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## The Impact of COVID-19 on International Student Support: A Global Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unique challenges to international students. Student Affairs and Services (SAS) across the higher education sector played a key role in supporting students and institutions during the pandemic. This article reports the findings of an exploratory survey with SAS practitioners from around the globe on the ways in which SAS responded to the pandemic and sought to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on students, in general, and international students specifically. The results demonstrate that international students were among the primary groups of students impacted by the pandemic. Specific challenges identified include mental well-being, inability to return home, financial hardships, fear, and uncertainty. Discrimination of certain groups was also noted. SAS intervened to assist international students in navigating these challenges across world regions, including services declared essential for international student support. Finally, financial implications and the future of international student support are explored.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, international students, mobility, student affairs services, student support

COVID-19 wreaked havoc on higher education (HE) as it did on most areas of society, communities, and nations (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Ly, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). In the course of 2020, an overwhelming number of national and international reports from various institutions, and governmental and not-for-profit organizations demonstrated how the pandemic was impacting international student experiences, travel, and overall mobility, describing it as a “Seismic Impact” (Fischer, 2020, p. i). Tesar (2020) argued that universities can no longer expect large numbers of international students on their campuses and need to adjust to different realities, as the implications from COVID-19 “shattered the overall structure of our degrees and programs and units, our plans, our academic rules and processes” (p. 556). The international student experience has changed along with the higher education context, and student affairs and services (SAS) practitioners who work in the international student domain have to adapt. International students are defined throughout this study as any student “who has crossed borders for the purpose of study” (Rebolledo-Gómez & Ranchin, 2013, p. 1).

The study’s objectives are to capture how SAS colleagues around the world were responding to the impediments facing international students during this extraordinary time in history, establishing a base knowledge of contextual differences, and informing future practice.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONTEXT**

SAS administrators are integral in managing emergencies and crises impacting students and higher education institutions (HEIs) (Treadwell & O’Grady, 2019; Zdziarski et al., 2007). It was evident in the early days of the onset of COVID-19 that this was no ordinary crisis and that there would be long-term global impacts on student mobility, internationalization, and international students.

As much as internationalization is not only conceptualized in quantitative terms (Brandenburg et al., 2019), it is impressive to note that in 2017, there were 5.2 million international students globally, which is more than a 60% increase from 2 million in 2000 (OECD, 2020). The top destinations for mobility are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, and the Russian Federation. There is also considerable consistency in the top countries of origin of international students over the past decade, whereby the number one source country of international students is China, followed by India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia (Krsmanovic, 2021; OECD, 2020).

Researchers point out the importance of international students in academic communities through their invaluable impact on “diversity and internationalization of their classrooms” (Hsiao-ping et al., 2015, p. 1; Seeber et al., 2016). Other benefits include enhanced revenue for HEIs, prestige and rankings, increased talent and economic viability for the country and region, and personal development for students (Brown & Jones, 2007; Chao et al., 2017; Choudaha, 2016; OECD, 2020). Most recently, Brandenburg et al. (2019) discussed how the benefits should be expanded to include the socio-cultural

impact through volunteerism and community engagement, and de Wit (2019) suggested that it should include “global learning for all” (p. 7).

HE and SAS practitioners are central in supporting international students in their personal, social, and academic goals. The support ranges from psycho-social development and support to assisting with pragmatic issues around permits and accommodation (Arthur, 2017; Ly, 2020; Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016). Ludeman and Schreiber (2020) recently argued that “The impact SAS has on students, both academically and developmentally, proves to be essential and central to the HE mission and enterprise” (p. 10). Typically, SAS is the first staff who students studying abroad encounter when they arrive on their host campus (Wecker, 2017). The kind of support given to international students traditionally includes managing immigration and visa status (Choudaha, 2016; David, 2020). Much of this happens through orientation programs, or central offices dedicated to international student support, or is decentralized throughout the campus.

