se refiere que:

La súbita necesidad de suspender las actividades académicas presenciales resultó en detrimento del carácter inmersivo de la experiencia de movilidad de los estudiantes que se encontraban en estancia, y que en algunos casos tuvieron que volver a sus lugares de origen, exponiéndose en el proceso al contagio. En otros casos, optaron por aislarse en una casa distinta a la de su lugar de origen. (Ramírez y Ramírez, 2021, p. 232)

También se observaron obstáculos que tuvieron que ver con el escaso financiamiento público, la falta de claridad en los procesos administrativos y con las embajadas, quedando varados/as en el país, esperando a que reinicien las actividades presenciales o bien imposibilitados/as para regresar a sus países de origen, debido al cierre de aeropuertos y fronteras (Gómez, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). La inmovilidad de las y los estudiantes internacionales en México también se afectó cuando las embajadas emitieron restricciones de viajes, debido a la crisis de las aerolíneas y alertas sobre la pandemia y con ello, el cierre de algunas fronteras. Esa acción emergente limitó la movilidad de las y los estudiantes para evitar contagios, obligando a permanecer en el país en que se encontraban (Alcántara, 2020; Gómez, 2020).

## Resultados

### “La Incertidumbre de no Saber qué te Depara el Futuro” Inmediato

Las tensiones que se reconocieron en los relatos de los/as participantes en el estudio fueron varias, entre ellas destacamos las formativas relacionadas con su posgrado por haber estado durante la ERE (Area-Moreira, 2021), la atención administrativa en sus instituciones y la cuestión económica, particularmente con las becas de CONACyT. Por su parte, las tensiones personales estuvieron enfocadas a su salud mental, de su familia y las diferentes consecuencias por el confinamiento social que provocó la pandemia.

Respecto a las formativas relacionadas con su posgrado, dijeron que al principio de la pandemia fue caótico, lo que fue propio de la ERE, porque sintieron incertidumbre sobre si habría clases o no, además no sabían cómo se les evaluaría y, en algunos casos, identificaron mayores exigencias desde sus clases virtuales en comparación con las presenciales. En general se advirtió la preferencia del estudiantado para debatir y analizar los textos de los seminarios en persona, ya que extrañaban el contacto humano. Sobre los eventos académicos presenciales que tuvieron que posponer o modificar, mencionaron la cancelación de coloquios, estancias de investigación internacionales y congresos nacionales e internacionales. En cuanto a las modificaciones, éstas las vivieron particularmente en las asesorías con sus tutores/as o directores/as de tesis, ya que todos las realizaron por llamada, videollamada o por correo electrónico. Otro aspecto que mencionaron fue sobre el proyecto de investigación de tesis, el cual lo ajustaron de acuerdo con las circunstancias. También sufrieron la falta de acceso personal a la biblioteca y, por lo tanto, muchos/as hicieron uso de textos que buscaron en Internet o en las bibliotecas virtuales, pero en ocasiones no encontraron los libros que les interesaban, además de que expresaron que disfrutaban más leer los textos impresos y socializar en los espacios de sus instituciones:

En mi casa tengo un escritorio, mi mesa y todo. Pero sí que extraño el hecho de toda la preparación que hacía antes. Porque, siempre estaba desde la mañana hasta en la tarde en la universidad, en la biblioteca y tenía ese rol de estudiante, y venía a mi casa y ya era como la desconexión con la universidad. Y ahora, pues, mi casa es, por decirlo así, mi cubículo para trabajar (Hombre, Honduras).

El estudiantado que cursa el doctorado tiene situaciones particulares que enfrenta en el desarrollo y culminación de sus estudios, dependiendo de las áreas de conocimiento en la que se ubiquen sus posgrados. Varios/as de ellos/as dijeron que no sabían si publicarían a tiempo sus artículos para titularse; una estudiante, quien realiza el Doctorado en Ciencias Biomédicas, no había podido concluir sus experimentos en el laboratorio y, otro más, mencionó que desconocía como llevaría a cabo el examen de candidatura del doctorado:

Por ejemplo, todavía tenemos un artículo que ya debería de estar enviado hace dos o tres meses a revistas y no ha podido salir, precisamente porque no hemos podido conseguir, ir resolviendo esos asuntos, entonces, son parte de los trabajos que se van atrasando. También está la cuestión de que debemos hacer la candidatura, pues ya el tiempo se está pasando y todos estos son problemas que va generando la pandemia (Hombre, República Dominicana).

Estamos restringidos para el uso del laboratorio, en mi caso particular, pues yo me tengo que retrasar para finalizar el doctorado, precisamente porque en medio de la contingencia no podemos, apenas estamos retornando a los laboratorios y no a diario, sino con horarios restringidos, ¿no? Y con menos frecuencia que antes. Entonces, obviamente, estoy también sin financiamiento de Conacyt, porque, pues, este es el último semestre que me financia la beca, ha sido un poco difícil a nivel económico, pues solventarlo (Mujer, Venezuela).

Ese estrés les afectó en su rendimiento académico porque al trabajar en sus casas, compartieron que se distraían fácilmente y no se concentraban. Para este cambio repentino de la educación virtual, manifestaron que no estaban preparados, fue una tensión (Dubar, 2005) entendida como punto de crisis, pero que no evitó su actuar dado que tuvieron que aprender a utilizar plataformas que poco o nunca habían utilizado, pero en ese momento era la única vía de comunicación para continuar con su vida académica; aunque, por otro lado, también las redes sociales se volvieron una distracción. Además, esta nueva forma de trabajo les resultó muy agotadora porque no contaban con un espacio y el mobiliario adecuado para trabajar virtualmente. Respecto a la atención como estudiantes internacionales por parte de sus

instituciones, siete lamentaron no contar con una comunicación adecuada con ellos/as, lo cual fue corroborado en el estudio de Bustos-Aguirre y Cano (2021), como una debilidad en las IES mexicanas, la falta de preparación del personal universitario. Lo anterior fue puesto en evidencia también en otros estudios a nivel internacional, por ejemplo, en el caso de estudiantes de doctorado provenientes de China en los Estados Unidos.

En la investigación que presentamos, una estudiante dijo que fue tanta la indiferencia, que tuvo que enviar un correo a las más altas autoridades de su institución para que la atendieran y resolvieran cuestiones administrativas no resueltas. La frustración fue mayor porque refirieron que son pocos/as estudiantes extranjeros/as en sus posgrados y, aun así, no los/as orientaban en los diferentes trámites que necesitaban realizar, “pienso que gestionar un doctorado con estudiantes extranjeros, implica que, tú como coordinador del posgrado tienes que saber, cómo están tus estudiantes extranjeros y qué recursos poner a disposición para su bienestar, pero no es así”. Los trámites migratorios suelen ser complicados, tardados y confusos, además, con la pandemia, se volvió más difícil postularse a una beca, regular su situación migratoria en México, y contactarse con sus embajadas y consulados en el país:

El principal problema de la comunicación que estamos identificando la mayoría de los becarios extranjeros, lo hemos conversado en grupos que tenemos, ha sido por la parte de la atención a los becarios extranjeros de la universidad, que ha sido inexistente. Por otro lado, tampoco hemos tenido comunicación desde las embajadas y los consulados de nuestros países en México. Entonces, creo que es la parte por donde nos hemos sentido más solos; hablé por mí y por otros becarios con los que lo hemos hablado, nos sentimos abandonados (Mujer, Cuba).

En la cuestión económica relacionada con la beca de CONACYT, ocho estudiantes expresaron que vivían con la incertidumbre debido al retraso que tuvieron en la elaboración y avance de sus tesis, lo que les podría afectar en su evaluación y rendimiento académico, por ello solicitaron una extensión de la beca debido a que, por ser extranjeros, no contaban con otro sustento económico en México, lo cual les fue negado:

Es una situación contingente, pero no sabemos hasta cuándo se va a extender, se suma, sobre todo, la incertidumbre de no saber qué te depara el futuro. Creo que ha sido lo más estresante, la incertidumbre. Esperar todos los meses a ver si efectivamente va a caer o no va a caer la beca, sobre todo pensando que somos estudiantes extranjeros, que no tenemos otro sistema de apoyo en México que no sea la beca (Mujer, Cuba).

En ese sentido, es evidente que las IES mexicanas carecían de recursos financieros para apoyarlos en un determinado momento (Bustos-Aguirre y Cano, 2021). Conocer de qué manera respondieron las IES al entorno adverso que enfrentaron los estudiantes internacionales es muy importante porque las propias instituciones “podrían funcionar como amortiguador para reducir la influencia sociopolítica negativa” (Tang y Flint, 2022, p. 35). Con respecto a la salud, la mayoría de los/as participantes en el estudio presentaron algún problema en su salud mental, ya que vivieron momentos de ansiedad, estrés y depresión, lo que les afectó al momento de dormir y también en su rendimiento académico. Debido al confinamiento social, que fue tan radical y repentino, se identificaron repercusiones en su entorno familiar: siete compartieron que fue estresante coordinarse en sus horarios con sus parejas, además cuatro de ellos/as tenían hijos/as, así que el reto fue organizarse para realizar las labores domésticas, atender a sus hijos/as y dedicar tiempo para el posgrado:

Mi hijo tiene dos años y medio. El año pasado empezó el maternal y estos meses de pandemia, obviamente estuvo aquí en casa, está aquí en casa, y también tuve que hacer actividades con él, que mandaban de la escuela. Entonces, de esas actividades me ocupaba yo. También eso le quitó, bueno, no sé si le quitó tiempo o yo decidí ocuparme de esas cosas, de mi hijo, y resignar un poco el trabajo de la tesis (Mujer, Argentina).

El estudiantado externó que les preocupaba contagiarse con virus SARS-CoV-2, tanto ellos/as o sus familiares, principalmente esto último, debido a que se encontraban lejos de sus países de origen. A uno de ellos le tensionaba contraer la enfermedad porque tenía asma. Tres dijeron que no estaban realizando ejercicio, lo cual repercutía en su salud, por ejemplo, subir de peso, estresarse y en su estado de ánimo.

### **“Establezco Prioridades por Día”**

Las estrategias durante la pandemia por parte de los estudiantes que se encontraron tuvieron que ver con los esfuerzos que las y los estudiantes pusieron en marcha para manejar y resolver demandas internas y externas desbordantes

o tensionantes (Lazarus y Faulkman, 1984) pero también se identificaron acciones que los/as coordinadores/as de los posgrados, así como el profesorado y tutores/as realizaron para solventar y apoyar al estudiantado.

Como mencionamos, la mayoría de los/as estudiantes se adaptaron a esa nueva dinámica de trabajo virtual, aun con algunas problemáticas, pero aprendieron a utilizar plataformas como Zoom, Skype, Script, Google Meet o hacían llamadas y videollamadas por WhatsApp; también utilizaron aún más el correo electrónico, tanto para sus clases como para las asesorías, lo que se volvió una oportunidad porque lograron mayor familiaridad y dominio de las TIC (Bustos-Aguirre y Cano, 2021; Ramírez y Ramírez, 2021). Sin embargo, una estudiante comentó que trabajaba así desde antes de la pandemia:

Nosotros ya veníamos acostumbrados a un ritmo de trabajo virtual, pero en la tesis, con reuniones virtuales, porque una de mis asesoras está en Monterrey y otra está entre Ciudad de México y Canadá. Entonces, la virtualidad ha sido algo que siempre hemos tenido en nuestros encuentros de asesoría de tesis y, la verdad, la comunicación ha sido bastante buena (Mujer, Ecuador).

Con respecto a las clases, dos estudiantes mencionaron que, en alguno de sus seminarios, les pidieron crear un grupo de Facebook, donde discutían las lecturas, lo que les pareció un beneficio porque contaban con más opiniones y preguntas para participar en los seminarios. En ese acompañamiento virtual, una participante comentó que, junto con otras estudiantes, crearon un círculo de lectura que llamaron “Lecturas amorosas de tesis”, con la finalidad de acompañarse, emocionalmente y académicamente en el desarrollo de sus investigaciones.

En cuanto a la capacitación de los/as docentes, una entrevistada reconoció que su asesora es una persona mayor y le costó adaptarse a las TIC, sin embargo, para el resto, los/as asesores/as se adaptaron a la situación y se mostraron comprensivos/as con sus estudiantes, ya que mantuvieron una comunicación constante, aunque no fue igual como la presencial, por ello el trabajo se volvió más autónomo y flexible. En algunos casos también fue un proceso formativo de mayor seguimiento:

Tengo una buena relación con mis dos directores. Son codirectores, los dos, uno en Colombia y el otro que está en México. Y con los dos ha sido una relación un poco más cercana. Un poco más de llamadas por WhatsApp. No solamente para ver cómo va la tesis, sino para ver cómo estoy yo también. Ellos han sido un poco más comprensivos, porque, además, ya saben que tengo la vigilancia y el seguimiento del seminario (Mujer, Colombia).

Debido a esta situación de la pandemia, los estudiantes reestructuraron sus tesis de maestría y de doctorado, por ejemplo, cuatro de ellos iban a realizar estancias de investigación en diferentes países, además de México consideraban a Bolivia, España o Chile, pero no fue posible desarrollar el trabajo de campo presencial, sino que se volvió virtual, por ello tuvieron que cambiar la metodología y población a estudiar; en ese sentido, refirieron que durante la pandemia su investigación se volvió más teórica que de intervención. Mientras, hubo el caso de una estudiante que no le afectó en su trabajo académico:

Para mí no es tan complicado porque al final, mi próxima etapa en el proceso de investigación es justamente una etnografía virtual, es decir, es estar sentada detrás del ordenador, haciendo mi proceso etnográfico de esa manera. Entonces, no hay un gran cambio en lo que tiene que ver con la investigación, ni con la metodología (Mujer, Cuba).

Anteriormente se observó que un grupo de estudiantes lamentó no haber tenido una buena comunicación con las autoridades en sus instituciones. En cambio, para algunos/as, la comunicación se dio por varias vías, como correo electrónico, chats, grupos de WhatsApp o videollamadas, es decir que ciertos/as administrativos/as sí estuvieron atentos/as para apoyarles en lo que necesitaron, ya fuera para saber su estado de salud o por trámites pendientes, como el de migración y el proceso de titulación:

La secretaria de mi posgrado, en este caso hay dos, constantemente están por WhatsApp, ya las tengo en WhatsApp. Ellas se comunican constantemente conmigo por WhatsApp. De hecho, a mí me tocaba renovar mi permiso migratorio, por ejemplo, ahí, *ahorita* en julio, que son vacaciones. Y ellas, antes de terminar el semestre,

o sea, te meten por WhatsApp y todo, y estuvieron en comunicación conmigo. Yo fui a sus casas por unos documentos que necesitaba, estuvieron muy atentos a mi persona. Mi asesora de tesis también me ha facilitado *muchísimo*, el hecho de que se abrieran las herramientas digitales fue muy útil, para trabajar con ella por videollamada (Hombre, Honduras).

También se identificó a una estudiante que dijo estar muy aislada, no tuvo ningún tipo de comunicación con la coordinación de su posgrado, pero su asesora estuvo al tanto de ella, en todo momento. En el caso de otra participante en el estudio, el abogado de su universidad se comunicó con la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores para saber las condiciones especiales que tenían hacia los/as estudiantes extranjeros/as que se encontraban en México. Y otra estudiante que se encontraba en España haciendo una estancia de investigación al momento del inicio de la pandemia, contó con el apoyo de un grupo de profesoras que la apoyaron para sostenerse allá, así como ampliar su estancia de investigación, ya que no le fue posible regresar a México por el cierre de las fronteras.

Para solucionar el problema del financiamiento, solo una estudiante expresó que la coordinadora de su posgrado les ofreció un préstamo mientras les llegaba la beca CONACYT, “En la universidad, nos prestaron dinero. Antes de que llegara la beca, la coordinadora nos ofreció pues, “pro pago” en la universidad”. El resto del estudiantado no mencionó cómo solucionaron esa situación, pero se apreció una constante comunicación virtual entre algunos/as de sus profesores/as para apoyarles.

Dado que la mayoría del estudiantado presentó algún problema relacionado con su salud mental, buscaron diversas estrategias para superarlo. Por ejemplo, algunos/as desarrollaron una rutina diaria donde contemplaron el trabajo académico, labores del hogar, comidas y ejercicios, “trazo horario y trato de respetarlo, por ejemplo, digo “este es mi tiempo para hacer esto o para hacer lo otro”, establezco prioridades por día”. De hecho, cuatro de ellos/as fueron a terapia para intentar superar las tensiones por la pandemia y otros/as mencionaron que realizaban ejercicio o salían a caminar para desestresarse. En algunos casos encontramos soluciones más prácticas, una entrevistada dijo que tenía una terraza y le ayudaba a relajarse porque veía las plantas y los árboles desde ese espacio. Otra, decidió dibujar o leer novelas. Dos estudiantes dijeron que dejaban el celular en silencio y solo lo atendían por algunos momentos. Aunque también hubo quienes necesitaron apoyarse con medicamentos, por ejemplo, una tuvo que tomar calmantes para la ansiedad, ya que le estaba afectando su vida diaria y otro hizo uso de la herbolaria para relajarse.

Respecto a la convivencia familiar, los/as cuatro que viven con su pareja e hijos/as, para mantener el equilibrio personal y familiar, tuvieron que determinar horarios y respetarlos, así, al priorizar actividades, podían cubrir tanto las familiares como las académicas. Además, poco a poco adecuaron espacios porque debían compartirlos entre todos/as.

### **“Mi experiencia de Vivir en México, Está a Medias”**

Las y los estudiantes perciben algunas situaciones de difícil resolución en su futuro, particularmente en el ámbito académico y en lo laboral. El estudiantado expresó que la pandemia les permitió conocer y adaptarse a una nueva forma de trabajo académico desde la virtualidad, para realizar sus trabajos de campo, examen de candidatura, presentación de avances de tesis, congresos, seminarios o talleres. De hecho, uno dijo que la pandemia le permitió observar las potencialidades para mantener sus vínculos tanto en México como en su país de origen, continuar colaborando y fortaleciendo sus redes:

A mí me gustaría estar, mitad y mitad. Mitad en Perú y mitad en México. Un semestre en Perú y un semestre México, eso sería para mí lo ideal. Porque aquí también estoy generando vínculos, redes, que no quiero perder cuando regrese a mi país. Y en mi país tengo ya toda una vida hecha, también tengo redes y vínculos. Creo que el tema de lo virtual es algo importante, en la medida que voy a mantener esos vínculos. Ahora ya sabemos que sí podemos dar clases virtualmente, que podemos estar en congresos virtuales, podemos tener seminarios virtuales, talleres, incluso, virtuales. (Hombre, Perú).

Mientras, otro mencionó cierta frustración, porque, aunque se iba a titular de la maestría en Antropología, sentía que su formación académica no estaba completa por no haber hecho su trabajo de campo presencial, lo cual es fundamental en su formación:

Uno de los desafíos es, cómo lograr titularme o graduarme de una maestría en Antropología, sin haber hecho un trabajo de campo de forma presencial, tradicional, como lo hacen los antropólogos. Entonces creo que eso es una carencia, una debilidad que voy a tener en mi formación como antropólogo (Hombre, Venezuela).

