

Living through COVID-19 Pandemic as International Students in Canada: Collaborative Autoethnography of Struggles and Resilience

Jhonattan Bello¹, Suyeon Cho², Siyin Liang³, Cong Luo⁴

University of Calgary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of a number of international students and the disruption inevitably has caused suffering. With an aim to provide an in-depth understanding of the international students' experiences, we examined our own written narratives on how the pandemic challenged our lives, and how we strove to build resilience and deal with the challenges. Upon analysis of the qualitative data collected from our respective narratives and group discussion, the following themes emerged: (1) Intersecting Identities, (2) Systemic Barriers to Achieving Goals, (3) Systemic Risks Caused Instability, and (4) Strategies to Build Resilience. By addressing several complex challenges that the international students faced, we hope to inform higher education stakeholders who seek to better accommodate the unique needs of international students.

Keywords: COVID-19, international student experience, resilience, graduate students, challenges in higher education, post-secondary education

Bello, J., Cho, S., Liang, S., & Luo, C. (2021). Living through COVID-19 Pandemic as International Students in Canada: Collaborative Autoethnography of Struggles and Resilience. *Emerging Perspectives*, 5(2). 17-22.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, international students (IS) have been experiencing dramatic changes in life that have led to an increased number of obstacles that range from travel restrictions to anxiety about immigration status. This challenging situation has disrupted the educational progress of many students (Blankstein et al., 2020; Hilburg et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020). With IS representing 57.2% of the total growth in all postsecondary program enrollments over the 2018/2019 academic period (Statistics Canada, 2020), there is an emphasized need for higher education institutions to find ways to help overcome IS' difficulties and enhance their well-being. In this context, this collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2012) research examined the challenges that the authors experienced and their strategies for building resilience.

¹ jhonattan.bello@ucalgary.ca

Literature Review

Amidst the pandemic, IS have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group that has been struggling with COVID-19-related challenges including mental health issues (Amoah & Mok, 2020; Le, 2020). Amoah and Mok also reported that when asked about their wellbeing, a considerable number of IS reported feeling at risk and isolated, primarily since they were far away from home and restricted from travelling during lockdown. Regarding the academic aspect, they also felt that this pandemic caused a massive disruption in their educational progress (Amoah & Mok, 2020). Moreover, data indicated that IS were more vulnerable than domestic students in terms of resilience (OECD, 2018). Notably, resilience-building requires not only individual efforts but also systematic support from immediate communities (Ungar, 2019). Taking all this into account, we argue that IS need proper support from universities, as well as Canadian society, to enhance their resilience and overcome this pandemic. As Firang (2020) argued, IS' insights and experiences during this time of uncertainty are worth being investigated by scholars.

Methodology

We, a group of international graduate students in Canada, employed collaborative autoethnography to examine our own lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Chang et al. (2012), this methodology allows researchers to “gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (p. 24). The purpose of our collaborative autoethnography research was to understand, (1) how the pandemic affected our lives, including our academic achievements and well-being; and (2) how we built resilience to deal with the pandemic. All the authors acted as both participants and researchers. The authors critically reflected on their life experiences during the pandemic and wrote their respective narratives. Upon agreement, we shared these narratives with one another and analyzed them by generating codes and themes collaboratively (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2011). All data collection and analysis were secured via online data storage and online video conferences. Only the authors had access to the storage and participated in the conferences.

Findings

Upon analysis of our stories, four themes emerged: Intersecting Identities; Systemic Barriers to Achieving Goals; Systemic Risks Caused Instability; Strategies to Build Resilience. These themes represent the various forms of adversity that the authors experienced, as well as ways in which they developed resilience.

