

© *Journal of International Students*  
Volume 12, Issue 4 (2022), pp. 909-932  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i4.2905>  
[ojed.org/jis](http://ojed.org/jis)

## **International Students by Treaty: Common Space, Different Vulnerabilities**

Cherry-Ann Smart  
*Information Smart Consulting, Jamaica*

### **ABSTRACT**

Nonnational students in the Anglophone Caribbean are often affected by natural or man-made disasters that affect their experiences in the host country. However, the region had never experienced pandemic disasters such as COVID-19. Its occurrence highlighted latent concerns such as prejudices, border issues, and weak institutional support despite the existence of geopolitical treaties. Using the concept of the looming vulnerability framework, and incorporating a transformative lens, the research examined factors that contributed to these students' vulnerabilities at institutions of higher education in the Caribbean during the pandemic. A qualitative research design using regional newspapers accounted for students' collective voices. The results showed that nonnational students' mental well-being was affected by factors including institutional role, management of communication, access to resources, their governments' expression of financial support, and perceived discrimination from the host community. The article highlights the potential for students' further marginalization in the absence of pragmatic disaster preparedness plans.

**Keywords:** Caribbean, COVID-19, developing nations, higher education, international students, looming vulnerability

---

During the COVID-19 pandemic, international students the world over were caught in a maelstrom of uncertainties that disrupted their studies and financial investments, which added stress to their already vulnerable status in a foreign country. In the Anglophone Caribbean, nonnational students faced similar challenges. Despite a semblance of protection under geopolitical treaties unlike their counterparts in the United States (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020), similar uncertainties and diverse levels of institutional support added to existing challenges of their mobile study experience during the pandemic.

In the Caribbean, students attend tertiary level institutions within the region that range from 770 to 4,288 km from their home territories. Interisland air travel is facilitated by three carriers, with other alternatives being commercial transit through the United States. This alternate transit is expensive and requires travelers to possess a U.S. visa. Apart from the limited availability of flights, nonnational students were faced with border closures and strict lockdown measures in host and home territories. The nature of this pandemic meant resolutions undertaken during past natural disasters, such as home governments' swift repatriation of students by special flights (e.g., post passage of a Category 5 hurricane in Jamaica; "UWI Students Return," 2004) could not be implemented. To prevent contagion, governments instituted special security procedures at borders for citizens' readmission. Meanwhile, in host territories, island-wide curfews and stay-at-home orders restricted access to food, medicine, and other services. Correspondingly, at host institutions, housing accommodation, program continuity, financial worries, and uncertainties about the virus added to students' concerns.

Specific knowledge of international and nonnational students' vulnerabilities and capacities in the face of disasters in the Anglophone Caribbean is unknown. Although the region experiences annual disruptions of natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and pockets of civil disruptions such as states of emergencies because of crime and coups, their experience of biological hazards such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) is nonexistent. The purpose of this research, therefore, was to identify factors that contributed to the vulnerabilities of nonnational tertiary level students at host institutions in the Caribbean during the pandemic. Data culled from newspapers provided theoretical and methodological opportunities to examine social movement events (Earl et al., 2004) and were useful to examine information behavior (Tanacković et al., 2014). Themes were derived using content analysis. The article demonstrates the need for transformative strategies to understand and

address the vulnerable status of nonnational students within tertiary institutions in the Caribbean in the event of disasters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Reasons for Studying Abroad

Prospective students of international higher education consider different aspects in their decisions to study in a host country. Cubillo et al. (2006) identified some of these factors as safety, security, quality of life, and visa and entry requirements. Other authors pinpoint factors such as quality of education, proximity to home, and amicable political arrangements with the host country (Forbes-Mewett, 2020; Lam et al., 2017; Marginson, 2012). Studying abroad increases opportunities for research and to learn about different groups and ways of life, thus increasing intercultural sensitivity (Chien, 2015).

### International Students' Wellbeing

Recent occurrences in international politics and violence against students on U.S. campuses emphasize the importance for universities to implement policies and programs to reduce risks and maintain safety and security for migrant students (Kapucu & Khosa, 2013). *Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative* suggested short-term migrants, including international students, face disproportionate struggles that affect their lives and security during a disaster (Perchinig, 2016). Their vulnerability is often intensified because of their marginalized status, and further emphasized through limited social networks, restrictions on mobility, discrimination, hostility, and xenophobia, to name a few (Guadagno et al., 2017; Rahming, 2019; Sherry et al., 2009). Guadagno et al. (2017) maintained the extent of migrants' vulnerability, during and after disasters, was often determined by the host university. This is possibly because the academy represents the first official port of information (Lam et al., 2017). Thorup-Binger and Charania (2019) affirmed this behavior in their qualitative study of international students after the 2010 Darfield earthquake in New Zealand. International students' belief that their institution would provide adequate support following the disaster emphasizes the importance of host institutions to honor this responsibility. It was only in the absence of a dedicated emergency hub (Izumi et al., 2020), or noncommunication, that students resorted to their respective embassies or consulates (Lam et al., 2017; Walters, 2018).

