Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

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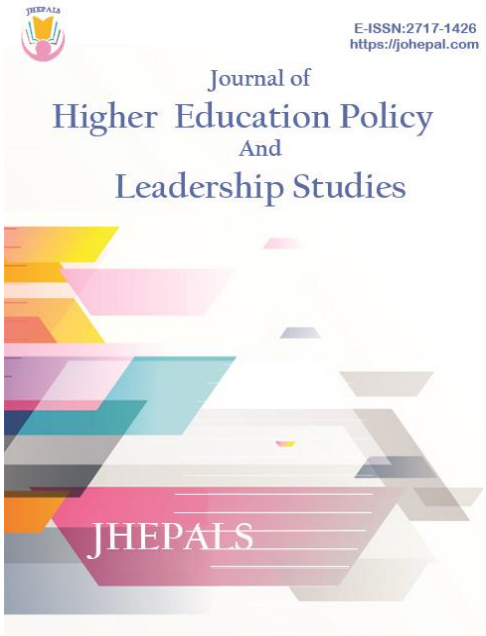

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Article Received **2024/01/11** | Article Accepted **2024/03/18** | Published Online **2024/03/31**

Cite article as:

Rezai-Rashti, G., Arumuhathas, S., Zhao, C. F., & Leung, V. (2024). Racialized international students and their experiences in a Canadian university during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *5*(1), 8-24. https://dx.doi.org/10.61186/johepal.5.1.8

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[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.5.1.8]

Racialized International Students and Their Experiences in a Canadian University During COVID-19 Pandemic

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E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 5 Issue: 1
pp. 8-24
DOI:
10.61186/johepal.5.1.8

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Abstract

Internationalization is part of Canadian universities' strategic priorities. Recruitment of international students is key to universities' operational budget to compensate for budget cuts caused by a neoliberal emphasis on transparency, efficiency, productivity, and cuts in public spending. The latter measures have resulted in an increased enrolment of international students, primarily from India and China (Crossman et al., 2023), as well as the rise of international student tuition fees at Canadian universities. This research centers on racialized students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on their voices and concerns with racism and microaggression as well as other challenges they have experienced during these critical times. Drawing on a case study methodology (Yin, 2014) and using semi-structured interviews, we interviewed six racialized students at one university in Ontario, Canada. The findings show that measures taken by provincial and federal Canadian governments lead to remote learning, isolation and, surprisingly, mitigated experiences of overt racism on university campuses. However, participants expressed instances of microaggression through social media that targeted mainly racialized students from China. They also highlighted the financial difficulties they encountered and the lack of institutional support that caused them emotional and mental stress which consequently impacted their academic progress.

Keywords: Racialized Students; Internationalization; Microaggression; COVID-19; Higher Education

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[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.5.1.8]

Introduction

Coronavirus pandemic(COVID-19) has impacted the world immensely. The lockdowns had serious consequences for education systems around the world, particularly for higher education that is increasingly relying on international students to compensate for the decline of public funding to education. Statistics from Universities Canada in 2014 show that 82% of Canadian universities made internationalization among their top five priorities. In the same year, the Canadian federal government announced their plan to drastically increase the size of international students (Stein, et al., 2019). Anderson (2015) argues that, over this period of increasing growth of international students in Canadian universities, tuition fees for these students has also been increasing to compensate for the ongoing budget cuts to public universities. International students typically pay three to four times more compared the fees paid by domestic students. While universities claim that their internationalization plans are not solely focused on the intake of international students, in practice, the primary focus has been to recruit students. According to Guo and Chase (2011), one of the main objectives of internationalization in Canada has been to increase enrolment of international students. By the end of 2022, there were 807,750 international students in Canada, predominately from Asia, with India and China being the top sending countries (Crossman et al., 2023; Canada Bureau for International Education, 2023). The overwhelming majority of racialized international students calls for attention to this demographic with special considerations to student experience in higher education.

Globally, higher education institutions have been going through some fundamental changes (Brown, 2015; Ball, 2015; Giroux, 2014; Lawrence & Rezai-Rashti, 2022). We believe that current changes in higher education are changing the governance of higher education by its neoliberal emphasis on transparency, efficiency, productivity, and cut in public spending.