Intersecting Identities

To understand the complexity and contextuality of our own lived experiences, examining the intersecting identities that we occupied was critical. For example, Author 1 expressed that being a “full-time graduate student, partner, parent, and teacher of my own kids aggravated by a feeling of social isolation became a load too heavy to hold which ended up in more fear, anxiety,

frustration, irritability, unmanaged stress, and depression”. We acknowledged that the status of IS was not the only aspect of our identities; different dimensions of our identities determined the unique way in which we dealt with our challenges. Our perceptions of identities went beyond the role of being students. When the pandemic hit, our political, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions collapsed all at once, and we felt more at risk as the unstable status of IS became more evident. Some of the additional challenges that were represented in our stories included, the lack of access to support staff with intercultural competence; concerns regarding anti-Asian sentiment; and proper economic support.

Systemic Barriers to Achieving Goals

The pandemic brought about systemic barriers to pursuing our educational, career, and life goals and caused a series of frustrations. More specifically, all the authors struggled to achieve a satisfactory level of academic performance and research progress, which is one of the most salient goals for IS. For example, Author 1 and Author 2 had to cancel the fieldwork for their research, which was the most desired method for their studies, and they struggled to abruptly change their research design. Additionally, working from home was found challenging for most of the authors and negatively affected their academic performance, which caused severe frustration. Furthermore, Author 1 especially grappled with this challenge due to the increased child-care responsibility that did not allow for enough time and productivity for his study.

The pandemic obstructed our attempts to achieve certain life goals such as achieving financial independence and pursuing an after-graduation career. More specifically, Author 3 sought to obtain intercultural experiences while studying in Canada. However, her pursuit of intercultural experiences was interrupted by social isolation during the pandemic. Author 3 stated, “no, this is absolutely not *the lived experience* [emphasis added] that I want to have as an international graduate student.” These challenges, including the feeling of frustration, might have been experienced by any student. However, our research found that these challenges could easily and directly threaten IS due to their unstable status.

Systemic Risks Caused Instability

Structural disadvantages that face IS have become more evident since the pandemic. Our research identified some of these that were related to immigration status, financial instability, mental health, social isolation, and discrimination. For example, Author 1 stated, “not achieving the expected performance at the university that will, in turn, jeopardize the completion of my degree and my immigrant status.” He felt this way because he was worried about “running out of money to pay for basic needs and tuition fees,” and the increasing uncertainty “to get a Post-Graduate Work permit.” In fact, from the onset of the pandemic, IS still paid significantly higher tuition fees than their Canadian counterparts but received limited to no financial support from the government and their university (Greenfield, 2021; Quinn, 2020). Although scholarships and internal on-campus work opportunities were available, there were very few financial support programs that were specifically tailored for IS to help overcome this economic predicament. The financial instability further affected mental health by causing severe levels of anxiety. For example, Author 2 stated, “I was feeling guilty over wasting time and money, and accordingly I was

unconsciously punishing myself by spending all day at the workstation while not allowing proper care for myself.”

Additionally, the authors remarked on the isolation from the academic community and social networks, which intensified our feelings of frustration, depression, and trepidation. We found connecting ourselves to proper support platforms where we could have sought help and built resilience more effectively too difficult, such as in the parent-student community which Author 1 sought to reach out to. Furthermore, the increasing concerns around racism and xenophobia were identified as another factor that aggravated our feeling of isolation and instability. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there have been increasing reports on anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes worldwide (Gover et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2021). Author 4 stated that he had experienced microaggression and subtle forms of discrimination which resonated with Author 2 and 3. We contend that the pandemic took a heavy toll on the mental, physical, and psychological well-being of IS.

Strategies to Build Resilience

During the pandemic, the authors strove to motivate and encourage themselves to build resilience by seeking positive perspectives and useful strategies to deal with challenges. For example, Author 1 chose his supervisor as a role model and found positive traits of “optimism and resilience.” Similarly, Author 4 consistently communicated with his supervisor and discussed the strategies to advance his academic performance and future career, which he described as “a driving force to make me motivated.” In addition, he “obtained new perspectives by participating in online events” and engaged himself in various social programs available, including support for academic and professional development.