There are diverging views on the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Marinoni et al. (2020) and others (e.g., Bilecen, 2020; Martel, 2020; “New EAIE Report”, 2020) warned that the pandemic has stunted efforts to internationalize higher education via mobility and international students. Yet others are less pessimistic, arguing that other global influences including the pandemic pave the way for a new understanding of internationalization (Brandenburg et al., 2019; O’Malley, 2020). In the midst of this, Deardorff (2020) highlighted the risk of COVID-19 accentuating parochial populism and narrow-minded nationalism and calls for us “to reflect upon what matters most, what bonds us all together, and what it means to be a good neighbor” (p. xv), reminding us of the African concept of ubuntu: “I am because we are” (p. xvi). We are all part of a globalized world of HE (Altbach, 2010), and continuing the important work of HE internationalization, which includes supporting international students, is now more important than ever before.

This study is therefore designed to gain insight into the following areas related to international student support:

1. How and when was SAS involved in institutional decisions (and was support to international students considered)?
2. Which student population of students was most impacted?
3. What challenges were experienced by international students?
4. Were international students subjected to discrimination?
5. Which services were essential and how were international students supported?
6. What specific services or programs were offered to international students?
7. What changes do SAS professionals expect in the future?

## **METHODOLOGY**

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a research team of four higher education student affairs experts from Germany, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 and the related lockdowns, restrictions on practice, perceptions, and engagement of SAS in higher education across the globe.

### **Sampling and Sample**

An online survey was distributed using the referral sampling method (also called snowball sampling) (Creswell, 2013). A non-probability sampling technique was used to generate a stratified but non-random convenience sample that reflects the broad spectrum of student affairs professionals globally but is not strictly speaking statistically representative. The referral sampling method is appropriate to reach 'hard to reach' groups during extraordinary times (Creswell, 2013). While the sample is not suitable for theory testing or making statistically reliable generalizations, it is appropriate to explore different kinds of practices as well as variations between contexts, and it enables theory and hypothesis development.

As a starting point, the survey was distributed by the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) to its membership, as well as through email and social media (mainly Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) and networks known to the researchers. In addition, more than 20 national and international SAS associations that are members of IASAS shared the survey with their respective membership and researchers distributed it further to their networks. This combination of methods facilitated rapid responses that reached a level deemed adequate (Goodman, 2011; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). It allowed the researchers to reach SAS professionals in countries and regions that could not have been reached in a timely manner by other means (compare for alternatives Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

After cleaning almost 1,000 responses for duplicates and incompleteness, there remained 781 responses (of which 46% fully completed the questionnaire and the rest completed it partially). Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and NVivo tools were used for analysis. SPSS was used for descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation in quantitative analysis. NVivo was used for coding and thematic analysis of qualitative text responses.

The researchers used United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO's] (2018) and IASAS' geographical regions as the primary guides to organize responses into seven world regions (i.e., Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, Oceania, North America, and Latin America & Caribbean/LAC), which allowed for interregional comparisons. Table 1 lists the respondents by regions based on respective IP addresses. The researchers acknowledge that the regions are diverse, however, a country comparison would not have been useful as some countries (especially those that do not use English in higher education) have low participation numbers.

**Table 1: Number of Respondents by World Region, N = 781**

Region	Number of participants
Africa	118
Asia	144
Europe	207
Middle East	35
Oceania	108
North America	149
Latin America and Caribbean	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>781</b>

Of these respondents, 35% reported that they had less than 5% international students on campus, 21% reported that 10% of their student body was international, and 20% reported that 25% or more were international students on their campus.

### **Instrument Design and Data Collection**

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire hosted on the Qualtrics platform, consisting of 53 questions, after voluntarily consenting. The questionnaire comprised many qualitative, open-ended questions as well as several questions with multiple choice, rank, and grading options. Specifically, there were nine questions on HEI and SAS involvement in decision-making, four questions on SAS responses to the pandemic, three questions on the possible financial implications of the pandemic, and three questions on thoughts on how the pandemic will impact practices and approaches in the future. In addition, there were eight questions on residence halls/student accommodations, and eight questions on SAS professionals working remotely, three questions on student outreach and engagement with student leaders, and seven questions on the impact on unique student populations. Included in this questionnaire were nine questions specifically related to international students and internationalization. The questionnaire ended with a set of demographic questions.