El tema más comentado y de mayor preocupación por los/as estudiantes de doctorado fue la incertidumbre sobre la cuestión laboral en su futuro; esa fue una de las percepciones más importantes que presentaron como un desafío en su futuro (Raimundi et al., 2014). Una de las maneras en que piensan accionar en el corto plazo, es a través de un posdoctorado:

Siento que la sociedad mexicana ha sido muy solidaria conmigo y que yo tengo que retribuir de forma, muy humilde, algo de esa solidaridad. Me gustaría también ver la posibilidad de hacer un posdoctorado en México, a ver si sale esa posibilidad, quiero probar, probar a ver qué sale (Hombre, Chile).

Antes de la pandemia, quería moverme a Guadalajara. Quería moverme a otra ciudad y trabajar dando clases en la universidad. Ahora, el plan es distinto, ahora es donde me quieran llamar y me den trabajo, ahí iré. Me gustaría estar en México un año más, en lo que se regula esto y, después, me gustaría salir al extranjero para hacer un posdoctorado (Hombre, Honduras).

A mí me gustaría quedarme un tiempo más acá en México, teniendo un trabajo, no sé si de investigación o como docente quizás. Nunca trabajé en alguna institución del Estado en ningún país de los que estuve, sería una experiencia que me gustaría tener. Y si no, pienso en Ecuador o en Argentina, donde salga algún trabajo, como que no tengo una limitación geográfica (Mujer, Argentina).

Creo que estaré desempleada, como la gran mayoría de las personas que salen de un doctorado. Creo que estaré moviéndome, buscando un posdoctorado o algo así, para seguir viviendo de alguna beca o buscando trabajo directamente. Creo que, si me sale un buen trabajo en alguna parte, tendré que tomar esa decisión (Mujer, Colombia).

Otros/as estudiantes piensan regresar a sus países de origen, o bien, consideran migrar a algún país de América Latina. En cambio, un grupo de estudiantes de maestría externaron que les gustaría permanecer en el país para continuar con su formación académica con un doctorado:

Una de las cosas que creo que me ha pasado con la pandemia, es que siento que mi experiencia de vivir en México, está a medias, entonces sí estoy pensando mucho en el doctorado, en quedarme más tiempo. Antes no era una posibilidad tan viable para mí. Antes decía “me voy, vivo dos años *deli* y regreso y ya busco acá y sigo mi vida”. Pero como el sentir eso, así como en deuda, me hace pensar en esa posibilidad de hacer un doctorado y no nada más quedarme con la maestría (Mujer, Colombia).

La mayoría, tanto estudiantes de maestría como de doctorado, se preguntaban continuamente cuándo podrían viajar a sus lugares de origen debido al cierre de fronteras. Una estudiante comentó que tenía un plan a mediano plazo y era vivir con sus pares extranjeros/as antes de terminar la maestría, con la finalidad de sentirse más acompañada en ese trayecto. Mientras que, para el resto, el futuro es incierto, particularmente en lo que respecta a la continuidad de percibir sus becas (para quienes continúan en el posgrado) y de su inserción laboral (especialmente para quienes están próximos/as a concluir el doctorado, no les queda claro si podrán continuar en México o regresarán a su país de origen, y en qué condiciones lo harían).

Identificamos que, en algunos casos, las decisiones en el ámbito académico (y en su futuro laboral) de las y los estudiantes depende también de las negociaciones y acuerdos que armonicen con sus familias y sus parejas, ya sea que se encuentren en sus países de origen o vivan con ellos/as en México. En todo caso, los caminos y las acciones que se ponderan en la vida presente y futura de los/as participantes en el estudio, están y estarán estrechamente relacionadas con sus vínculos afectivos.

## A Manera de Conclusión

Los estudios de movilidad académica internacional cobran especial relevancia con la llegada del SARS-CoV-2, no solo por las dinámicas y procesos que se generaron con el cierre de las universidades y la total transferencia de los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje de manera virtual o conocido como ERE, sino también por las afectaciones que los propios actores experimentaron en su vida académica, personal, familiar y de pareja.

Tratando de contribuir en ese sentido, presentamos un estudio exploratorio sobre las experiencias de estudiantes provenientes de América Latina y el Caribe que cursaban una maestría o doctorado en alguna IES mexicana, durante los tiempos pandémicos. En la investigación, nos centramos en indagar las tensiones que vivieron, así como las maneras en que respondieron para gestionarlas o resolverlas. Interesó también mostrar algunos de los desafíos que perciben en su futuro. En el primer punto, las tensiones que se identificaron fueron el cambio de vida, la imposibilidad de vivir una internacionalización presencial, las restricciones de viaje por el cierre de fronteras, la incertidumbre del financiamiento (becas), la confusión en sus trámites migratorios, quedarse varados en el país de destino o en un hogar, distinto al de su origen.

En el caso de las estrategias, de acuerdo a los resultados presentados, observamos que los/as estudiantes, dependiendo de su situación personal y académica, resolvieron o gestionaron las diferentes tensiones, de acuerdo a sus propias posibilidades, limitadas por el confinamiento social. Principalmente resaltó el hecho de adaptarse a una nueva forma de aprendizaje y de vida a través de las TIC. El estudiantado implementó una serie de acciones que les permitió transitar de un estado de estrés y angustia por las experiencias traumáticas que les generó la pandemia, a otro en donde se posicionaron de manera proactiva para alcanzar sus metas, entre ellas destacamos el acondicionamiento de espacios para trabajar, la autoorganización de su vida y el contacto de manera virtual con su familia que se encuentra en su país de origen, así como la creación de pequeñas redes con sus pares tanto en México como en otros países a través de iniciativas creativas que les permitieron avanzar en la escritura de sus tesis y dar continuidad a sus clases y seminarios. También se visibilizaron algunas prácticas de autocuidado de la salud, lo que demuestra el carácter resiliente de los/as jóvenes investigadores/as en formación.

El mayor desafío en su futuro tiene que ver con el ámbito laboral y la oportunidad de quedarse en México, volver a migrar o retornar a su país de origen. En ese sentido, una posibilidad que se advierte, precisamente debido a la pandemia y a sus experiencias en torno a ella, es la coyuntura que se apertura con la virtualidad, la cual podrían aprovechar para generar nuevas oportunidades y redes en donde quiera que se encuentren. Desde luego, a ese esfuerzo individual del estudiantado, ayudaría que las autoridades encargadas de la movilidad académica internacional de las diferentes IES mexicanas mejoren los canales de comunicación y gestionen de manera eficiente la atención y resolución de situaciones que enfrenta el estudiantado internacional, especialmente debido a los tiempos pandémicos.

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# Movilidad Estudiantil Después del Covid-19: La Percepción de las Personas a Cargo de la Internacionalización en Seis Instituciones de Educación Superior Mexicanas

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## Abstract

*As a disruptive social fact, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the main activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) to adapt, among them student mobility stands out as one of the most visible internationalization strategies. The changes that sought to respond to the confinement due to the pandemic raised scenarios that, with the return to face-to-face, it is possible to assess their long-term influence on HEIs. This article responds to the need to document the modifications that were made during the pandemic and that persist in the return to educational establishments in terms of student mobility, particularly about the function of virtual international educational experiences and the way in which they coexist with physical student mobility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials with key involvement in the management of student mobility (and internationalization) during the pandemic. The officials belong to six HEIs – three public and three private – that are characterized by having a considerable volume of student mobility. What was called “virtual mobility” and its relevance to describe the changes experienced are analyzed. In addition, the adaptation processes and the way in which HEIs integrate virtuality as another means of internationalization that complements, but does not replace, physical student mobility are discussed.*

Keywords: collaborative international online learning (COIL), internationalization of higher education, student mobility, virtual mobility, pandemic

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## Resumen

*Como hecho social disruptivo, la pandemia por Covid-19 obligó a adaptar las principales actividades de las instituciones de educación superior (IES), entre ellas se destaca la movilidad estudiantil como una de las estrategias más visibles de internacionalización. Los cambios que buscaron responder al encierro por la pandemia plantearon escenarios que, con el*

*retorno a lo presencial, es posible valorar en cuanto a su influencia a largo plazo en las IES. Este artículo responde a la necesidad de documentar las modificaciones que se hicieron durante la pandemia y que persisten en el retorno a los planteles educativos en materia de movilidad estudiantil, particularmente sobre la función de las experiencias educativas internacionales virtuales y de la forma en que coexisten con la movilidad estudiantil física. Se condujeron entrevistas semiestructuradas a funcionarios con una participación clave en la gestión de la movilidad estudiantil (y la internacionalización) durante la pandemia. Los funcionarios pertenecen a seis IES—tres públicas y tres privadas—que se caracterizan por tener un volumen considerable de movilidad estudiantil. Se analiza lo que se llamó “movilidad virtual” y su pertinencia para describir los cambios experimentados. Además, se discute sobre los procesos de adaptación y la forma en que las IES integran la virtualidad como un medio más de internacionalización que complementa, pero no sustituye, la movilidad estudiantil física.*

Palabras clave: aprendizaje colaborativo internacional en línea (COIL), internacionalización de la educación superior, movilidad estudiantil, movilidad virtual, pandemia

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## Introducción

La pandemia representó una serie de desafíos a las instituciones de educación superior (IES) para continuar con las actividades que comúnmente se desarrollaban de manera presencial. Evitar el contacto físico forzó la adaptación de las labores para avanzar con los programas educativos en un contexto de incertidumbre. Gracias a esto, se improvisaron modelos emergentes remotos según los recursos disponibles de cada IES. Estos modelos se caracterizaron por el traslado de las clases presenciales hacia espacios improvisados mediante aulas remotas, virtuales, a distancia o en línea (Ibáñez, 2020). De esta forma, la emergencia sanitaria limitó la experiencia escolar a interacciones tecnológicas (en su mayoría) que dependían del acceso a medios, conectividad y capacitación de los docentes para trabajar en entornos virtuales (Bustos-Aguirre y Moreno, 2021).

En el caso de México —como de otros países latinoamericanos— la pandemia por Covid-19 se instauró en un contexto de múltiples problemáticas estructurales. Aunque los recursos tecnológicos pueden ser una herramienta potencial, no se debe olvidar que un grupo extenso de estudiantes o de IES no cuenta con los medios suficientes para aprender mediante ambientes virtuales. Esto implica que el encierro por Covid-19 no se experimentó de la misma forma entre sujetos, IES o países.

Las actividades de internacionalización de la educación superior, como un elemento clave de las IES, también se vieron afectadas por el distanciamiento social y cierre de fronteras entre países por Covid-19. En un inicio, la pandemia produjo el retorno a los países de origen de las y los estudiantes, profesores y académicos que se encontraban en una estancia de movilidad y, posteriormente, se cerró casi por completo la posibilidad de viajar cuando la pandemia estaba en su punto más álgido. Sin embargo, muchas de las prácticas se reinventaron, se buscaron otros mecanismos para desempeñar las actividades desde el encierro y, aunque fue un proceso complejo y lleno de obstáculos, dejó una experiencia valiosa que modificó las prácticas escolares y muestra cierta influencia en el futuro de las IES.

Con la vuelta a la presencialidad es importante rescatar las lecciones y las modificaciones que deja el haber vivido un periodo de cambios abruptos dentro de las IES, aunque también surge la duda sobre aquellas prácticas que prevalecerán después de la pandemia por Covid-19. Sobre la internacionalización es importante preguntarse ¿cómo se alteran los flujos de movilidad en la vuelta a lo presencial?, ¿qué conceptos emergen para dar cuenta de las adaptaciones que se llevaron a cabo para sostener las relaciones internacionales entre IES? ¿cómo conjuntar las experiencias internacionales virtuales con la movilidad estudiantil? ¿qué aportes ofrecen las experiencias internacionales virtuales en el acceso a los beneficios de la internacionalización?

En este artículo se presenta un análisis desde la perspectiva de figuras institucionales que cumplen una función de liderazgo en el desarrollo de la movilidad estudiantil en seis universidades mexicanas.

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## Principales Conceptos

La internacionalización se sustenta bajo dos pilares que agrupan las distintas actividades que la componen: en casa y hacia el exterior (Beelen y Leask, 2011, de Wit y Altbach, 2021). Por una parte, en la internacionalización hacia el exterior se incluyen las prácticas que implican el cruce de fronteras y cuya representación más conocida es la movilidad estudiantil (de Wit y Altbach, 2021) en sus diferentes modalidades, aunque también involucra la participación de académicos o administrativos. Tradicionalmente, la movilidad estudiantil se entiende como el cruce de fronteras nacionales con un propósito educativo (Teichler et al., 2011). En el contexto mexicano, la movilidad estudiantil constituye la estrategia de internacionalización más visible (Didou, 2019) y aunque ha aumentado a través de los años, sigue teniendo una presencia restringida al compararla con el tamaño de la matrícula. En México, los registros sobre movilidad estudiantil saliente y temporal indican que, en el ciclo escolar 2018/2019, alrededor de un 1% de estudiantes de la matrícula general han logrado acceder a una experiencia de este tipo (Bustos-Aguirre et al., 2022), lo cual ha sido una proporción que se presenta desde el 2012/2013 (Maldonado et al., 2017).

Por otra parte, la “internacionalización en casa” engloba todas las actividades que suceden al interior de una institución educativa (Beelen y Jones, 2015; de Wit y Hunter, 2015) y/o que tampoco requieren cruzar fronteras entre países. En la práctica implica el desarrollo de habilidades y competencias interculturales cuyo origen se relaciona con considerar a quienes son excluidos de las actividades internacionales que requieren viajar hacia el exterior (Beelen y Leask, 2011). De acuerdo con de Wit et al. (2015), la internacionalización en casa surge en Europa, en los años 90, como una reacción a la focalización de la movilidad estudiantil física y a que apenas un 10% de estudiantes solían participar bajo esta modalidad en el programa Erasmus. Diversos autores coinciden en que este tipo de internacionalización es la categoría que concentra las actividades internacionales que incorporan la tecnología y que tuvieron un fuerte auge en la pandemia por Covid-19 (de Wit et al., 2015; King, 2022).

Lo virtual no es un asunto novedoso en las IES. Antes de la pandemia ya existían formas virtuales de internacionalización que se podían reconocer, por ejemplo, a través de los “cursos masivos abiertos y a distancia” (MOOC’s por sus siglas en inglés). No obstante, Bustos-Aguirre y Vega (2021) señalan que un número reducido de IES incorporaban las tecnologías de la información y de la comunicación como parte de sus procesos de internacionalización; ya que en América Latina la proporción de IES con cursos virtuales representaba menos del 20% (Gacel-Ávila y Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2018, citados en Ramírez y Bustos-Aguirre, 2021).

Desde antes de la pandemia, la movilidad virtual ha sido un término en evolución (Vriens et al., 2010), por lo que puede entenderse desde múltiples perspectivas en el contexto de la diversidad de IES y de las características propias de cada país. En general, la movilidad virtual se entiende como una forma educativa que se apoya de recursos tecnológicos y que posibilita la interacción —síncrona y asíncrona—, aunque no implica la transferencia de la movilidad física a un entorno virtual (Ruiz-Corbella et al., 2021). Aunque la movilidad física o virtual son modalidades diferentes, con objetivos específicos y enfocadas en la resolución de problemas distintos, ambas modalidades tienen el propósito común de formar en competencias interculturales o internacionales. Con ello, la movilidad virtual se asume como “[...] el diseño de una estancia, a nivel local, nacional o internacional, en la que el estudiante desarrolla un periodo de estudios o determinadas materias [...] gestionada a través de la metodología de la educación en línea y las tecnologías digitales” (Ruiz-Corbella et al., 2021, p. 16).

Con la llegada de la pandemia, el uso de la tecnología como principal herramienta para continuar con la internacionalización trajo un debate conceptual sobre lo que constituye o no la movilidad estudiantil. Principalmente, se discute qué representa la movilidad estudiantil y cómo integrarla con las experiencias internacionales virtuales en el retorno a lo presencial. No obstante, existen diversas voces que rechazan el concepto de movilidad virtual, ya que la idea de “movilidad” se asocia al desplazamiento físico que hacen los sujetos y que, en la práctica, suele ser mucho más enriquecedor que las experiencias virtuales (Liu et al., 2022; Martel, 2022). Al respecto, Buckner et al. (2022) mencionan que aun cuando la movilidad física fue restringida en parte o por completo, la internacionalización se siguió entendiendo desde la movilidad de los estudiantes. Esto sorprende por las múltiples formas que engloba la internacionalización en casa. También existen posturas que defienden la movilidad virtual como parte de la movilidad estudiantil, lo que se observa en el concepto que se presenta desde la UNESCO: “[...] forma de movilidad que utiliza las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación para facilitar los intercambios y la colaboración académicos, culturales y experimentales transfronterizos y/o interinstitucionales [...]” (Sabzalieva et al., 2022, p. 6).

Existen diversas formas de clasificar las actividades virtuales de intercambio académico en función de los intereses específicos de cada institución. Algunas consideraciones que distinguen las experiencias virtuales es si tienen como objetivo la obtención de créditos, si se realizan para obtener un grado académico, si son síncronas o asíncronas, el periodo de tiempo en que se hacen y el número de IES que participan. Otra forma de clasificación proviene de la *European Association of Distance Teaching Universities* (EADTU) (2023), que indica que cualquier tipo de movilidad —física, virtual o mixta— se realiza bajo alguno de los siguientes cuatro formatos: 1) *integrada en un curso*, mediante actividades de aprendizaje colaborativo diseñadas en conjunto entre instituciones socias; 2) *intercambio de currículum e intercambio de movilidad*, que involucra acuerdos de movilidad entre la institución de origen y la anfitriona); 3) *currículum en red y ventanas de movilidad*, la cual se genera a través de una ventana de movilidad en la que cualquier estudiante de una institución socia puede participar); y 4) *currículum conjunto y movilidad integrada*, que ocurre mediante un consorcio que elabora un programa que incorpora la movilidad de forma obligatoria. Por otra parte, Sabzalieva et al. (2022), indican que la movilidad virtual puede tener diversas funciones: académica (estudiar un curso en otra IES), cultural (desarrollo de habilidades) o vivencial (experiencia laboral). La Tabla 1 presenta una descripción general con características de las principales nociones que las personas entrevistadas mencionaron respecto a la movilidad estudiantil de forma virtual.