While there are several studies dealing with experiences of international students during COVID-19 pandemic, a few studies centered the voices of racialized international students and their experiences specifically with racism.

This empirical study is focused on the perspectives of racialized international students and their experiences with racism, institutional support, and their emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We begin this paper with a review of current literature dealing with international students in the context of COVID-19 and then move to our methodological approach to data collection and analysis. The paper proceeds with the analysis of findings and discussion of experiences of racialized international students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Literature Review

A search of literature pertaining to international students, higher education institutions, and internationalization policies under COVID-19 has yielded a considerable number of research that explore the implications of this unprecedented global emergency on higher education. Several studies highlighted the perspectives of international students. For example, a group of BIPOC public health doctoral students in the southern US voiced their experiences of systematic racism, anxiety and stress, burdens of family and academic works, and concerns

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over their safety and immigration status during COVID (Blake et al., 2021). These students called on universities to make improvements regarding faculty training, mentorship, academic support, curriculum design, childcare, mental health services, and a focus on protecting international students (Blake et al., 2021). Researchers also recognized the survival, financial and emotional difficulties facing international students in the Australian context and paid attention to the vulnerable situations born by the international students' status, and racism against Asians during COVID-19 that caused mental and material distress for international students (Coffey et al., 2021; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). They challenged Australian government for failing to provide substantial support for international students.

Coffey et al. (2021) elaborated on the lived realities of three international female students during the challenging time and their study centred on the intersecting effects of gender, race, economic status, citizenship, and employment. They pointed out that the marginalization of international students existed before the pandemic and was exacerbated by the emerging crisis, and that the crisis disproportionally affects young women international students (Coffey et al., 2021). Although Coffey et al. (2021), as well as Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2020) touched upon the resurgence of racism and discrimination, deeper discussions about how racism has been sustained are not discussed.

In the Canadian context, Lei and Guo (2022) discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the rise of racism against Asian students in Canada. They challenge the limitation of multicultural policy in dealing with racism and call for revisiting the effectiveness of multicultural policies. They also suggest a pandemic anti-racism strategy as an alternative approach "which aims to call out any form of racism and xenophobia that is directly related to global pandemic and eliminate racial oppression for achieving racial justice in post-COVID Canada" (p. 15).

Firang's (2020) pilot project revealed that COVID negatively affected international students' wellbeing, academic performance, and social lives. Echoing Coffey et al. (2021), Nguyen and Balakrishnan (2020), Firang (2020) discussed the Canadian government's failure in providing financial support to international students and their negligence and exclusion of those without permanent residency status.

Varughese et al. (2022) in their paper on the experiences of international Indian students talked about social isolation as the greatest challenges facing international students during COVID given students' lack of social network and the cultural adjustment in a new country. They further argue that closures and lockdowns exacerbated their vulnerabilities:

> by cutting them off from friends and from familiar campus spaces and services. Campus closures and lockdown restrictions kept international students in their modest and crowded dwellings for an extended period of time. The sudden pivot to online instruction and uncertainties around academic performance, program completion, and immigration deadlines compounded the effects of social isolation, with adverse impacts on mental and physical health. (p. 62).

Ibrahim et al. (2022) also suggest the serious impact of pandemic on education of Black and racialized student because of remote learning and home schooling. They write that

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> The Black and racialized people are bearing the disproportionate brunt of the pandemic….as post-COVID future are being imagined and structured, we see signs already that Black, Indigenous, and racialized students might be left behind as a result of remote learning and home schooling (p.xx).