SAS practitioners were able to participate in the survey during the month of May 2020 and they did not have to answer all questions.

### **Analysis**

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to analyze the qualitative responses. Specifically, it was used to extract themes via word frequency counts which were recorded and are reflected in the findings below (Woolf & Silver, 2018). SPSS offers statistical analysis of data and generates tables, visual graphs,

and charts of the data which help us understand the SAS responses to COVID-19, i.e., describe observations rather than test hypothesis (Courtney & Gordon, 2013).

### **Limitations**

Given the sampling methods used in order to access the hard-to-reach respondents under the uncertain conditions of the first COVID-19 wave, the data presented in this study are not fully randomized and should not be statistically generalized without further interrogation. As typical in exploratory empirical studies, statements of generality and comparison should be understood as propositions that require further testing (Bonevski et al., 2014).

### **Ethics**

This research was approved by the institutional research review board of the American University of Sharjah in the UAE, the home institution of one research team member.

## **FINDINGS OF THE GLOBAL SAS COVID-19 RESEARCH**

The coronavirus pandemic impacted international students in specific ways and higher education institutions and SAS rallied to devise innovative ways to support them. In this section, we discuss the experiences of SAS professionals around providing support to and engaging with the needs of international students. Provided that the data we discuss here are not statistically representative, we use the data to explore, describe, and try to understand the creative ways in which SAS engaged with the situation around international students across the globe and in specific regions.

### **SAS Involvement in Institutional Decision-Making**

The majority of respondents (86%) indicated that SAS was key in the institutional decision-making during the pandemic on their campuses. When making decisions for their student communities, reasons around “community safety,” “teaching and learning,” and “ethics and care” were the top three considerations for institutional decision-making in all world regions, in this order. For Europe, Oceania, and North America, these three reasons were followed by how the decisions impacted international students, and then impact on students living in residence halls. The other regions considered residence halls first then international students. Overall, SAS across the seven regions was involved in the institutional decision-making by the second month (82%) of the institution being impacted by COVID-19. Our results suggest that SAS played a central role early-on in institutional decision-making around the pandemic and its impact on international students.

## Impact on International Students and Other Student Groups

Research respondents identified international students as the student group that was impacted more significantly than others. Figure 1 shows that international students, in general, and Asian and Chinese students as a special group of international students, were identified as the student groups most impacted by the pandemic. The second group identified by respondents was students with lower socio-economic status (SES). This group was followed by students from difficult home situations that included violence, marginalized because of sexual identity, loss of a job, inadequate Wi-Fi, and students living and learning with disability. The categories are not mutually exclusive as there is some overlap; yet, there were clear regional variations, which are discussed below.

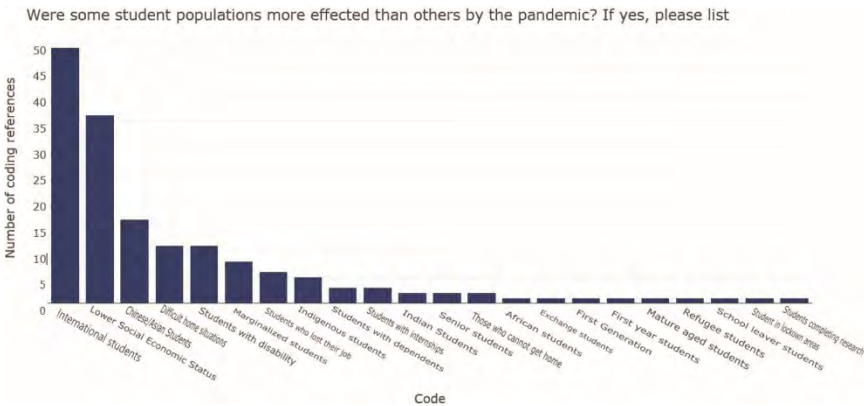


Figure 1: Populations of Students Impacted by COVID-19

### Regional Variations

Respondents from Europe indicated that international students were the student group most impacted, followed by the student group who had lost their jobs, and then students who were living in difficult home situations. International students were considered the most impacted group of students in Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), and the Middle East. This is also the case for North America, followed by the group of lower-SES students.

