

# Exploring International Students' Difficulties During Pandemic

Sihan Zhang\*

Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, US

\*Corresponding Author Email: szhang4@trincoll.edu

**Abstract.** This paper reviews the various difficulties that international students have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article will collect and analyze the difficulties they face from multiple perspectives, including academic, life, emotional, etc. International students in this study can come from all over the world and ethnicity, but they are all students from higher education institutions of the United States and other Western countries. Depending on their nationality or ethnicity, the study will also analyze the degree and number of difficulties they face. By analyzing whether and how the difficulties they faced were resolved, the US colleges and universities can more clearly understand what the needs of international students are under special circumstances, along with helping colleges and international students to get through the last time of the pandemic. The contribution of this paper is by reviewing the difficulties of international students that have been resolved and unresolved during this pandemic period, in similar crisis situations in the future, colleges and universities can provide international students with the help they need more quickly and accurately.

**Keyword:** COVID Period; International Student; US College And University; Difficulty; Education Pattern; Mental Health.

## 1. Introduction

Starting from March 2020, colleges and universities across the United States began rushing to prepare for the pandemic period. Both students and faculty are facing huge but numerous problems at this time. International students are undoubtedly one of the groups facing the most difficulties and troubles at this time. This reviewing paper aims to prepare for future similar crisis situations and also help colleges and international students to get through the last time of the pandemic. Most of the research in this area focuses on the psychological problems of international students and the effect of remote courses. The living conditions of international students who cannot return home and the learning conditions of international students with disabilities are not some popular topics for research of this area. This paper will introduce the impact of COVID to international students and higher education system based on several perspectives, including students' financial, mental health and school performance.

## 2. COVID-19 And Education

### 2.1 Impact of COVID-19 on the education system & School Closure

To limit the spread of COVID-19 which is a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the US states have adopted a range of non-pharmaceutical interventions. School closures were among the most consistently applied interventions. Over a 10-day period in March, the 50 states in the United States closed Grade 12 kindergartens and day care centers; almost every college and university followed suit. These closures have had an unprecedented impact, affecting 21 million children in day care, 57 million students in kindergarten to grade 12, and 20 million college and university students. School closures were broader than the United States. By the middle of April, 192 countries had closed their schools, affecting almost 1.6 billion of the world's students [1]. While there is limited evidence of efficacy, school closures have been promoted as effective mitigation strategies during pandemics [2]. The closure of universities has affected student learning in universities. To ensure continuity in the colleges and universities, immediate action is necessary. For

the running of the course, the online teaching methodology is adopted. Universities are adopting learning management software and open source digital learning solutions to offer online courses.

## 2.2 International students difficulties

Research shows that international students are frequently not well served by the United States higher education institutions, even before the pandemic. Throughout the campus, resources are designed to serve American students, and with little or no other options that might be more accessible or culturally acceptable to foreign students. For example, international students are less likely to receive services through college counseling centers, which are designed for US students and do not provide culturally acceptable services for international students [3]. International students also describe feelings of neglect or exclusion from professors and peers, which they attribute to a lack of cultural inclusion in the curriculum structure and extracurricular activities [4]. In addition to the lack of culturally acceptable resources for international students, these students have additional challenges. International students may experience academic challenges, social isolation, few internship or employment opportunities, and financial hardship due to discrimination, difficulty adjusting to an unfamiliar country, and immigration issues.

After pandemic, international students face even more challenges. In many respects, the neglect of the well-being of international students has become worse. Travel restrictions since COVID-19 and the recent ICE decision on online admissions restrictions and the administration's "America First" policies, including the "Muslim travel ban," have put international students under increasing pressure on their status and future in the US [5]. However, US higher education institutions do not appear to be doing much to support international students. Instead, institutions are again ignoring the limited resources to support these students and forgetting that international students are dealing with a crisis when they are most stressed.

In times of crisis, international students are often severely affected at the same time as being ignored by their institutions. For example, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian international students faced discrimination after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and all international students faced uncertainty about their legal status within the United States. This uncertainty proved to be prescient, as changes to visa rules and paperwork improves its difficulty for foreigners to study in the United States after September 11 [6,7]. The most seriously injured group of international students in this crisis are Asian students, mainly Chinese students. Since the pandemic was evolved in Wuhan city of China, those people with Asian faces are considered to be the source of the pandemic. They are often hurt both physically and mentally after the pandemic [8]. However, their colleges and universities do not always provide them with adequate and due protection and assistance.

