

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Learning Experiences and Challenges facing Black International
Students at the University of Windsor**

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Abstract

In the past two decades, the international-student population increased to about 600,000 (Canada Bureau for International Education, 2018). According to The Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, 2019I), international students contributed an estimated \$21.6 billion to the Canadian gross domestic product. With the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment of international students, and the economic contribution they bring is under threat. More so, the lockdown imposed by the government, and schools' adoption of online learning, further poses challenges and unique experiences to children, and young persona, especially international students. We used qualitative data from a focus group of 10 male Black students, aged 20 years and above, attending the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. In addition, we include the experiences and concerns of a student in Nigeria. The findings show that students face a number of social and environmental factors that negatively impact their online learning experiences. These factors include: economic support from parents/guardians, availability and access to learning resources, the place of residence, and lack of academic support from instructors, administration, and peers. We conclude that many Black students feel dissatisfied and stressed by the lack of support and how they have been neglected during COVID-19. These experiences are likely to impact their mental health severely.

Keywords: Black international students, COVID-19, financial hardship, social support

Introduction

In the past two decades, the international-student population increased to about 600,000 (Canada Bureau for International Education, 2018). According to The Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, 2019I), international students contributed an estimated \$21.6 billion to the Canadian gross domestic product. With the COVID-19 pandemic, recruitment of international students, and the economic contribution they bring is under threat. This paper examines the experiences and challenges that Black international students face in the university of Windsor's adoption of online learning. The investigation explores the double jeopardy facing international students, due to the impact of COVID-19 on their heritage and host societies, and the adoption of online learning that hinders interactions among peers and between students, instructors, and other learning-resource service providers, such as the writing support desk.

Accordingly, we adopted an ecological framework, which allowed the researchers to learn, document, and analyze the multiple-level factors, the micro-, meso- and macro-, that shape the experiences and challenges posed by COVID-19 and online learning. The research questions addressed include: i) What are the impacts of the emergency transition to online learning performance and adaptability of international students? ii) What are the issues facing international students in their transition to online learning? iii) What are the advantages, disadvantages, and opportunities that go along with online learning among international students?

Literature Review

With the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased focus was on the ecological and climatic factors, such as spatial disparities on incidence and mortality (Zhang & Schwartz, 2020), and health issues, like mental health issues (Corburn et al., 2020; Dalal et al., 2020). There is paucity in the literature focusing on sociocultural, behavioural and political factors (Friedler, 2020), except some that have examined social distancing (Rahman, 2020), political issues, such as leveraging power (Domínguez et al., 2020), and the preparedness of international students for online learning (Dhawan, 2020). Such paucity fails to recognize the important role of “anthropogenic dynamics that influence and continue to shape COVID-19 pandemic” (Friedler, 2020).

Internationalization of higher education has grown in Canada, and across the globe in obtaining foreign certification (Abe, 2020; Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019). The availability and quality of information communication technology (Anikeeva et al., 2019; Soltovets et al., 2020; Strielkowski & Chigisheva, 2018; Tarman & Dev, 2018), through the widespread use of mobile devices and Internet connection that offers stable, high-speed connections in the north have greatly aided online learning (Kim, 2019). However, scholars cautioned that it is important for faculties and instructors to take cognizance of the cultural backgrounds of students (Baez Zarabanda, 2019; Kang & Chang, 2016), as well as their individual adaptability. For instance, Hua (2017) argued that the adaptability of international students depends on individual adaptability (Pelly et al., 2020), which is a consequence of their class, race, the years of schooling, and socio-economic characteristics. Paechter & Maier (2010) reported that international students tend to prefer online learning, rather than face-to-face learning, because of improved logistics and flexibility, which increases interpersonal communication with peers and teachers.

The disadvantages of online learning include: poor performance, technical hitches, and the need to have self-control in order to manage pressures from daily activities, including learning and their competencies (Baytak et al., 2010; Sinacori, 2020). The readiness for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is of great concern, and does impact satisfaction with online learning (Adnan, 2018), particularly for students in certain fields of education, like engineering (Naji et al., 2020) and the sciences, such as chemistry (Perets et al., 2020). Notwithstanding the lack of time to plan for online learning because of COVID-19, limited data exist on international students in China (Denuyakor, 2020), Australia (Ma et al. 2020), and Russia (Novikov, 2020).

Methods

The research used a qualitative research method for data collection and analysis involving a focus group. Snowball and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants. We successfully utilized existing conduits from previous research. The focus group allowed us to garner specific ethnographic data, because it provided a distinct and homogenous group setting (Krueger, 2014), in terms of occupation, which nurtured the interactions between the researcher and the researched, in order to increase the depth of investigation and unmask hard-to-gather personal perceptions on sensitive topics such as sexuality, sexual behaviour, and HIV (Creswell, 2009). The particular ethnographical framework enabled us to study the general perceptions and experiences of religious leaders who are against the phenomenological approach, which looks at the individual perspective. The ability to observe the physical and visual interactions further enhanced our understanding of hidden responses, such as participants who are introverts, and from whom more probing may elicit valuable and critical information (Sade-Beck, 2004).

Qualitative Data Analysis: We transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim to create text documents for both manual and electronic analysis. Qualitative content analysis was undertaken to determine the response profiles for each category of information. The conditional matrix method described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), and recommended for analyzing subjective perceptions of diseases, further guided the data analysis. Member checking of the interview transcripts by participants ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Results

The data highlighted a number of environmental and social factors that shape Black international students experiences and challenges of online learning.