With our research, we hope to illuminate the nuances of systemic racism in the lives of racialized international students and their experiences in higher education, their well-being, and income disparities during COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach guided by Yin (2014) to delve into the experiences of racialized international students amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure rich and diverse perspectives, we employed purposeful sampling techniques to recruit participants who self-identified as racialized, representing various nationalities including China, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Africa. The study included a total of 6 female participants recruited between 2021 and 2022, comprising five graduate students and one undergraduate student in her final year. Data collection primarily involved qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, necessitated by COVID-19 restrictions, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. The research questions guiding this study centered on exploring the nuanced experiences of racialized students amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the interview questions delved into participants' lived experiences, their encounters with racism, adaptation to online learning environments, the adequacy of institutional support mechanisms, and the impact of these factors on their emotional well-being. These interviews were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, challenges, and perspectives freely. Subsequently, all interviews were transcribed manually by the research team to ensure accuracy. The analysis phase commenced with a thorough review of the transcribed data to identify recurring themes and emergent patterns. This process involved multiple readings of the transcripts to gain a nuanced understanding of the participants' accounts. Following this, thematic coding was employed to categorize the data according to relevant themes. Three main themes emerged: encountering microaggression and racism, financial challenges, institutional and emotional support. Through this comprehensive methodology, we aimed to illuminate the multifaceted realities faced by racialized international students during these unprecedented times.

Table 1.
Participants' Citizenship and Program of Study

Pseudonyms	Nationality	Student Status	Program of Study	# Academic Years Attended
Stacy	China	Graduate	TESOL	2 + Years
Farideh	Iran	Undergraduate	Political Science	4 + Years
Zahra	Azerbaijan	Graduate	Education	3 + Years
Samantha	India	Graduate	Education	3 + Years
Hawa	Ghana	Graduate	Hispanic Studies	2+ Years
Jennifer	China	Graduate	Education	1+ Years

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Findings

One of the main objectives of our research was to uncover the experiences of racialized students during COVID. In our in-depth semi-structured interviews, participants in the study stated that they did not experience any expression of overt racism within their universities. In contrast, students noted how they perceived Canada as more egalitarian and accepting of diversity compared to their own countries. All participants asserted that the emergency measures leading to lockdowns and remote learning caused limited interaction among students and faculty members. However, the statement from participants clearly shows those who were the main target of racism were predominantly international students from East Asia who are currently the majority of international students in Canada.

Encountering Microaggression and Racism

According to participants, most of incidents of microaggression during COVID happened in social media and outside of university campuses. For example, one of the participants stated that before pandemic, she had a positive experience in university and had friends but after the pandemic the situation changed for her:

> In 2019, before the pandemic starts, I was in a program where I enjoyed the program, and I was very happy and made a lot of friends. But in 2020, the damage starts. I had like Instagram or Facebook. And then one day, just during that pandemic, I started to see, you know, some posters that such as Chinese people suck because they cause the virus or something like this. (Stacy)

Interestingly, most of our participants argued that they were not the target of racism during the pandemic, but they asserted that they were aware of the racism targeted particularly against East Asian students.

> Um, honestly, I haven't really experienced like, overt, like racism or discrimination. During COVID, I think maybe like my group, like, because I'm Middle Eastern. I think we weren't like specifically targeted. I know that East Asian students were. So, I did have friends who had to experience like, they had to, like hear some really nasty remarks from their peers, specifically, especially in the beginning, like everyone was really ignorant about what it really was, and everything like that, you know, they heard the word Oh, it's like it started in China. And then just everyone really went with it. Okay, quite fortunate in that sense…The thing that I personally witnessed was through like social media posts, it was very abrasive. It was like making fun of the fact that oh, you know, it just it came from China. So personally, for me, that made me feel kind of like disgusted. Yeah, I it made me uncomfortable. (Farideh)

Similarly, another racialized international student who does not identify as East Asian conveyed that learning online and remotely after transitioning into Canada made her feel apprehensive since she witnessed the ongoing prejudice against East Asian students:

> And for me, it was personally it was like, horrible, like, you don't do that to another person. But for me, if I could say personally, like, if I experienced, if I had apprehensions, then the answer would be no. And that comes from a place of

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> the confidence in the ability to vocalize your opinions that hey, you don't do that to me? Which I believe not everybody has. Yeah, and so that put me in a certain position in a certain place, which others like, would not be. (Samantha)

Interestingly, one participant discussed social isolation caused by pandemic prevented experiences of racism as she believes she did not experience racism based on race as she had limited social interaction beyond her social bubble.