## 3. Various Kinds of Difficulties that Have Solutions

### 3.1 Fulfil Course Works

As mentioned earlier, from March to April 2020, many Western higher education institutions led by the United States have closed their schools. However, there is no consistent standard for how courses are set up after the fall semester as they were in the spring. The details of when and how classes are conducted are left to schools or professors.

Due to the different policies under the pandemic situation in different countries, international students will encounter many special difficulties at this time. One of the most widespread problems is that many international students cannot return to the U.S. when the semester begins after returning to their home countries for the summer [9]. Even with the support of remote classes, the difference in time zone is an unavoidable challenge for many international students. These challenges are significant because they can easily affect international students' classroom performance and grades [10]. Although these challenges can easily affect the completion of international students, it is not too difficult to design their solutions. Because schools and professors have enough freedom to plan individual courses. It is not difficult to spot the difficulties of international students and help to find

solutions. Through online platforms such as ZOOM, Moodle, and YouTube, many academic challenges faced by international students have been solved in many ways. With the support of these online education platform, the asynchronous distance learning method was large used to solve the time zone issue for international students [11,12].

Asynchronous distance learning gives students the freedom to access courses and their instructional materials at any time, from any location, with an internet connection. Another advantage of asynchronous learning is that almost everything that happens in the environment is recorded. All materials, communications, and interactions may be archived electronically. Participants can review course materials including recording, lectures and presentations, and communications between participants. This information can usually be provided to course participants at any time [13].

### 3.2 Mental Health Problems

The mental health problems faced by international students at this time can be divided into three categories: loneliness, anxiety and depression.

It is true that loneliness was a mental health problem that international students often faced before the pandemic began. However, compared with the loneliness caused by differences in language and culture, the loneliness faced by international students after the pandemic is more complicated and serious [14].

While the spread of cases was largely contained during the months of social distancing and movement restrictions, it was clear that such restrictions in social contact also severely hindered social support, according to the study. Lack of this support can create and exacerbate feelings of loneliness [15]. In addition, the yearning for relatives and hometown is also the reason why the international students feel a strong sense of loneliness [16].

Under the pandemic, anxiety and depression are also some of the most serious mental health problems affecting international students. Most of the sources of anxiety and depression for international students are fear and worry. First, the fear of contracting COVID has caused a lot of anxiety among international students. Not only do students fear that they will be infected, but they are also worried that their family members will be infected [17]. In addition, the multi-national hatred of Asians, mainly Chinese, due to COVID has also made many Asian students who are unable to return to their home countries worry about their own safety [18]. In addition, because the policies of various countries are constantly changing with the local pandemic situation. This makes the life of international students more unstable than that of common students. The complicated process of returning to their home country or going to campus is one of the main causes of anxiety for many students [19].

Because assessment of the mental health challenges of international students related to their unique cultural background remains underdeveloped, although almost all higher education institutions in the United States have departments to help students overcome mental health problems, their main service models and styles often only meet the needs of local students [20]. Professionals may misinterpret the mental health needs of international students and provide inappropriate or inadequate support without regard to cultural background, nationality, and the unique circumstances of being an international student. For example, stress and worry about academic performance can affect the mental health of international and U.S. students. While self-imposed pressures related to the academic performance of U.S. students tend to be the greatest, pressure from family, friends, home communities, or sponsoring government organizations can be the greatest stressors for international students [21]. Without knowledge of this potential difference, professionals may recommend strategies to address self-stress, which may not alleviate international students' concerns [22]. In addition, many international students from East Asian countries have a completely different understanding of mental health issues from mainstream perceptions in Western countries. Needing mental health related help and having a mental problem is a stigma for them in their own cultures [23].

Therefore, mental health assessments and interventions for international students need to be culturally sensitive and conducted by culturally competent professionals. After the pandemic caused

the mental health problems of international students to aggravate, institutions and scholars began to pay attention to the particularity of international students' mental health problems. From 2020, many psychologists began to collect various attitudes and needs of international students towards mental health issues, and designed psychological counseling programs for international students of different cultures and nationalities [24].