**Tabla 1. Tipos de experiencias virtuales de intercambio académico**

Concepto	Descripción	Temporalidad	Sincronización	Categorización EADTU	Funciones
Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)	Enfoque didáctico que reúne a profesores de diversas instituciones para que diseñen e impartan un curso o módulo en conjunto que pueden tomar los estudiantes de ambas instituciones mediante medios virtuales.	De un módulo (bimestre por ejemplo) a un curso completo.	Síncrona o asíncrona	-Integrada en un curso. -Currículum en red y ventanas de movilidad. -Currículum conjunto y movilidad integrada.	Académica (reconocimiento de créditos)  Cultural (generación de habilidades interculturales)
Clases espejo	Metodología didáctica que incorpora medios digitales en la que dos o más profesores de diversas instituciones educativas planean e imparten un número reducido de clases que realizan por medios digitales.	Número reducido de sesiones (uno a tres).	Síncrona o asíncrona	-Integrada en un curso.	Académica (reconocimiento de créditos) Cultural (habilidades interculturales)
Virtual International Collaboration (VIC)	Proyectos en los que estudiantes o profesores de diversos países e instituciones trabajan en conjunto mediante medios digitales para crear un curso específico que desarrolle determinado tipo de habilidades o conocimientos.	Más de dos sesiones y hasta un curso completo.	Síncrona o asíncrona	-Integrada en un curso. -Currículum en red y ventanas de movilidad. -Currículum conjunto y movilidad integrada.	Académica (reconocimiento de créditos) Cultural (habilidades interculturales)
Intercambio académico virtual	Programas o actividades de educación persona a persona sostenidos, habilitados por la tecnología, en los que se lleva a cabo una comunicación e interacción constructivas entre individuos o grupos que están separados geográficamente y/o de diferentes orígenes culturales, con el apoyo de educadores o facilitadores.	Cursos completos	Síncrona	-Intercambio de currículum e intercambio de movilidad.	Académica (reconocimiento de créditos) Cultural (habilidades interculturales)

Fuente: Elaboración propia con base en información de BUAP (2023), EVOLVE (2023) ENVOIE (2022) y SUNY COIL (2023).

En tanto que las alusiones de las personas entrevistadas y de la literatura a la movilidad estudiantil mediante medios electrónicos son diversas y de que el concepto de movilidad virtual es problemático porque se confunde con características específicas de la movilidad estudiantil física, se usa la noción de *experiencias internacionales virtuales* para aludir a todas las formas de movilidad que no son físicas y que incorporan la tecnología para llevarse a cabo. Así, por ejemplo, los COIL, las clases espejo, los VIC y el intercambio académico virtual, representan formas específicas de experiencias internacionales virtuales.

En diversas investigaciones se reconoce el potencial de las experiencias internacionales virtuales como una vía para expandir la generación de competencias, sobre todo para estudiantes que no pueden ser parte de la movilidad física (Hernández-Nanclares et al., 2019; Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Sin embargo, también se reconocen diferencias sustanciales. Aunque las experiencias educativas internacionales virtuales también representan una vía para que los estudiantes desarrollen competencias digitales, interculturales y lingüísticas (Helm, 2019), las experiencias de movilidad física tienen un impacto más profundo en la vida de los estudiantes (Kóris et al., 2021), pues implican mayor inmersión cultural y práctica del idioma.

A partir de la pandemia será relevante entender las características propias de las formas virtuales y diferenciarlas de la movilidad física. Para ello, lo importante es entender las potencialidades de cada variante y usarlas según las necesidades de cada institución educativa. La movilidad virtual, eventualmente, puede representar un complemento de la movilidad física en la intención de generar mayores competencias internacionales (Ruiz-Corbella et al., 2021; Vriens et al., 2010) y podría significar una forma de capital de movilidad (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) que motive a estudiantes de educación superior a buscar una experiencia de movilidad presencial.

### **Aproximación Metodológica**

En este artículo se integra una postura de análisis interpretativo de entrevistas semiestructuradas como instrumento para recoger información; así como la codificación y análisis de contenido como método de interpretación (Flick, 2007). Se buscó dar sentido a los relatos de las personas entrevistadas sobre los procesos de internacionalización y su afectación por la pandemia de Covid-19. De acuerdo con Berger y Luckmann (1968), la realidad se construye socialmente y es susceptible de analizarse en función de las experiencias concretas de las personas, que en este caso se enmarcan por su adscripción institucional. En ese sentido, cada IES representa una forma de organizar, a partir de valores, objetivos, cultura y recursos, las acciones que responden a los requerimientos que planteó la pandemia. Así, la pandemia se asimila y dota de significado a partir de la experiencia concreta de cada persona y de su adscripción institucional (Flick, 2007).

La entrevista semiestructurada es un instrumento mediante el cual se obtuvo información de forma flexible porque permitió incorporar temas emergentes (Taylor y Bogdan, 1994). Para ello, se utilizó un guion de entrevista con 10 ítems, con una duración aproximada entre 45 y 60 minutos para su realización. Como recurso metodológico, la entrevista representa la construcción de un discurso oral mediante las narrativas de las personas dirigidas por intervenciones de un investigador (Chase, 2005). A su vez, el discurso oral recurre al lenguaje de las personas, el cual representa “[...] las objetivaciones comunes de la vida [...] de las personas [que] se sustentan por la significación lingüística” (Berger y Luckmann, 1968, p. 55). El discurso que se narra oralmente representó la vía para acceder a los significados que las personas atribuyen al tema de estudio que se analiza.

Las personas que se entrevistaron se distinguen por su capacidad para dar cuenta de la relevancia de la internacionalización como fenómeno social afectado por la pandemia por Covid-19 (Flick, 2007). Se indagó la perspectiva de las principales figuras institucionales que desarrollan los procesos de internacionalización en universidades públicas y privadas. La experiencia de estos funcionarios es importante porque desempeñan una función de liderazgo en el desarrollo de la movilidad estudiantil con experiencia en el antes, durante y después de la pandemia. En total se entrevistaron a siete personas, cuatro de universidades privadas y tres de universidades públicas. El nombre de las personas entrevistadas y su adscripción institucional se reportan de forma anónima; no obstante, se ofrecen algunos datos que permitan contextualizar los hallazgos. La Tabla 2 muestra información descriptiva sobre la información que constituyó el referente empírico.

En el caso de México la movilidad estudiantil se concentra en un núcleo reducido de IES (Bustos-Aguirre et al., 2022; Maldonado et al., 2017), por lo que se buscó que las personas a entrevistar pertenecieran a IES con una participación destacable en el envío o recepción de estudiantes internacionales. Asimismo, las instituciones educativas que se consideraron en este estudio se distinguen por contar con oficinas de internacionalización y con reconocimiento de la

**Tabla 2. Caracterización del referente empírico**

Clasificación institucional	Región	Creación	Campus	Matrícula total	Movilidad saliente temporal	Movilidad entrante temporal	Área de experiencia de personas entrevistadas	Código
Público, autónomo (PA1)	Metropolitana	1974	5	60,865 (2021)	320 (2019)	27 (2019)	Coordinación General para el Fortalecimiento Académico y Vinculación	P1H*
Pública, autónoma (PA2)	Centro occidente	1940	5	13,454 (2021)	222 (2019)	195 (2019)	Dirección General de Relaciones internacionales y cooperación académica	PA2M
Pública, autónoma (PA3)	Sur Sureste	1944	5	58,330 (2021)	118 (2019)	132 (2019)	Coordinación de cooperación académica	P3H
Privada, alto perfil (PR1)	Sur sureste Noroeste Noreste Centro occidente Centro sur Sur sureste Metropolitana	1943	26	94,424 (2021)	4,342 (2021)	958 (2021)	Vicerrectoría de internacionalización	PR1H
Privada, alto perfil (PR2)	Metropolitana Noroeste	1943	2	11,172 (2022)	183 (2019)	108 (2019)	Coordinación de movilidad estudiantil	PR2M PR2H
Privada, alto perfil (PR3)	Centro Sur	1973	2	13,959 (2022)	125 (2019)	Sin dato	Dirección de relaciones internacionales y movilidad	PR3M

Fuente: Elaboración propia tomando como referencia la clasificación regional de la ANUIES (2013), la categorización de IES privadas de Silas (2005) y los datos de movilidad estudiantil de la Base 911 y de las páginas oficiales de las instituciones. \*En este caso el funcionario nos compartió la información de forma escrita.

internacionalización como una actividad importante que se suele incluir como parte de las políticas institucionales. También, en tanto que existen características importantes asociadas al sostenimiento de las IES, se trató de equilibrar la participación de IES públicas y privadas con la intención de revisar si existe alguna tendencia específica al respecto.

Para analizar la información se recurrió a la transcripción de las entrevistas y al análisis de su contenido. Los fragmentos de entrevista escrita fueron codificados a través de dos categorías generales que originaron subtemas específicos. Por una parte, se analizó el contenido en función de la discusión conceptual que significó la inclusión de las formas virtuales de la movilidad, lo que permitió comprender la postura de las personas sobre el concepto de movilidad física y virtual, los tipos de experiencias virtuales que incorporaron y la comparación entre las formas de movilidad estudiantil física y virtual. Por otra parte, se codificaron las entrevistas a partir de los cambios en la gestión de la movilidad estudiantil en relación con la pandemia por Covid-19, con lo que se pudo analizar la relación entre la movilidad física y virtual en el retorno a lo presencial, las estrategias de movilidad estudiantil durante y después de la pandemia y los beneficios de la movilidad estudiantil y de la modalidad virtual.

## Principales Hallazgos

La primera parte de los hallazgos se concentran en la distinción conceptual que establecieron las y los funcionarios que brindaron información para este análisis. Al respecto, la noción central es la crítica que establecen el concepto de movilidad virtual, en el que coinciden en que las experiencias virtuales deberán entenderse de forma diferente a la movilidad estudiantil. En la segunda parte de los hallazgos se presentan los procesos de adaptación de las actividades de internacionalización, particularmente de la movilidad estudiantil. Para ello, se indagó sobre la capacitación docente, la preservación de las experiencias virtuales en el retorno a lo presencial y el rumbo que tomó la movilidad estudiantil frente al retorno a lo presencial. En la parte final se discuten las ventajas de las experiencias virtuales por su potencial para que más estudiantes construyan habilidades que los vinculen al contexto internacional.

### *Movilidad Virtual No Es Movilidad Estudiantil*

Durante la pandemia, las experiencias de tipo virtual obtuvieron una notable visibilidad y una mayor incorporación en los procesos educativos de las y los estudiantes y del personal académico; sin embargo, un punto importante es entender que si bien fueron una alternativa en tiempos de encierro a la movilidad física, en el retorno a lo presencial representó un elemento extra de los procesos de internacionalización que complementan el objetivo de beneficiar a los estudiantes mediante la generación de habilidades útiles en el contexto global.

En la práctica, las y los funcionarios entrevistados criticaron la noción de movilidad virtual porque consideran que es un término erróneo, entre otras razones, porque no implica el desplazamiento físico que caracteriza a la movilidad estudiantil. Para Van Hove (2021), uno de los principales beneficios de la movilidad física es que las experiencias fuera del aula tienen una función importante en el desarrollo de competencias interculturales, lo cual escapa a lo virtual. El autor sugiere reservar el término “movilidad” para su significado original, puesto que la noción de “movilidad virtual” es engañoso e inútil. Un argumento al respecto se encontró en lo que compartió la persona entrevistada PR1H, para quien las experiencias internacionales deben de ser clasificadas como tales:

[...] hemos utilizado el concepto de movilidad, pero es más bien una experiencia internacional, ya sea presencial o virtual. Estos dos tipos de experiencias son complementarias más no comparables, ya que involucran habilidades y aprendizajes diferentes [...] (PR1H).

La postura de la funcionaria de la universidad PA2 es contundente respecto al rechazo del concepto de movilidad virtual. Según su experiencia, la reducción de la internacionalización a la movilidad estudiantil llevó a conceptualizar las experiencias de colaboración internacional virtual como un derivado de la movilidad estudiantil, no como una forma más de la internacionalización en casa con características útiles pero distintas:

[...] yo he [discutido] una apreciación personal, porque así me siento, que voy casi sola contra [varios académicos y organizaciones] que llaman movilidad a lo que no es movilidad. Y yo lo que digo es [que] históricamente hemos reducido el concepto de internacionalización a la movilidad. [...]. Entonces, [...] trasladamos esta idea de que si no hay movilidad ya no tiene valor la internacionalización. Por tanto, pareciera que hay que llamarle movilidad a [las experiencias virtuales de aprendizaje] (PA2M)

Asimismo, la persona de la institución PA3 hizo alusión al concepto de movilidad virtual como un oxímoron citando a Ramírez (2021). Desde su discurso, existe cierta contradicción en llamar movilidad estudiantil a experiencias que no requieren el desplazamiento de los sujetos. Al incluir la palabra “virtual” en la movilidad estudiantil se pierde su esencia, por lo que la movilidad estudiantil sin salir de casa no existe (Ramírez, 2021). Al respecto, una de las personas entrevistadas señaló lo siguiente:

[...] desde mi punto de vista muy personal, si es virtual ya no es movilidad. Porque movilidad te dice que te desplazas. [...]. [En la movilidad virtual] nadie se está movilizándose, simplemente es un intercambio virtual de clases y de conocimiento (P3H).



Adicionalmente, la persona PA2M expuso que la mayor parte de los beneficios de las experiencias internacionales virtuales se relacionan con que no implican desplazamiento físico, por lo que cuestiona porqué razón habría que llamarle movilidad a algo que no lo es y que representa una alternativa diferente de la movilidad estudiantil física. En este sentido, las dos personas de la institución PR2, sostuvieron que el concepto de movilidad virtual es problemático porque genera confusión con aquello que distingue la movilidad estudiantil física o geográfica. Estos funcionarios argumentaron que, aunque ambas formas de internacionalización son de utilidad, la movilidad física se distingue por sus contribuciones al ser una experiencia con mayor inmersión cultural. En palabras de una de estas personas:

[...] para mí movilidad es movilidad. O sea, para mí la movilidad implica [...] movimiento, implica ir de un lado a otro. Entonces, es un concepto que [...] se me hace muy problemático porque creo que [...] desde antes [de la pandemia ya había] experiencias [internacionales] virtuales (PR2M).

Dentro de la información que se recabó surgieron alternativas al concepto de movilidad virtual. Las y los funcionarios propusieron nociones como experiencias de enseñanza aprendizaje virtuales o a través de la modalidad educativa de Aprendizaje Colaborativo Internacional en Línea (COIL por sus siglas en inglés), los VIC, intercambio virtual y clases espejo (las cuales se describen en el apartado conceptual). Los COIL resultaron la forma de trabajo que más mencionaron las personas entrevistadas, la cual destacaron por su contribución pedagógica al permitir construir conocimiento a través de clases que organizan profesores y estudiantes de distintas IES para mejorar sus habilidades. Al respecto, Ramírez y Bustos-Aguirre (2021), con evidencia empírica, confirman que los COIL mejoran las habilidades tecnológicas e interculturales de los estudiantes, aunque para ello se requiere una implementación adecuada a partir de la capacitación e incentivos a docentes, el aprovechamiento de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación, y el dominio de idiomas.

La importancia de cuidar la forma de nombrar las experiencias virtuales internacionales radica en situarlas adecuadamente dentro de las diversas estrategias que componen la internacionalización y entenderlas como alternativas distintas pero complementarias. El uso de la tecnología para propiciar la internacionalización no es un tema novedoso dentro de las IES (Lawton, 2015). Lo que quizás sí es nuevo es la expansión del uso de la tecnología en las IES, pues la pandemia trajo consigo la adaptación de una estructura institucional que habilitó las clases a distancia a través de elementos como la capacitación docente, el uso de plataformas o la metodología de las clases. Esa infraestructura representa la oportunidad de contribuir a la internacionalización en casa.

La postura del conjunto de personas entrevistadas es que, en lo concerniente a la movilidad estudiantil, lo virtual jamás podrá sustituir lo que conlleva moverse de forma física, lo que es congruente con lo que señalan autores como Liu et al. (2022). En cambio, los informantes reflexionaron sobre la forma en que se puede complementar la movilidad estudiantil con lo virtual, más allá de sobreponer la una sobre la otra; es decir, valorar las ventajas que cada una conlleva y usarlas de acuerdo con el contexto, los recursos disponibles y los intereses de cada IES.

### ***El Futuro de lo Virtual al Regreso de lo Presencial***

La experiencia de la pandemia dejó posibilidades de cambio en términos de innovación. La expansión del uso de medios tecnológicos —producto de la pandemia— trajo consigo la necesidad de capacitar al personal docente en el uso de nuevas metodologías y tecnologías, lo que representó uno de los retos más importantes para continuar con lo que comúnmente hacían mediante contacto físico. Aunque algunos docentes se sentían habituados al manejo de la tecnología en las clases, un conjunto extenso de profesores mostraba carencias al respecto. De acuerdo con el funcionario de la institución PR3, el sesgo en el manejo de recursos tecnológicos fue más visible en los docentes de mayor edad: “hay docentes [de generaciones avanzadas para quienes] no es tan fácil [...] resolver cosas desde la computadora porque lo tenían que hacer ellos solos” (PR3M).

En el tema de la capacitación docente se observan experiencias distintas de acuerdo con la universidad de adscripción de los y las entrevistadas. En algunos casos, el trabajo previo a la pandemia en la relación entre lo virtual y lo internacional fue fundamental para atender efectivamente los retos que se enfrentaban durante la etapa de restricción al contacto físico. En el caso de la institución P3, desde el 2017 se trabajó con la metodología COIL, por lo que la llegada de la pandemia hizo que el número de profesores que participaban de estas actividades aumentara considerablemente. Estos cursos persisten en el retorno a las clases presenciales:

Pues decidimos entonces [adaptar] la metodología [COIL], traerla para la universidad [...]. En lugar de esperar las convocatorias de los colegas de SUNY COIL Center, [decidimos] hacer nuestro propio curso. Eso fue en 2017. El curso es casi igual, [aunque] no una réplica [exacta] del SUNY COIL Center. [...]. Cuando viene la pandemia, [una] buena parte de nuestra experiencia de trabajo en línea con profesores ya estaba [...] avanzada (PR3H).

De forma similar, pero en el caso de la institución privada PR1, el trabajo previo en cuanto a la impartición de materias a distancia representó una estructura que fortaleció las adecuaciones a raíz de la pandemia. En la entrevista con este funcionario sobresalió la necesidad de continuar con la capacitación del colectivo docente por la importancia que representa mejorar en la construcción de experiencias virtuales internacionales con el paso del tiempo:

Previo a la contingencia mundial ya se [ofrecían,] a nivel profesional [,] experiencias internacionales virtuales. Durante estos dos años pandémicos se logró fortalecer la oferta y expandir a los niveles educativos de preparatoria y de posgrado (PR1H).

En algunas IES públicas, la capacitación docente representó un desafío mayor, pues la brecha entre los que manejaban recursos tecnológicos y los que no era más amplia. En palabras de una de las personas entrevistadas se señaló lo siguiente: “definitivamente, la transición al ámbito digital fue nuestro principal obstáculo” (P1H). Lo anterior es congruente con lo que expresó otra persona a cargo de internacionalización de una IES pública:

Lo que sí siento [es] que hay todavía una brecha muy grande [respecto] de las competencias de los profesores para aprovechar, en la medida de lo posible, los ambientes de aprendizaje mediados por tecnología, para tener casi el mismo impacto, o [...] quizás [mejor] en algunos casos [,] que la educación presencial [...] (P3H).

