

Reflective Piece

Underrepresented Racial, Ethnic, and Ability Groups (UREAG): Scholarship, Community, and Advocacy

PAVAN JOHN ANTONY
Adelphi University, USA

ADEMOLA ALABI AKINRINOLA
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA

Underrepresented Racial, Ethnic, and Ability Groups (UREAG), a Standing Committee of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), brings together diverse scholars and professionals from all over the world through its various programmatic platforms during and beyond the CIES annual conference, to engage in intentional and candid conversations about systemic and institutional equity and access issues that affect minoritized populations. Beyond engaging in dialogues, UREAG identifies and removes barriers to increasing effective participation of underrepresented racial, ethnic, and ability groups in CIES policies and programs.

UREAG operationalizes its vision in several ways, including, (a) providing travel grants and registration subsidies to support graduate students and early-career scholars' participation at CIES conferences; (b) holding mentoring sessions for faculty, students, and scholars to learn from one another and share helpful resources to advance participants' career and professional aspirations; (c) organizing receptions at CIES conferences where participants can connect and network with scholars and professionals from around the world; (d) organizing strategic (free) monthly webinars, starting from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address salient topical issues such as, *Surviving Tenure as a Faculty of Color in Higher Education*; *Black Lives Matter: Bringing Scholars Together for an Open Dialogue on Solidarity in Times of Injustices*; *Global Learning Equity and Education: Obstacles and Opportunities*; *Strategies for Graduate Students to Navigate the COVID-19 Pandemic*, among others. These webinars are attended by scholars from around the world; (e) publishing newsletters to highlight affiliates' professional and scholarly engagements around the world, making their work more visible to and appreciated within the broader international scholarship community; and (f) Last but certainly not the least, UREAG is committed to taking a holistic approach to reviewing proposals with the main goal of providing equitable platforms for all scholars and scholarship from around the world, especially by and on minoritized people, pushing it from the periphery to the center. This approach has been very helpful, allowing many international scholars, especially those whose primary language is not English, to present their work and be a part of the CIES.

The 2021 Conference

The 2021 conference was unique in many ways. Scholars from diverse global backgrounds presented topics and shared experiences addressing different salient issues. For example, COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on education, learning, schools,

families, and communities; global protests in response to anti-Black racism, pandemic-exacerbated anti-Asian hate crimes, to name a few. Several themes emerged from the conference presentations and discussions. It was a no-brainer that the theme that had the most engagement—in terms of participation and quality of discourse—was the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars and students from around the world discussed the challenges they have faced during COVID-19, including the following:

1. International Students returning to their home country without completing their programs:

Universities across the U.S. adopted policies that were different from one another. Many international students were asked to return to their home country due to the pandemic. Several students who returned home struggled to continue their program due to time zone differences and lack of access to stable high-bandwidth internet and technology.

2. International students delaying their graduation dates due to lack of job opportunities and to maintain their legal status:

International students can work in the U.S. legally for a year (non-STEM majors) or three years (for STEM majors) after their graduation on Optional Practical Training (OPT) status. However, at the beginning of the pandemic and well into mid-2021, many organizations laid off employees, rescinded job offers, and froze hiring due to the negative economic impact of the pandemic. This made international students who would like to engage in post-graduation OPT opportunities delay their graduation. Consequently, to stay legally in the country, many students decided to delay their graduation where it was possible to do so.

3. Lack of funding for several graduate students to complete current programs of study:

Both international and domestic students also faced financial hardship during the pandemic. Many universities across the country made significant budget cuts during the pandemic. Consequently, many graduate students lost their teaching and/or research assistantships.

4. Low enrollment and lack of job opportunities in higher education:

Enrollment of domestic and international students were significantly low since the beginning of the pandemic because many university departments did not admit new students into their graduate programs, while some of the ones that admitted students offered no funding opportunities for them, grossly limiting the opportunities for further study for international students who wanted to pursue that career path. This low student enrollment, along with many other budget cuts, forced many campuses to freeze the hiring of new faculty members.

5. Tenure and promotion on hiatus:

Many college and university faculty members who were planning for promotion and tenure decided to delay their application process. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “Tenure-track faculty members whose work is disrupted by the institutional or governmental response to COVID-19 should have the option to stop their tenure clock for the duration of the disruption.”

6. Individuals with disabilities being forced to remain at home due to the pandemic:

The pandemic has forced many individuals with disabilities to remain at home due to health issues, accessibility, and transportation. While some individuals considered this as an opportunity to learn at their convenience at home, others struggled with loneliness and depression because they did not have access to the on-campus resources and community they had hitherto enjoyed.

7. Faculty members being owed salaries:

Faculty members from the international (Global South) communities shared their stories during the CIES 2021 mentoring session of how they were owed salaries by the university or government officials, depending on funding governance and structure, for several months during the pandemic. To survive, some had to move back to their parents' home to cut down on rent, utilities, and living expenses, while others borrowed money from parents and family members to cover expenses. These are ongoing issues for some of our scholars in the international community.

In all, while the programmatic engagements may vary, UREAG's goal is lucid and comprehensively inclusive: To create safe and welcoming spaces for all affiliates and attendees from underrepresented groups around the world to engage in dialogues about issues that affect the collective, and echo the voices of minoritized people, advocating for their inclusion and effective participation in all CIES policies and programs.

Authors' Brief Bio

Dr. Pavan John Antony is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Adelphi University's School of Education and Health Sciences and the Chair of UREAG - CIES. He can be reached at pantony@adelphi.edu

Ademola Alabi Akinrinola is a Doctoral Researcher in the Education Policy, Organization and Leadership Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the Vice-Chair of UREAG - CIES. He can be reached at ademola2@illinois.edu