

International Student Challenges Further Amplified in the Era of a Pandemic: A Tale of a Bangladeshi Graduate Student

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ABSTRACT

International students have always been in challenging situations and this pandemic amplified it further. To smoothly transition to the educational platforms and integrate into a new country, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, international students need adequate support from educational institutions and governments. Integration plays a dominant role in adaptation to life in a foreign country and academic success. Based on Tinto's (2011) integration model, this study explores the unique challenges based on the lived experiences of an international doctoral student from a lower-income country, Bangladesh, enrolled in an Ontario university. It focuses on the learning experience of the international doctoral student's integration to become a scholar within this changing time. Self-reflection on the hurdles experienced and the coping strategies during the evolution inform the analysis. Finally, the study concludes by highlighting the role of adequate institutional and government support services by offering valuable recommendations for international students' integration.

Keywords: Doctoral education, international student, integration, support, COVID-19, lived experience

An internationally mobile student is one that has left their country or territory of origin and moved to another country or region with the singular objective of studying (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2006). The OECD (2006) is similar in definition but makes an important distinction between "international students" and "foreign students" in defining terms for the cross-border-mobility section of its comparative dataset. Adopted in 2006, the OECD and UIS

convention is to use the term “international student” when referring to students crossing borders for the specific purpose of studying and “foreign student” for non-citizens enrolled at an institution of education outside their home country but who have not necessarily crossed a border to study (OECD, 2006; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006).

Responding to a growing need for new insights and perspectives to improve higher education policy and practice for international students in the era of coronavirus (Covid-19), this text analyzes the changing roles and responsibilities of institutions and international education leaders. The article highlights vital challenges for international students that arose because of the global health crisis, such as student learning, well-being, and the changing emotional, legal, and financial implications of studying abroad. Studying this population's experiences is important as international students in Canada alone spend an estimated \$21.6 billion on tuition, accommodation, and other expenses in 2018 and sustain close to 170,000 jobs in 2016 (Government of Canada, 2020). These are international students from different countries coming to Canada to pursue their higher education. It is significant to explore their experiences in the field of international higher education to sustain this enrollment and make "Canada a powerhouse in international education" (Government of Canada, 2020, para. driving prosperity).

The Covid-19 pandemic has required students to adapt to an unprecedented challenge as it has drastically changed the educational landscape worldwide and international students have their own set of unique challenges (Neuwirth et al., 2020; Okwuosa, 2021; Stavicka & Odina, 2021). International students had to also worry about things such as border closures, visa and graduation status, courses conducted online or canceled, living far from loved ones, and not having a strong support network, having to find a place to live if dormitories closed, and finances (Firang, 2020; Keung & Teotonio, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). International students' challenges in Ontario regarding isolation, travel ban, online learning, etc., amid the Covid-19 pandemic, are indeed some significant problems in this era of unprecedented uncertainty and difficulties. While most international students encountered common challenges such as navigating online courses, fear about the virus and health concerns, and social isolation, some international students faced other inimitable challenges during Covid-19, as evidenced by reports of multiple incidents of racism and racial discrimination committed against international students due to their race and/or ethnicity (Berger, 2020; Horton, 2020; Tavernise & Oppel, 2020).

This article is a critical auto-ethnographic reflection of an international Bangladeshi graduate student's account of their experiences during Covid-19. It also provides some insights on where government and institutional support can alleviate international students' experiences in coping with Covid-19 and presents an opportunity for tertiary education systems worldwide to learn from one another. The number of Bangladeshi international students is increasing in Canadian institutions; however, their voices are often unheard as they are often not courageous enough to speak for themselves. In other qualitative inquiries, their voices are sometimes mixed with voices from international students from their neighboring regions. Coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds,

these international students from Bangladesh are often fearful of speaking about their challenging journeys, thinking that it might impact their stay in Canada. This Bangladeshi international doctoral student is one of the very few students who is using their courage to speak about their journey by discussing their lived experiences. These experiences enabled the author to grow and develop the valor to speak up.