Todas las personas entrevistadas coinciden en que aún con el regreso a lo presencial, las experiencias virtuales se mantienen y se expanden, lo que corrobora que las adecuaciones durante la pandemia tienen un efecto persistente. El crecimiento de las experiencias virtuales internacionales contrasta con la reducida incorporación de recursos tecnológicos en la internacionalización hasta antes de la pandemia (Bustos-Aguirre y Vega, 2021).

Hay [...] muchas escuelas que van a poner una cuota fija de COIL para su profesorado y hay otros que no, hay otros que son totalmente voluntarios. [...] pero el número que tenemos es impresionante. Para que tengas una idea, un curso COIL promedio tiene entre 25 y 30 estudiantes de mi universidad y 25 a 30 estudiantes de la otra universidad. Digamos que tiene un promedio de 50 estudiantes sumando los dos. Si tienes 100 cursos tienen 5,000 estudiantes [...] (PR1H).

[...] las [...] experiencias de aprendizaje en línea, [o] en colaboración internacional [...] se expandieron. Y eso creo que no va a parar, porque ya los profesores tomaron conciencia de lo valioso que es [...] alcanzar a todo un grupo de estudiantes con una experiencia de internacionalización [virtual] de ese nivel (PA2M)

El comportamiento de la movilidad estudiantil con el regreso al contacto físico fue otro tema de interés para las personas entrevistadas. En las instituciones privadas PR1 y PR2 se observa un repunte que supera las cantidades de movilidad estudiantil que se tenían hasta antes de la pandemia, lo que quizás se relaciona con el alto perfil socioeconómico y cultural de la mayor parte de sus estudiantes. La razón que explica el crecimiento de movilidad estudiantil en el regreso a lo presencial es que quienes planeaban salir solamente pausaron su decisión, y en la vuelta al contacto físico, muchos de estos estudiantes se encontraban en el tramo final de sus estudios, por lo que era su última oportunidad para vivir este tipo de experiencias:

[...] este semestre que está a punto de terminar hemos batido récord. Normalmente los semestres tenemos unos 2,500 estudiantes fuera, este semestre tenemos casi 3,600. Y tenemos [a] tantos afuera porque hay muchos estudiantes que se les acababa ya la carrera y no habían tenido la oportunidad [de hacer movilidad estudiantil presencial]. Entonces, todo este tapón [sic] que surgió para los estudiantes más avanzados que tenían prácticamente

su última oportunidad, [se liberó con la vuelta a lo presencial y la] han aprovechado y han salido. Por eso tenemos casi mil estudiantes más este semestre que lo que es habitual en el semestre de agosto a diciembre [...] (PR1H).

Este año ya retomamos la movilidad [física] por completo, tanto saliente como entrante, y ahora ya estamos teniendo números que incluso superan a los números prepandémicos. Entonces, ya para el tema de movilidad estudiantil presencial ya pasó la pandemia, me parece [...]. En los alumnos visitantes ahí estamos cerca de los números grandes de [antes de] la pandemia (PR2H).

En cambio, en las instituciones públicas PA2 y P3 el comportamiento de la movilidad estudiantil saliente ha crecido paulatinamente. Lo que también se explica, entre otras cuestiones, por el perfil socioeconómico del estudiantado, y para quienes pagar una experiencia de movilidad presencial es más complicado y suelen requerir de apoyos externos para participar. Sin embargo, las becas o apoyos disponibles se redujeron a raíz de la pandemia por Covid-19 y de su efecto en la economía de las familias:

[...] Antes, el gobierno [...], desde el 2002 o 2003, nos daba un apoyo para la movilidad estudiantil. Que no era el 100% [de los gastos de movilidad] pero era un muy buen apoyo para los estudiantes y dejó de darlo poco antes de la pandemia. Entonces, al no haber becas [...] a eso le atribuyo que la mayoría que quería [salir de movilidad estudiantil] no haya realizado su trámite. Y estoy hablando [...] de los estudiantes que se van a ir en 2023. Y, por otra parte, la precariedad económica al interior de las familias afectadas por la pandemia. Porque cuando las becas inicialmente se cortaron no notamos tanto la diferencia en los números. Y [ahora me doy cuenta y] digo ‘aquí sí afectó, ahora sí está afectando la economía familiar para apoyar a los estudiantes a salir’ [...] (PA2M)

Y tomando en cuenta que [ahora] va a ser un poco más difícil por [...] la inflación y la restricción presupuestaria y pues movilidad presencial implica viajes, implica avión, y eso es muy [...] caro. Yo me espanto de los costos de los tickets actualmente [...] (PRH).

Otro tema importante es que el uso de recursos tecnológicos brindó la posibilidad de contar con más estudiantes de otros países o con alumnos de naciones con las que nunca habían colaborado. En ese sentido, México se caracteriza por ser un país del que salen muchos más estudiantes en comparación con los que vienen en términos de movilidad estudiantil; es decir, que por lo común no representa un polo de atracción (UNESCO-IESALC, 2019). Los datos más actuales —2018/2019— señalan que por cada estudiante internacional que viene a una IES mexicana, alrededor de 3.5 estudiantes mexicanos van a IES de otros países (Bustos-Aguirre et al., 2022), lo que se explica por factores económicos, académicos y sociales (UNESCO-IESALC, 2019). En el plano social una de las razones que más afecta la atracción de estudiantes a México se vincula con la violencia que se vive a raíz del crimen organizado y del narcotráfico, tal y como señaló una de las personas entrevistadas:

[...] una cosa que sucedió antes [es] que fuimos muy afectados [...], mucho antes de la pandemia, [por] la violencia. A nosotros se nos derrumbó terriblemente la movilidad entrante. Aquí en donde está mi oficina es la escuela para estudiantes extranjeros y era una escuela que recibía 400 estudiantes por semestre y pagantes la mayoría. [...] inclusive [estos estudiantes que venían] representaba una generosa fuente de ingresos que [...] permitía hacer otras cosas. Y [...] a raíz de la violencia se nos derrumbó terriblemente, de que [no] llegamos a tener ni 50 estudiantes extranjeros por semestre (P3H).

No obstante, como se mencionó, se obtuvo evidencia por parte de la institución privada PR2, de que las experiencias virtuales permitieron atraer a un número mayor de estudiantes de otros países:

Sobre todo, en el mercado latinoamericano donde [nuestra universidad] sí tiene cierta posición [...] como institución, por lo que los estudiantes, sobre todo de esta región, han aceptado o han buscado esta posibilidad más que los nuestros hacia fuera (PR2H).

Adicionalmente, las experiencias virtuales permitieron construir nuevas relaciones con países con los que no se trabajaba de manera física:

Aquí tenemos estudiantes que han seguido cursos COIL con universidades socias ubicadas en Europa, Norteamérica, América del Sur y con Asia Pacífico. Algo sorprendente es que también universidades y docentes en donde no teníamos un vínculo previo se han acercado con el equipo de *Global Shared Learning* para realizar colaboraciones COIL. Nuestros estudiantes se han beneficiado enormemente de aprender de manera sincrónica y asincrónica con estudiantes de Pakistán y de Malasia [...] (PR1H)

Aunque se esperaba un impacto negativo en cuanto al comportamiento de la movilidad física después de la pandemia (Stacey, 2020; Bustos-Aguirre y Vega, 2021), se observan matices según las características de las IES y del perfil socioeconómico del estudiantado.

### ***Razones a Favor de las Experiencias Internacionales Virtuales***

Uno de los principales beneficios de las experiencias internacionales virtuales es que involucra a una mayor proporción de estudiantes que no suelen ser parte de la movilidad estudiantil (Woicolesco et al., 2022), lo que puede incluir a personas discapacitadas, migrantes y refugiados, personas sin los recursos suficientes o para aquellos que combinan la escuela con el trabajo (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). En ese sentido, el discurso de las y los entrevistados coincidió en que las experiencias virtuales amplían la participación de grupos que comúnmente no se decidirían por la movilidad estudiantil que involucra el desplazamiento físico:

También se amplió la posibilidad de que un mayor número de estudiantes accediera a este programa [que] anteriormente [estaba] limitado por los recursos económicos que implicaba el trasladarse fuera de casa (PR1H)

Bueno pues tenemos, al igual que la UNAM, la suerte de que movilizamos menos del 1% de la matrícula. [...] esto ha sido en términos generales [...]. Y ahora los cursos VIC han sido recibidos de muy buena manera por los estudiantes porque, insisto, son estudiantes que normalmente no están pensando en [realizar] movilidad presencial [...] (P3H)

Algunas investigaciones indican que el reducido número de sujetos que participan de las experiencias de movilidad física suelen diferenciarse por contar con más recursos económicos y culturales, lo que indistintamente puede contribuir a ampliar las brechas de desigualdad (Finger, 2011; Maldonado et al., 2021). Como indicaron algunos funcionarios, lo ideal sería que los estudiantes vivieran una experiencia internacional presencial; sin embargo, resulta difícil que todos accedan debido a los recursos que demanda. Sin embargo, hay posicionamientos como el de Liu et al. (2022), para quienes la menor calidad de las experiencias virtuales, en comparación con las físicas, significa que las primeras no necesariamente contribuyen a la equidad. Desde la lógica de dichos autores, por el contrario, se corre el riesgo de segmentar las experiencias virtuales para quienes cuentan con menores posibilidades, mientras que la movilidad estudiantil se concentraría en quienes tengan mejor posicionamiento económico y cultural. Sin embargo, las personas entrevistadas abogaron por la inclusión a través de las experiencias internacionales virtuales, y lo consideraron una alternativa complementaria a la movilidad estudiantil.

Un argumento a favor de las experiencias internacionales virtuales lo ofrece el funcionario PR1H, quien resaltó que se debe de considerar la situación socioeconómica que atraviesa México, por lo que contar con diferentes tipos y formatos de experiencias internacionales es fundamental. Desde esta postura, las experiencias internacionales virtuales, como los cursos en colaboración COIL, contribuyen a ampliar los beneficios de la internacionalización aprovechando la experiencia que deja la pandemia por Covid-19:

La movilidad internacional presencial de los y las estudiantes mexicanos en el extranjero [al año] son aproximadamente 40,000 de un total de 4.5 millones de estudiantes universitarios. El promedio en México sería entonces de un 0.7% frente al promedio mundial que es de 2.5%. Así que tenemos que ser más creativos y pensar

en otros modelos de internacionalización que permitan a nuestros y nuestras estudiantes, sin importar su situación económica [que] puedan vivir una interacción internacional (PR1H).

Otro factor que se destacó durante las entrevistas fue el efecto de las experiencias internacionales virtuales para que los estudiantes se animen o busquen alguna oportunidad para hacer movilidad estudiantil. En ese sentido, las experiencias internacionales virtuales pueden figurar como una forma de capital de movilidad (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002):

Y sí les gustaría participar en un programa [de movilidad] internacional presencial porque eso es lo que nosotros esperamos, que esto de la virtualidad sea un paso para [...] una movilidad hacia algún programa internacional [físico]; [por ejemplo] un programa corto, una misión académica [o] un intercambio [...] (PR3M).

Pues inclusive ha sido un motivante para que ellos [...] piensen en hacer movilidad presencial después de esta experiencia [virtual]. Se dan cuenta de que es algo muy interesante que pueden aprender [...] fuera de la universidad [...], entonces, no ha habido rechazo de la movilidad virtual [...] (P3H).

Sería interesante que el o la estudiante, a lo largo de su carrera universitaria, pudiera tener entre tres y cuatro inmersiones virtuales tipo COIL [o de otro tipo] y que a partir de esta experiencia se pueda estimular [la participación en] una experiencia internacional presencial (PR1H).

También se enfatizó la impronta que deja la pandemia en términos de innovación y flexibilidad administrativa para cursar parte de los créditos mediante cursos virtuales internacionales. La pandemia trajo consigo la aceptación de los cursos virtuales como una alternativa a las materias o asignaturas que se contemplan en los planes de estudio. Esto significa que los estudiantes pueden mezclar materias presenciales con virtuales internacionales, lo que se asumió como un rasgo muy positivo:

Donde [...] veo potencial y tal vez una nueva tendencia es en las estructuras administrativas que permitan esta movilidad. Justo por el tema de la innovación, de la presión por la eficiencia administrativa [...] pues muchas universidades también tuvieron que trabajar fuertemente en sus propios procesos, en sus capacidades, en sus esquemas de apoyo. Y eso podría tener un efecto positivo en los números de movilidad [...] (PR2H).

[...] ahorita [si alguien] quisiera hacer un intercambio virtual estando ya escolarizado, puede tomar unas materias virtuales, por supuesto. Estando aquí en la [universidad], si [alguien] quiere tomar la oferta de la lista de las universidades, puede [tomar] una [materia virtual] de Rumania, puede [tomar] una [materia virtual] de Perú y una de Colombia. [Eso es] aparte [de] lo que tenga aquí [presencial]; es decir, si [...] no se abrieron algunas materias [presenciales aquí en su universidad] pero [el estudiante ve] que [una materia virtual] de Rumania [le] sirve, la [puede incluir como parte de su plan de estudios] o la de [otro país como] Suiza, la [curso virtual] y la revalida [...] (PR3M).

Las estrategias que desplegaron las IES para plantear alternativas a la movilidad estudiantil muestran cierto isomorfismo institucional (Levy, 2004), considerando que las limitaciones de contacto físico no dejaron mayor libertad para estrategias distintas. Básicamente, las soluciones fueron casi las mismas. En las IES estudiadas utilizaron la tecnología como una herramienta para desprender experiencias internacionales virtuales, principalmente a través de los cursos COIL y, en menor medida, las clases espejo y las experiencias VIC o intercambios virtuales. Las diferencias entre IES se observan en que algunas —P3 y PR1— tenían mayor experiencia en el desarrollo de cursos en línea y contaron con mayores recursos. Asimismo, el comportamiento de la movilidad estudiantil marca diferencias entre IES, pues en algunos casos hay un repunte considerable de la movilidad presencial en la vuelta al contacto físico.

## Conclusiones

Este artículo presenta un análisis de seis IES mexicanas muy diferentes en cuanto a tamaño, financiamiento, misión y tipo de estudiantes a los que sirven. Sin embargo, dichas instituciones compartieron el cierre de los planteles y los desafíos que el resto del sistema educativo vivió con la pandemia.

Ante un evento inesperado, tienen que surgir nuevas respuestas, algunas ya estaban ahí, otras fueron construyéndose y se tuvieron que inventar algunas soluciones también. El cierre de las IES derivada de la pandemia ha sumado nuevos temas que estaban en pausa o sobre los cuales no había definiciones como el tema de la movilidad virtual.

La mayor parte de las voces durante la pandemia hablaban de afectaciones negativas relacionadas con la internacionalización, traducidas en una disminución de la movilidad estudiantil. Sin embargo, un efecto que en primera instancia no era tan visible es que las tecnologías de la información y de la comunicación pueden representar un medio para democratizar los beneficios de la internacionalización. Es decir, aunque existieron efectos negativos, muchos aún por ser estudiados y reportados, también se observan posibilidades de cambio que benefician a los y las estudiantes de las IES.

Aunque la movilidad estudiantil tiene un impacto más profundo en la vida de las personas, las experiencias virtuales abren la posibilidad de colaborar con personas de países con las que no se había tenido contacto incluso antes de la pandemia. Mientras que las experiencias virtuales representan un canal para que más estudiantes de otros países cursen estudios parciales en IES mexicanas. Por último, el aislamiento forzado llevó a organizar nuevas formas de relacionarse de estudiantes y personal académico en las IES, lo que también, idealmente, puede significar construir nuevas vías de comunicación y nuevos lazos educativos y de cooperación entre IES de diferentes países.

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## **Cuba y la Pandemia de 2020: El Rol de la Educación Superior Cubana Respecto al Cumplimiento de los Objetivos del Desarrollo Sostenible**

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### **Abstract**

*This report analyzes the context of Cuban higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the necessary restructuring and redesign of strategies in planning, aligning with the indicators and goals with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. In this sense, we present an analysis of the role of the Ministry of Higher Education of Cuba as an agency of the central administration of the state in the execution of said objectives based on the contributions made by Cuban universities in the observance of the SDGs.*

Keywords: sustainable development goals, higher education system, Cuba, Covid-19

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### **Resumen**

*Este informe analiza el contexto de la educación superior cubana durante la pandemia COVID-19, así como, la necesaria reestructuración y rediseño de estrategias, en función de la planificación, alineando los indicadores y metas con los Objetivos del Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) de la Agenda 2030. En ese sentido, se presenta el análisis del rol del Ministerio de Educación Superior de Cuba, como organismo de la administración central del estado en el desempeño de dichos objetivos, fundamentándolo en las contribuciones realizadas por las universidades cubanas en la observancia de los ODS.*

Palabras claves: objetivos de desarrollo sostenibles, sistema de educación superior, Cuba, COVID-19

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## **Introducción: La pandemia en Cuba**

La pandemia llegó a la isla de Cuba en marzo 2020, estando en medio de una crisis económica por el bloqueo del gobierno de los Estados Unidos, y la escasez de productos básicos, medicinales y alimenticios. Por si fuera poco, el pueblo cubano presentó una amplia gama de sintomatología recurrente que se manifestaba no solo en el daño físico, sino también en lo emocional, sentimental y axiológico, dejando secuelas en las personas tras sufrir sus embates (Balluerka Lasa, 2020). En respuesta, el presidente de Cuba, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez con la cátedra de ciencia, tecnología y sociedad de la Universidad de La Habana para desarrollar investigaciones sobre el COVID -19, ratificó la importancia que el gobierno cubano proveyó a la educación superior para mitigar el virus y sus efectos en la población (Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, 2020). Las instituciones de educación superior tienen una responsabilidad social de llevar la ciencia tanto a los responsables políticos como a la sociedad en general. Dado los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) basados en argumentos en el conocimiento, las instituciones de educación superior respondieron con nuevas investigaciones y sugerencias a cambios futuros con referencia a la creencia en la ciencia— especialmente con relación a la pandemia.

Desde este contexto, surge el interrogante: ¿Cómo se analiza la labor y las contribuciones realizadas por las universidades cubanas en el cumplimiento de los ODS durante la COVID-19, notando los logros y los desafíos? Para responder, se presenta en este artículo el rol de la educación superior en el cumplimiento de los ODS, las universidades como centros de aislamiento, la enseñanza universitaria durante la pandemia, los nuevos usos de la tecnología, cómo enfrentar el impacto psicológico, y la educación superior como centro de investigación, terminando con las conclusiones.