### **Higher Education amid COVID-19**

Tran (2020) highlighted the fragility of current transactional higher education models amid COVID-19. Common topics in the literature have been the transition to online teaching modules and high levels of apprehension by tutors and students. In developing nations, the digital divide posed a unique barrier (Partridge, 2007), which further heightened skepticism among tutors about their ability to effectively teach online (Izumi et al., 2020). This focus on pedagogy was rivaled only by institutions' panic about pecuniary upsets (Dunkley-Willis, 2020), with the "personal realities" of postsecondary students a seemingly uncontested third, after crisis management (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). In the Caribbean, some institutions assumed an almost amorphous role, deferring responsibility for "their" nonnational students to home governments. This inherently "neutral approach" seems antithetical to international higher education within treaty arrangements, suggesting perhaps the injection of neoliberalist tendencies. However, authors such as Walters (2018) contended institutions need to come to terms with the politics of international education by assuming responsibility for international students. Castiello-Gutiérrez and Li (2020) concurred with this position, as they argued that international students were more than a business transaction. Despite the internationalization of higher education, this ethical and moral aspect, and its alignment with corporate social responsibility, remains largely unmediated and seldom addressed in the literature on international students. During unexpected hazards, such as disasters and civil disruption, failure by institutions to grok situates these students in precarious positions where their mental well-being may be adversely affected.

### **Student Vulnerability amid COVID-19**

An individual's initial response to a disaster is perhaps panic, followed by an innate urge to escape, fight, freeze, or submit (Gilbert, 2016). Invariably, the barrage of media reporting that follows disasters sometimes serves to instill greater anxieties than provide comfort. During Hurricane Katrina, research showed the influence of the media and their tendency to overstep boundaries (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007). Inflammatory language exaggerated claims, which fueled the ongoing panic (Tierney et al., 2006). For international students, management of communication can reduce stress and build resilience (Forbes-Mewett, 2020; Thorup-Binger & Charania, 2019). Kapucu and Khosa (2013) stressed the need for tailored communication since insufficient, disjointed, or limited communication added to the panic and increased feelings of vulnerabilities. To this end, Izumi et al. (2020) advised that higher

education institutions should conduct regular awareness programs on risks, preparedness, and responses for campus stakeholders. Ideally, this should include a comprehensive risk communication strategy, encompassing all disasters—natural, biological, and man-made. These are just a few of the measures to protect students' well-being as sojourners of international higher education.

### **Vulnerability as a Conceptual Framework**

Human beings are vulnerable to specific hazards but credit their resilience as symptomatic of the generative capacity to survive. Diverse conceptual frameworks of vulnerability span multiple sectors from medicine to disaster management (Wisner, 2016), and are riddled with ambiguity (Peroni & Timmer, 2013). Wisner (2016) suggested this was because these models were definitions expanded to highlight how diverse sectoral processes negotiated their “loss and harm and obstacles to recovery” (p. 9). In their looming vulnerability model (LVM), the framework used in this study, Riskind and Rector (2018) suggested that an *individual's perception* of a threat, *if it occurs*, was as important as the imminent threat as it hindered the mind's response mechanism and contributed to the etiology of stress and anxiety. The “looming cognitive style” (LCS) is an evolutionary construct that refers to an individual's perceived bias toward prospection and perception of future threats. It is based on a mental image of the threat's rapid progression as it draws nearer and intensifies as it becomes more urgent (Yeo et al., 2020).

Although the concept falls under the suite of cognitive behavioral theories, it does not presuppose that students' exposure to these stresses is a corollary for psychological disorders such as depression. Rather, early detection of a hazard allows an individual to prepare for harmful stimuli and to engage in self-protective behaviors. However, Riskind and Rector (2018) maintained some individuals may be at greater risk of anxiety than others. So although the risk of direct infection with COVID-19 might be negligible, the imminent uncertainty could adversely affect international students' psychological state (Serafini et al., 2020).

The LCS joins other cognitive behavior models in psychology, which conceptualizes, identifies and assesses, and generates appropriate interventions for anxiety and other disorders. This construct differs from conditions such as embodied predictive coding where both sensory and interoceptive states modulate inferences (Pezzulo, 2004).

Cognitive behavioral theorists such as Aaron T. Beck (1976) highlighted anxiety as a response to an impending negative event. Anxiety is linked to stress and other psychological disorders and explored using

lines of inquiry such as worry (Capobianco et al., 2018), uncertainty (Zlomke & Jeter, 2014), and depression (Weger & Sandi, 2018). Early detection of hazards allows individuals to prepare for harmful stimuli and engage in self-protective behaviors.

Cognitive theories augment and expand the understanding of human behavior and its environment. Piaget's model of cognitive development posited that knowledge gained from dynamic or operative knowledge was of greater importance to cognitive development than information derived from static properties (Riskind & Rector, 2018). Accordingly, Strenger (2012), in situating the LVM between the philosophical thoughts of Hume and the existentialism of Heidegger and Merleau Ponty, advocated for more integrative use of concepts and categories in psychotherapy. Human survival depends on actual bodily experiences where skepticism and doubts are cured or overridden by praxis and not by vicarious or utopian existences.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative research design (Creswell, 2014) addressed the research question: What are the factors that influenced nonnational tertiary level Caribbean students' vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic at host institutions in the Caribbean? Newspapers were the data source because they were important to frame an understanding of collective actions and social issues exhibited within the public discourse. They function as an outlet for society in their dealings with quisquous institutions, shadow protests, and collective actions (Earl et al., 2004). Newspapers also acted as a recorder of the social construction of students' protests during the pandemic and are appropriate given their historically proven benefits in research traditions (Earl et al., 2004). Voices of the vulnerable population and affected stakeholders were heard through the reported narrative. In this way, they "collaborated" to suggest ways to transform the institutional culture (Farias et al., 2017).