Research Question

The primary research question is, “What are my key challenges as a Bangladeshi international student in starting my doctoral program in an Ontario university during the Covid-19 pandemic?” There has been some research with the voices of international graduate students regarding their experiences during the pandemic; however, no known studies were found specifically examining the voice of a Bangladesh PhD student. The goal of this study was to provide the voice of an authentic experience of an international Bangladeshi graduate student. Exploring the experiences of a Bangladesh PhD student allows for a deeper understanding of students from developing and/or lower to lower-middle-income countries studying in Western developed countries. In turn, this permits opportunities for more targeted support for students from similar backgrounds or circumstances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Keung and Teotonio (2020) share challenging stories of international students as colleges and universities abruptly halted due to travel restrictions imposed in the wake of the global Covid-19 health crisis. Border closures, flight cancellations, shuttered language testing sites and closed visa offices as some of the major challenges. A growing number of international students who intend to come to Canada were now deferring their study plans. “I am afraid to be in a country where I do not know anyone and have nowhere to go during this pandemic. I don’t think it would be mentally healthy for me to go to a place for the first time, alone with all these problems, says Olaifa” -a potential international student as cited by Keung and Teotonio (2020, para. 4). As the health crisis drags on, colleges and universities are asking the federal government to allow all international students to do online courses while in their own country.

International student enrollment in Canada has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic (Keung & Teotonio, 2020) as most of the universities moved into an online format (Ross, 2020). International students who are already in Canada were also going through severe challenges including being a vulnerable minority group of people and the impact on their well-being during the current global health crisis. Wong et al. (2020) interviewed three international students from India, the Netherlands, and Mauritius, and they shared how they have been continuing to study and stay connected to their classmates and families during this critical time of the pandemic. In answer to this question, how has the pandemic changed you? one of the students answered “It has reinforced my belief that I am studying the right things. We are seeing how opinion is so divided and there are such global

disparities. We studied these things in the classroom, and now we are watching them unfold in real-time” (Wong et al., 2020, para. 7).

Wong et al. (2020) illustrates, for these students, how the situation escalated quickly. Some of them preferred taking a flight at a higher cost and move back to their home country because they would desire to be with family rather than being stuck in the dorm. For others, flying was not an option; with closed borders and financial stress, they had to stick around experiencing the pandemic in a different way.

A narrative inquiry by Jaber and Cordeiro (2021) shared that the sudden global emergence of Covid-19 brought unimaginable, ever-changing, and unrelenting challenges. It affected how the world functioned, how businesses and governments were run, and how people interacted, among other difficulties. In another study, Sahu (2020) articulates the rapid worldwide increase of infected cases created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what will happen. This stress may lead to unfavorable effects on students' learning and psychological health. Sahu (2020) states international students staying far from home are not only worried about their health, safety, and education, but they also have a considerable number of concerns for the well-being of their families. Sahu (2020, (Para. Mental Health) further mentions:

“The Covid-19 pandemic may have a serious impact on the careers of this years' university graduates. They are experiencing major interruptions in teaching and assessment in the final part of their studies. They may likely graduate late due to the postponement of the final examination. Further, the graduates are going to face the severe challenges of the global recession caused by the Covid-19 crisis”.

Koo et al. (2021a)'s study explored international students' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of racial discrimination during Covid-19 in the U.S. By conducting three virtual focus group interviews with 18 international students, they identified three key themes that encapsulated participants' experiences of perceived racism: perceptions of racism—explicit discrimination and fear of threats, feelings of being unwelcome and unsafe, and two faces of quarantine—navigating tensions of relief and isolation. Koo et al. (2021b) share that while Covid-19 is not international students of color's fault, international students of color are often targets of racism and suffer from such racist incidents. Although there are many efforts to promote positive campus climates and racial justice on campuses, international students continue to face racial discrimination issues and are more victimized due to their multiple, intersectional identities than non-international students of color (Koo et al., 2021b).