> They [people who were targets of racial aggression] weren't students. So, they were part of the community. But… I live in the university housing. So even in the place that I live I'm still surrounded by university and university students. So, everything is sort of like quarantine, or isolated in a way. So, I don't know. I don't have much experience with that, and I've not even had second hand experience because like I say, everybody that I know is a student. (Zahra)

Racialized students also discussed limited interaction with domestic students and mostly with international students with similar experiences during pandemic.

> We don't get so many chances to chat with others in different programs… Yeah, we still don't have chances to connect, to talk to domestic students. And I think it's because, you know, international students already feel like they're like scared. This is new environment, culture shock. They tend to stick with people of their own kind, you know. (Jennifer)

However, for black student, their experience with racism was not connected to the pandemic but the racism that has been experienced historically for solely being black (Das Gupta et al. 2020; Ibrahim et al. 2022). One of our African participants from Ghana expressed racism she experienced outside of university:

> [At the mall] I was just going around looking through things, and this sale associate kept following me…I felt it was so uncomfortable because I felt like "Why do you have to follow me? Do you think I'm going to steal?" The other white people around us were also looking at things but were not followed. (Hawa)

Despite this incident, the same student suggested that racism in Canada, overall, tends to be "subtle" in nature. She explained:

> In Canada, I feel like racism happens in a very subtle way… I remember when I came to Canada, people were asking me if I have a TV or speak English… some subtle racist comments that people make. And I don't even know if they know it's racist. (Hawa)

Our findings suggest that COVID-19 mainly impacted East Asian students given the role of social media, particularly claims made by Donald Trump calling COVID-19, the Chinese Virus and stating that it is not racism because it is coming from China.

While several racialized students stated that they personally did not experience overt racism, a closer look at their narratives exhibited that when discussing racism, they mainly

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focused on the individual, instead of the systematic racism. In our interviews with these racialized international students, we also noticed that several of them were from countries with repressive political and social systems and for them, Canada was a more accepting and tolerant society. Compared with Asian participants, our African participant was more aware of nuanced incidents of racism and othering. In addition, the transitory nature of being an international student may have prevented them to critically engage with racism experienced by racialized people.

Financial Challenges

All participants interviewed had financial challenges caused by the pandemic, both in terms of lack of university support as well as obtaining part-time jobs as a result of lockdowns that caused by pandemic restrictions. Students are also largely affected by the dramatic increase of living costs. One graduate student expressed her financial difficulty living in Canada during the pandemic, and specifically pointed out how her funding package from the university failed to keep up with the inflation and rising prices.

> Financially, I think students in our program are under a lot of pressure. We have to find other means of supporting ourselves because we're not paid during summertime, and also because everything has gone up, like, my rent has gone up, every time I go shopping, and I'm talking about like grocery, like basic, basic necessities. Everything, everything has increased in terms of prices. But funding and TAship is still the same. It's the same as it was, I think, 2 years ago, that, you know, that makes a lot of difficulties for us, because we have to think of other ways… I have to, like I have to work outside, along with my studies, so that I can support myself. (Farideh)

The international student from India talked about the increased price of airfare to travel from India to Canada during the pandemic. She argued universities did not take into account this increased burden on international students when they moved from remote to in-person classes during the pandemic. As one of our participants discussed:

> Flights were normally like going to be like 5000 RMB. But just due to a pandemic, so many flights were canceled, and they could be, like, at least three times more expensive than before. Okay? Yeah. tI costed so many like so much, you know, on the air, which was definitely a rip-off. (Samantha)

Another participant discussed the increase in tuition during the pandemic and questioned the institution's lack of humility during such a global crisis. University strategically increased tuition fees to compensate for the deficit which was mainly attributed to the loss in enrollment during the pandemic and the switch to remote learning.

> We're also international students. Like, for example, I think the last year when everything was online, they increased international tuition by a lot more than we initially thought they would which really angered me. Tuition was supposed to be around like $31,000. I think it varies by year, but for my year it increased by like $3,000. So, you'd expect that at least in those instances, in that moment, when everybody was financially affected, like negatively by COVID-19, they would at least like not increase by a lot at the very least or not increasing at all.

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> The problem is that there's no cap on international tuition. So, they just kind of university can basically arbitrarily increase it as much as they want, depending on how they budget things. (Farideh)

Participants also discussed support from their supervisors and academic advisors in terms of their understanding in providing more time to complete academic requirements. However, this eventually affected them financially because university does not provide funding for PhD students beyond four years.