### **Author Positionality**

This inductive research assumes it can be viewed through the lens of the transformative framework to "interrogate patterns within personal or social meaning" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thus, these findings are one possible interpretation based on my position as an Afro-Caribbean citizen and nonnational alumna of a regional university. I have observed, researched, and advocated for more equitable relational issues of foreign and international students. This experience contributed to meaning in the newspaper accounts.

### **Study Area and Population**

The Anglophone Caribbean are islands whose coastlines border the Caribbean Sea. The area encompasses some 2.754 million km<sup>2</sup> with a population of approximately 44.42 million (as of 2019). The islands are popular tourism sites and relatively peaceful despite their disruptive origins as receptacles of trafficked African slaves from the 16th to the 19th century. Islands are sovereign states and require the presentation of a passport to gain entry. Some islands host several tertiary-level institutions.

The terms “international” and “foreign” are often used interchangeably in the literature. The International Organization for Migration considers international students as persons “living, working or staying in a country other than her or his country of citizenship, regardless of her or his legal status, the reason for entry in the country and length of stay” (Guadagno et al., 2017, p. 9). In this research, the terms are inclusive and describe nonnationals who are in the country specifically for education. In the Caribbean, the demarcation has implications for institutional treatment. For example, The University of the West Indies, which is featured in this study, categorizes students based on country status because of the treaty that established the institution (Caribbean Community, 2002). Students who originate from islands that are signatories are considered “foreign students”; students outside that arrangement are considered “international.” This status has implications for tuition fees. Medical schools are located in Grenada, St. Kitts & Nevis, and Cuba that fall outside of this treaty arrangement, but fall within favorable geopolitical arrangements; their students may be regarded as regional transients.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data were retrieved from daily newspapers (Downs, 1972). Nineteen articles dated from March to August 2020 were extracted from eight newspapers (see Table 1). The data was publicly available, without human engagement and did not require Institutional Review Board permission. Featured student subjects originated from or studied in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Cuba, Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, St. Kitts & Nevis, Anguilla, Antigua, Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and The Bahamas. Specific search terms used to retrieve articles from the newspapers’ websites were: “international students,” “foreign students,” “university,” “COVID-19,” “Caribbean,” “Jamaica,” “Trinidad and Tobago,” “Guyana,” “Grenada,” and “pandemic.”

The use of multiple newspaper publishers addressed validity and concerns of reporting standards and sensational and unbalanced accounts

of events (Barranco & Wisler, 1999). Although validity problems can also occur with the news-value paradigm, the nascent origins and proximity among the Caribbean public posits cross-border transactions of students, and the activities of higher learning institutions are of regional concern. All newspapers had high degrees of reliability and credibility as premier national publications. One publication, *The Gleaner*, has been Jamaica's newspaper of record for more than a century (Bowen, 2009). Newsworthiness as evidenced by significant occurrences in these major newspapers were reported as continuing events and not unexpected, novel, or unique (Barranco & Wisler, 1999). Downs (1972) referred to this practice as the "issues-attention cycle" or "media attentional cycle" (pp. 38-39).

**Table 1: Caribbean Newspaper Coverage March to August 2020**

Name	Countries of collective narrative
<i>Barbados Today</i>	Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Cuba,
<i>Grenada</i>	Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, St. Kitts
<i>Jamaica Observer</i>	& Nevis, Anguilla, Antigua,
<i>Newsday</i> [Trinidad & Tobago]	Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and
<i>Stabroek News</i> [Guyana]	the Grenadines, The Bahamas.
<i>The Gleaner</i> [Jamaica]	
<i>The Tribune</i> [The Bahamas]	
<i>Trinidad Express</i>	

**Table 2: Generated Themes and Subthemes**

Major themes	Subthemes
Symptoms of mental stress	Feelings of isolation Anxiety Uncertainty Fear of the unknown Stress Depression Panic
Institutional positioning	Anxiety, uncertainty, stress
Management of communication	Anxiety, panic, stress
Expressions of positive experiences	Gratefulness, happiness, spirituality, patience
Access to resources	Food security, food shortage
Expressions of financial assistance	Gratefulness, anxiety, patience
Discrimination, stigma, and xenophobia	Perceived discrimination Stigma Xenophobia

### **Data Analysis**

An analysis of themes involved “identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). It seemed an appropriate technique given its flexibility with “sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to generating meaning” (p. 297). In this instance, recurrence and importance of themes (Buetow, 2010) were centered on the LVM.

Data analysis occurred in three phases after I uploaded the articles into the NVivo 12 Plus software. At Phase 1, I read each news article repeatedly and coded for patterns (Saldaña, 2015) from extracts of quotations from students and stakeholders. Coded items related to expressions of social life (i.e., perceptions, beliefs, and opinions); institutional responses (i.e., schools and governments); and environmental hazards related to COVID-19. In Phase 2, I refined codes and grouped for emergent themes related to behaviors or experiences expressed as a result of the pandemic. In Phase 3, I explored supporting and contrasting quotations to gain a richer understanding of the scene. A colleague voluntarily reviewed the codes. There was a minor disagreement about whether the term “racism” could be used with this population. Eventually, we agreed that “xenophobia” might be more appropriate. The analysis yielded seven major themes and 16 subthemes (see Table 2).

## **RESULTS**

### **Symptoms of Mental Stress**

Students expressed varying levels of stress brought about by the uncertainty of disruptions surrounding the pandemic. These were manifested through feelings of anxiety, depression, panic, confusion, and fear. Some situational factors were room confinement that forced self-isolation. Border closures limited freedom of movement, and the nature of the virus required persons to maintain physical distancing, which limited social contact.