Muslim students face unique challenges related to adaptation to a new educational environment and managing cultural expectations. Alqudayri and Gounko (2018) reflect on the religious difficulties of being Muslim, Islam as a flexible religion, the difficulties with racial constructs and ethnic stereotypes, and gender difficulties of male/female interactions and perceptions of veiling. Another similar study conducted by Anderson (2020) revealed that studying and living in

western countries affected these international students' values and changed how they viewed themselves, their culture, and their community. These studies also reflect some demographical aspects for some international students in Canada and their transitional pre-pandemic challenges (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Anderson, 2020). However, these challenges of international students seem to have further amplified during the pandemic and are likely to outlast post-pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Socio-economic Marxist structures involving neoliberalism and capitalism are advancing the discourse of internationalization and altering the higher education landscape (Bamberger, Morris, & Yemini, 2019). Internationalization is not an isolated phenomenon in higher education; it is embedded in the broader context of higher education in the global arena. The exercise of power constitutes and produces practices, policies, and regimes in educational institutions (Howarth, 2010); the deterritorialization of the education policy process has essential theoretical and epistemological implications.

Internationalization promotes the global education perspective in drawing international students for an integrated, collaborative educational experience (Knight, 2015). The aspect of integration plays a dominant role in the internationalization of higher education in both policy and practice as abundant research suggests that integration is key for adaptation to life in a foreign country and academic success (Brown, 2019; Merola et al., 2019; Vazirani et al., 2018). Another seminal study from Rienties et al. (2012) points to integration as a strong predictor of international student satisfaction. This study shares that several groups of international students in Ontario experienced stress while adapting to the host country's culture. They further share that international student integration should widen its focus and explore the underlying mechanisms of integration (Rienties et al., 2012).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, integration is simply defined as the action or process of successfully joining or mixing with a different group of people (Integration, n.d.). However, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, another complex definition of integration is the incorporation as equals into a society or organization of individuals of different groups (Integration, n.d.). Moreover, integration relating to students, can be strongly associated with theories based on the Student Integration Model developed by Tinto (1975; 1997). Based on the theoretical framework of Tinto's (1975, 2011) student integration model and student integration to universities are often used to analyze the auto-ethnographic narrative highlighting the international doctoral student's experiences to provide evidence of reflective and collaborative practices.

The three general facets of Tinto's (1975) model are: (a) students enter college with different levels of academic preparation and characteristics; (b) they develop different levels of integration into an institution's academic, social system, including various strengths and diversity in preparation standards; and (c) they

develop different levels of integration into an institution's social system, including the establishment of different levels of interaction with peers through formal, semi-formal, and informal groups and with adult members of the academic community.

One of the main problems in higher education relates to the high dropout rates universities have been experiencing recently, in both types of traditional learning and e-learning (Nicoletti, 2019), which further increased due to the closures brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nicoletti (2019) shares that there are several intertwined factors that act as sub-factors or rather stronger factors adding to the challenges for the university students in their integrating pathways such as geographic (Murray, 2014), social (Belloc et al., 2010; Paura & Arhipova, 2014), cultural (Wiseman et al., 2004), temporal and economical (Belloc et al., 2010), among several others; these are in addition to those related with the course (Durso & Cunha, 2018; Giannakos et al., 2017; Gordon, 2016) and with the institutional environment, which vividly connects to the stories of international students.

Tinto (2011) proposes if academic and social integration are positive, commitment and motivation to attain a degree are enhanced, and high levels of either type of integration might offset low levels of the other factors which influence persistence. Tinto's model originally noted that the integration of a student both academically and socially was an indicator of his or her ability to persist. To be successful in the pursuit of a degree, students need to achieve a level of commitment to their career, academic goals, and the institution (Tinto, 1975), and without this integration, the failure to persist is likely (Tinto, 1997). Tinto (2011) eventually expanded his model of integration to include stages such as separation, transition, adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, incorporation, finances, learning, and external obligations for commitments.

Overall, Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975) suggests that students come to higher education with background traits (e.g., race, secondary school achievement, academic aptitude, family educational, and financial contexts). These traits, or characteristics, lead to initial commitments, both to the goal of graduation and to the specific institution attended. The initial commitments are hypothesized as influencing academic performance and interactions that affect the student's integration—the greater the individual's integration, the greater their commitment to the institution and goal of graduation. Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975) attempts to understand which factors contribute to a student's decision to drop out of a university, based on their levels of social and academic integration.