> My professors were really helpful when I told them that I wasn't feeling well. and they helped me to postpone my comprehensive exam. So that was really helpful. The only problem that me and a lot of my classmates are having is the financial issue. Because even though we've been able to postpone our academic progress, we are taking it much easier, or much slower, but financially we have to stick to the the 4-year funding, and that's the like the main issue. Okay, fine, we've been allowed to fall back a little, to not progress as fast as we should have That's been really helpful we've not been reprimanded, or criticized for that. But the fact that we're not going to get any financial assistance as of the end of next term, that is going to be a huge problem for each and every one of us, because we're international students, because we only have ourselves to think of. Like if I wasn't an international student, I could have, I don't know, I'd gone back home, you know, to my parents. I could have relied on them for some sort of financial help. (Farideh)

Furthermore, international students, who are not from affluent countries or families, rely largely on fundings. Some had been experiencing more monetary challenges during the pandemic due to political situation and the economic challenges in their home country:

> For people like me. We are a lot in my country, and by we I mean people of medium social background, like economically. And we do not usually afford to go abroad and study there. So, what we go after, is a scholarship, a fully funded scholarship. (Jennifer)

> I'm stressed all the time about how much I'm spending, about what I'm gonna do, like within the next few months. But my TA ship comes to an end. How am I gonna support myself? So, all that is so much, it's so stressful. In addition to your studies that just puts too much pressure. And it was also the situation, the political situation in Iran. That's just like the icing on the cake. (Farideh)

Consistent with literature suggesting the monetization of internationalization, international students recognized that the admission of international students serve as economic incentives for the universities. They further posited that the tuition fees for international students are simply unaffordable and the opportunity for scholarships is even more rare as compared to domestic students. One student stated:

> If Canada lowered their tuition fees, or there is some sort of funding for international students, there could be more international students who are deserving, not just because they have money, but because they have the Intelligent. (Zahra)

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Another participant argues that this neoliberal approach risks neglecting the intellectual contributions international students bring into the universities.

> In Canada, I think international students are just valued because of the income they bring, not because of their intellect. I don't think that's fair. (Zahra)

Institutional and Emotional Support

For international students who were residing in Canada and were unable to go back to their home country, they viewed that the widespread closure resulted in the discontinuation of services and a transition to online learning. An international student from the Middle East observed that the switch to online learning was a very difficult adjustment, where traditional technological and learning resources and services that were offered on-campus (in-person) were discontinued.

> [During] the initial stages of COVID …I went back home, because, you know, everything was pretty much in lockdown in Ontario, and you know, there wasn't much to do, we had no classes, nothing and school became fully online, at least for my program. And it was really difficult the beginning stages COVID. For me, especially as an international student, it's already like very isolating being halfway across the world where you don't have like a support system. And a lot of the resources that were available on campus at the time, you know, they were kind of put on hold all of a sudden, because I guess they were kind of struggling how to really proceed with offering these resources at the same quality online. (Farideh)

While some international students perceived being stranded on campus without any student services and resources to be detrimental, other racialized international students sought refuge at their Canadian university. To explain, one participant recounted her dangerous experience being secluded and under lockdown not solely because of COVID-19 but because of political turmoil between neighbouring states that resulted in warfare and causalities. Thus, this student found herself in a precarious circumstance where her home (which was her online learning environment) was unsafe. The student expressed her frustration towards her host university regarding their lack of intervention or acknowledgement in pledging support given the pandemic and political climate.

> Universities [sometimes release statements] like … we stand with them we support you and everything but back then I didn't see anything like that, so I mean I was also their student I'm not saying that you have a lot of Azerbaijani students I don't think they do maybe that's why maybe even the university administrator don't know about my country ... I just felt neglected by the whole world. (Zahra)

The student not only was discouraged about the lack of awareness of global crises apart from the pandemic. The failure in institutional response and support compounded by the intersection of the pandemic and political upheaval resulted the student to feel overwhelmed and neglected.

