

IMPACT OF CLOSURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES ON WELLBEING OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Philip Kwashi Atiso Ahiaku

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract: *The surging coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has impacted all spheres of the economy not sparing higher education in South Africa. The impact was felt by both staff and students not only on teaching and learning but also on their socio-economic, health and physical well-being. This paper sought to explore the experiences international students during the closure of the universities in the country due to Covid-19 pandemic. This paper adopted the data from self-designed questionnaire administered to 68 international students from a public university in South Africa. The quantitative data were analysed using the descriptive statistics. The results show that international students were more vulnerable and exposed to socio-economic and mental challenges including sense of low esteem, financial distress and emotional distress during the pandemic which impacted negatively on their academic outputs and social wellbeing, amongst other things. The findings also revealed that the university authorities did not take the necessary steps to address the life circumstances of the international students. The paper, therefore, highlights the holistic understanding of how to mitigate and alleviate the socio-economic impacts of such pandemic in future through opening dialogue, changing institutional policy to respond to emergency as at when it occurs, and the universities or higher institutions should put in place intervention strategies to assist foreign students during the outbreak of a disease.*

Keywords: *Covid-19; International Students; Experiences; Higher Education; Socio-economic Impact.*

Introduction

The effects of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic did not spare only the facet of the world economy, but it also spared education sector as well. The closure of all educational institutions in late March 2020 was to contain the first strain of the virus in the country. The closure affected post-secondary institutions throughout the world and it affected students differently and some of these students were international (Olaniran & Uleanya, 2021). Some institutions of higher learning had put measures in place to mitigate and savage the effects of the closure on academic and research work. However, most countries especially in developing world did not achieve much as compared to their developed counterparts (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, 2021).

Mindful of socioeconomic and nationalities of students, countries and higher educational institutions responded to the transmissions of coronavirus. The pandemic brought into focus various socioeconomic challenges of various affected populations. The pandemic created new stress among international students including worries about oneself

and loved ones. Other stress includes infection fears, frustrations because of the disease, boredom, inadequate supply of information and financial loss and health issues. The woes of the international students were exacerbated by the lack of physical movements and social activities through quarantine (Brooks et al., 2020).

The varied degree of restrictions was imposed to ease the spread of the coronavirus including restrictions on domestic and international flights and closure of education institutions (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020). The closure of the universities was considered the best way of controlling and minimising the spread of COVID-19; however, the effects of the closure was devastating. These effects were not only limited to teaching and learning but socio-economic challenges as well. The restrictions of Covid-19 impacted on students social life, travelling restrictions prevented students from visiting one another and they remain trapped abroad because they couldn't even go back home, they faced financial challenges, and emotional and health stress (Cao et al., 2020), (Rajkumar, 2020).

This paper was necessitated by the absence of a comprehensive data and research material on the effects of closure of higher institutions during covid-19 on international students. Some papers have been published on the COVID-19 pandemic and students with a focus on teaching and learning, (Chea, Hun & Cheam, 2020), physical and mental health, (Browning et al., 2021), (Son et al., 2020), the economy, and social life (Aristovnik et al., 2020). The limitations of these studies about students and closure of higher education institutions were either on countries and students in general or limited to an academic field (Medical students) (Choi et al., 2020) but not on international students. Very few that cover international students (Olaniran & Uleanya, 2021) but are only limited to social life. Against this backdrop, this study is sought to explore the impact of university closure due to Covid-19 on international students. This intellectual piece was guided by the question: How did the closure of universities impact on international students studying in South Africa?

Methodology and Design

This paper adopted the case study design to establish the impact of institutional closures on the wellbeing of international student during COVID-19 and a self-designed questionnaire was constructed to answer the questions on biographical data of respondents. The second section of the questionnaire elicited information on respondents' social life, economic effects, emotional effects and health effects. The biographic data section of the questionnaire had seven questions ranging from gender, age, course of study, and country of origin. The second section was sub-divided into five (B1-B5) and each sub-section had about seven statements except B4 that had nine and B5 three. The B1 asked international students about their experiences with accommodation during the lockdown. This was followed by B2 where students responded to their experiences with dealing with institutional managements including teaching and non-teaching staffs. The sub-section B3 received responses from international students about their personal and

physical well-beings. The sub-section B4 covered students' emotional issues. Further questions on institutional supports were answered in section B5, where the respondents had to express their experiences on help received from institutions and government agencies such as department of home affairs regarding their visa and other documentations, the healthcare centres and department of social welfare. The data was collected using 5- point Likert scale rating: expressing satisfaction level, agreement and importance from 1 (highest level) to 5 (lowest level) with the 'option of not sure'.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a pool of international students from a public university in South Africa. This university closed down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as early as March 23, 2020 to all students including international students. The questionnaires were sent to the WhatsApp platform with a total number of 80 international students.