Responses from the Africa and Asia regions diverged from this finding. African SAS respondents indicate that lower-SES students were most impacted, the second group most impacted were students living in difficult home situations including students living in overcrowded households, students who lacked access to Wi-Fi, and those exposed to gender-based and family violence. The third group in the African sample was students with disabilities. In the Africa region, the SAS respondents identified international students only as the fourth group most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conversely in Asia, the data show that respondents from that region considered the student group most impacted as those living in difficult home situations, then lower-SES students, and third were international students.

The findings in this section illustrate several points. First, the fact that in all contexts SAS was involved from the earliest moments of the pandemic in institutional decision-making is an acknowledgment of the importance of SAS. Second, the finding that international students are considered the student group that was most impacted by the pandemic in five of the seven world regions is informative. The pattern of world regions also corresponds with patterns of international student mobility.

### **Specific Challenges Facing International Students**

The survey asked SAS professionals what the most prevalent challenges were facing international students during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents overwhelmingly noted emotional stress (96%), the challenges faced by international students to return home (88%), financial challenges (74%), and fear (67%) as impacts. This is explored further below and discussed in terms of emerging regional variations.

#### ***Mental Health and Emotional Well-being***

Almost all of the responding SAS practitioners (96%) noted that international students faced enormous emotional stress during the pandemic. It is therefore not surprising that the most important essential SAS service noted by survey respondents across the globe was counseling services, which responded quickly to offer virtual mental health support. Along with the ongoing provision of mental health services, communication to international students was paramount according to the data. A North American colleague noted that among the specific support services established during the pandemic was the creation of “Specific Task Forces” for international students involving SAS and faculty partners who were assigned “to check in and support international students.” Another respondent from North America referred to the increase of “First Alert Teams” in their SAS unit.

Other qualitative responses to the survey show the range of help developed for international students that included, for example, in Oceania, a “dedicated cross-functional team working with international students and communicating with them via phone, group chat, workshops and Moodle.” A SAS staff member in the Middle East worked to pair up student leaders to answer questions and concerns in a peer support network, and offer support through “video content.” In African universities and elsewhere, WhatsApp groups were created to communicate with students and answer specific queries, especially those from international students. Other help in North America included “storage for personal belongings for those who moved out” and “free food hampers for international students who needed it.” In Asia specifically, SAS considered and supported the families of international students as well through outreach.



### ***Inability to Return Home***

A large majority of the survey respondents (88%) indicated that international students in their institution were impacted by the closing of borders and airlines not operating due to the pandemic. SAS navigated immigration issues for students during this time, assisted with continuing their studies, and ensured accommodations and food when needed. Indeed, there was a tremendous amount of support offered around immigration and the need to get students home. Respondents mentioned the following support services they offered to international students:

- “Facilitation of travel for aid from government and ability to study remotely from home country”; and “embassy connections” were comments from colleagues in LAC;
- “Regular communication about study permits” and “specific online sessions were offered to F-1 and J-1 students and advising was done remotely” were responses from North America staff. (Note: Under US law, F-1 and J-1 is a Visa status for international students studying in the US.);
- When returning home was not possible “due to war or other strife,” a respondent from Middle East assisted by providing these students “with funds to reside with relatives in safer places.”

This global survey further shows that SAS practitioners in all world regions assisted students in navigating ministry of health requirements and numerous visa challenges when they arose.

### ***Financial Hardship***

Seventy-five (75%) of respondents indicated that international students were suffering financially during the pandemic. SAS offered emergency grants to students for transportation, housing, and food. When asked how their institution supported international students a SAS practitioner in Oceania noted that “70+% of applicants” who applied for hardship monies were international students. Another Oceania colleague mentioned that other forms of help were offered by their institution, like grocery vouchers and food banks.

