

Commentary

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Received: 27 May 2021 - **Accepted:** 01 Jul 2021 - **Published:** 06 Jul 2021

Keywords: COVID-19, psychological effect, socioeconomic impact, health challenges, international students, families

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Cite this article: Joseph Adu et al. Assessing the psycho-socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on foreign students and their families. PAMJ - One Health. 2021;5(14). 10.11604/pamj-oh.2021.5.14.30044

Available online at: <https://www.one-health.panafrican-med-journal.com/content/article/5/14/full>

Assessing the psycho-socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on foreign students and their families

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Abstract

The global impact of COVID-19 pandemic cannot be quantified due to the erratic spread of the virus worldwide. One area of concern that has not been highlighted is the effect of COVID-19 on international students and their families. Majority of these students are found in the developed world, contributing substantially to the economic growth of their host nations, but they have been excluded from various financial packages rolled-out by these host governments. Health challenges awaiting these students could be dire if nothing is done to ameliorate the hardships under the current circumstances. Future research should look at the psycho-socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 among international students.

Commentary

Though the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to cause havoc to the global economy, its impact is difficult to measure due to the erratic spread of the virus [1]. Since the first reported case in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 has infected more than 169 million persons and claimed over 3.5 million lives worldwide [1]. Despite the lockdown measures that governments implemented in early 2020 to curb the pandemic, countries continue to record new cases of COVID-19, which could have implications on tourism, food supply, and healthcare. Although key areas of every economy have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic [2,3], the aviation and health care sectors seem to be tremendously affected. The aviation sector is seeing its worse performance in the past two decades due to lockdowns, border closures, and restrictions on international travel to curb the spread of the virus [3]. Globally, health sectors continue to be under intense pressure owing to the huge number of people seeking for COVID-related treatments amidst other illnesses. Many healthcare professionals have been infected and succumbed to the virus worldwide, with high numbers reported in Europe, Central and South America, and Asia [1]. Although health experts are working to save people from the rising mortalities, they are engulfed with fear due to the dreaded nature of the virus [4].

While appreciating the effort to project the plight of frontline workers involved in mitigating the impact of the pandemic, one area of concern that has not been highlighted by the media and the research community is the impact of COVID-19 on international students and their families. International students are found everywhere, with the majority located in high-income nations. Many of these students come from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in search of academic fortunes to better their lives after school [5]. These students contribute substantially to the growth of their host economies [6,7], as they fill human resource gaps in their host countries and work for income to support themselves. In 2018, international students were reported to have

contributed about \$45 billion to the economy of the United States of America, and \$15.5 billion to the Canadian economy in 2016 [7]. Top student destinations including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom appear to have similar economic benefits from international students, with Canada's foreign student population increasing six-fold over the past two decades and ranked third in the world after USA and Australia [8]. However, the spread of COVID-19 worldwide and its related travel restrictions and lockdowns have left these students and their families in a state of despondency and uncertainty. Students from LMICs continue to live in uncertainty due to lack of resources and in some cases, failure of leaders in their home countries to make arrangement for their return. There is a sense of insecurity among these students since they appear to have been left out of students' relief packages announced by respective governments of countries where they are currently studying. The health challenges awaiting these students could be very dire if nothing is done to ameliorate the hardship under the current circumstances. We, therefore, discuss the psycho-socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 on international students and their families. We also discuss some remedial measures to reduce adverse outcomes that COVID-19 could bring.

Psychological impacts of COVID-19 on international students: living as a student in this pandemic without relatives in a foreign country could be more challenging with heightened experiences of psychological distress and uncertainties. A recent study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of college students in the US showed high levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts [9], which could have negative consequences on their performances. The stress and anxieties most international students and their families experience appear not to be different from those reported above [9]. With current global travel restrictions, these students adhere to their host countries' COVID-19 prevention protocols, with continual separation from their families in their countries of origin. This could have serious

psychological concerns such as anxiety and depression as these students adapt to the strict laws amidst their financial constraints. The families of these foreign students back home could equally suffer the same levels of psychological distress for fear of what the future holds for their relatives under the current circumstances. The separation of students from their families and the attending psychological difficulties could eventually have serious socioeconomic and health implications on both parties, especially as there appears to be no end in sight for the coronavirus pandemic.

Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 on international students: there is documented evidence of the link between socioeconomic factors (income and wealth, education, employment, household composition, social mobility, income inequality) and health outcomes [10]. This paper discusses the social mobility, employment, and income inequality in connection with the socioeconomic challenges of international students in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. Socially, the global lockdown and social distancing measures employed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 continue to separate students from their friends and families even within the same country and cities. The situation becomes much complicated where students and families live in different countries and can only communicate through social media and virtual technology. Although such methods of communication appear to be helping to reduce the high levels of COVID-related separation and anxieties, the technology comes with cost, especially at a time when most foreign students are jobless and are not cushioned by any form of COVID-related financial reliefs instituted by governments of their countries of residence. Economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic are apparent [2,3]. Summer vacations are productive period where activities not only take away boredom while keeping students active around the clock, they also help sustain their health and economic status. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has turned these opportunities into challenges where most students are without any jobs and social supports. Yet, these students continue to pay their

school fees, rent, and other utilities amidst the social distancing, isolation, travel restrictions within and across nations making it extremely for them vacation jobs. Arguably, inadequate planning about the global spread of the virus alongside restrictions and closure of international borders have left international students in a fix as to how best they could financially deal with potential constraints in the academic years ahead. This is even more serious, especially if one considers the fact that fees for foreign students could be increased in some universities across the globe.

What is the way forward? currently, international students find themselves in a precarious situation due to the ongoing infection rates and lockdowns. They, therefore need the support of all stakeholders in education to resolve the psychological and socioeconomic turmoil that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. Many international students, especially those from developing countries may not come from middle class families; some of whom are without entry scholarships. Therefore, these lingering COVID-19-related challenges they face could truncate their academic dreams prematurely should existing protocols of movement restrictions across borders continue for the next couple of years. It may be very prudent to offer students and their families' free access to psychological services by respective governments through the various institutions of the host countries. Psychological therapy may be a first step towards support by helping to reduce the fear and anxiety that usually come with separation and state of the unknown. Access to counselling services without any financial commitments will not only build the resilience of students in the medium term, but also help deal with potential post-pandemic traumatic stress and subsequent surge in chronic physical and mental health problems.

The social impacts of the ongoing pandemic on foreign students and their families abroad could be reduced via enhanced and frequent interactions using social media and virtual calls. Even though this form of social interactions come with some

shortfalls such as availability of technology and its related costs, we believe telecommunication industries worldwide could reduce service charges for students and relatives so they could be in constant contact despite being away from each other. The extant literature speaks to strong relationships between socioeconomic status and mental health of every individual [1-3]. Thus, the economic exigencies that international students find themselves in are very critical, and the only way for them to come out of their financial difficulties is to obtain support from all stakeholders including governments of their host countries. Such assistance could be in the form of foreign students' subsidies to support in paying for their rent and groceries through food banks. We also believe that it may not be out of place for international students to be offered special job schemes where they would be provided with job placement in key areas on the job market. Students contribute immensely to the global economy. We suggest that international students should be considered as part of beneficiaries of ongoing governmental financial support available to local students and citizens since they (international students) also contribute to sustaining these economies in various ways.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

All the authors have read and agreed to the final manuscript.

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