The participants consisted of both undergraduates and postgraduate students pursuing Masters and PhD degrees across the faculties of the university. All participants were informed through consent letter which assured them of the voluntary nature of the study and that they were not under any compulsion to participate in the survey. The questions were also designed to exclude the names of the participants to protect their anonymity.

Procedures

The data was collected between May and June 2020. The questionnaire was first tested on piloted basis to optimise contents validity and to ensure question clarity. Adjustments were made to the wording and questioning style as suggested from the piloting to provide concise questions. The questionnaires were transformed into Google documents and posted to the WhatsApp group. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 24 (IBM Corp) was used to analyse the data. A descriptive statistics characteristics of international students were evaluated. The responses were summarised as raw counts and frequency percentage.

Findings

Biographical Data of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the international students who participated in this research indicated that 69% of the participants were males while 31 % were females, with 22 % studying various courses at undergraduate level and 78% were pursuing their postgraduate degrees in doctoral and masters levels in South Africa universities. In the

distribution by nations, 50% of the respondents were from Nigeria, 25% were from Ghana, 6,3% were from Kenya, 6.3% were from Lesotho, 6.3% were from Congo, 6,3% were from Zimbabwe and 6,3% were from Malawi. Most respondents were between 31 and 50 years (50%). Among the respondents experience in the university, 12,5% had to spent two years, while 62, ,5% spent three years and 25% spent four years. The finding indicates that all the international students were from Africa.

Accommodation for International Students

The issue of institutional closure and travel restriction affected students in diverse ways. In spite of the lockdown and travelling restrictions participants from the neighbouring countries were able to return home, especially respondents from Lesotho, Eswatini, and Zimbabwe. However, respondents those from the East and West Africa countries could not immediately return home. None of the respondents were accommodated on-campus and had to look for off-campus accommodation. Most of the respondents 50% got private accommodation, 31.3% were accommodated by their affiliate religious groups and 18.8% were housed by close family members. These results show that international students were stranded without accommodation when universities were closed due to Covid-19. The university did very little to support international students' accommodation, but faith-based organisations such as churches and mosques, friends and family assisted in accommodating the stranded international students.

The organisations did not only provide accommodations but food as well.

Support Services Received from Academic and Administrative Staff

Services received	Satisfaction level (%)	Not sure (%)
Academic	56.3%	18.8%
International student affairs	25%	12.5%
Finance office	25%	31.3%
Student Counselling office	6.2%	43.8%
ICT department	31.3%	25%
Library	37%	25%

Table 1. Satisfactory level of services received by international students

From table 1, it indicates that international students were not satisfied with services provided by the relevant departments. However, concerning services received from academics (Lecturers and supervisors), the international students were satisfied (56.3%), international students affairs (25%), finance office (25%), student counselling services (6.2%), ICT department (31.3%) and library (37%). This finding indicates that, the university authorities provided little assistances to international students in terms of

finance, counselling, provision of information and technology and library services. It also indicates only lecturers and supervisors were in touch with their students during this period.

General Wellbeing

Domains of general wellbeing	Most of the times (%)	Little of the time (%)
Physical wellbeing	49%	51%
Mental wellbeing	66.5%	33.5%
Financial problem	75.1%	24.9%
Academic work	68.8%	31.2%

Table 2. Extent of international student worry over general wellbeing

Table 2 showed the participants level of worries over their general wellbeing during the period. Respondents were mostly worried over their financial status (75.1%), 68.8% were mostly worried about their studies, 66.5% were worried about their mental health and 49% were worried about their physical health. The finding implies that international students were concerned about their general wellbeing especially, their finances. However, most students were less worried about their physical wellbeing.