Even before COVID-19, financial resources were one of the challenges for international students (Hsiao-ping et al., 2015). In Europe, about 59% of students work to support themselves (Gil, 2014). European SAS professionals noted that due to the pandemic, many students lost their part-time jobs, which impacted their ability to meet expenses. SAS practitioners in Europe assisted students in obtaining government emergency grants and other forms of financial assistance.

### ***Fear and Uncertainty***

Along with the other three factors, respondents noted that fear was affecting international students in their institutional contexts. Even though there were no specifics in the multiple-choice questions on why this group of students faced fear, some of the qualitative responses suggest that the international students' fear was founded in the uncertainties they faced; how they would be able to study if they were away from campus, their inability to return home in some cases, and for some, food and housing insecurity. Adjusting to a new culture and acculturating (Berry, 2006) is a pressure that any new international student faces. The academic, day-to-day, and economic stresses facing the students were, of course, greatly intensified during the global health pandemic (Cao et al., 2020).

Survey results show that SAS worked to mitigate challenges facing international students while adapting to a different work mode. The uncertainty around if and how they were going to be able to finish the semester, fund housing and other necessities, along with the inability to be with family and networks familiar to them, clearly exasperated international students by May 2020 in the height of the pandemic. As noted above, it is not surprising that the number one concern for those from the sample was the mental health of international students.

### **COVID-19 Discrimination**

A factor that may have aggravated the fears and impact on their mental well-being may have been discrimination experienced by international students in some contexts. International students make decisions on where to attend college based, among other reasons, on how welcoming the country is to international students (Choudaha, 2017; "International Student Survey-QS", 2020). International students typically chose to study across borders to improve socio-economic status for themselves and their families (Brown & Jones, 2017; Choudaha, 2016). According to an IEE study, one of the reasons a student chooses to study overseas is to improve their chances to find work back home (Arthur, 2017; Chao et al., 2017). International students are often facing financial struggles and need to find ways to fit in and adjust academically and socially (Hsiao-ping et al., 2015). With the recent wave of nationalism and populism around the world even though in some countries like the US new presidential changes may make the country more welcoming, many communities do not see the value of international students (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020; Mok, 2018), which can lead to a hostile environment.

Three-fourths of the global sample of SAS practitioners (75%) did not feel that their international students were subject to discrimination. Yet, out of the 25% who responded affirmatively when asked which ones of their international student populations were targets of discrimination, the majority answered students from Asia.

### ***Regional Variations***

The 25% who noted that their international students faced discrimination were primarily from four regions: Oceania, North America, Asia, and Europe. No responses were received from Africa, LAC, and the Middle East.

A SAS professional from Oceania commented, “I have listed that Asian students experienced stigma, but this was not so much on campus, more in our country’s social media and the reaction in community (e.g., people stopped frequenting Chinese restaurants and Chinatown areas).” Another respondent from Oceania noted, “International Chinese students were facing a lot of issues regarding entry into NZ during COVID19.” The first comment could be more about the perceived discrimination felt by Chinese/Asian students that they heard about through media and in communities outside of the university; yet, these comments can send an unwelcoming message. Furthermore, a colleague in North America noted, “Yes, international students, and yes, Asian American/API students. Our campus didn’t have any specific incidents of racism, but fear was increased, in general, for those populations and what has been happening.”

The open-ended responses show that there may not have been many direct experiences of discrimination of international students as a result of the pandemic. However, some of the qualitative data indicate that the culture and political discourse around the coronavirus may have impacted international students, especially Asian/Chinese students. With a general increase in the level of xenophobia and prejudice toward international students (Beckstein, 2020; Dearthoff, 2020), this can negatively impact well-being. A recent global study of social media posts confirmed that the overall public felt negative about overseas visitors to their country (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2020).

### **Specific SAS Support Offered to International Students**

The survey asked SAS professionals what services SAS continued to offer during the lockdown and restrictions in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and which services were specifically offered to international students.

#### ***Essential Services***

When campuses moved to online teaching and learning, many SAS units were designated as “essential services.” They typically included counseling and mental health services, health care, housing/student accommodation, and academic advising. The main essential SAS support offered to students across all seven regions was mental health and counseling services. Primarily, these services were offered virtually with some face to face (F2F) offering for emergency services, health care, and residential needs.