Such online events, including a variety of workshops, conferences, and socializing events that the university hosted, also helped the authors to stay connected with support communities. In this regard, all the authors emphasized that rebuilding a *sense of community* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) was an effective and essential strategy for developing resilience. However, the authors further pointed out that simply gathering people did not necessarily provide them with a sense of community, especially when such gatherings occurred sporadically. Author 2 stated, “I did not feel like I was belonging to the groups of random people in which no one expected further relations with each other.” Consequently, the authors focused on building an “authentic” sense of belonging through the opportunities that could have created stable bonds with people. For example, Author 2 further stated that engaging in this collaborative research helped her feel “authentically connected” as “the trusted colleagues” shared their struggles to “contribute to changing society for the better.”

Conclusion

The contributions made in this study are aimed at serving as a window for educators, administrators, policy makers, and many other stakeholders in the field of higher education to gain a nuanced understanding of IS. This collaborative autoethnography allowed us to look back on our struggles, discomforts, and unpleasant experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also reflected on the practices and strategies that we developed and adopted to cope with these challenges. Along the path of this research, we established a genuinely trustful relationship with each other, and this strong sense of community helped boost our resilience. In sum, we strove to shed light on the COVID-19-related challenges that IS faced, with the hope that this study provides insights for post-secondary institutions seeking to better accommodate the unique needs of this growing population of students.

Author details

¹ Jhonattan Bello, Leadership, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada. jhonattan.bello@ucalgary.ca

² Suyeon Cho, Curriculum and Learning, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada. suyeon.cho@ucalgary.ca

³ Siyin Liang, Adult Learning, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada. siyin.liang@ucalgary.ca

⁴ Cong Luo, Language and Literacy, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada. cong.luo@ucalgary.ca

*All authors contributed equally, and their names are listed alphabetically.

References

- Amoah, P., & Mok, K. H. (2020, June 23). The Covid-19 pandemic and internationalisation of higher education: International students' knowledge, experiences and wellbeing. *Emerald Blog*. <https://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/opinion-and-blog/covid-19-pandemic-and-internationalisation-higher-education-international-students>
- Blankstein, M., Frederick, J. K., & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020). *Student experiences during the pandemic pivot*. Ithaca S+R <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/sr-report-student-experiences-during-the-pandemic-pivot.pdf>
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F., & Hernandez, K. A. C. (2012). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Routledge.
- Firang, D. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international students in Canada. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 820–824. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820940030>
- Gover, A. R., Harper, S. B., & Langton, L. (2020). Anti-Asian hate crime during the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring the reproduction of inequality. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45, 647–667. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>

- Greenfield, N. M. (2021, April 2). *Fears that international student intake will keep falling*. University World News. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210402091353306>
- Hilburg, R., Patel, N., Ambruso, S., Biewald, M. A., & Farouk, S. S. (2020). Medical education during the COVID-19 pandemic: learning from a distance. *Advances in Chronic Kidney Disease*, 27(5), 412–417. <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.ackd.2020.05.017>
- Kong, J., Ip, J., Huang, C., & Lin, K. (2021). *A year of racist attacks: Anti-Asian racism across Canada one year into the COVID-19 pandemic*. The Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter. https://mcusercontent.com/9fbfd2cf7b2a8256f770fc35c/files/35c9daca-3fd4-46f4-a883-c09b8c12bbca/covidr racism_final_report.pdf
- Le, A. T. (2020). Support for doctoral candidates in Australia during the pandemic: The case of the University of Melbourne. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1859677>
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6–23. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(198601\)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I)
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- OECD. (2018). *OECD reviews of migrant education: The resilience of students with an immigrant background*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264292093-en>
- Quinn, C. (2020, May 1). *Canada's international students "left out" of support package*. The Pie News. <https://thepienews.com/news/canada-international-students-support/>
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.
- Simamora, R. M. (2020). The challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: An essay analysis of performing arts education students. *Studies in Learning and Teaching*, 1(2), 86–103. <https://doi.org/10.46627/silet.v1i2.38>
- Statistics Canada. (2020, November 25). *International students accounted for all of the growth in postsecondary enrolments in 2018/2019*. The Daily. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/201125/dq201125e-eng.htm>
- Ungar, M. (2019). *Change your world: The science of resilience and the true path to success*. The Sutherland House.