## **La Educación Superior Durante la Pandemia**

### **Los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible**

Para Cuba, la consecución de la Agenda 2030 y sus objetivos constituyeron una prioridad del Estado como parte de las políticas públicas. Las acciones diseñadas en la estrategia de política pública cubana se concretaron en la alineación de los 17 Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) con el Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Económico y Social hasta el 2030 (PNDES). En el 2019, se activaron equipos de trabajo multidisciplinarios integrados por varios organismos, entidades, centros de estudio e investigación, académicos, territorios y organizaciones de la sociedad civil; bajo la conducción de las instituciones designadas como responsables de cada ODS (CEPAL, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). En el Congreso Internacional de Educación Superior “Universidad 2020,” se reconoció el papel de este congreso como un “evento que propicia el debate sobre el rol social de la educación superior para contribuir al cumplimiento de los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible de la Agenda 2030” (UNESCO, 2020, parra. 2).

El programa del sistema de la educación superior se integró a la planificación estratégica de país, el cual fue actualizado en el 2019 (ORPDALC, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Entre los principales desafíos que afectaban el cumplimiento de la misión del Ministerio de Educación Superior (MES) estaban las relacionadas con las políticas de educación superior aceptadas, y las políticas de otros organismos aprobadas en las que a la educación superior le correspondía participar. Por lo tanto, la educación superior implementó estrategias para alcanzar los objetivos, coordinando las relaciones interinstitucionales y los métodos de informatización, información y comunicaciones (MES, 2019).

Se definieron ocho objetivos estratégicos, que constituyeron las prioridades de trabajo en ese periodo para la educación superior en Cuba. Se resolvió formar profesionales integrales, competentes, con firmeza política, ideológica y comprometidos con la Revolución, que satisficieran la demanda de graduados para el desarrollo económico y social del país. Se determinó lograr la preparación y completamiento del claustro de profesores y de los dirigentes educacionales, que se distinguiera por ser activistas de la ideología y política de la Revolución Socialista de Cuba, con un alto porcentaje de doctores. También, se planteó incrementar el impacto de las universidades y entidades de ciencia, tecnología e innovación en los sectores estratégicos para el desarrollo económico y social del país. Se concibió garantizar el desarrollo científico y tecnológico, la introducción a la sociedad de los resultados de la ciencia y la satisfacción de las necesidades nacionales de capacitación, superación y posgrado de profesionales, así como los dirigentes y reservas en correspondencia con las demandas del desarrollo sostenible local, territorial y del país. (Alonso Becerra, 2020; Alonso Becerra et al., 2021; MES, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Se incluyó un enfoque integral y sostenible para la labor educativa y política ideológica en las universidades (Rodríguez Santana et al., 2019).

Otros objetivos incluyeron garantizar la cultura digital y el desarrollo de la informatización pertinente y novedosa en correspondencia con el perfeccionamiento de los procesos de la educación superior y la informatización de la sociedad cubana. Avalar el impacto en el desarrollo local aportando conocimientos, estrategias, tecnologías, y procesos de innovación que contribuyeran a identificar las potencialidades para exportar, sustituir importaciones, lograr encadenamientos productivos y mejorar la calidad de los servicios. Gestionar los recursos materiales y financieros que garanticen la infraestructura necesaria y el transporte para el aseguramiento de los procesos de la educación superior. Finalmente, asegurar la calidad de educación superior por la acreditación de sus programas e instituciones con una categoría superior (Alonso Becerra, 2020; Alonso Becerra, 2021; MES, 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

## **Las Universidades Como Centros de Aislamiento**

Con el comienzo de la pandemia en 2020, más del 80 por ciento de las universidades cubanas funcionaron como hospitales o centros de aislamiento, teniendo a profesores y educandos empleados como voluntarios en labores afines al enfrentamiento del COVID-19 (ADN Cuba, 2020). La Resolución 3/21 del MES estableció que en los territorios donde fuera imposible iniciar las actividades docentes, los alumnos participaran en tareas vinculadas con la producción, su futura profesión o la lucha contra la pandemia en sus municipios (Duyanah, 2021). Las autoridades dispusieron que las actividades académicas dependieran de la situación epidemiológica en cada territorio, y que los centros de estudios debían adecuar las orientaciones a sus características, realidades y posibilidades, lo que pudo significar que las modalidades de estudios fueran de forma no presencial. (Duyanah, 2021).

Como centros de aislamientos, las universidades fueron atendidas por brigadas conformadas por docentes, estudiantes, y personal de la salud. En estas instituciones se realizaron labores de higienización, atención directa en la zona roja a pacientes positivos, trabajo en la cocina, ubicación de pacientes a las distintas salas creadas a partir de su clasificación, entre otras tareas de choque (Labacena Romero, 2020). También formaron parte del escenario epidemiológico. Constituyeron un espacio no solo para la contención de la cadena de contaminación o contagio, sino donde también se transmitían mensajes de salud, acompañadas de orientaciones al personal de salud, enfermos y sus familiares sobre la situación actual y perspectiva que se iba conociendo a diario (López Angulo et al., 2020).

Se designó a un profesor por facultad como responsable para coordinar, de forma conjunta con un profesional de la salud (médico o enfermera). El área de salud asignó estudiantes y determinó el trabajo comunitario integral a realizar. Estos estudiantes participaron en la pesquisa diaria en los barrios y comunidades con el objetivo de prevenir y detectar casos positivos de COVID-19. Además, aplicaron la prueba de antígeno para detectar infecciones activas y la presencia de proteínas del virus. Implementaron el aislamiento para evitar la transmisión y el aumento del contagio (Hierrezuelo Rojas et al., 2022).

Existió una gran alianza entre las universidades y eso permitió que en todas las rotaciones siempre se contara con la juventud (Labacena Romero, 2020). La mayoría de los voluntarios jóvenes tenían entre 20 y 23 años. Se organizaron tras una convocatoria de la Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC), la Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU), y otras organizaciones masivas (Labacena Romero, 2020).

## **La Enseñanza en las Universidades: La Tecnología**

Aunque los edificios de las universidades se convirtieron en centros de aislamiento, se sustentó el trabajo que realizaron las universidades cubanas a partir del 2020. La enseñanza presencial fue suplantada por la modalidad online y fue necesario rediseñar los métodos y mecanismos empleados a las nuevas condiciones del trabajo a distancia y teletrabajo, con sesiones de trabajo y encuentros de manera virtual (MTSS, 2021; Peiró y Soler, 2020). Este proceso se distinguió por su participación e inclusión, materializando los principios de interdependencia entre las dimensiones del desarrollo sostenible, el enfoque universal de la Agenda 2030, y el compromiso de no dejar a nadie atrás, uno de los seis principios rectores del marco de cooperación para el desarrollo sostenible (Alonso Becerra et al., 2021).

Uno de los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible está dirigido a garantizar una educación inclusiva, equitativa y de calidad al promover oportunidades de aprendizaje para todos. Para tal fin, se desarrollaron tecnologías para el acceso a la educación, brindando mayores oportunidades económicas y de inclusión. El uso y empleo de las redes sociales durante la pandemia reforzaron el acceso a los programas de las carreras, contenidos de las asignaturas, sistema de evaluación, y

actividades evaluativas. Se seleccionaron y elaboraron los documentos educativos para ser incorporados a estas plataformas y se crearon plataformas virtuales en todas las universidades con el acceso de navegación gratuita a través de las cuentas creadas a los docentes y estudiantes. Esta nueva modalidad de estudios en las universidades cubanas permitió la participación no solo de los estudiantes sino también de los demás actores sociales: la familia y la comunidad (Berdut et al., 2021).

Las universidades cubanas realizaron la preparación de los docentes para la dirección de este proceso y a los estudiantes para recibir la instrucción e interactuar virtualmente. Fue necesario efectuar la preparación inmediata de los docentes a la plataforma Moodle, televisión (conocidas como “teleclases”), y con grupos en WhatsApp y Telegram (Jiménez-Puig y Fernández-Fleites, 2021; Zas et al., 2020). Se emplearon los correos electrónicos para el envío de las evaluaciones sistemáticas y trabajos evaluativos (Jiménez-Puig & Fernández-Fleites, 2021). Los docentes prestaron la atención diferenciada a estudiantes de manera presencial por no tener las tecnológicas para el acceso a la plataforma y el uso de las redes sociales. También se generaron carpetas con toda la información necesaria para que los estudiantes desde sus casas y centros de trabajo pudieran acceder a las mismas. Estas incluían programas de estudios de las carreras y modalidades de estudio, cronogramas y horarios de impartición de las conferencias virtuales e intercambio con los profesores, bibliografía básica a emplear y otras fuentes bibliográficas para enriquecer los contenidos. Conjuntamente, se colocaron los exámenes a realizar según cronogramas de evaluación, las evaluaciones sistemáticas a desarrollar por los estudiantes, así como orientaciones generales de organización y dirección de los procesos (Ferrales, 2021). Las defensas de tesis para maestrías y doctorados, así como la realización de postgrados y diplomados, se programaron fuera de la universidad—en casas o empresas. Estas concepciones permitieron una educación más inclusiva, garantizando una mayor preparación y cultura. A pesar del aumento en casos de COVID-19, la educación superior incrementó las plazas en un 18% durante la etapa 2020-2022, según el MES (EFE, 2021). Yuniel Labacena Romero (2020) expresó “La universidad semeja un ‘barco’ en alta mar en medio de una tormenta”. Las universidades demostraron el apoyo solidario y humano en áreas de eliminar la pandemia del COVID-19.

### **La Colaboración de las Universidades con la Biotecnología**

La labor científica durante la pandemia se realizó por parte de estudiantes y profesores universitarios en conjunto con la industria biotecnológica de Cuba. Por ejemplo, se creó el *Pesquisador Virtual*, una aplicación tecnológica innovadora para la autopesquisa desarrollada por la Universidad de Ciencias Informáticas en conjunto con el Ministerio de Salud Pública (MINSAP) y el Ministerio de Comunicaciones (MINSAP, 2020). Tenía como objetivo identificar, en tiempo real, las personas que se reconocían a sí mismas con alguna sintomatología respiratoria y que pudieran ser sospechosas de la enfermedad. De esta forma, se evaluaron para asumir conductas de vigilancia en la salud. La información era trasladada a los centros de dirección establecidos en las direcciones municipales y provinciales de salud y el MINSAP. Además de constituir una herramienta de uso ciudadano, esta herramienta reflejaba una responsabilidad individual con la salud que no sustituye la pesquisa activa, y contribuyó a elevar la inmediatez en la toma de decisiones y a fortalecer las acciones de vigilancia en salud desde los policlínicos (MINSAP, 2020).

Se hizo patente la necesidad de una comunicación social, que ayudase a la comprensión del alcance de la enfermedad, del cuidado y de las medidas de protección en espacios públicos y privados. Dichas actividades resultaron en la elaboración de materiales creativos para reforzar orientaciones sanitarias en el país. Por ejemplo, se diseñaron y conformaron productos en formatos impresos y digitales, medios de difusión masiva en programas de radio y televisión, además de la red de redes en sus diferentes plataformas y opciones (Alonso Falcón, 2020).

### **Cómo Enfrentar el Impacto Psicológico**

El proceso docente-educativo fue afectado en las instituciones educacionales no solo en el cumplimiento del contenido, sino también por el impacto psicológico en estudiantes y profesores (Balluerka Lasa, 2020). Funcionaron varios proyectos de acompañamiento psicológico y social a distancia. Vale destacar el proyecto de la telepsicología, como una alternativa para la asistencia psicológica en línea, para garantizar la intervención psicosocial con un carácter humanístico para dar respuesta a las necesidades psicoemocionales y psicosociales (Lorenzo Ruiz, 2020; Santana González, 2020). Además, los llamados “Psico grupos de WhatsApp,” conformados tanto por profesores como alumnos

de la facultad de psicología, profesionales de la salud, especialistas y orientadores, servían como base para la recepción y atención de inquietudes y contención emocional, así como de una amplia gama de problemáticas psicosociales (Zas et al., 2020). Conjuntamente, se utilizó la habitual línea telefónica de ayuda antidroga “103”, con cobertura nacional de carácter gratuito para recibir llamadas asociadas al apoyo psicosocial por el COVID-19. Estos servicios de Psico Grupos WhatsApp y 103 priorizaron la necesidad de promover la salud, acompañar a las personas en el proceso de sufrimiento, duelo, ansiedad, desorientación, y especialmente la necesidad de recibir ayuda, ser escuchado, y aconsejado profesionalmente, siguiendo una ética emancipadora (Zas et al., 2020).

#PsicologíaConCuba fue un proyecto de producción audiovisual y textual de mensajes de orientación psicológica a la población (Lorenzo Ruiz, 2020). Se combinaron saberes y experiencias del quehacer de la psicología en Cuba, de profesionales de la producción y los servicios, de profesores e investigadores, de universidades e instituciones especializadas, y estudiantes en formación. Compartieron sus experiencias y sus prácticas profesionales en cápsulas o minivideos con grabaciones para difusión de experiencias de mayor necesidad para motivar y activar factores protectores y de resiliencia humana (Lorenzo Ruiz, 2020).

Se incorporaron iniciativas de acompañamiento psicosocial a través de medios sociales, páginas de web institucionales, y correos electrónicos. En ellos se trabajó en el manejo de emociones, las temáticas familiares, migración, las cuestiones económicas, la vida cotidiana, los proyectos futuros, las acciones más especializadas en psicoterapia antiestrés, el manejo del aislamiento social, los problemas de desbordamiento de grupos de alto riesgo y la vulnerabilidad (Balluerka Lasa, 2020). Finalmente, se constituyó un alto vínculo entre colegios de psicología de las Américas y asociaciones internacionales. Se intercambiaron materiales y publicaciones para su valoración y difusión.

## **La Educación Superior Cubana como Centro de Investigación**

La misión de la industria biotecnológica de Cuba es de atender de manera eficaz las necesidades del sector de salud pública. En ella colaboraron docenas de instituciones, incluyendo la educación superior. Compartieron sus logros y conocimientos, facilitando el avance rápido en la innovación y aplicación de los descubrimientos científicos en el país, como las respuestas al Covid-19 (Yaffe, 2020).

Las investigaciones realizadas para crear una vacuna propia permitieron la creación de cinco vacunas cubanas contra la COVID-19: *Abdala*, *Soberana 01/02/Plus*, y *Mambisa* (MINSAP, 2021). El nombre *Soberana* reflejó la importancia económica y política que para el país significa. Sin esta producción nacional, Cuba hubiera tenido grandes dificultades para acceder a vacunas extranjeras, debido a su alto costo en los mercados internacionales o a raíz del embargo de los Estados Unidos. En el proceso de investigación científica para la fabricación de las vacunas, participaron científicos cubanos de los diferentes centros de investigación, incluyendo la industria farmacéutica y biotecnológica y las diferentes universidades de ciencias médicas del país (MINSAP, 2021; Yaffe, 2020).

Se crearon fármacos para combatir el COVID-19 y su producción se logró a través de las industrias cubanas con la colaboración de las instituciones universitarias. Los fármacos Nasalferón y la Biomodulina T fueron alternativas profilácticas que garantizaron la inhibición de síntomas severos cuando la persona ya estaba contagiada. Además, lograron una protección frente a la exposición al SARS-CoV-2 (MINSAP, 2021; Yaffe, 2020). Paralelamente, se incluyó la producción de sueros y otros medicamentos naturales como las pastillas de *Anamú*, *Moringa* y *Viprol* para la atención a pacientes sospechosos y positivos de portar el virus. Todos los logros alcanzados fueron posible por la integración de los diferentes centros investigativos e industrias farmacéuticas y biotecnológicas, con la contribución de profesionales universitarios y estudiantes (MINSAP, 2021; Yaffe, 2020).

Por medio de esta colaboración de diferentes centros e industrias, junto con la participación de estudiantes universitarios, se elaboraron programas estadísticos y matemáticos y mapas geográficos, pronosticando la situación del COVID-19 del país acerca del incremento de los casos positivos (Pérez-Capdevila et al., 2020). Se formaron equipos integrados en cada provincia del país para prever y crear las condiciones técnicas, materiales y humanas necesarias para enfrentar el aumento de casos positivos, aspecto que evidenció el papel de la ciencia y la innovación en la lucha contra esta crisis sanitaria.

La creación de centros especializados para la realización de las pruebas diagnósticas conocidas por su sigla en inglés PCR<sup>1</sup> constituyó otra de las acciones realizadas por especialistas de la salud con el apoyo de las universidades de las ciencias médicas y estudiantes como parte de sus prácticas profesionales (Garay Hurtado, 2021). Con las pruebas diagnósticas, los diferentes medicamentos, los fármacos utilizados en la prevención y tratamiento contra el COVID-19 y el proceso de inmunización con las vacunas cubanas, se evidenció mucha efectividad. Por citar un ejemplo, en 2020, Cuba registraba un total de 12 225 casos de infección por coronavirus y 146 muertes en una población de más de 11,2 millones, lo que correspondía a una de las tasas más bajas del hemisferio occidental (Bell Castillo et al., 2023).

Esta colaboración entre la industria de biotecnología, los centros investigativos, y la universidad siguió con la creación de cinco modelos de ventiladores pulmonares en la asistencia a pacientes con COVID-19 (Romeo Matos, 2020). Se trató de un producto orientado a la ventilación mecánica de emergencia en pacientes adultos aprovechando las facilidades de uso de las bolsas de resucitación manuales diseñadas para la reanimación cardio pulmonar (Romeo Matos, 2020). Fabricados en tres meses, estos equipos realizaron la función de medir el oxígeno y presentaron un alto rango de soporte con baterías sin necesidad de depender de la electricidad. Concebidos ante la escasez de ventilación de emergencia por periodos no mayores de 24 horas de trabajo ininterrumpido, resultaron de gran ayuda. Estos dispositivos fueron diseñados y realizados por grupos de organismos que contaron con la participación de profesionales universitarios y estudiantes (Romeo Matos, 2020).

Las universidades de ciencias médicas acompañaron al sistema de salud cubano contra el COVID-19. Cuando comenzó el curso para nuevos ingresos, como parte de los contenidos introductorios, se capacitaron a los estudiantes sobre el COVID-19 y se unieron a la pesquisa. En los años terminales, los estudiantes también participaron en los servicios asistenciales, los laboratorios de biología molecular, en el control de las estadísticas, en la gestión de datos, en los ensayos clínicos de los candidatos vacunales cubanos y en las actividades de control sanitario internacional (Pérez, 2021).

Las acciones tomadas por las universidades muestran el espíritu de solidaridad, de fraternidad y compromiso de una población en pleno proceso de madurez. Los profesores y estudiantes universitarios se incorporaron a la producción de alimentos en zonas agrícolas, fábricas e industrias productivas durante el COVID-19 (Viñas Rodríguez, 2020). Se crearon brigadas de trabajo en los principales centros productivos del país por las universidades y empresas, y organismos para el desarrollo de las prácticas profesionales de los estudiantes. Los productos cosechados fueron distribuidos en hospitales y en centros de aislamientos creados para mejorar la alimentación de los pacientes ingresados positivos con COVID-19. Estas brigadas llevaron alimentos a las personas de edad avanzada, personas con discapacidad, y a quienes se encontraban en situaciones sociales difíciles. A estas personas, se les asistió con hacerles las filas para comprarles la canasta básica subsidiada por el gobierno de comida y artículos de higiene y de limpieza para que no tuvieran que salir de sus hogares (Viñas Rodríguez, 2020). Estas experiencias muestran que se puede conformar otro mundo de relaciones humanas, donde cada persona sea parte de un cuerpo social decidido a generar flujos de solidaridad con el compromiso de ayudar a los más vulnerables.