Categorizing SAS functions as essential services and offering these via virtual avenues occurred across all regions. As of May 1, 2020, 76% of respondents noted that the specific support for international students took place virtually, 20% offered support virtually and F2F, and a small percentage (4%) provided help in person only.

**Regional Variations.** Although nominal, respondents from Asia (10%) and the Middle East (7%) noted slightly more F2F provision of support to international students than respondents from other regions of the world, where, on average, their share of F2F services was low (3.5%). When asked how international student support would be delivered for the remainder of 2020, respondents were hopeful that they could implement more programs and services in a hybrid manner. Of the global SAS respondents, just over half (51%) indicated they would be able to offer virtual services, 45% indicated they would offer both F2F and virtual and 4% said they would only offer F2F. Respondents in Oceania more than any other region responded with a higher percentage (65%) than the 45% for all regions that they would operate support for international students in a hybrid fashion.

Because of the timing of new health and travel regulations for Oceania respondents, SAS was managing both students from China who just arrived for the semester and students who were still in their country of origin. Thus, it was a challenge for SAS to remotely support both F2F students and those who were remote. Further comments indicate again that the well-being of international students was a major concern, so it is not surprising that the main essential service for students globally was counseling.

### ***How International Students Were Supported***

Figure 2 illustrates the ways in which SAS supported international students to help their transition to online learning, provide accommodation and offer food security, and deal with various other challenges that students faced to continue their education. Travel restrictions prevented many international students from returning to their host campus after Christmas breaks, “spring breaks” or the Lunar New Year celebrations, or other reasons that had taken students home. Others needed housing/student accommodation, and counseling and health services were again among the most frequently offered. Other assistance mentioned most often included financial assistance, staff support, support around academic issues, and immigration-related challenges.

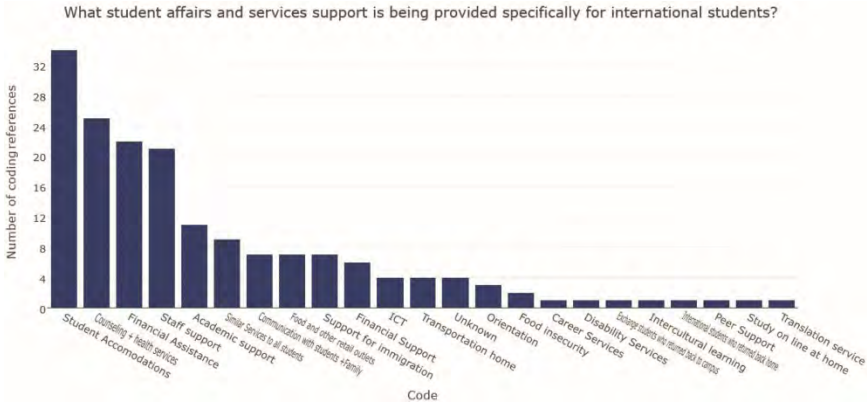


Figure 2: SAS Specific Support for International Students

**Regional Variations.** The diversity of higher education systems and institutional types across the globe provides for regional variances in the provision of services specific to international students during the pandemic. In Europe and Oceania, responses show that providing financial assistance was the most frequently provided service to international students. As mentioned above, this may be because in Europe, international students who support themselves lost part-time jobs. In Asia, student accommodation and financial help were not the primary service offered to international students. Instead, communication outreach to students, counseling services, and academic support ranked slightly higher. As one respondent from Asia indicated: “Students all have a ‘case manager’ from student affairs maintaining contact.”

The top three services that North American SAS professionals continued to provide to international students, in particular, were student accommodations, communication outreach to students, and financial assistance. As indicated by a respondent in North America, “[Students were placed in] single rooms to ensure physical distancing and [provided meals at] staggered mealtimes for food pickup. We permitted international students to remain, without cost, because of border closures.” Although counseling and mental health was the number one service offered to all students, SAS respondents indicated that housing and student accommodation was more of a concern for international students compared with local/domestic students due to travel restrictions.