METHOD

To deepen the knowledge of the lived experience of an international graduate student, the study uses autoethnography, which is an innovative style of qualitative inquiry where the author uses self-reflection and writing to explore personal experiences and connects the autobiographical story to broader social meanings (Ellis, 2004). Grounded in postmodern philosophy that makes room for diverse and non-traditional ways of knowing, autoethnographic work produces

“highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher to extend sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). This study focuses on the autoethnographic account of an international doctoral student enrolled in an Ontario higher education institution based on the lived experiences of the challenges encountered due to the pandemic. This is an account of self-reflection on the social, cultural, and emotional challenges experienced in beginning an intensive doctoral program during this severe Covid-19 pandemic, which informs the analysis.

Autoethnography is an innovative style of qualitative inquiry that has captured the attention of an ever-increasing number of scholars from various disciplines (Ellis, 2004). It is an interpretive research method that studies social phenomena through the lens of the author/researcher's personal experience (Wall, 2010). This research employs the auto-ethnographical method because it changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits. These aspects are significant for such an exploration as the author's story is unique, vulnerable, and seeks support for the author and the other international students.

The ethnographic inductive analysis involves uncovering patterns, themes, and categories in the data analysis that must be organized, coded, and analyzed. Smith (2017) adds to the importance of qualitative research methods, by stating, “stories teach us who we are by constituting our identities and sense of self” and that “people need stories because of the work they do for us, which primarily, is to help make the world meaningful” (p. 505). With the emphasis on the narrative, the stories become both the method and phenomena of the study. An autoethnography allows for a self-story that voices a “narrative oriented inquiry,” honoring the told, the re-telling, and the teller (Hiles et al., 2017, p. 8). The advantage of autoethnographic research is allowing the researcher's voice to be heard and access the data because the researcher is the primary source and the root of the data (Mendez 2013). A narrative in temporality “refers to events understudy in transition” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p. 479). Attention directs inquirers to the past, present, and future of the people, places, things, and content being studied by finding and filling a gap in existing storylines. Duncan (2004) outlines a critical aspect that even though the researcher the data source, it is important to maintain rigorous methods of data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

In this study, triangulation was involved by collecting the handwritten notes from the author's everyday personal journal entries and weekly academic research reflections written as course assignments. After completing the coursework, the author sat down and reflected on the data in developing analytical color codes highlighting words and phrases, eventually emerging into thematic patterns. Moreover, the author used peer debriefing, also called analytic triangulation, calling upon a disinterested peer to take a close look at the data collected from the author's personal and academic journal reflections to assess whether they had

missed a key point, overemphasized a minor one, or repeated one or more points. Peer debriefing requires the researcher to work together with one or several colleagues who hold impartial views of the study (Given, 2008). Many writers have suggested that peer debriefing enhances the trustworthiness and the credibility of a research project (Janesick, 2007; Spall, 1998; Stahl & King, 2020).

Reflection Diary

I am an international student from Bangladesh. I started my doctoral journey at an Ontario university in the summer of 2020, just amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Being an international student and starting a doctoral program in a foreign land among mainly native students is, in of itself, stressful. However, I was more anxious because the program began online, and I was restricted from the in-person exposure. I am a strong believer in collaborative learning and engagement; the beginning of my doctoral journey online made me more conscious of that missing piece. I started wondering how I would collaborate with my peers and the instructors if it is all through the screen. I was also nervous about whether I had enough technical skills to conduct my doctoral coursework online. I come from a developing country, Bangladesh, a country with a huge population, and is still struggling to strengthen its technological infrastructure. There have been significant improvements to education that resulted in nearly universal access to primary education and greater gender equality in primary and secondary education in Bangladesh over the last decade. However, learning outcomes and completion rates have not kept pace with the advances in participation and gender parity. This is despite investments in infrastructure and improvements in teacher training, curriculum revision, and textbook provision (Bangladesh Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, 2015; Islam, 2020).