Student Emotions

Emotions	Some of the times (%)	Never experience (%)
Anger	93.7%	6.3%
Frustration	93.7%	6.3%
Boredom	87.5%	12.5%
Anxiety	100%	0%
Hope	93.7%	6.3%

Table 3. International students' expression of emotion during lockdown

The effect of institutional closures on international student emotion was determined. The respondents expressed their emotions stating how they were affected. On the issue of emotion, 93.7% of the respondents had expressed anger some times during the lock, 93.7% experienced some extent of frustration. Among the respondents, 87.5% experienced boredom and 93.7% were hopeful about the lockdown. All participants experience some sort of anxiety. The finding indicates that almost all international students experienced some emotional feelings with all experiencing anxiety have been anxious.

National Institutions and Support

Institutions departments	Dissatisfied (%)	Not sure (%)
Home affairs	93.7%	6.3%
Social welfare	93.7%	6.3%
Healthcare centres	6.3%%	12.5%

Table 4. Satisfaction level of international students and national support

Table 4 showed the outcome of how the some national institutions and departments impacted the international students during the lockdown and closure of the institutions of higher learning. The finding showed that 93.7% of the respondents were dissatisfied about the conduct and services of department of home affairs. Similar number of respondents 93.7% expressed their dissatisfaction about the department of social welfare. However, very few of the respondents (6.3%) who sort healthcare services were dissatisfied. This implies that most international students who went to seek healthcare services during the lock down were treated well. Home affairs and social welfare did not extend their services to the international students.

Discussions

This study has contributed to wellbeing of international students in As South African higher institutions. The study examined the social, health and economic wellbeing how these have affected them during the COVID-19 pandemic locked out. The finding on biographic data shows that all the participating students were from Africa origin representing three of the four geopolitical areas excluding the Northern territory. This finding suggest that there may be more African students in South Africa than other countries. Again this can partially be explained from the fact that the university is situated in a rural area. The reason for high number of respondents coming from Nigeria may also have something to do with language policy of South Africa.

The present study produced finding about accommodation for international students during the pandemic. The finding suggests that the university authorities did not provide alternative accommodation arrangement for the students. In similar situation, Germany and the United States provided alternative accommodation for their students especially those who could not go to their home countries (Kercher & Plasa, 2020), (Martel, 2020). This made the students from West African states the most vulnerable (OECD, 2020). This phenomenon also compelled students from the SADEC region to use illegal routes to travel back home. Because, the students were not housed by the university, the student lacked support in terms of logistics and finance. The university did very little to support the students. There was poor communication between the management of the institution and the students. Most of the International students were not satisfied with the teaching staff, the university's information obtained and websites and social media which are indication of

inefficient communication from high institution education management. The poor communication between the institutions and the international students affected the necessary support to be received from their institutions.

This finding also confirm the existing barrier in the institutions between the university management and international students in the country (Haniff, 2020).

Even though students were concerned about their physical wellbeing, and few being affected by COVID virus, they were both in good physical and mental health. Their mental health status was not measured to reveal the true status. However, one believes that, the effects of being away from home and families could bear some psychological and mental effects on them. What may trigger this mental health may be the uncertainty of, majority of these international students as to when the pandemic would end and institution to be opened for them to have their normal life back.

As the finding revealed, international students emotions were determined under the following expressions of anger, frustration, boredom, anxiety and hope. The analysis of emotions showed feelings of frustrations due to a bleak future since communication between them and their institution management yielded less or no results. Some students also expressed the feeling of boredom and anxiety because of a ban on social gatherings and religious activities which made it difficult for them to interact with others. Besides the banning of social gathering, communication with the locals also became difficult due to language barrier. Despite the frustrations and boredoms, most students were hopeful of returning to normality. Some international students expressed positive emotions of returning to their institutions to continue with their studies. The expression of negative emotions is an indication that some international students may have experienced psychological and mental health unknowingly to them.