## **Las Conclusiones**

A pesar de todo, Cuba enfrentó la pandemia del COVID-19 utilizando como método fundamental, la innovación y la ciencia, con el apoyo de la investigación por las universidades y otros centros de investigación. Los jóvenes universitarios asumieron un rol protagonista al ser multifuncionales durante la pandemia. Las universidades cubanas contribuyeron con su labor, al cumplimiento de los ODS, aspectos que fueron fundamentados, con mayor énfasis en los referidos a la educación de calidad y exclusividad, la salud y bienestar, así como el desarrollo de la industria, la tecnología, e innovación. El país y sus instituciones estatales elaboraron sus estrategias para cumplir con los indicadores que sustentaban dichos objetivos. En consecuencia, las universidades cubanas apoyaron el cumplimiento de los ODS durante el COVID-19.

Entre las principales labores desarrolladas se encuentran: la continuidad y desarrollo del proceso docente educativo a través de la modalidad virtual; la labor de pesquizaje en las comunidades y provincias; el trabajo desarrollado por las universidades como centro de aislamiento de casos positivos; el proceso de inmunización de la población con las

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<sup>1</sup> Reacción en Cadena de Polimerasa.

vacunas cubanas; y el trabajo desarrollado por las brigadas de estudiantes vinculadas directamente a la agricultura y centros productivos para la producción de alimentos, entre otras importantes labores realizadas.

Entre las principales innovaciones ejecutadas para contribuir con el enfrentamiento del COVID-19 y el cumplimiento de los ODS, se encuentran los avances tecnológicos, tal como convertir el sistema de educación superior de manera online, crear el pesquisador virtual y las aplicaciones de programas estadísticos, matemáticos y geográficos. También es notable los logros en salud y bienestar que dirigió la educación superior junto con otras instituciones durante la pandemia tales como la producción de los ventiladores pulmonares de emergencia y la producción de las vacunas cubanas, así como la producción de medicamentos naturales para la prevención y tratamiento del COVID-19.

Las universidades cubanas jugaron un papel fundamental durante todo el tiempo de pandemia, al no descansar en alcanzar los objetivos del desarrollo. Lo cual, nos lleva a comprender que la educación es un campo de problematización que trasciende el ejercicio docente, y se proyecta en un movimiento evolutivo que recorre y atraviesa tanto el mundo interno y el externo, en dinámicas recursivas que reconfiguran la dialógica intra e intersubjetiva, y en un campo de posibilidades de acción la educación se entiende no solo como instrucción, o acumulación de conocimientos, sino como valor, como educación para la vida.

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## **Book Review: Constructing student mobility: How universities recruit students and shape pathways between Berkeley and Seoul** **The MIT Press (2023). ISBN 9780262373371 By Stephanie Kim**

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**This Book Review was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT” or other support technologies**

### **Overview**

*Constructing Student Mobility: How Universities Recruit Students and Shape Pathways between Berkeley and Seoul* challenges the dominant discourse on international student mobility. Kim (2023) argues that the book “centers on universities—rather than students—as the most important actors in understanding student mobility flows” (p. 4). Kim explores topics for current higher education scholars to re-focus on the emergence of novel university pathways, the contested influx of international students, and the global student supply chain as well as institutional actors. In other words, this book aims its scholarships to provide a better understanding of international student mobility to further navigate through developing study abroad systems within today’s industrializing international education.

Kim has accumulated these scholarly findings over a decade of studying, researching, and working in higher education in the United States and South Korea. The book consists of three distinct research studies that the author has conducted in South Korea, California, and Washington, D.C. First, Kim conducted participant observations and semi-structured interviews across Berkeley and Seoul, primarily at UC Berkeley and Yonsei University. Second, she interviewed a total of eighty-three students, faculty members, administrators, and other professionals. Third, Kim contextualized information acquired through observations and interviews by compiling documents including university mission statements, strategic plans, deans’ statements, promotional materials, enrollment statistics, institutional reports, etc. Further, Kim offers a plain view of internationally mobile students by situating students’ experiences whose global aspirations are cultivated through two specific universities—University of California, Berkeley in the United States and Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.

### **Organization of the Book**

The focal discussion of this book was extrapolated from the combination of the author’s professional experience, academic research, and participated students’ primary experiences. The book consists of 6 chapters as follows: 1) “Those Rich International Students,” 2) A Pathway into UC Berkeley, 3) A Pathway into Yonsei University, 4) The Contradictions of Choice, 5) The Global Student Supply Chain, and 6) Lessons from a Turbulent Decade. This book also includes a methodological appendix for those interested in how the studies were conducted.

Chapter 1: “Those Rich International Students” demonstrates the palpable impact of the economic prosperity embedded in the global student supply chain and its impact on the U.S. economy, primarily from South Korean students. Kim points to the market-driven logic in higher education as the conflation of international students regarding revenue generation—and how this is related to the educational culture in South Korea. Chapter 2: A Pathway into UC Berkeley examines students from South Korea studying at UC Berkeley. The embedded story explains how the California higher education system reconfigured its pathway and admission systems along with its community colleges. Chapter 3: A Pathway into Yonsei University examines Yonsei University in South Korea. The discussion captures the early years of the international college’s operations in the 2010s as they opened an international college with an adaptation of the American liberal arts model.

Chapter 4: The Contradictions of Choice shares stories of students who chose to pursue their education at either UC Berkeley or Yonsei University by participating in the universities’ agreements, such as an exchange student program. Further, the chapter problematizes the concept of international students’ decisions through encountered challenges and the process to come to fruition in their educational investment. Chapter 5: The Global Student Supply Chain identifies a range of associated education agencies and individuals between universities and students within the industry of the global higher education market. This process funnels students to specific universities to reinforce the global student supply chain to specific universities to accommodate market demands. Chapter 6: Lessons from a Turbulent Decade places emphasis on lessons from the post-recession decade in global higher education and reflects on the future of international student mobility: the emergence of novel pathways, the contested influx of international students, and the acknowledgment of the global student supply chain. These lessons triggered a reformation of mechanisms for university arrangements to further captivate students’ attention through more internationally mobile pathways. Moreover, the chapter provides resonating stories from the students who participated in the book earlier and their post-college lives.

### Analysis

Considering the author holds multiple identities—as an academic scholar, a woman, a Korean American, a speaker of fluent English and a serviceable Korean, the author takes a reflexive approach to transparentize the analytical perspective in various scenarios through participating students’ primary experiences with their decision to internationally pursue higher education. While the students’ shared experiences provide a broad understanding of the given circumstances, readers should keep in mind that there could be other variable scenarios and limitations in eliciting standardized practices when solving complex challenges with international student mobility. Particularly, issues pertaining to international students’ temporary residence status and limited work authorization remain an ongoing subject of discussion.

The author uses an expression that South Korea has “hypercompetitive” college admissions. An additional factor to consider is the academic grading process in the education systems between South Korea and the United States: relative evaluation vs. absolute evaluation. In South Korea, the academic grade is often given in the certain top percentile while classmates compete with each other, known as relative evaluation. For example, if there are 30 students in a class, only 10% can receive an academic letter grade of A—3 students. The students’ grades are based on ranking and how well they do compared to their peers. In the United States, the academic grade is often based on absolute evaluation—which is to evaluate the performance in relation to certain standard criteria established as a whole, regardless of other individuals’ outcomes. This system could be a contributing factor in giving the sense of competing versus cooperating with each other—which affects the “hypercompetitive” college admission system that is constantly in flux as the author mentions. Subsequent to this educational environment, another challenge is “a high unemployment rate of university graduates” (Jeong, 2018) in South Korea. Accordingly, Jeong (2018) discusses how universities in South Korea have transformed their new policy practices toward globalization and a knowledge-based economy through competition and marketization—to respond to the new social environment in higher education over the past two decades.

The rapidly growing interest in pursuing higher education in South Korea is a significant element of today’s global market consumption in the education industry. Kim briefly mentions the rapid shift of culture in attaining [higher] education before and after the Korean War in the 1950s. This historical event conveys a principal understanding of why

most South Koreans had not completed primary school around that time—and why today’s South Korean youth are the most educated in the world in terms of higher education attainment among members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The culture of promoting higher education in South Korea might have been derived from the history of limited education opportunities; therefore, parents who were born or raised near or immediately after the Korean War may want to provide their children with privileged access to [higher] education that they did not have. History creates culture; culture creates expectations. These expectations can play a major role in creating students’ responsibilities in their educational investment.

For the return on their educational investment and student mobility among many other countries, the choice of country and time to study abroad should be made prudently. Kritz (2016) shares findings that countries with higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita tend to have more students abroad compared to others. This economic factor may be another interface in shaping international student mobility ratios between different countries. With the increasing number of studies focusing on the internationalization of higher education, Yang (2020) also questions about rights, responsibility, justice, and equality of international student mobility since these topics have remained largely scattered. It is imperative for international students to understand subsequent limitations in studying abroad and prepare within available options along with contingency plans.

### **Contributions to the Field of Comparative and International Higher Education**

The scholarly contributions of this book carry significant value in filling a noticeable gap between higher education scholars and practitioners whose audiences are connected to international students. This book well-contextualizes the education systems and modern trends between South Korea and the United States through selective individuals who have gained relevant experiences. For higher education scholars and/or practitioners who are not familiar with the opportunities and embedded challenges that international students have been experiencing or will experience, this book provides readers with a general understanding of international students’ mobility. While there are implicit learning opportunities that international students can benefit from this book, the primary audience of this book may be more suitable for higher education scholars and practitioners rather than international students.

Also, the author reconciles the need for demand and supply to achieve global and domestic aspirations between universities with an implication of refining the mechanisms of university pathways to further strategize the education market. The book further identifies associated stakeholders and acting agencies that are involved in supplying the global education chain, along with associated challenges and opportunities that students may encounter during their endeavors. Parallely, the author provides contextualized knowledge to supplement an increasing education sector with the global student market and its associated economic implications.

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## 2023 Annual Report: Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education (JCIHE)

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**This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT™ or other support technologies**

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### Abstract

*The Journal of Comparative and International Education (JCIHE) shares the 2023 Annual Report with our readership. This report shows the advances that the journal has made over the last year and areas where change can occur in the New Year. A key strength is that JCIHE is meeting its goals for increasing visibility and for increasing the diversity of authorship and their global institutional affiliations.*

Keywords: comparative, diversity, impact, international, higher education

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### Introduction

The *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education (JCIHE)* is a newer journal in the field and yet has made a notable impact in terms of expanding current and important discussions in the field. As Editor-in-Chief, I am pleased to share this Annual Report for the 2023 volume year that shows how JCIHE is meeting its goals for increasing visibility for the scholarly articles and for increasing the diversity of authorship and their global institutional affiliations. The 2023 articles showcase aspects of comparative and international higher education that are making a difference in influencing policy, practice, and future research. In addition to empirical articles and scholarly essays, in 2023, JCIHE added a Book Review section that critically shares reviews on contemporary books that hold significance for scholars and practitioners engaged in comparative and international higher education. All reviews are commissioned directly by the Book Review editor. New for 2023 is the inclusion of multi-language abstracts for selected articles. The 2023 Annual Report is divided into four sections: (1) Academic Impact; (2) Metrics & Downloads; (3) Editorial Activity; and (4) Authorship and Article Details.

## International Academic Impact

To increase international academic impact, JCIHE drew on the Higher Education SIG of the Comparative and International Education Society and other international associations to diversify the JCIHE board members and staff.

### Editorial Board, Advisory Board, Reviewers, and Administrative Staff

1) JCIHE has a strong geographic distribution of a diverse Editorial Board that includes known scholars from: Argentina, Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Kazakhstan, Scotland, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United States, Vietnam. Many of these individuals were invited to join the board if they won a best book, best article, or best dissertation award from the CIES Higher Education SIG. As such, they are respected scholars in the field of Comparative and International Education.

2) JCIHE has a strong geographic distribution of a diverse Regional Editor Board that includes members from: Australia, Egypt, England, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Korea, Latvia, Luxemburg, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and United States. These scholars are also members of the Higher Education SIG of the CIES society and/or had high impact articles published in JCIHE.

3) JCIHE has a strong geographic distribution of a diverse administrative staff with editorial and production leads from Australia, Ecuador, England, Hong Kong, Korea, Kuwait, South Africa, Switzerland, and United States.

In 2023, JCIHE had 804 reviewers, and 432 readers.

### Increase JCIHE Metrics

This section shows the growth of JCIHE readership from GoogleScholar h-index and from ERIC annual report on downloads. Table 1 shows the GoogleScholar h5-index and h5-median and highlights that JCIHE had an **85% increase in citations in one year!** Table 2 shows ERIC Bi-Annual Report statistics for All Views & All Downloads in which JCIHE had 2,577 downloads in 2022 and 3,242 downloads in 2023. Table 3 shows the title of articles with the top downloads in the ERIC report. Table 4 shows the authors and article titles with the top downloads in the OJEC Platform of articles published 2018-2023. Despite this growth, JCIHE still needs greater recognition that can be achieved with continued downloading, reading, and citing articles. This is how we gain stronger recognition in the field.

**Table 1: GoogleScholar h5-index and h5-median**

GoogleScholar	2020	2021	2022
H5-index	4	5	8
H5-median	7	7	13

**Table 2: ERIC Bi-Annual Report on All Views and All Downloads**

Date	All Views	All Downloads
June 1 – December 31, 2022		2,577
January 1 – June 30, 2023	2,477	3,242

<https://eric.ed.gov/?api>, Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education.

**Table 3: OJED Top 20 Downloads: January 1, 2023 – November 26, 2023**

Author	Title	Total Views
Tang	Contributions of Capitals to Chinese International Graduates' Employability in Australia	1228
Tavares	Theoretical Perspectives on International Student Identity	1065
Maravillas	Filipino and American Teachers: Their Differences in Psychological Needs, Performance, and Culture	1075
Ballo et al.	Applying Student Development Theories: Enhancing International Student Academic Success and Integration	933
Ahmed	#RhodesMustFall: Decolonization, Praxis and Disruption	912
Brunner	'Edugration' as a wicked problem: Higher education and three-step immigration	830
Trilokekar et al.	The Nexus of Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, and National Security: A Comparative Study of International Education in the U.S. and Canada	815
Merlin et al.	Academic Stress, Social Support, and Adjustment Among International Students in India	781
Zhang et al.	International Doctoral Students' Sense of Belonging, Mental Toughness, and Psychological Well-Being	754
Cooley et al.	Foreign Donations in the Higher Education Sector of the United States and the United Kingdom: Pathways for Reputation Laundering	754
Ritter	Singapore's Search for National Identity: Building a Nation through Education	711
Howe et al.	Experiences of International Students at a Canadian University: Barriers and Supports	666
Phan et al.	Why Institutional Scholarship Policy Matters: Its Influences on Graduate International Students of a Regional University in Taiwan	658
Zhang et al.	Coping and adjustment during COVID-19: Experiences of Chinese international doctoral students in the United States	654
Huynh et al.	Digitalisation of the Teaching and Learning for International Students in Higher Education: A Systematic Review	638
Zhang	A Comparison between Pedagogical Approaches in UK and China	617
Djita	Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic On First-Generation, Low-Income and Rural Students In Indonesia And Vietnam: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study	608
Huang	Investigating Student Development of Intercultural Communication Competence through Collaborative Online International Learning	599
Phan et al.	Why Institutional Scholarship Policy Matters: Its Influences on Graduate International Students of a Regional University in Taiwan	606
Polat	The Education Process of Children with Imprisoned Parents After the July 15, 2016 Coup Attempt in Turkey	563
Poudel	Information and Communication Technology in English Language Teaching: Some Opportunities and Challenges	563
Le	Dealing with Acculturative Stress: How International Students' Personality Traits Help?	559
Tay et al.	The Nature of Bullying in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Students' Experiences in Ghana and Norway	553

**Table 4: ERIC Reporting Top Views/Downloads: January 2023 – June 2023**

Title	Views	Downloads
Inclusion and Safe-Spaces for Dialogue: Analysis of Muslim Students	83	40
Pride and Prejudice: An Intersectional Look at Graduate Employability of Transgender and Queer International Students	81	58
'Those First Few Months Were Horrible': Cross-Cultural Adaptation and the J-Curve in the International Student Experience in the UK and Norway	81	78
The Impact of COVID-19 Outbreak on International Student Mobility: Analysis, Response Strategies and Experience from China	73	63
Reimagining Global Partnerships in Higher Education through Open Systems Theory	69	61
Japanese Higher Education: The Need for STEAM in Society 5.0, an Era of Societal and Technological Fusion	68	72
University Internationalization, Immigration, and the Canadian Dream: How Federal Citizenship Immigration Legislation Marginalizes International Graduate Students	67	48
Exploring the Effect of Team Identification on International Students' Adjustment to Higher Education in the United States	66	54
Exploring the Disparity of Minority Women in Senior Leadership Positions in Higher Education in the United States and Peru	60	71
The Smell, the Emotion, and the Lebowsky Shock: What Virtual Education Abroad Cannot Do?	49	20

### JCIHE Editorial Activity

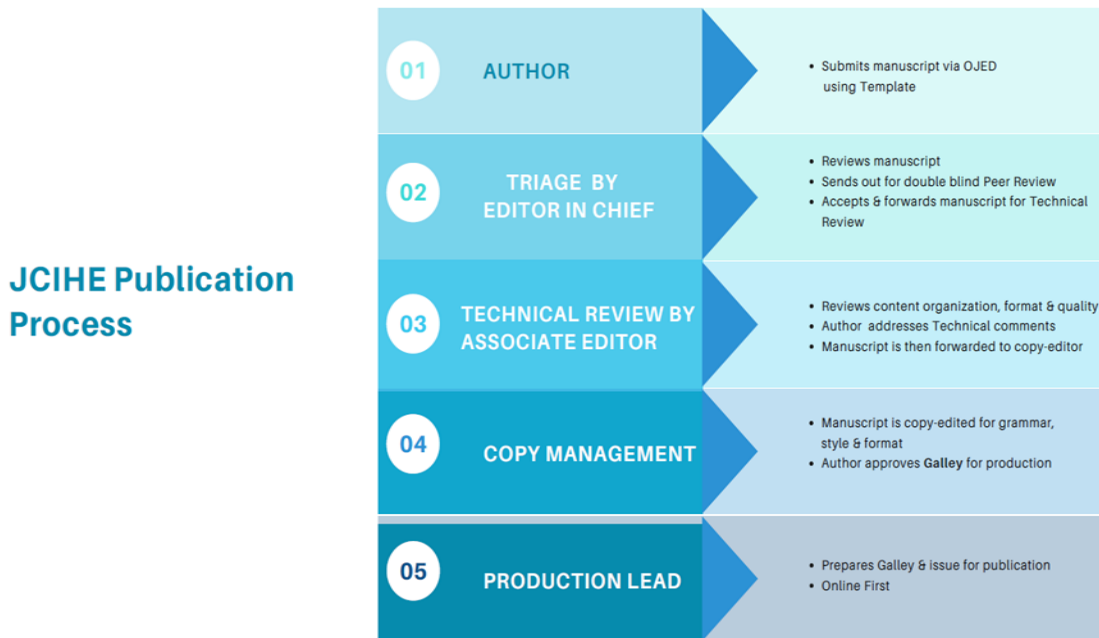
JCIHE is dedicated to expediting the review and publication processes. In 2023, JCIHE had several delays in receiving quality peer-reviews on time. This greatly expanded the timeframe from submission to first decision with an average to reject at 95 days and the average to accept at 210 days. Table 5 shows the expanded JCIHE Editorial Activity for 2023. JCIHE has a strict review process that is shown in Figure 1.