After enrolling in the program, I continuously questioned my abilities about whether I would be able to begin such a rigorous program online or not. I was also conscious of hour-long online classes sitting at home and adapting to the new learning environment. These worries drowned me in a world of emotional stress and challenges. Although I was already residing in Canada for the last few years and adapting to this foreign land, the pandemic changed the whole scenario. I was so lonely and isolated, being home all day long and worrying about all these hurdles. Previously, I used to share my apartment with two other domestic flat mates, but they left to live with their families after the closure of the campus. I could not travel back home due to border closures and traveling within Canada was restricted to a great extent. The hope of vaccination was still flickering, and although I did not worry about traveling to Canada for my classes, I was stressed. When everything moved online, I could have been in my home country doing my classes from there. This would have saved me all my living costs and would have allowed me to be with my family during this crucial period. The stress regarding financial concerns was strong as on-campus, retail, and service jobs were not an option with all the closures and layoffs due to Covid-19. And finding other jobs was tough due to my temporary resident status (study permit). I could not go back home, nor could someone come to visit me. All I could do was get stuck on the

screen for fifteen hours a day for my online commitments; feeling isolated and lonely at the end of the day. Going out to restaurants, gyms, and swimming to socialize and get an emotional boost were also not options. I was indeed drowning in the world of academic, emotional, and social challenges that were typically bridged more smoothly to integrate into a new normal.

ANALYSIS

My reflections in this study present an example of the wide array of challenges of international students faced during the pandemic regarding their integration and seeking support services from their institutions and the government. Although the government of Canada took several measures to support international students during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020), international students are a vulnerable population. They need additional assistance, especially during this Covid-19 pandemic when they are isolated. Okwuosa (2021) shares that Ottawa (Capital of Canada) updated its policy for international graduates during Covid-19, but advocates say it hasn't gone far enough to address longstanding issues and the new pandemic realities. While job loss and underemployment have been a province-wide challenge during the pandemic, international graduates looking for skilled work also face a specific set of stresses as their ability to remain in the country hangs in the balance.

For international students from Bangladesh and other lower incoming countries, the financial stress was tremendous. The exchange rate for the currencies of these countries is low, making it impossible for them to run their finances, i.e. bringing money, from home. This got further aggravated during the pandemic with inflation, job loss, and the other economic downfall. This suggests the need for finding employment for international students from these countries is crucial. As a result of this pandemic, several international graduates took up work in warehouses and grocery stores to earn money. Working in these jobs though is considered low-skilled and high-risk and doesn't bring them closer to their dream of settling permanently in Canada. "None of this work counts toward permanent residency because it's not valued, but this is the work that, as we have seen through Covid-19, sustains our communities and keeps the economy moving" (Okwuosa, 2021, para. 8).

As my reflective diary shows, my time in Canada during Covid-19 I struggled to make sense of where I belonged. In my graduate program, I was the only international student from Bangladesh. There were only two other international students from the eastern region, but they were still home and could not travel due to the border closures. This sense of being alone and unable to connect with anyone from my country, from a similar culture or society I belong to, made me anxious. This impacted my ability to relate culturally and socially to other international students. I realized that it was even more challenging with limited number of individuals from neighboring countries as there was a vast difference in our cultures. However, there were no options to connect with individuals from my country or with someone from a similar cultural and social background as mine. Bangladesh is a country with a dominant Muslim population, and Islamic

learnings are integrated into our everyday thoughts and lifestyle. With this conservative notion in mind, it is indeed challenging for international students from countries like Bangladesh to take up practices that we have been taught as forbidden. As Alqudayri and Gounko (2018) mention, the challenges international students face because of their religious identities are crucial because lifestyles are often so different even compared to neighboring countries. Additionally, sometimes, because of being explicit about religious practices, we also become victims of racialized and discriminatory acts making it more challenging for us to create that sense of belonging to a foreign land.