### 3.3 Healthcare Access and Needs

Health care services are another issue. International students often need to obtain health insurance through their university, which is expensive with few benefits. Therefore, many international students are afraid of getting sick. This means they need help in unfamiliar medical settings. They need to worry about whether they will get proper treatment and whether they can afford the high cost of treatment [25].

In fact, because of the severity of the pandemic, higher education institutions in the United States and other regions have taken into account the great impact of illness on international students. Therefore, after a few months of the pandemic, almost all international student insurance guarantees that the medical expenses incurred by international students due to COVID-19 will be covered [26].

## 4. Various Kinds of Unsolved Challenges

### 4.1 Financial Issues

During the pandemic, many international students in the U.S. have faced significant financial problems with disastrous consequences due to campus closures and other reasons. For example, one student from Libya described [27]

*"I rely on my on campus job to pay my bills since my parents cannot afford to help me out. Even though I can stay on campus I don't have much money left. I don't know how I will afford to pay my future bills such as my health insurance, my textbooks, and saving up to pay for my OPT bills."*

For this student and many others, their financial situation during COVID-19 is closely tied to their position on campus and their visa status. Even if they desperately need financial support, it is difficult for international students to be legally allowed to apply for off-campus jobs. This often means that international students rely on their on-campus jobs to make money, but because campuses are closed, they lose that income. Although both international and domestic students will lose some earning opportunities due to campus closures. However, due to visa restrictions, international students are unable to work elsewhere to earn money, and some students are unable to support themselves, leaving them in serious financial hardship [28].

### 4.2 Discrimination and Racism

WHO issued guidelines in 2015 calling for an end to the linking of viral diseases to areas with first outbreaks in order to reduce stigma and negative impacts. The guidelines emphasize that the virus will infect all humans and that in the event of an outbreak, everyone is at risk [29]. However, a few politicians remain stubborn. Former U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly linked the COVID-19 virus to China, and Brazilian Rep. Eduardo, son of Brazilian President Bolsonaro, called the outbreak "China's fault." Other regional politicians, including the UK, also say China is to blame [30,31].

To insist on associating a virus and the disease it causes with a place is irresponsible and needs to be stopped immediately. It is clear that since the outbreak of the pandemic, Asians around the world have been the target of racist attacks [32]. Law enforcement agencies say they are focusing on investigating hate crimes, but it may be too late for some — including most of the more than 700,000 Chinese students studying abroad. Many Chinese students who have not returned to China are in a dilemma. On the one hand, they are afraid of continuing to suffer racial discrimination, on the other hand, they are worried about the uncertainty of their future studies, and the recovery time of international flights is also unknown [33].

Yet the stigma and discrimination against international students is not limited to those from where they study. International students are also harmed by stigma and discrimination after returning home. Taking Chinese students as an example, with the rapid development of the pandemic in countries around the world, many overseas students chose to interrupt their studies and return to China. International students returning to China to "avoid the pandemic" was originally a personal choice under the crisis, but in the eyes of some Chinese, it has become "returning to China with the virus", and has encountered verbal criticism on the Internet. The reason for this stigma is that, on the one hand, many of the imported cases are international students, and on the other hand, due to the impact of individual international students not cooperating with the isolation work after returning to China, many public have formed more negative impressions of the international student group. Under the hype of some online public opinion, the international student group has repeatedly encountered discrimination and a certain degree of stigma [34].

## 5. Further View

Besides to helping colleges and international students to get through the last moments of the pandemic, this paper also aims to prepare for future crisis situations. Even if the period of COVID is coming to an end, it is always the right thing to prepare for the future.. By reviewing the difficulties of international students that have been resolved and unresolved during this pandemic period, in similar crisis situations in the future, colleges and universities can provide international students with the help they need more quickly and accurately.

The epidemic has inspired scholars and researchers to pay more attention to the international student population. Whether it is the improvement of the online distance course system or the research on the special needs of international students by psychologists, they can provide certain physical and mental safety guarantees for international students in future crises. However, it is still a question about how to deal with these unsolved challenges.