**Table 5: JCIHE Editorial Activity: January 1, 2023 – November 26, 2023**

Name	2023-01-01 — 2023-12-28
Submissions Received	152
Submissions Declined (Desk Reject)	36
Submissions Declined (After Review)	18
Submissions Published	70
Days to First Editorial Decision Description for Days to First Editorial Decision	38
Days to Accept	210
Days to Reject	95
Acceptance Rate Description for Acceptance Rate	61%
Rejection Rate Description for Rejection Rate	39%
Desk Reject Rate	32%
After Review Reject Rate	7%



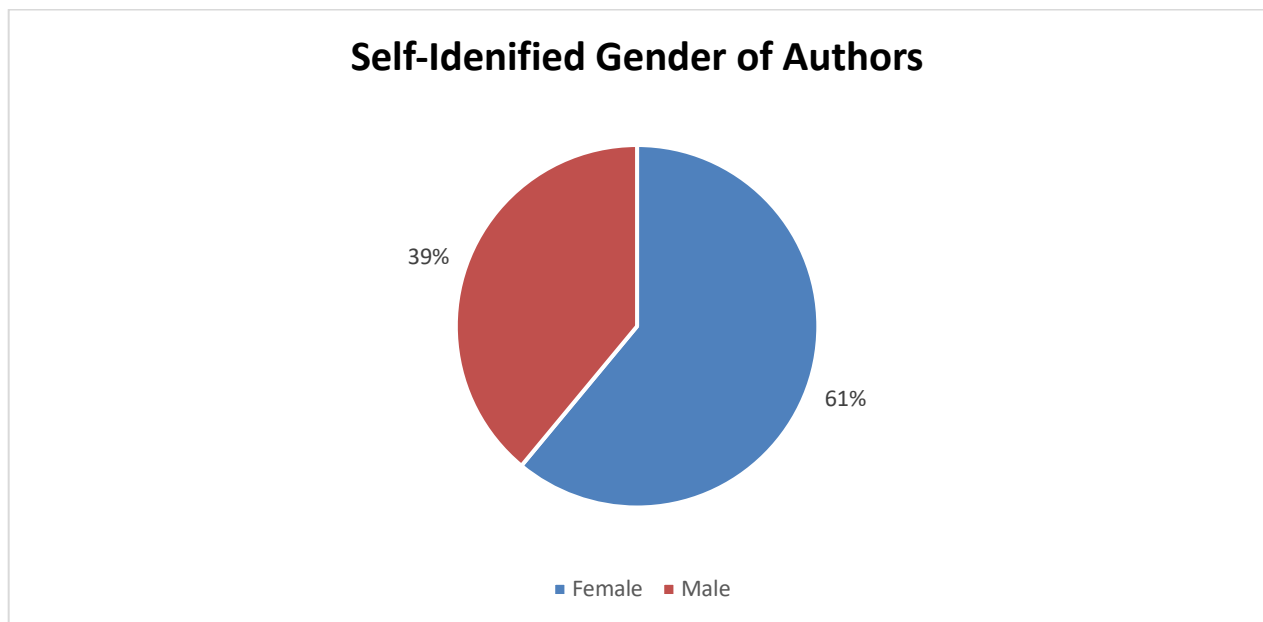
**Figure 1: JCIHE Editorial Publication Process**



### Authorship and Article Details

This section details authors profiles who were published in JCIHE Issue 15, 2023. Graph 1 shows gender identification of authors. In 2023, 61% of authors were women (n=72) and 39% men (n=46). Table 1 and Graph 2 show, shows author academic and professional positions, and Graphs 3-7 detail the country of institutional affiliations that shows increased author diversity.

**Graph 1: Authorship Gender Identifications**



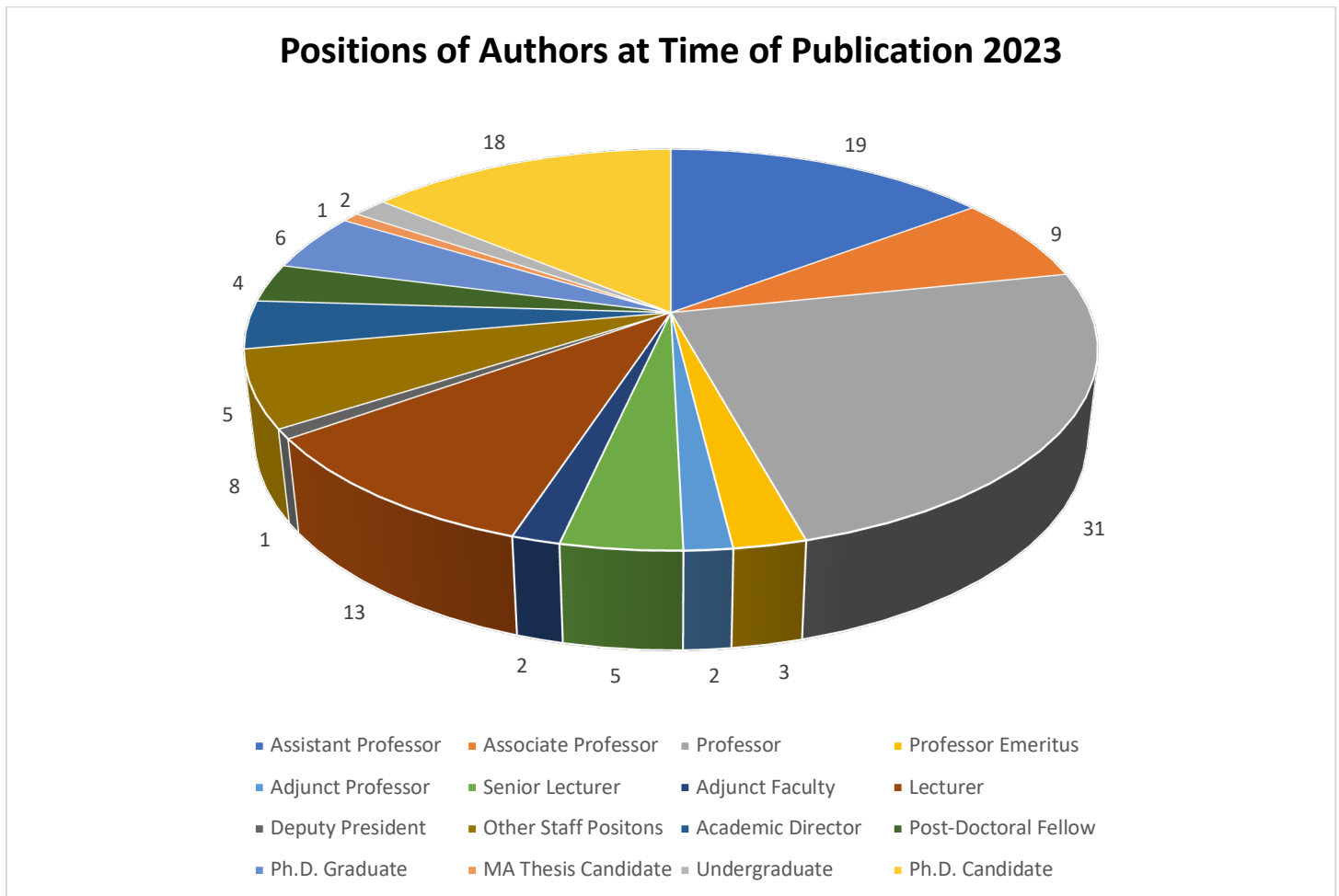
## Author Academic and Professional Positions

Table 6 and Graph 2 show that authors, at the time of publication, held various positions. The top three ranks of authors in 2023 were Professor (n=31), Assistant Professor (n=19), Ph.D. Student (n=18). Due to the number of positions, Graph 2 consolidates the non-academic track positions.

**Table 6: Author Rank at the Time of Publication 2023**

Rank	Number	Rank	Number
Professor Emeritus	3	Director	2
Assistant Professor	19	Educational Designer	1
Associate Professor	9	Psychologist	1
Professor	31	Academic Director	4
Adjunct Professor	2	Student Affairs Professional	1
Senior Lecturer	5	Post-Doctoral Fellow	4
Lecturer	13	Ph.D. Graduate	6
Science Teacher, Ministry of National Education	1	Ph.D. Student	18
Teaching Specialist	2	MA Student	3
Deputy President	1	Undergraduate Student	2
Adjunct Faculty	2		

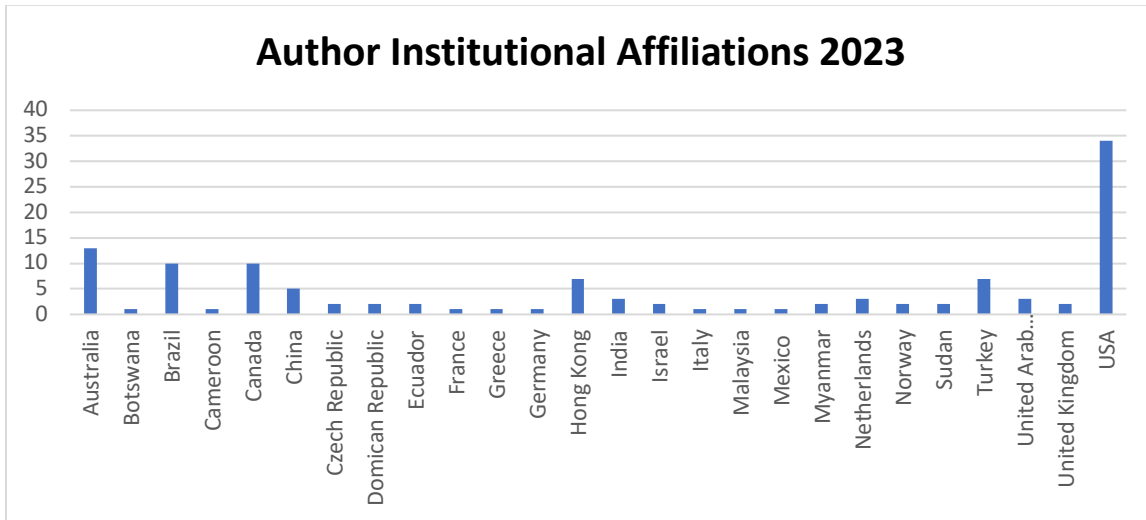
**Graph 2: Positions of Authors at Time of Publication in 2023**



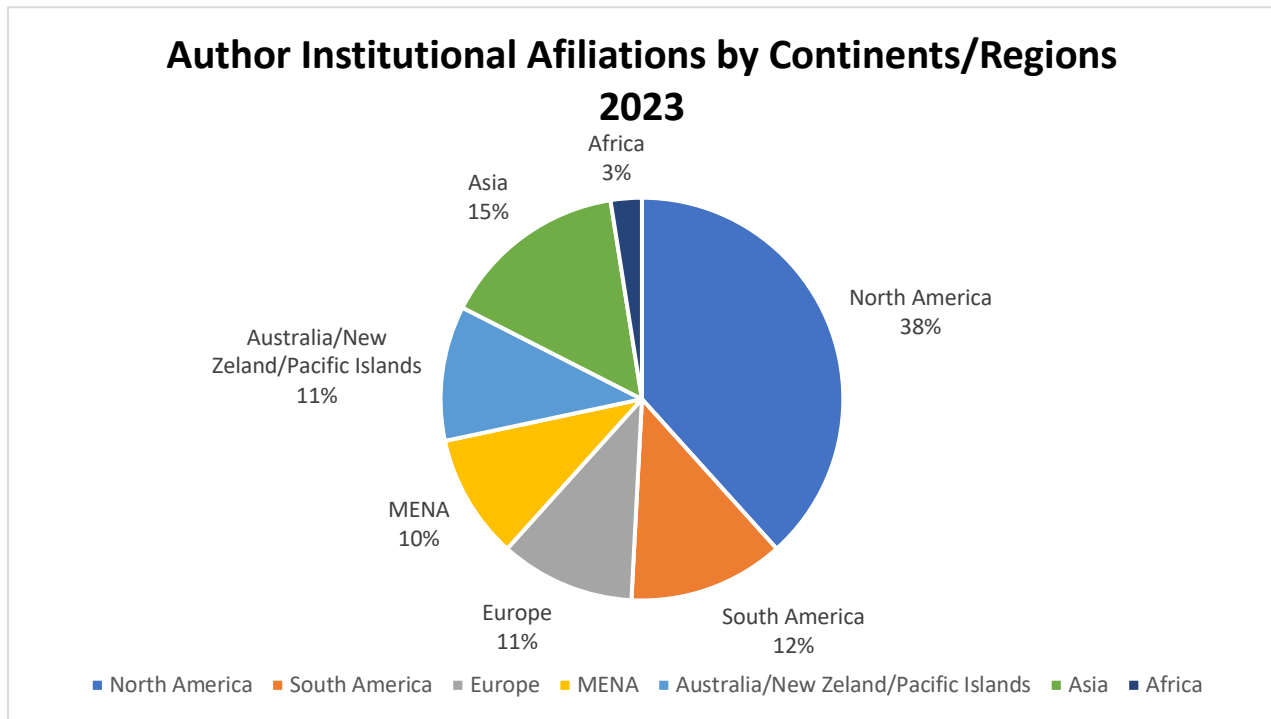
### Author Institutional Affiliations by Continent and Country

Being a journal that is international in scope and purpose, JCIHE is pleased to share that in 2023, JCIHE increased inclusion of authorship from around the world who write about comparative and international higher educational issues with increased representation of authorship from the Global South. In 2023, 62% of authors had institutional affiliations outside of Canada and the United States. In total, authors represented 25 countries. Graph 3 shows institutional affiliations by countries, Graph 4 by continents/regions, Graph 5 shows countries with over five articles, Graph 6 countries with less than five authors, and Graph 7 is a multi-year comparison of top country authorship from 2021-2023. These graphs show a great diversification of authorship with even representation from most regions of the world. The 2023 Winter Special Issue helped to bring in voices from Central America and South America.

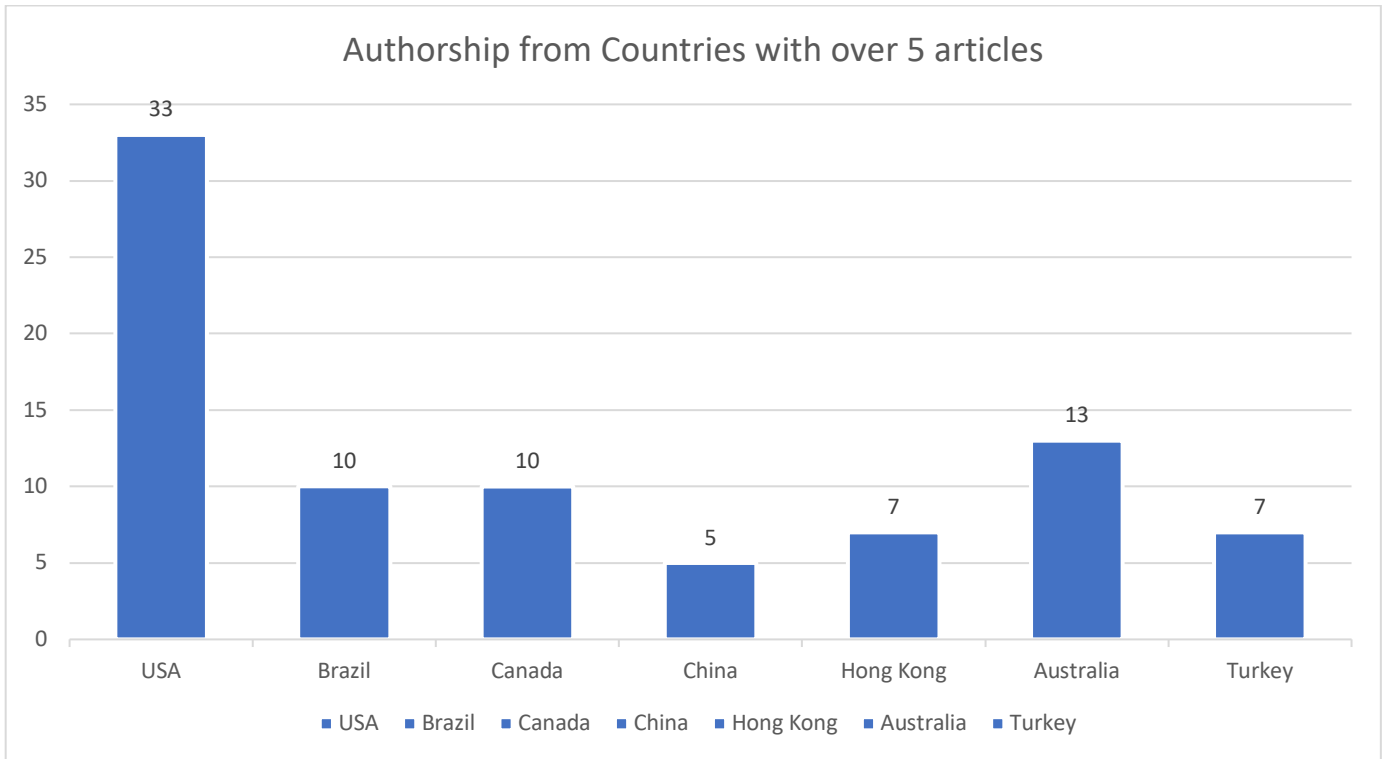
**Graph 3: Author Institutional Affiliations by Continents/Regions**