This is in-line with research illustrating an increasing number of international students entering North American universities have experienced issues with a sense of belonging, which can, in turn, impact their academic, social performance, and psychological well-being (Chen and Zhou, 2019). This was aggravated further during the pandemic (Peters et al., 2020). Multiple studies offer valuable insights for future international students to have greater exposure to the required resources, to make smoother academic, emotional, and social integration, and also, for universities to provide additional assistance to support the academic and professional development of international students, who find it challenging to grapple with these barriers (see Burel et al., 2019; Chen & Zhou, 2019; Howlett & Nguyen, 2020; Zhou et al., 2017). Reflecting on Tinto's (2011) theoretical framework, the academic and social integration are significant factors that lead to a more substantial commitment and motivation to attain a degree. My experiences suggest that institutions can better support international students to cope with their personal and academic challenges which may become compounded during such public crises as Covid-19.

According to the International Education Strategy (2019-2024) (Government of Canada, 2020), the evolution of the internationalization of higher education in Canada is happening rapidly. Every year, many international students come to Canada from around the world to pursue their academic and career goals (Guo & Guo, 2017; Heringer, 2020; Knight, 1997). However, disorienting experiences are increasingly common among most international students. Students report instances of academic differences, culture shock, language barriers, and financial constraints (Liu, 2016; Trilokekar et al., 2014). As my experiences illustrate, the pandemic amplified the difficulties for international students. It was challenging for me to begin a doctoral program entirely online. Completely online sessions are tough for intense programs as it is so isolating. For international students, places to socialize are work and school. For me, it was indeed challenging to overcome my isolation due to the lockdowns. This often led to emotional breakdowns. I live in a community full of local people, so I never got the opportunity to interact with someone from my country or region during the pandemic. I struggled to get a grip on this unfamiliar way of life for such a long time. Academic adjustments due to the transition to the online systems are challenging as international students come from different educational backgrounds. Social and cultural issues due to the instances of racism, emotional and psychological breakdowns from being isolated due to travel restrictions made me unable to connect to the local community; as demonstrated by my narrative I

was home alone for more than two years without any flat mates, no social and community connection. Lastly, the challenges of taking doctoral courses online without any classroom collaboration was an added stress, diminishing the aspect of social and academic integration as highlighted in Tinto (1975)'s student integration model.

My auto-ethnographic account of an international graduate student who started the doctoral program amid the pandemic aligns with past research suggesting the need for universities and the government to help international students more than normal times for a smooth student integration (Tinto, 1975) as the heinous impact of the pandemic created additional barriers (Cheng, 2020; Esses et al., 2021; Sahu 2020). As we have witnessed the outbreak unfolding globally, the safety and well-being of international students should be a high priority for the institutions who recruit international students. Universities should emphasize mental health support by offering strategies for managing stress and coping with the pandemic. Any student experiencing feelings of heightened anxiety about Covid-19 should be provided with proper support and timely (Zhai & Du, 2020) as they don't have their family nearby, unlike many domestic students. Furthermore, universities should offer systematic support (Cheng, 2020) to these vulnerable international students. Atlin (2020) shares that a June 2020 survey found 26 percent of international students reported losing their primary source of income and 34 percent reported finding it difficult to afford rent or utilities. As my narrative showed, I had difficulty finding employment due to the closures of many businesses near campus and all on-campus activities going online. Universities should consider monetary support and the general living expenses of struggling international students. Universities, governments, banks, and student loan companies could support international students by making them eligible for student loans irrespective of their temporary residency status.

Throughout this pandemic year, the difficulties faced by several groups of Canadians based on their identity (e.g., race or skin color, ethnicity, age, gender, disability) became a hot topic of conversation (Statistics Canada, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing inequities in Canadian society and highlighted the need for more granular data about the social impacts of Covid-19. Many international students, especially Asian students, have experienced multiple microaggressions and blatant discrimination (Bhanot et al., 2021; Statistics Canada, 2020). Before the pandemic, I could not apply for several jobs because of my residency status. Institutional and government efforts have been lacking to address such issues, which can be addressed through more work opportunities for international students irrespective of their backgrounds. During the pandemic, I also encountered discrimination in public places when I was hanging around in groups of Asian friends. The experiences of social exclusion, racism, and discrimination that many international students had throughout the pandemic should hopefully lead to a growing awareness of the issues faced by this vulnerable population.