One of the most glaring problems brought to light by the pandemic has been the inability of international students to earn enough money because of visa restrictions after schools closed whether schools can provide some remote work to students. Works such as maintaining and updating school websites or providing school referrals where students can get paid just by answering phone calls or recording videos.

As for discrimination, as an ongoing problem, it may be an unsolvable problem, but this does not mean that limiting discrimination is not necessary. However in fact, in this pandemic, many higher education institutions have not noticed the stigma and discrimination against individual groups in time. In the next crisis situation, institutions should be more timely aware of how the crisis is affecting various ethnic groups and identity groups, and provide additional protection and clarification for them if necessary.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, many policies, such as school closures, in place to limit COVID-19 have had enormous impacts and challenges on the lives of all students. However, the international student group faces more daunting and more challenges. During this period, they need to deal with academic challenges, social isolation, few internship or employment opportunities, as well as discrimination, and even severe financial crises. Especially Asian students, who are mainly Chinese students. Because of their Asian faces, they are believed to be the source of the pandemic, and after the pandemic, they are often hurt physically and mentally. While higher education institutions have guaranteed international students' rights in many ways, such as academic completion, mental health, and healthcare needs, international students in crisis still face many challenges that need to be addressed in the future.

Financial problem and discrimination are among the most urgent to be addressed. These two problems are indeed difficult to eradicate, but in a crisis, higher education institutions and educational

organizations have the ability to reduce their severity. However, in this pandemic, these two problems were clearly reflected. This is undoubtedly disappointing. All these facts during pandemic shows that there is not enough research on the needs of international students in crises. When international students need help most, higher education institutions and even the government cannot effectively protect the basic rights and interests of international students due to insufficient data and information. Therefore in the future, research on international students under crisis is highly recommended to be developed by educators and scholars.

## References

- [1] Donohue, J. M., & Miller, E. (2020). COVID-19 and school closures. *Jama*, 324(9), 845-847.
- [2] Cauchemez, S., Ferguson, N. M., Wachtel, C., Tegnell, A., Saour, G., Duncan, B., & Nicoll, A. (2009). Closure of schools during an influenza pandemic. *The Lancet infectious diseases*, 9(8), 473-481.
- [3] Kim, Nayoung, Seungbin Oh, and Jayna Mumbauer. 2019. "Supporting International Students: Enhancing College Counselors' Multicultural Counseling Competence." *Journal of College Counseling* 22(2): 179-192.
- [4] Wu, Hsiao-ping, Esther Garza, and Norma Guzman. 2015. "International Student's Challenge and Adjustment to College." *Education Research International* 2015: 1- 9.
- [5] Bhojwani, J., Joy, E., Hoxsey, A., & Case, A. (2020). Being an international student in the age of COVID-19. *Navigating Careers in the Academy: Gender, Race, and Class*, 3(2), 47-60.
- [6] Harvard Civil Rights Project. 2003. *Know Your Rights on Campus: A Guide on Racial Profiling, and Hate Crime for International Students in the United States* (Online) Retrieved September 3, 2020.
- [7] Rosser, Vicki, Jill Hermsen, Ketevan Mamiseishvili, and Melinda Wood. 2007. "A National Study Examining the Impact of SEVIS on International Student and Scholar Advisors." *Higher Education* 54(4): 525-542.
- [8] Ji, Y., & Chen, Y. W. (2022). "Spat On and Coughed At": Co-Cultural Understanding of Chinese International Students' Experiences with Stigmatization during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Health Communication*, 1-9.
- [9] Salazar, N. B. (2021). Existential vs. essential mobilities: insights from before, during and after a crisis. *Mobilities*, 16(1), 20-34.
- [10] Wang, B. (2022). Time, temporality, and (im) mobility: Unpacking the temporal experiences among Chinese international students during the COVID-19. *Population, Space and Place*, 28(5), e2545.
- [11] Lowenthal, P., Borup, J., West, R., & Archambault, L. (2020). Thinking beyond Zoom: Using asynchronous video to maintain connection and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 383-391.
- [12] Syafiq, A. N., Rahmawati, A., Anwari, A., & Oktaviana, T. (2021). Increasing speaking skill through YouTube video as English learning material during online learning in pandemic covid-19. *Elsya: Journal of English Language Studies*, 3(1), 50-55.
- [13] Midkiff, S. F., & DaSilva, L. A. (2000, August). Leveraging the web for synchronous versus asynchronous distance learning. In *International Conference on Engineering Education* (Vol. 2000, pp. 14-18).
- [14] Misirlis, N., Zwaan, M. H., & Weber, D. (2020). International students' loneliness, depression and stress levels in COVID-19 crisis. The role of social media and the host university. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2005.12806*.
- [15] Okruszek, Ł., Aniszewska-Stańczuk, A., Piejka, A., Wiśniewska, M., & Żurek, K. (2020). Safe but lonely? Loneliness, mental health symptoms and COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*.
- [16] Koo, K., & Nyunt, G. (2022). Pandemic in a Foreign Country: Barriers to International Students' Well-being during COVID-19. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 1-14.
- [17] Feng, S., Zhang, Q., & Ho, S. M. (2021). Fear and anxiety about COVID-19 among local and overseas Chinese university students. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 29(6), e249-e258.
- [18] Zhai, Y., & Du, X. (2020). Mental health care for international Chinese students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(4), e22.