### ***Psychological Impact of Quarantine***

Being locked in now because you have to, has produced the psychological feeling that you are trapped. (Salmon, 2020)

COVID-19 has created a spirit of anxiety in me. (Salmon, 2020)

### ***Financial Support***

Students' transient status was exacerbated by thoughts of imminent disruption to finances. Concerns extended beyond their circumstances to worries about family members being affected by actual or potential job loss. Results showed governments and institutional support were uneven thus contributing to levels of anxiety.

If I get kicked out, she said, I have no money and I'm in a foreign place. (Gioannetti, 2020)

As a student, I have been dependent on my relatives in TT [Trinidad and Tobago], and like most citizens who are not essential workers, the lockdown has affected their ability to work. (Fraser, 2020)

I can only speak on behalf of myself, I am eternally grateful for the aid which we received and I do not stand by the statements that were recently made in the news report regarding feeling neglected by our Government. In my opinion, we were seen and treated as a top priority and I wish to say again, thank you very much. (Webb, 2020)

### ***Institutional Positioning***

Each institution's position as it related to outward engagement with its nonnational student population varied and contributed in part to ease or aggravate students' vulnerabilities. Institutional positioning was posited to be a result of their resources, student focus, risk aversion, nationalism, and global outlook. Reports varied among institutions.

The situation is stressful on many levels but SGU [St. George's University] has done all it can to accommodate and help those stranded. The university is paying for the flight, so they just awaiting government approval. (Gioannetti, 2020)

Surely the university [UWI] would have let the students know what the closures—at the campus, country, and border levels—would mean for them?

And why did the students feel they had to directly contact the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and National Security? One would imagine that the university [UWI] takes responsibility for the welfare of its registered students and that it would have

been directly engaging them to ascertain their needs. Shouldn't the university have been communicating both with its students and the governments involved?" [Stakeholder comment] (Hunte, 2020)

### **Management of Communication**

Nonnational students were affected by the quantity, mode, and handling of the communication during the pandemic. The lag in institutional communication laid the groundwork for the dissemination of exaggerated and contradictory, not necessarily fake news, which fueled students' anxiety.

Rumors of an infected patient at the campus hospital circulated in mid-February,...“mass hysteria” among students has not subsided. (Smith, 2020)

I think it's because there's so much information out there on the virus that people don't always know what to believe. (Smith, 2020)

We thank you, our students, for your patience and resilience as you adapted to the significant changes over the last couple of months. We are aware that we should have communicated with you sooner. We apologize for this. [Principal's response to criticism from the Student Guild] (Randall, 2020)

While government information from the host and home countries was channeled through official channels such as government websites or newspapers, social media posts were unmanageable. The lack of a dedicated communication channel from institutions meant an inability to check dubious information (Pennycook et al., 2020). In addition to concerns about personal safety, students worried about limited official news about the status of their academic program.

Negligible communication from the institution to its primary charges: its students. [Stakeholder comment]. (Hunte, 2020)

Whereas I welcomed the move to reintroduce face-to-face learning via the blended approach, it is disappointing that the first place our students get confirmation is via a newspaper. Just

last week I wrote to senior administration about the importance of communication. (Randall, 2020)

It's really about tightening up the communication between students and the university. [Comment by a High Commissioner] (Fraser, 2020)

### **Expressions of Positive Experiences**

Some students thought it was important to maintain focus on their original goal and channel pent up uncertainties on their studies. Spirituality and faith were important to maintain a calm attitude.

There's really nothing we can do besides pray and try to stay in our rooms. (Smith, 2020)

...writing journal entries, listening to music, exercising and watching plays have helped him through the often-lonely experience. On the other hand, wisdom has found that being involved in her studies takes her mind off the pandemic. (Salmon, 2020)

The announcement of the pandemic in March occurred soon after the resumption of classes in the New Year. Students circumvented their limited mobility, social isolation, and loss of peer network by using social media to create new networks.

The situation in Grenada has been scary. (Gioannetti, 2020)

We can't do much about it besides trying to stay clean and not letting people cough on you. (Smith, 2020)

We have tried to band together during this time by engaging in different activities such as exercising, cooking and studying together. I also keep frequent contact with my family and friends who are back home .... Their support definitely keeps me going. (Salmon, 2020)

### **Access to Resources**

Nonnational students' inability to access resources such as food, cleaning products, and medication contributed to feelings of powerlessness and anxiety from this looming threat. Individual countries implemented disparate methods for persons to access supplies by limiting

shopping days or instituting shop-by-surname days. Some students complained of depleted supplies while waiting in line. Since maintenance of hygiene was a prime precaution against spread of the virus, inaccessibility and inflated costs for these items were of concern.

The supermarkets on campus are empty. We can't get wipes, sanitisers, [rubbing] alcohol or medication. (Smith, 2020)

New measures include that certain basic food and items will be rerouted to the bodega; it is common knowledge that these items in the bodega can only be sought with the use of a booklet. Foreign national students do not have access nor can they utilize the same. ("Covid-19: Guyanese doctors," 2020)

I was out of food during April when Grenada only allowed you to go to the grocery two days for the week (and) it was by last-name basis. (Gioannetti, 2020)

International trade and supply chains were disrupted due to border closures and embargoes. In times of crisis and scarcity, as often happens, locals have a home-court advantage. No special provisions were made for foreign students who had to compete with natives' local knowledge.