The government and public restraints during the first wave of the pandemic were overwhelming and dictated much of what was going to happen for the international student population; whether they remained in their host country of study or returned home, or in the inverse case, whether they were confined to their home country or would be able to return to their chosen country of study eventually. As has been shown in this section, SAS professionals in different contexts and with different emphases were there to intervene and assist international students in meeting the guidelines, dealing with immigration policies and travel arrangements, or ensuring ongoing provision of accommodation, catering, as well as health and well-being services.

## **The Post-Covid-19 Future of SAS Support to International Students**

When the survey was conducted in May 2020, every world region was still experiencing the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some countries were still under lockdown while in others lockdown restrictions had gradually begun to be lifted (Langer, 2020). Without a vaccine in the offing and a second wave looming, there was much uncertainty as to the lasting changes that the pandemic might have on higher education and international students.

In our study, SAS professionals commented that the way international students were supported would change as a result of the COVID-19 experience. In the process, they also made several critical comments. Thus, when asked about mistakes made by the institution or what they would do differently, a general comment was that HEIs and SAS needed to be smarter and more nuanced in their approach to serving international students to level the playing field for students from different backgrounds and abilities, and to ensure student success (also see, Bardill Moscaritolo & Roberts, 2016; Humphrey, 2020; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020).

Our coding of open responses indicates a nuanced set of expectations. On the one hand, SAS practitioners hoped that the medium to long-term impact of the pandemic experience would be enhanced globalization efforts in the profession. On the other hand, respondents believed it was likely that there would be fewer international students that will negatively impact their institution's finances. In any case, they expected that there would be a restructuring of SAS organizations and that changes in services were likely. For example, a colleague from North America stated:

Fewer international students will mean less demand for those services in the short term. However, if anything this pandemic has taught us the world is a small place that is highly connected. We need a continued focus on internationalizing our campuses to build awareness, cultural understanding, and nurture a global perspective.

With respect to what the future may hold, foremost on the minds of SAS professionals were the financial impact of the pandemic on HEIs and the provision of SAS support to international students.

### ***Institutional Financial Impact of Less International Students***

Three-fourths of the respondents (75%) believed that it would take more than two years for their institution to recover financially from the effects of the pandemic. Thus, SAS staff were concerned about layoffs and furloughs, especially in international student support and exchange offices/units, which they expected to be more affected. It is unclear if lack of international students was the main reason but based on the open-ended responses on internationalization and the future impact on SAS, a major fear for SAS professionals around the globe was that the impact of the pandemic would be restructuring and job losses.

In the European sample, international students were noted as the main population affected by COVID-19. With respect to the future, European respondents were therefore concerned about the impact of fewer international students on their internationalization efforts. Similarly, respondents from the Middle East noted that international students were the number one population affected by the pandemic. A respondent from the Middle East argued that less international mobility of students would increase the homogeneity of the campus and that this was concerning.

### ***Possible Restructure of SAS Impact on International Student Support***

As intimated above, the start of the pandemic required SAS practitioners to quickly adapt to delivering services and education in different ways. Remote working arrangements were hastily put in place as restrictions were implemented for staff and students on campus. With fewer international students, reduced budgets, a lack of F2F support (because of restricted activities on campus) has changed how students learn and develop outside of the classroom, which calls for SAS to support students differently. What has been learned from this experience and how will this translate into new models of support especially for international students? Will specific services for international students be combined into services for all students?

When asked to predict possible changes to SAS, themed coding of responses indicate that expected changes in how SAS might change involved more online provision of services and support for students. This can be seen, for example, in the following quote: “The philosophy or the basis of our work has been challenged and the how-to for our day-to-day work has drastically changed.” This change in SAS philosophy and way of providing SAS will require creativity and re-invention. “It gives another way to think about [a] modern way to internationalize student affairs and services: that services can be given without social interaction.”