As we enter the next Covid-19 phase, it will be critical to reflect on the role of government and the educational systems in fostering adequate support services for international students in Canada regarding their academic and social

integration. In collaboration with other organizations, educational institutions, and the Canadian government could collect more information about discrimination and racism. This would fill a critical information gap, particularly with the pandemic, by shedding light on the context the pandemic has created for international students in Canada.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

After the Covid-19 outbreak, when we are back to “normal”, higher education institutions should pay more attention to and support international students. As institutions and the government develop policies to react to the fast-changing situation, we cannot afford to neglect international students. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to last well after pandemic ends; the government and the educational institutions should explore a post-Covid-19 policy vision.

There are vivid and significant discrepancies between the policy and the lived experiences of international students. That is why my research is crucial in giving international students a voice instead of dwelling excessively on the challenges these students encounter, even after the repetitive assurance from the policy makers. This research helps identify gaps between international graduate students' negative experiences and the policy which allows for better design and implementation of policies to improve the international student experiences. International students are a vulnerable population, and high levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty have resulted among them due to the impact of this Covid-19 pandemic. The vulnerabilities are expected to last post-pandemic, so international students are looking for federally funded settlement supports to make their journey smoother as many do not have their family in country to support them. They need institutional support services regarding academic integration from online learning systems opportunities to collaboration to help fight isolation and improve cultural assimilation into the local communities while being away from their family.

Post-secondary institutions have substantial impacts in smaller communities, and international students contribute significantly to many small urban and rural economies. In addition, these students represent potential long-term immigrants who are vital to filling labor market gaps in smaller communities. Hagar (2020) noted that the economic impact assessment conducted by the Northern Policy Institute estimates that a 20% decrease in international students in Northern Ontario's post-secondary institutions would result in an estimated \$23 million in lost tuition revenues and an additional estimated \$20 million loss in contributions to their communities.

Research (Duncan 2020) on international students views of Covid-19, perceptions of safety, and their views of online verse face-to-face delivery. The survey results reveal that:

“Thirty-one percent of respondents stated they would be willing to start their course online and move to face-to-face learning at a later date, but

by far the greatest preference was to defer to January 2021 if this meant face-to-face learning would be possible” (Duncan, 2020, para. 8).

Of the students who stated they would prefer to defer than study online, 69 percent stated they believed it lacked international exposure and 47 percent stated the standard of online teaching was a concern. According to the International Consultants for Education and Fairs (2020), international students exploring destination preferences is also interesting in terms of how the competitive dynamic among destinations could shift as the pandemic runs its course. Given the strong underlying demand for in-person instruction, for example, destinations seen to have a stronger public health response and can move more quickly to open borders and campuses will likely earn greater market share by attracting students who had originally intended to study elsewhere. This would be an added challenge for international students to keep this new aspect in mind, among other factors, while choosing their ultimate higher education institution.

To tackle these issues, it advised that the federal and provincial government allow international students to renew post-graduate work permits during the post-Covid-19 economic recovery and provide employment opportunities to international students to fight against financial constraints. They could pilot an expansion of universal healthcare coverage to include international students, which would provide needed medical support which would aid their physical and mental health. Government could provide sufficient funding to the educational institutions, on the one hand, while placing caps on the tuition costs for international students on the other hand. This would help international students, like me, feel less stressed about their finances and focus more on their academic and social integration.

International students' contributions to the Canadian educational systems and the economy are lasting. Canadian institutions and the government need to address international students' ongoing concerns in this competitive field of comparative and international higher education. My lived experiences describe one example of the experience of an international graduate student's integration into becoming a scholar during the Covid-19 pandemic. I dealt with many challenges: technological breaches, feeling of isolation, financial constraints, etc.; these are issues inevitably affecting international students greater than domestic students as they are likely used to this academic and social systems and have friends and family closer to support them emotionally, socially, and financially. In sum, this study argues for the Canadian government and its higher education institutions to provide specific specialized support for international students to help them integrate and overcome the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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