Further, this study measured how government agencies impact on the international students. Different government agencies impacted differently on students. Alarmingly 81% of the respondents did indicate that they were dissatisfied with services and support received from institutions such home affairs and social welfare. The result suggests that respondents received very little assistance from these institutions. The government introduced support services for the citizens of South Africa to alleviate their socio-economic distress. The social welfare introduced the COVID-19 relief fund for citizens who are not working or have their livelihood affected by the pandemic, but nothing was done or given to international students. The relief funds were not extended to other nationals and international students unlike their counterparts in the developed countries. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand among others extended financial assistance to their international students (Haniff, 2020). The failure of the universities and the country to extend social-economic assistance to international students further deepened the already existing disparities in treatment of foreigners in the country and exacerbated the discrimination and abuse meted to foreigners in the country. Perhaps, any form of relief extended to international students especially from Africa may have been misconstrued and spark xenophobic attack on them.

The department of home affairs on the other hand suspended all documentations and issuing of visas to foreign students. However, concession was given to foreign students to use their expired documents within the country to access basic services such as the hospital and the banks.

The respondents who attended healthcare facilities expressed their satisfaction only 25% of the respondents were dissatisfied. International Students with medical aid received satisfactory treatment from the private health institutions whereas, others without medical aid attended public health institutions and received unsatisfactory services. In all, the respondents were satisfied with other institutions more than their institutions of learning.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study has some limitations. In the instance the sample for this study was from a single university in the country as a result the findings may be biased and generalisation may be done with caution. The study is also limited because data for the study was collected into the lock down and respondents may have failed to give accurate accounts and may under or overestimate their satisfaction and perception levels.

Nevertheless, the findings are very important since this is one of the few empirical studies on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student's life in South Africa. However, other studies may be conducted to extend to other universities in the country. For policy purposes, institutions of higher learning should provide support services for international students. They are to ensure that specific information on accommodations is provided during period of academic interruptions. Provision of services such as physical health, mental health and psychological and counselling support are available to international students.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive and empirical insight of international students and perception of the different aspects of their lives during the pandemic especially the period immediately after the closure of the higher institutions of learning by Department of Higher Education and Learning. The findings from the study indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted significantly on the wellbeing of international students. The outbreak impacts negatively on the mental health, emotions, social and daily life of international students. The poor support services rendered to the international students exacerbated the mental health, emotions and social lives of the international student creating a stress situations for most of them. The socio-economic challenges and fear of getting infested by the virus has thrown the students into state of frustration, emotions and some psychological and stress situations. The findings call for our universities and higher education institutions to forge collaboration and pay attention to vulnerable international

students to resolve the diverse, mostly negative effects of the COVID-19 measures on the students. The communication gap between the management of the universities and international students be strengthen and contribution of foreign students be recognised and accorded such.

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Philip Kwashi Atiso Ahiaku

Department of Business Management, College of Economic and Management
Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3636-4282>

ahiakpka@unisa.ac.za

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Резюме: Развиващият се коронавирус SARS-CoV-2 засегна всички сфери на икономиката, без да щади висшето образование в Южна Африка. Въздействието беше усетено както от персонала, така и от учениците не само върху преподаването и ученето, но и върху тяхното социално-икономическо, здравословно и физическо благосъстояние. Стермежът на тази статия е да изследва опитът на чуждестранните студенти по време на затварянето на университетите в страната поради пандемията от Covid-19. Това проучване изследва данните от самостоятелно разработен въпросник, предложен на 68 чуждестранни студенти от публичен университет в Южна Африка. Количествените данни са анализирани с помощта на описателна статистика. Резултатите показват, че чуждестранните студенти са били по-уязвими и изложени на социално-икономически и умствени предизвикателства, включително ниско самочувствие, финансови затруднения и емоционални страдания по време на пандемията, което се е отразило негативно върху техните академични резултати и социално благополучие, наред с други неща. Констатациите също така разкриват, че университетските власти не са предприели необходимите мерки за справяне с житейските предизвикателства на чуждестранните студенти. Следователно документът подчертава холистичното разбиране за това как да се смекчат и облекчат социално-икономическите въздействия на такава пандемия в бъдеще чрез диалог, промяна на институционалната политика за реагиране на извънредна ситуация, когато тя възникне, и приемане от страна на университетите или по-висшите институции на стратегии за намеса за подпомагане на чуждестранни студенти по време на избухване на заболяването.

Ключови думи: COVID-19; чуждестранни студенти; преживявания; висше образование; социално-икономическо въздействие

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