Cuba has recently been plunged into even more difficulties following the exacerbation and intensification of the embargo placed by the USA. This has caused a lack of and/or shortage of basic food, goods, personal care products, necessities and services. These elements have all been compounded by the recent introduction of the COVID-19 epidemic locally. ("Covid-19: Guyanese doctors," 2020)

We are living off the food that we brought up here from Jamaica before the pandemic, and we have very limited amounts now. (Bailey, 2020)

So we cannot get access to things like rice, sugar, soap or toothpaste now because they are not available in the other markets. (Hunte, 2020)

## **Expressions of Financial Assistance**

Expressions of financial assistance were either a source of comfort or distress. Governments' decision to repatriate their students, or wire funds for their upkeep, was an acknowledgment of students' vulnerable status in the foreign country. These expressions were, however, individual decisions, and inconsistently applied across board.

I was extremely grateful when I heard that the government was sending money to students trapped in other countries during this pandemic. (Fraser, 2020)

The government chartered a plane to Jamaica on Saturday for Bahamian students studying in the region....The only reason we did this is because the largest cluster of Bahamian students outside of this country is in those three countries. We're going to have to review this policy about going for Bahamian students wherever they happen to be. Parents and students must realise once you leave this country, getting back here is your responsibility. (Rolle, 2020)

Some institutions expressed their univocal relationship with students through reminders of financial obligations.

Students who are away from the halls have been given various options to store their belongings for a fee while they are away. Some students have chosen the option of their belongings remaining in their room undisturbed, for which the applicable storage fee will apply. (Wilson-Harris, 2020)

However, external stakeholders appeared reluctant to accept the aleatory interest institutions demonstrated toward nonnational students. There was an inference that institutions held some responsibility for their safeguard.

There are students locked down at the various halls of residence; students who are struggling to pay rent because they could not get back to their homelands, whose families are hard-pressed now to fund them; what arrangements have been made to help them get by? [Stakeholder comment] (Baksh, 2020)

### **Discrimination, Stigma, and Xenophobia**

In the early stages of the pandemic, there was some level of stigma and discrimination brought about by ignorance and trending information. Nonnationals perceived their status attracted discrimination. Treatment from locals heightened or lessened feelings of vulnerability. The silence of authorities in the light of claims of stigma and xenophobia affected students' feelings of vulnerability.

They just have a little soap and we were hearing that the taxi operators aren't accepting work from UWI students because they don't want to get infected. (Smith, 2020)

"The Cubans are of the opinion that these items are for the locals and have openly objected to our presence in their lines," the letter said. ("Covid-19: Guyanese doctors," 2020)

The student said that some Jamaicans have experienced high levels of discrimination from residents and grocery store clerks who prevent them from buying supplies. ("Covid-19: Guyanese doctors," 2020)

## **DISCUSSION**

This research explored factors that influenced the vulnerabilities of nonnational tertiary level students at host institutions in the Caribbean at the start of the pandemic using the LV framework. Descriptions of students' vulnerability in the findings were unique to nonnational students in the respective territories and comparable to the literature on mobile students (Lam et al., 2017; Thorup-Binger & Charania, 2019). Although the number of students who remain and receive higher education in the Caribbean is larger than the numbers that study overseas, they receive incomparable levels of scholarly interest. Therefore, they represent a largely unexplored demographic in the landscape of international higher education. Often the literature demonstrates a common error of conflating Caribbean students with the African American or African demographic, treating their issues or expectations as homogeneous. The lessons to learn and unlearn the distinctions are treated with less avidity by those for whom this singularity is beneficial and fuels the paucity of research that suppresses the voices of transient Caribbean students. For example, through issues on identity as "foreign-born Caribbean Blacks" (Mouzon & McLean, 2017) with unfeasible categories of "foreign-born European

Whites.” Additionally, the representativeness of Caribbean students is sometimes narrated from the “soft power” perspective of the educational institutions. These discrepancies lack percipience as they suggest mobile students’ experiences within the Caribbean are perhaps phlegmatic, given the region’s marketing as a tourist destination. However, these perceptions avoid critical questions about this market such as students’ reception in territories with geopolitical accommodation, their vulnerabilities within neoliberal (Anglo-Caribbean) or socialist (Cuba) higher education sectors, or the condition of universities within the Caribbean. Regional universities were established on a claim of postcolonial social justice and democracy. Their establishment was important to regional economic development although Echols (1996) argued the inability to create borderless higher education institutions was short-sighted.

The literature illustrated international students sought host countries that were secure, nearby, had favorable geopolitical arrangements, and were low risk (Cubillo et al., 2006; Lam et al., 2017; Marginson, 2012). Findings from this study support the notion given the genesis of tertiary arrangements. However, while the Caribbean is perceived as highly homogeneous based on its history and geography, each island is heterogeneous in its outlook and culture. Over the years, there has been a greater focus on nationalism instead of regionalism, which is attributed to the polarizing nature of Caribbean politics and neoliberalism (Hinds, 2006). Disputes between island states have resulted in a boycott of goods, services, and rising xenophobia, which have weakened assurances in geopolitics. This knowledge, coupled with the unpredictability of the pandemic, is proposed to contribute to students’ decision to flee or engage in self-protective behaviors (Gilbert, 2016; Riskind & Rector, 2018).