## **DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This global COVID-19 study provides evidence from SAS practitioners around the world that international students were among the student groups most affected by the pandemic. In world regions that are typically destinations for international students, this group was noted without fail as the most impacted. In the world regions from where more globally mobile students originate, international students were among the top five groups but typically not the most frequently mentioned. Nonetheless, global SAS professionals made international students a priority in their efforts to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Top exporting countries can leverage these results to leverage and engage SAS practitioners to help support international students. The pandemic has demonstrated the value and centrality of SAS programs and services for student success. Hosting international students at scale is a major undertaking for any institution, and knowing the essential and germane supports needed by international students and working together with those providing these supports

can help policymakers and higher education professionals realize success for their institutions and students.

### **Focus on International Students and Support**

A strong implication of this research is the attention that the pandemic has brought to international students, reopening questions around the purpose and value of international student mobility, and the nature and delivery of specific SAS services to appropriately support international students facing unique challenges in the context of the pandemic. These same questions present themselves in a post-COVID-19 future. As shown in this study, SAS professionals around the globe expect a restructuring and potential consolidation of SAS services, in general, along with an increased use of hybrid (virtual and F2F) models of providing SAS to international students.

### **Post-COVID-19 Continued Focus on International Student Support**

The findings show the challenges experienced by international students during the pandemic, including their mental well-being, financial hardship, inability to return home (or to campus), related anxieties, and (a sense of) discrimination, and fear. With respect to lockdown travel restrictions and grants to alleviate students' financial hardships, there are lessons to be learned too. SAS professionals work with higher education institutional and system policymakers to decrease the impediments faced by international students whether it is in the way financial grants are determined and administered or interpreting immigration guidelines. The global birds' eye view of this study provides a rich source for developing and testing related propositions.

### **Partnerships for Improved Mental Health Services**

The mental health of youth and adolescents must be a priority around the world. How can new partnerships among public and private sectors assist HEIs in meeting the mental health needs of students and give special attention to international students' well-being, not just during a pandemic? Research by Cao et al. (2020) on the impact of COVID-19 on Chinese students concluded that 26% of those studied presented with anxiety as a result of COVID-19. They call for institutions and government to work together to solve the problem "to provide high-quality, timely crisis-oriented psychological services to college students" (p. 4).

This study showed that mental well-being was the most persistent challenge, and student counseling and mental well-being services were therefore a key essential service mentioned in most regions as HE swiftly moved away from F2F modes of instruction and operation to other programs and service delivery modalities, throughout the pandemic. The rapid response teams, peer counseling models, and so forth, developed in the process, which were able to respond to



international students' well-being challenges, need to be documented in-depth to diversify and enhance SAS provision to this group going into the future.

### **Managing Racism Impacting International Students Must Be a Priority**

With the pandemic came more incidents of racism and xenophobia (Deardorff, 2020). We concur with Lee and Rice's (2007) call for institutions of higher education to evaluate how they manage racism impacting international students. Perhaps, with new relationships in place because of COVID-19 now is the time to have these conversations with internal and external stakeholders.

A common emergency across the globe presents tremendous challenge and hardship, yet provides an opportunity to review various perspectives and responses to the emergency. This study demonstrates that similar challenges for international students globally can be addressed and solved in different and culturally appropriate ways.

### **CONCLUSION**

The primary objective of the study was to gain a comparative understanding of SAS response to the pandemic, particularly as it affected international students, to advise future practice. This survey describes and analyses the SAS responses to and engagements with international students at higher education institutions across the globe during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. International students were impacted in unique and distinct ways, primarily experiencing challenges around mental health, returning home, financial hardship, and dealing with acute issues around anxiety and uncertainty. Comparison across the world reveals that most regions listed international students as the most vulnerable group during the COVID-19 crisis at that time. The Africa and Asia region divert from this trend, with Africa listing students from lower-SES and students with disability, and Asia listing students living with difficult home situations as more vulnerable than international students at that time in that region. It emerges from these findings that SAS has played a vital role in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on international students. Given that this research was done during crisis under time pressure, seeking responses from hard-to-reach participants, the results were not intended to test theory, but to illuminate the experiences of international students and the SAS responses to their needs along with regional variations. The understanding generated by this research guides higher education and SAS decision-makers to strengthen the support provided by SAS to international students.

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