Student study permit

In Canada, international students need a student study permit for school, but some students have a permit to work outside the university, while others can only work within the university campus. These differential opportunities create two classes of students, the privileged and the marginalized, which make one group who has more economic autonomy than the other. Students reported that funds from these opportunities were useful in meeting personal needs, like phone bills and Internet data. However, the lockdown of businesses translated into lack of jobs,

and also isolation from peers. Thus, causing financial difficulties and limited social interactions. The global economic downturn further impacted the living conditions of international students.

Economic support from parents/guardians

Globally, COVID-19 brought untold hardships to businesses, families, and individuals. There were job losses, and businesses went bankrupt, in extreme cases, while some were shut down for long periods, dwindling incomes, in comparison to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, there was a depletion of the resources of parents, and foreign reserves of many nations, including developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, like Nigeria. According to students' narratives, international students experienced delays in parents remitting tuition, and the government was unable to pay students' scholarships. These situations resulted from high foreign-exchange rates, low foreign reserve, and the low-income generation among parents/guardians. Thus, contributing to more economic deprivation among students. A student said, "Despite the economic downturn, [the] university continued to charge interest on outstanding tuition, and, this became so astronomical, that I have [sic] to withdraw from school, as my government could not remit my scholarship funds."

Availability and access to learning resources

Closely linked to these economic hardships was students' inability to utilize campus facilities, such as libraries, writing-help desks, and technology devices, nor attend social events that they had paid for. For example, some students talked about the breakdown of their personal computers, and the difficulty replacing them, while not being able to access computers in the library. In addition, students reiterated the Internet fluctuations in their places of residence. As such, they experienced poor Internet connections, which created frustration with online learning. One student noted that "living in the basement comes with poor Internet connections, and my inability to connect to Microsoft teams, which also limits my interaction with the professor, and failure to pose questions if I am not following the class discussions."

Support from professors and peers

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the lockdown of businesses and schools, as well as guidelines, including mandatory use of masks, and maintaining social distance that restrict interaction with professors and other students. Face-to-face learning allows asking questions on the spot in reaction to what the professor/instructor said, and as a contribution to the class discussions. To these students, face-to-face learning is the general experiences they bring to Canada. For many of the participants, online education is a totally new experience, and more difficult to follow in the sciences and engineering programs. The participants said, "Interactions with professors and peers in class fostered learning experiences, because students were able to overcome accent and language differences, by consistently asking questions directly." More importantly, students got practical learning experience in the face-to-face learning environment.

Distance from Parents and Families

There was a consensus that COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions further pose challenges to students. For example, participants reported that they were not able to travel to see their parents and families in their heritage societies due to fear of not getting back into Canada. The situation was worsened because their parents were not able to purchase flight tickets. Consequently, the inability to see their parents and siblings placed additional stress on international students who already face stresses from COVID-19. Most of the students noted that “while the Canadian government and service organizations focused primarily on its citizens and permanent residents, very limited concern and focus was on international students.” There was a general feeling of being abandoned and neglected, despite their past contributions to the country’s gross national product.

Case of a new female student

This case is from an 18-year-old female student who lives in Nigeria. She gained admission at the onset of the pandemic, and her experiences and challenges throw light on what it means to live and operate in two different worlds, from living in the south and schooling in the north. According to her narratives, the physical separation of learning from her place of residence created a digital divide, in terms of the more advanced, available and accessible information technology. The poor electricity and cost of fueling the generator to produce alternative source of electricity further compounded the situation.

The student also noted that she had difficulties purchasing the needed resources for her classes, despite having paid her tuition. However, of greater concern to this student is what lies in the future, in the postCOVID-19 world, in terms of getting the necessary travel documents and a student visa. She raised questions with regard to what would happen to her tuition if she is denied a visa, and can she continue to take online classes and graduate from a Canadian university while living and schooling from Nigeria? These questions are unanswered, because visa processing is autonomous, and politicians of government officials cannot influence visa decisions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Contrary to the stereotypical belief that all international students are privileged, many students are struggling to meet their needs, cope with online learning, and manage their studies whilst dealing with financial hardships, being away from family and loved ones, and having to isolate in their residences. According to Tannock (2018), not all international students are well-off, because many are actually on student loans or bank loans through their parents. These experiences are likely to impact their mental health severely (Dalal et al., 2020). Students face multiple jeopardies with struggling to manage their studies, dealing with financial hardships, being away from family and loved ones, and having to isolate in their rooms, which has been reported to affect mental health severely (Dalal et al 2020). Based on the experiences of an international-student study, Roe (2020) noted that students were ready to advise others not to school in Australia.

International students also demand fee reductions, since their studies are now conducted online, and they are unable to utilise campus facilities, such as libraries and technological

devices, nor attend the social events they have paid for. However, while very few institutions have offered fee reductions for international students, many participants worried about schooling costs as their families back home are also adversely hit by COVID-19. In conclusion, the pandemic has a ripple effect for international students in terms of future graduate visa applications, due to online learning that may require many students to ask for an extension of visa and health insurance, thereby incurring additional unforeseen costs. In addition, Vincent (2020) reported that the pandemic exacerbated workplace exploitation of international students, with employers utilising this critical situation for their personal gain.

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