- [19] Salazar, N. B. (2021). Existential vs. essential mobilities: insights from before, during and after a crisis. *Mobilities*, 16(1), 20-34.
- [20] Kim, Nayoung, Seungbin Oh, and Jayna Mumbauer. 2019. "Supporting International Students: Enhancing College Counselors' Multicultural Counseling Competence." *Journal of College Counseling* 22(2): 179-192.
- [21] Misra, R., & Castillo, L. G. (2004). Academic stress among college students: Comparison of American and international students. *International Journal of stress management*, 11(2), 132.
- [22] Carmack, H. J., Bedi, S., & Heiss, S. N. (2016). International students, university health centers, and memorable messages about health. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 52-72.
- [23] Maeshima, L. S., & Parent, M. C. (2022). Mental health stigma and professional help-seeking behaviors among Asian American and Asian international students. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(6), 1761-1767.
- [24] Koo, K., & Nyunt, G. (2022). Pandemic in a Foreign Country: Barriers to International Students' Well-being during COVID-19. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 1-14.
- [25] Bhojwani, J., Joy, E., Hoxsey, A., & Case, A. (2020). Being an international student in the age of COVID-19. *Navigating Careers in the Academy: Gender, Race, and Class*, 3(2), 47-60.
- [26] Covid Insurance for International Students. Path2USA. (2022, August 22). Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.path2usa.com/us-visas/student-visas/covid-insurance-for-international-students>
- [27] Bhojwani, J., Joy, E., Hoxsey, A., & Case, A. (2020). Being an international student in the age of COVID-19. *Navigating Careers in the Academy: Gender, Race, and Class*, 3(2), 47-60.
- [28] Hastings, C., Ramia, G., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., & Morris, A. (2021). Precarity before and during the pandemic: International student employment and personal finances in Australia. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10283153211065136.
- [29] World Health Organization. (n.d.). Who issues best practices for naming New human infectious diseases. World Health Organization. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/news/item/08-05-2015-who-issues-best-practices-for-naming-new-human-infectious-diseases>
- [30] Taskinsoy, J. (2020). The World Is at a Dangerous Crossroads on 'China Virus' and US 'Political Virus'. Available at SSRN 3713745.
- [31] de Andrade, F. M. R., Barreto, T. B., Herrera-Feligueras, A., Ugolini, A., & Lu, Y. T. (2021). Twitter in Brazil: discourses on China in times of coronavirus. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), 100118.
- [32] Rubin, D. I., & Wilson, F. A. (2021). Blame China: Trump and Anti-Asian Sentiment During COVID-19. In *A Time of Covidiocy: Media, Politics, and Social Upheaval* (pp. 10-31). Brill.
- [33] Binah-Pollak, A., & Yuan, S. (2022). Negotiating identity by transnational Chinese students during COVID-19. *China Information*, 0920203X211065013.
- [34] Li Tingting. (2021). A Study on the Stigma of International Students and Returned Chinese in the Public Opinion Field in the Post-War Epidemic Period (Master's thesis, Heilongjiang University).