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The impact of Covid-19 on the social and cultural integration of international students

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The outbreak of Covid-19 has created difficulties for international students' integration. The widely reported challenges they face (new culture, language, academic environment, homesickness, loss of support networks, etc.) have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the isolation imposed by institution closures, general lockdowns, and travel restrictions. This paper presents the work in progress of a literature review which aims to gather comprehensive state-of-the art evidence about the impact of Covid-19 on the integration of international students, both degree and credit mobile, in their host countries and institutions. Specifically, it aims to analyse the responses to Covid-19 of the actors involved in international student mobility (national/regional authorities, institutions and their staff, mobility promoters), if and how these responses have influenced the social and cultural integration of international students, as well as the experience of these students themselves.

Full paper

Background

International students' well-being and satisfaction are essential for a successful academic experience. This, in turn, is dependent on their social and cultural integration (Merola et al., 2019). Social integration involves formal contacts between colleagues on learning matters and informal interaction with peers and participation in student activities (Severiens and Wolff, 2008). It implies a sense of belonging (Rivas et al., 2019) and is expressed by the size of social networks and quality and quantity of interaction (Merola et al. 2019). Cultural integration is associated with the sphere of cultural habits, values, beliefs or language (Algan et al., 2012).

Integration is a challenging process for multiple reasons (Smith & Khavaja, 2011). International students not only encounter a new cultural, social and academic environment and a new language (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Zhou et al., 2008; Van Mol and Michielsen, 2015), but also experience homesickness and discrimination (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Thompson and Esses, 2016; Nada and Araújo, 2019). Hosting institutions play a crucial role in helping students' integration through tailored support services, information provision, initiatives that bring national and international students together, counselling, etc. (Ward, 2015; Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day, 2010; Perez-Encinas and Ammigan, 2016; Thompson and Esses, 2016).

The covid-19 outbreak has challenged further the integration of this already vulnerable student group (Gallagher et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020; van der Welde et al., 2021). Institution closures, general lockdowns and travel restrictions have exacerbated international students' isolation (Sahu, 2020). Their reliance on host institutions to support integration has become stronger (Sahu, 2020 Moscaritolo et al., 2021). Although various studies have already considered the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on students in general, international students have been neglected. The studies which look at the integration of international students are still scarce. Integration during the pandemic has been influenced both by

national policies (Gallagher et al., 2020; Tran, 2020) and by institutional practices (Le, 2021; Metcalfe, 2021; Sahu, 2020; Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2021).

Aims

This systematic literature review aims to gather comprehensive state-of-the art evidence on the impact of covid-19 on the social and cultural integration of international students, both degree and credit mobile, in their host countries and institutions. Specifically, the objective is to analyse the responses to the pandemic of the actors involved in international student mobility (national/regional authorities, institutions and their staff, mobility promoters), if and how these responses have influenced international students' integration, as well as their experience.

The literature review is currently underway, and the employed method is reported here.

Method

Building the literature corpus was a multiple-stage process, following the PRISMA statement on systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009). First, based on the research questions, search terms (and synonyms/variations) were identified for the analysed group (international students), the process (integration) and the period (covid-19), as well as combinations hereof. Second, the search was performed in five databases (ERIC, Proquest, Scopus, Web of Science, LLBA and PsychInfo) to ensure breadth and retrieve as many publications as possible. Although the idea was to be as inclusive as possible, the search was restricted to 1) peer-reviewed publications, 2) with full-papers available, 4) research-based (opinion articles or commentaries, for example, were excluded), 3) published in English. There were no exclusion criteria on methodological grounds or publication type. Initially the search was performed in the title, abstract and keywords only, but few results were obtained. To identify additional relevant literature, the search was then extended to full texts. The cut-off date was May 2022.

Screening and selection of results followed. The search returned 7708 documents, but following a first screening, only 158 were included in the specialised corpus. Of these, 22 were duplicates, resulting in a provisional corpus of 136 documents. Each of these documents was subsequently read in more detail by two researchers to decide if they were relevant. The reading in pairs was aimed to minimise researcher subjectivity, as a reliability check to ensure that only documents addressing the review topic were considered. 59 documents were excluded and, currently, the corpus includes 77 papers. Grey literature was excluded from the search, except publications by influential international organizations (10 reports).

The next stage will be the full reading of the documents, in which these will be analysed and coded following a protocol for standardised data extraction to minimise researcher subjectivity (Tranfield et al. 2003). The final stage will be a descriptive analysis of the state-of-the-art literature on the impact of covid on international students' integration as well as a thematic analysis of key emerging themes.

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