These disruptions to the region’s cultural homogeneity have affected locals’ reactions to intraregional visitors. In some ways, the pandemic served as a spark to this tinder, as the findings highlighted overt hostility and discriminatory tendencies among some locals. Locals’ interpretation of the imminent threat was to resort to a protective “fight” mode (Gilbert, 2016), as looming threats can trigger anger reactions (Risking & Rector, 2018). Unfortunately, migrant students are often exposed to microaggression and territorialism by locals during and after disasters (Guadagno et al., 2017). Home-court disadvantage was compounded by the lack of social networks and communities and the closure of escape routes that triggered anxiety of this never-experienced SARS. More research is required to ascertain if micro aggressive tendencies are habitual behaviors during normal times. Nevertheless, COVID-19 was unique as there were no minimal cues. Perceptions were derived from a combination of diverse visual and auditory inputs from the media and fueled by

imagination. These effects on mental well-being support the LVM that some individuals, more than others, are at greater risks for anxiety (Riskind & Rector, 2018; Yeo et al., 2020). Here, the individual's cognitive style was important as a negative cognitive style was more susceptible to anxiety disorders versus a highly resilient individual.

Resilience was pegged to trust, and trust in institutions was significant to ensure migrants' safety during a crisis (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Migrant students' ability to trust their tertiary institution to provide adequate support in the event of a disaster (Thorup-Binger & Charania, 2019) was not fully supported in the findings. Across the region, institutional responses were uneven. Some universities were prepared to sponsor students' desire to escape while others adopted a position of neutrality. Neutrality inferred a withdrawal of support, which is posited to be a response to the disruption of students' fiduciary obligations (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). It was only when students' public protest via the newspapers posed a public relations risk that they mobilized with efforts at mitigation. Sunstein (2003) coined the phrase "probability neglect" to describe a pattern where the amount of concern may be inadequately sensitive to the probability of harm. The more universities align their products with international counterparts, the greater students' perception and expectation of synchronized services. Accordingly, the availability of newsfeeds (Littlefield & Quenette, 2007) exposes and allows for comparisons about students' treatment in other territories. There is also the matter of failed expectations, which can result in disappointment, frustration, resentment, and increased anxiety levels. Stakeholders' anticipation that the university would safeguard migrant students was largely unmet but introduced other concerns that can add to the stress, such as faith-based questions (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014) and a plethora of crises—such as identity, legitimacy, and self-worth.

This study is limited by its research design. However, it contributes to the body of knowledge of nonnational students in the Anglophone Caribbean and the larger arena of student mobility. It is also limited in its intentional "silencing" of the voice of institutions and governments to justify their decisions. Overall, this work is not generalizable as qualitative studies are designed to increase understanding of a phenomenon.

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

In the quest to protect and ensure the safety of migrant students who study within the Caribbean, higher education institutions need to create disaster plans that encompass physical, economic, environmental, and social factors (Füssel, 2006). Social factors especially will address

students' well-being, security, and resemble good governance. Too often disaster plans focus on crisis management, with strategies designed to protect the institution rather than their main stakeholders—students. In preparation for disasters, institutions need to create a stakeholder map, devise risk reduction strategies, create an emergency communication plan, and leverage technology in their implementation.

### ***Stakeholder Map***

Higher education institutions need to ascertain the stakeholders to whom they must pay attention. Since the establishment of the Treaty in the Caribbean, institutional cultures and associated sociocultural imperatives have transformed with globalization. This brought fundamental shifts in the way migrant students are treated, and implications for the way students experience stressors that contribute to vulnerabilities.

### ***Risk Reduction Strategies***

There is a need to develop or revisit mechanisms to identify, evaluate, monitor, and, importantly, action plans to reduce risks and manage the consequences of imminent disasters. The Caribbean is at risk annually for natural disasters. However, weak institutional responses suggest that existing plans are one-dimensional and unable to handle looming threats such as this biological hazard. Plans should also be culturally inclusive and not inosculate the needs of nonnational students with those of domestic students.

### ***Emergency Communication Management Plan***

An institutional emergency risk disaster plan needs to contain specifically tailored instructions, be written in language to mitigate fear, empower its audience, and be accessible to all students. This plan should contain avenues to initiate unique two-way communication channels that should be functional and fully operational during an emergency. This is especially when strategic communication lines are established between governments and the institution to ensure their citizens' safety. Institutions should be cognizant that while Consuls and High Commissions are the government representatives on islands, educational contracts are inter- and intranegotiated. Additionally, the government communicating with itself in a foreign country may be an ineffective approach.

### ***Leverage Technology***

As much as possible, universities need to leverage technology to keep track of their nonnational population. This is particularly important when communicating with governments or family stakeholders and to ensure

students' safety. It is also important for accurate reporting in the event of death, or as in this research, the dispensation of much-needed funds to ensure survival. As mentioned earlier, values of compassion should be endogenous to universities in their treatment of nonnational students.

## CONCLUSION

The experiences of nonnational students in the Anglophone Caribbean are an underresearched area in the literature on student mobility. The etiology of COVID-19 was an anomaly for a region more inured to natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes and man-made crises such as coups, curfews, and even crime. Despite the ability of these events to create vulnerable situations, they are predictive inferences with definitive responses. However, the amorphous structure of COVID-19 made it difficult to appraise this impending threat. The lack of a specific disaster readiness plan to ensure nonnational students' security and safety, protection from hardships, and mitigation of risks was evident.

The conceptual framework of LV presented is intended to alert researchers of mobile students' vulnerability when faced with imminent threats. Its application requires those concerned with international higher education to understand that heightened vulnerability occurs regardless of location and geopolitical arrangements. Further, the findings underscore how minority student groups are always at risk for microaggression. Moving forward, this study demonstrates the need for organizational stakeholder mapping. Ideally, this map should be an authentic analysis of the environment to distinguish salient groups. An examination of changing relationships of educational institutions within expanding neoliberalism is also required.