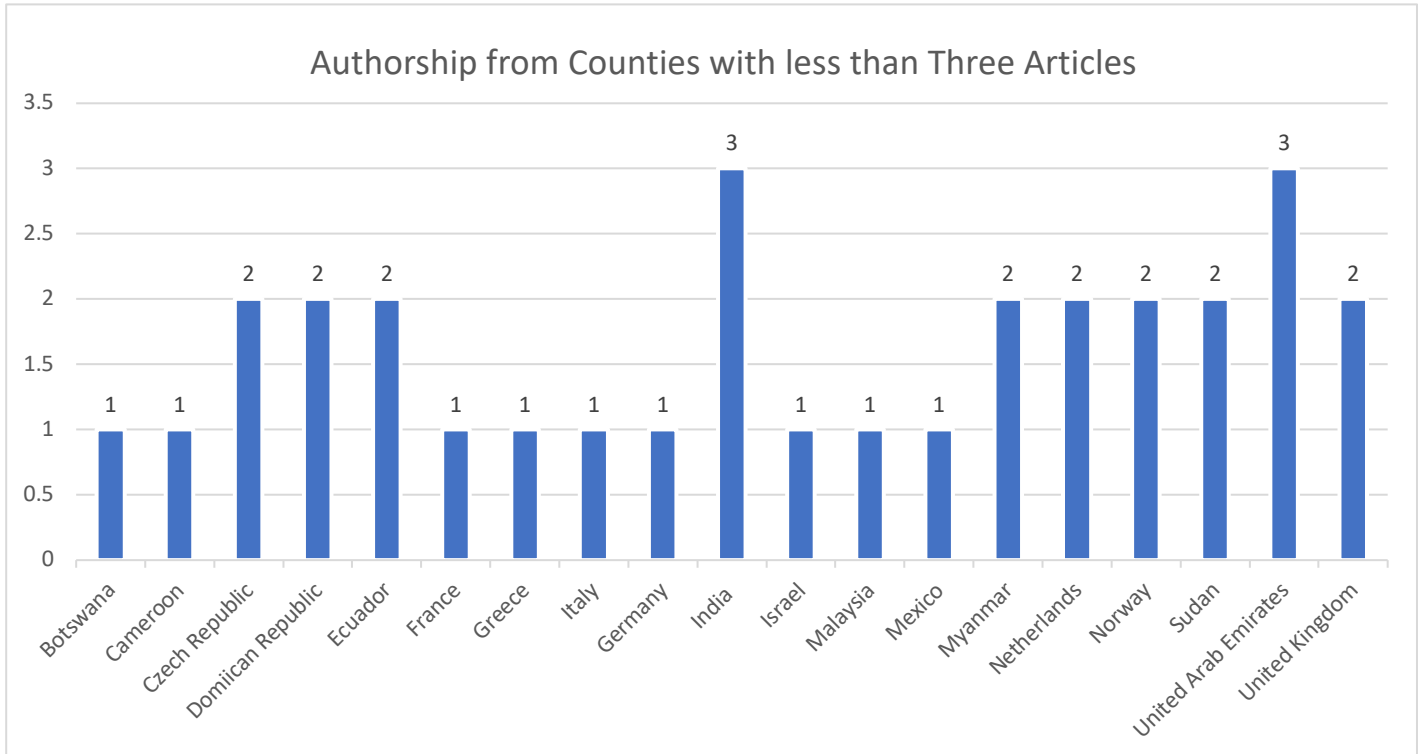
**Graph 4: Authorship from Countries with over 3 articles**



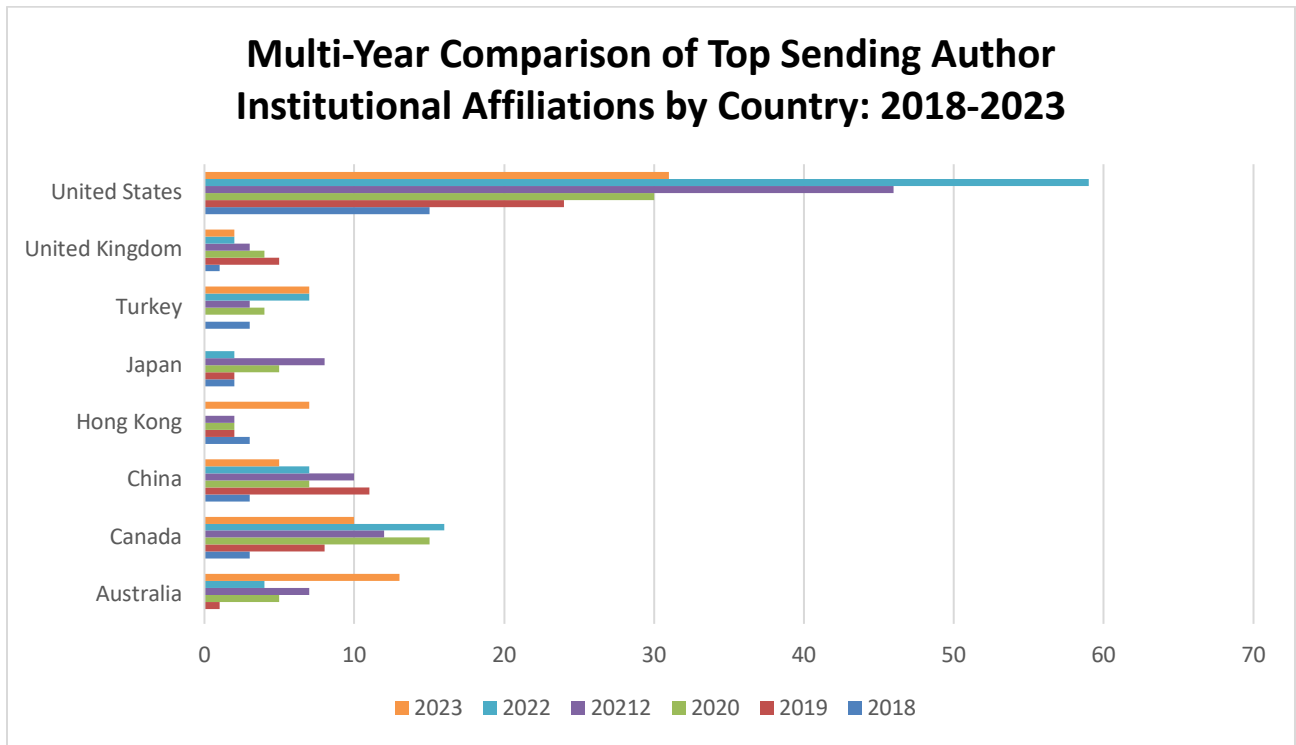
**Graph 5: Authorship from Countries with over 5 articles**



**Graph 6: Authorship from countries with under 3 articles:**



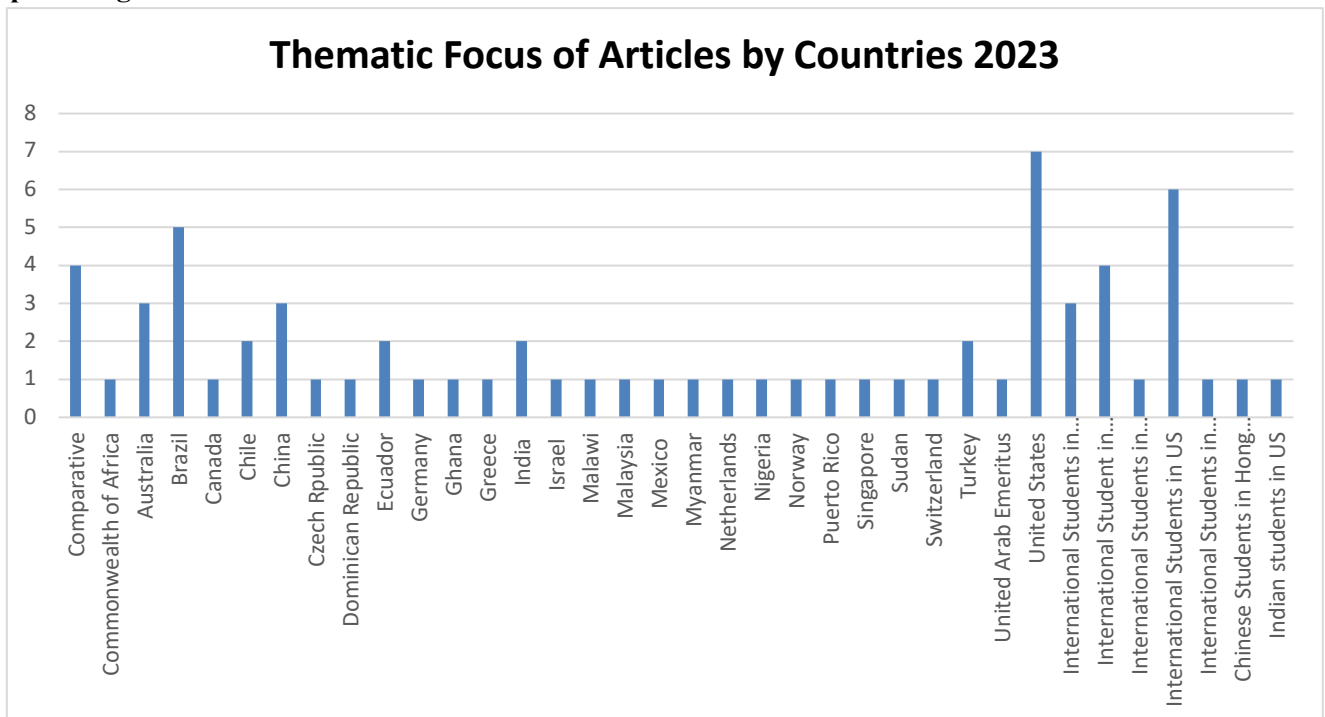
**Graph 7: 2018-2023: Multi-year Comparison of Institutional Affiliations**



**Regional and Thematic Focus of the Articles**

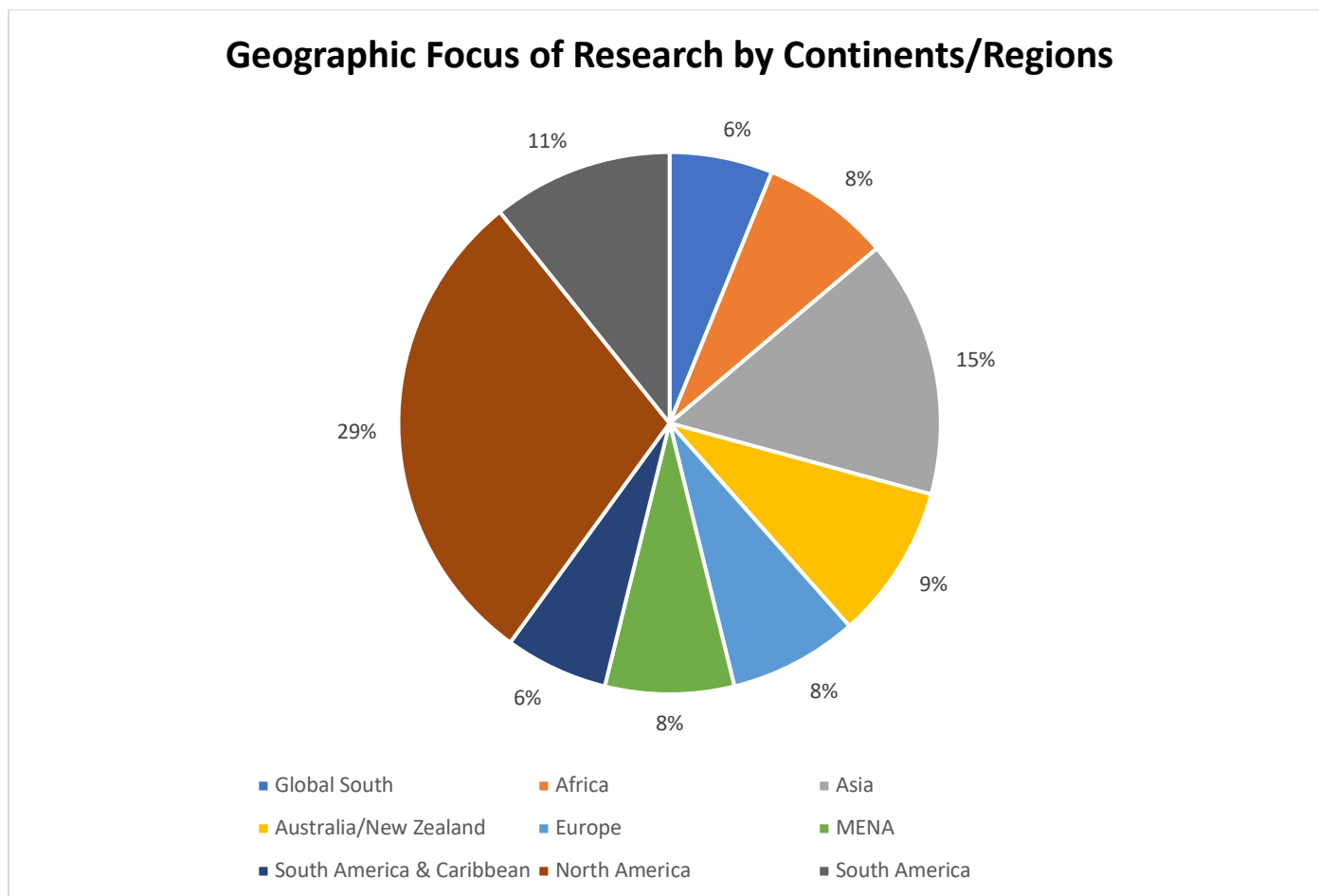
While the institutional affiliation of JCIHE authors is diverse, the geographic and thematic focus of a significant number of the articles remains focused on the study of international students in United States and in Canada. The continental focus does show some diversity with a focus of higher educational issues in North America (29%), Asia

**Graph 8: Regional and Thematic Focus of Articles**



(15%), South America (11%), and Australia/New Zealand (9%). Graph 8 shows the thematic focus of the articles published in 2023 by countries and Graph 9 by continents. The theme of international students, especially in United States and Canada continues to be of interest to our authors and our readership. An equally important theme is that of the effects of COVID-19 on the HEI sector.

**Graph 9: Focus of Articles: Continents**



### Article Methodologies and Keywords

#### Methodologies

In 2023, authors used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Table 7 details the methodologies used in the articles published in 2023. Within the quantitative focused articles, the most used methods were online survey (n=8), mixed methods (n=6), and multiple regression analysis (n=5). Within the qualitative focused articles, the most used methods were interviews (n=16) and Critical Analysis in Literature Review (n=6).

#### Keywords in Articles

Keywords provide a picture of the trends in the research published in 2023. Table 8 shows keywords with 4 or more mentions and Table 9 shows all keywords found in articles in 2023. It is not surprising that research on COVID still dominates due to the tremendous impact it had on international higher education. The other two noted keywords are international students and transnational mobility. Also notable is a focus on decolonialization, which was a topic of focus for the 2023 Winter Special Issue.

**Table 7: Methodologies Used**

Quantitative Total	24	Qualitative Total	43
Survey (online)	8	Interviews	16
Mixed Methods	6	Literature Review: Critical Analysis	6
Questionnaire	4	Systemic Literature Review	5
Statistics	4	Case study: single	5
Multiple Regression analysis	5	Content Analysis	2
Cross-sectional survey design	1	Essay: Decolonizing Methodologies	2
Mega database comparison	1	Essay	2
Quasi-Experimental	1	Participatory Action Research Case Study	2
		Case study: Multiple & Comparative	2
		Focus Group	2
		Participatory Emancipatory Approach	2
		Archival Methods	1
		Comparative Analysis	1
		Critical Website Analysis	1
		Document Review	1
		Holistic Single Case Design	1
		Thematic Document Review	1
		Website Analysis	1

**Table 8: Keywords with 4 or more mentions**

Keyword	Quantity	Keyword	Quantity
COVID-19 pandemic	11	Internationalization	5
Decolonialism	5	International students / mobility	11
Higher Education	9		

**Table 9: Quantity of All Keywords in 2023**

Keyword	#	Keyword	#	Keyword	#
Academic Achievement	1	Character Strengths	1	Digitalization	1
Academic & Social Challenges	3	Chinese Higher Education	2	Digital Technology	1
Academic Campus	1	Chinese International Students	1	E-Learning	1
Academic Gender Disparity	1	Colonialism	2	E-Teaching	1
Academic Performance	1	Coloniality	1	Educational Diplomacy	1
Academic Support	1	Collaborative Online International Learning	1	Embodiment	1
Acculturation Strategy	1	Commonwealth	1	English Language Only	2
Adjustment	2	Competencies	1	English Language Teaching	2
Africa	1	Complexities	1	English as Second Language (ESL)	1
Anti-colonial	1	COVID-19 Pandemic	11	English Foreign Language Teachers (EFL)	1
Archives	1	Critical Internationalization	1	Engagement	1
Asia	1	Communication	1	Epistemic (In)Justice	1
Asian International Students	2	Coping Strategies	2	E-portfolio	1

Assessment	1	Cultural Adjustment	1	Equity	1
Black Feminist Thought	1	Decolonial Higher Education	1	Ethics of Care	1
Brazil	1	Decolonial Practices	2	Experience	1
Bullying	1	Decolonialism	5	Fulbright	1
Canada	1	Decolonization of International Education	1	Gender	2
Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions	1	Denial	1	Ghana	1
Challenges	2	Disruption	1	Global South	3
Keyword	#	Keyword	#	Keyword	#
Globalization	3	Language in Education	1	Representation	1
Governance	1	Language Ideologies	1	Scenario Planning	1
Higher Education	9	Languages Without Borders	1	Self-efficacy Belief	1
Human Rights	2	Literature Review	1	Self-regulation	1
Inclusive Excellence Framework	2	Malawi	1	Social Adjustment	1
Identity	1	Management	1	Social Justice	1
Identity Conflict	1	Mental Health	1	Social Support	1
Identity Expansion	1	Meritocracy	1	Socio-economic Class	1
Indian International Students	2	Mixed Methods	1	Socio-emotional Learning (SEL)	1
Information Technology	1	Mobility	1	Strategic Management	1
Imperialism	1	Modernity	1	Student Business Model	1
Imagined Community	1	Multilingual	1	Students of Color	1
Institutional Supports	2	Myanmar	1	Student Engagement	2
Integration	1	Negative Behaviors	1	Student Mobility	2
Intention Equality	1	Nigeria	1	Student Perceptions	1
Intercultural Competencies	3	Norway	1	Study Abroad	1
International Education	4	Online Learning	1	Supplemental Instruction	1
International Higher Education	3	Online Orientation	1	Teacher Education	1
International Student Experiences: Vancouver	1	Online Support	1	Teaching & Learning	2
International Students/Mobility	10	Online Teaching	1	Testimony	1
International Student Transition	1	Organizational Change	1	Translanguaging	1
International Teaching Assistant (ITA)	1	Positive Psychology	1	Trampas	1
Internationalization	5	Postcolonial Studies	1	Undergraduate Students	1
Intersectionality	2	Power	1	Visual Discourse	1
Investment	1	Pre-service	1	Whiteness	1
Knowledge Production	1	Quota System	1	Women in academia	1
Learning strategies	1	Race	2		