## REFERENCES

- Bailey, T. (2020, April 27). Slamming shortages, med students in Cuba plead to come home. *The Gleaner*. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20200427/slamming-shortages-med-students-cuba-plead-come-home>
- Baksh, V. (2020, May 1). Caring for students. *Trinidad Express*. [https://trinidadexpress.com/opinion/columnists/caring-for-students/article\\_d3a8872e-8c05-11ea-84df-534bb77b3b56.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/opinion/columnists/caring-for-students/article_d3a8872e-8c05-11ea-84df-534bb77b3b56.html)
- Barranco, J., & Wisler, D. (1999). Validity and systematicity of newspaper data in event analysis. *European Sociological Review*, 15(3), 301–322.
- Beck, A.T. (1976). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. Penguin.

- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40.
- Buetow, S. (2010). Thematic analysis and its reconceptualization as ‘saliency analysis.’ *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 15(2), 123–125.
- Capobianco, L., Morris, J. A., & Wells, A. (2018). Worry and rumination: Do they prolong physiological and affective recovery from stress? *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, 31(3), 291–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2018.1438723>
- Caribbean Community. (2002). *Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas establishing the Caribbean community including the CARICOM single market & economy*. CARICOM Secretariat.
- Castiello-Gutiérrez, S., & Li, X. (2020). We are more than your paycheck. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), i–iv. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2676>
- Chien, Y. Y. G. (2015). International postgraduate students in Britain: Reasons for studying abroad and issues related to adjustment. *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education*, 2(1), 737–748.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Covid-19: Guyanese doctors, students seeking evacuation from Cuba, say conditions deteriorating. (2020, April 20). *Stabroek News*. <https://www.stabroeknews.com/2020/04/20/news/guyana/covid-19-guyanese-doctors-students-seeking-evacuation-from-cuba-say-conditions-deteriorating/>
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Cubillo, J. M., Sanchez, J., & Cervino, J. (2006). International students decision-making process. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(2), 101–115.
- Downs, A. (1972). Up and down with ecology-the “issue-attention cycle”. *Public Interest*, 28(Summer), 38–50.
- Dunkley-Willis, A. (2020, April 9). UWI seeks help. *Jamaica Observer*. [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/uwi-seeks-principal-outlines-measures-being-taken-amid-covid-19\\_191571?profile=1470](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/uwi-seeks-principal-outlines-measures-being-taken-amid-covid-19_191571?profile=1470)
- Earl, J., Martin, A., McCarthy, J. D., & Soule, S. A. (2004). The use of newspaper data in the study of collective action. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110603>
- Echols, M. A. (1996). Regional economic integration and higher education: An idea for a university. *Law & Policy in International Business*, 27(4), 903–926.

- Edwards-Joseph, A., & Baker, S. (2014). Factors Caribbean overseas students perceive influence their academic self-efficacy. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1), 48–59.
- Farias, L., Rudman, D. L., Magalhães, L., & Gastaldo, D. (2017). Reclaiming the potential of transformative scholarship to enable social justice. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917714161>
- Forbes-Mewett, H. (2020). Vulnerability and resilience in a mobile world. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), ix–xi. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2002>
- Fraser, N. (2020, May 24). TT students at UWI Mona ‘stressed and confused’ as they cannot access grants. *Newsday*. <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/05/24/tt-students-at-uwi-mona-stressed-and-confused-as-they-cannot-access-grants/>
- Füssel, H. (2006). Vulnerability: A generally applicable conceptual framework for climate change research. *Global Environmental Change*, 17(2007), 155–167.
- Gilbert, P. (2016). *Human nature and suffering*. Routledge.
- Gioannetti, A. (2020, July 3). TT students in Grenada: We need to come home too. *Newsday*. <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/07/03/tt-students-in-grenada-we-need-to-come-home-too/>
- Guadagno, L., Fuhrer, M., & Twigg, J. (2017). Introduction: A case for migrant-inclusive disaster risk reduction. In L. Guadagno, M. Fuhrer, & J. Twigg (Eds.), *Migrants in disaster risk reduction: Practices for inclusion* (pp. 9–12). IOM and France, Council of Europe.
- Hinds, D. (January 01, 2006). Domestic non-cooperation and regional integration: Problems of Caribbean regionalism. *Social and Economic Studies*, 3, 32–48.
- Hunte, C. (2020, June 27). T&T students beg to come home. *Trinidad Express*. [https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/t-t-students-beg-to-come-home/article\\_37214b3e-b815-11ea-88cd-7fc838767649.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/t-t-students-beg-to-come-home/article_37214b3e-b815-11ea-88cd-7fc838767649.html)
- Izumi, T., Sukhwani, V., Surjan, A., & Shaw, R. (2020). Managing and responding to pandemics in higher educational institutions: Initial learning from COVID-19. *International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDRBE-06-2020-0054>
- Kapucu, N., & Khosa, S. (2013). Disaster resiliency and culture of preparedness for university and college campuses. *Administration & Society*, 45(1), 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399712471626>
- Lam, J. M., Tong, D. Y. K., & Ariffin, A. A. M. (2017). Exploring perceived risk and risk reduction strategies in the pursuit of higher education abroad: A case of international students in Malaysia. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 21(2), 83–104.
- Littlefield, R. S., & Quenette, A. M. (2007). Crisis leadership and Hurricane Katrina: The portrayal of authority by the media in natural disasters.

- Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 35(1), 26–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880601065664>
- Marginson, S. (2012). Including the other: Regulation of the human rights of mobile students in a nation-bound world. *Higher Education*, 63, 497–512. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9454-7>
- Mouzon, D. M., & McLean, J. S. (2017). Internalized racism and mental health among African-Americans, US-born Caribbean Blacks, and foreign-born Caribbean Blacks. *Ethnicity & Health*, 22(1), 36–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13447858.2016.1196652>
- Partridge, H. (2007). *Establishing the human perspective of the information society* [Doctoral dissertation]. Queensland University of Technology.
- Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., Lu, J. G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention. *Psychological Science*, 31(7), 770–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620939054>
- Perchinig, B. (2016). *Migrants in countries in crisis initiative: Supporting an evidence-based approach for effective and cooperative state action* (Research Brief). International Centre for Migration Policy Development.
- Peroni, L., & Timmer, A. (2013). Vulnerable groups: The promise of an emerging concept in European human rights convention law. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 11(4), 1056–1085.
- Pezzulo, G. (2014). Why do you fear the bogeyman? An embodied predictive coding model of perceptual inference. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, 14(3), 902–911.
- Rahming, S. (2019). Social support and stress-related acculturative experiences of an English-speaking Afro-Caribbean female student in U.S. higher education. *Journal of International Students*, 9(4), 1055–1073.
- Randall, F. (2020, July 17). COVID-19 leads to freeze of tuition and some hall fees at UWI Mona. *Jamaica Observer*. <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/>
- Riskind, J. H., & Rector, N. A. (2018). *Looming vulnerability: Theory, research and practice in anxiety*. Springer.
- Rolle, R. (2020, March 23). Plane sent to Jamaica to bring back 61 students. *The Tribune*. <http://www.tribune242.com/news/2020/mar/23/plane-sent-jamaica-bring-back-61-students/>
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.
- Salmon, D. (2020, May 17). UWI Caribbean students feel trapped, abandoned in Ja. *The Sunday Gleaner*. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20200517/uwi-caribbean-students-feel-trapped-abandoned-ja>
- Serafini, G., Parmigiani, B., Amerio, A., Aguglia, A., Sher, L., & Amore, M. (2020). The psychological impact of COVID-19 on the mental health in the general population. *Qjm: An International Journal of Medicine*, 11(8), 531–537.

- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. (2009). International students: A vulnerable student population. *High Education*, 60, 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9284-z>
- Smith, K. (2020, March 13). Bajan students in Jamaica short on supplies as country records first COVID-19 cases. *Barbados Today*. <https://barbadostoday.bb/2020/03/13/bajan-students-in-jamaica-short-on-supplies-as-country-records-first-covid-19-cases/>
- Strenger, C. (2012). Existential foundations of looming vulnerability: Thoughts about John Riskind's work with anxiety. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 22(2), 163–165.
- Sullivan, C., & Kashubeck-West, S. (2015). The interplay of international students' acculturative stress, social support, and acculturation modes. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 1–11.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2003). Terrorism and probability neglect. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 26(2–3), 121–136.
- Tanacković, S. F., Krtalić, M., & Lacović, D. (2014). *Newspapers as a research source: Information needs and information seeking of humanities scholars*. IFLA Lyons.
- Thorup-Binger, C., & Charania, N. A. (2019). Vulnerability and capacities of international students in the face of disasters in Auckland, New Zealand: A qualitative descriptive study. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 39, Article 101136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2019.101136>
- Tierney, K., Bevc, C., & Kuligowski, E. (2006). Metaphors matter: Disaster myths, media frames, and their consequences in Hurricane Katrina. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 604(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716205285589>
- Tran, L. T. (2020). Teaching and engaging international students. *Journal of International Students*, 10(3), xii–xvii. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2005>
- UWI students return after Ivan passes Jamaica. (2004, September 17). *Searchlight*. <http://testwp09.newsmemory.com/searchlight/news/news/2004/09/17/uwi-students-return-after-ivan-passes-jamaica/>
- Walters, J. L. (2018). International education is political! Exploring the politics of international student mobilities. *Journal of International Students*, 3(3), 1459–1478. <http://jistudents.org/doi:10.5281/zenodo.1254611>
- Webb, Y. (2020, May 13). Grateful Cave Hill students: 'We're being treated as top priority.' *Newsday*. <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/05/13/grateful-cave-hill-students-were-being-treated-as-top-priority/>
- Weger, M., & Sandi, C. (2018). High anxiety trait: A vulnerable phenotype for stress-induced depression. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 87, 27–37.

- Wilson-Harris, N. (2020, May 28). Boycott threat on 138 Student living over storage fees. *The Gleaner*. <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/lead-stories/20200528/boycott-threat-138-student-living-over-storage-fees>
- Wisner, B. (2016). Vulnerability as concept, model, metric, and tool. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.25>
- Yeo, G. C., Hong, R. Y., & Riskind, J. H. (2020). Looming cognitive style and its associations with anxiety and depression: A meta-analysis. *Cognitive Therapy and Research, 44*(3), 445–467.
- Zlomke, K. R., & Jeter, K. M. (2014). Stress and worry: Examining intolerance of uncertainty's moderating effect. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping, 27*(2), 202–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2013.835400>

### **Author Bio**

**CHERRY-ANN SMART**, PhD, is an independent researcher resident in Jamaica, West Indies. Her research interests focus on the international experience of Caribbean students, border issues as they affect human migration, social identity, inclusivity, and diversity in the field of information and the wider society. Email: [cherian\\_29@yahoo.com](mailto:cherian_29@yahoo.com)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1322-8835>