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> After a few days I stopped I deactivated on my social media because it was just too stressful seeing that you know the world is a hypocrite you know they will just support whoever they want to and then they … I felt like there's no point in living and trying to do something good and I felt like if I kept on allowing every like these news [from social media] I would you know… I could have been suicidal, so I stopped. (Zahra)

Furthermore, a majority of students reported that they experienced different degrees of social isolation during both in-person and online learning. When asked about their transitions moving from their home countries to Canada, an international student from China reported that she felt a sense of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and reasoned that, in part, it was due to the lack of networking and social activities from the university.

> I feel really lonely. During COVID, we don't really have much networking activity and the study and academic burden... the workload is very heavy. For international students, you are a newcomer and trying to adapt to the new country, the new weather, the new university, the new program, but for the majority of time, I did these things either by myself or the small circle of friends. (Stacy)

Another student propounded that online learning created a barrier for her to participate and connect with other students comfortably in class. She narrated:

> Three of them [Canadian domestic students] were very close… that was one thing that I felt like was holding me back. I felt like they already knew each other, and I was the only person left out. But after meeting with them [in-person classes] … they were really open, and it wasn't like they knew each other before… They were open to know me, they were asking me about my culture. (Jennifer)

When asked how international students cope with the feeling of loneliness or their overall mental health, Participant 3 explained candidly the ways in which she felt the university has failed to address the mental health needs of international students:

> I didn't do that well. I received a lot of pressure during my first PhD year. I wanted to find mental therapy or counselling, but I didn't know the resources. I know from the university website, we can find some information, but I want to find a Chinese counsellor because I'm more comfortable speaking Chinese than English. So, if I feel really depressed and really stressed, I want to speak to a professional that can share the same language as me. It would be more comfortable for me to share my thoughts and my depression. I don't want to have to switch [my thoughts and feelings] to English language, but I didn't find any therapy services in Chinese. (Stacy)

Another participant experienced emotional distress due to the war in her country and the world, and found it hard to concentrate. To complete her academic tasks, she had to make her utmost effort and give up other aspects of her life.

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> I had a really hard time concentrating because I was spending almost all my time just watching the news to see what's what is happening. And yeah it was it was a really difficult time for me, like trying, to study among all that but I think I tried. … I wouldn't say that I gave up in my learning because… Yeah, I was doing my best the best that I could do in that situation. But no I didn't give up on my learning, I did almost give up like on everything like in general. Because I was like OK this is the world what's the point of living? (Zahra)

Mental wellness issues expressed by our participants also resonate with existing empirical studies. While the pressure to excel in higher education is already stressful enough, the pandemic, with its ensuing social isolation, economic turbulence, and public anxiety, certainly created more difficulties to international students who lack support networks while trying to complete their academic programs in the meantime.

Overall, international students expressed a sense of isolation from both the cultural transition to a foreign country and the lack of social inclusion in the host country. Their experience with social isolation was further exacerbated by the lack of mental health support from the universities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings, our study generated three significant thematic outcomes that can be categorized as follows: (1) Racism and microaggression; (2) Financial challenges; and (3) Institutional and emotional support.

It is of particular importance to recognize that our participants have not reported to experiencing explicit racism and discrimination on-and-off campus which contrasts with the existing literature cited in this paper (e.g. Blake et al., 2021; Lei & Guo, 2022). It might seem that lockdown and confinement to social bubbles or solitude "protected" racialized international students in our study from undergoing overt racial aggression. However, indirect exposure to and general awareness of racism was frequently discussed, proven to be equally harmful for racialized international students. Further, indirect experiences demonstrated a sever limitation of social interactions for international students during the pandemic. Considering that the participants collectively voiced social, financial, academic, and emotional difficulties and insufficient support from their institutions, it is safe to argue that institutional racism, in the forms of neglect and exclusion, contributed to their negative experiences during COVID.

Though our participants indicated feelings of belonging and inclusivity, they did observe instances of racism thorough social media or anecdotes exchanged between friends. Majority of our participants disclosed that the prevalence of racism was heightened because of pandemic and manifested in the form of xenophobia. Targeted racist and hate acts in public spaces were recorded and shared on mainstream social media platforms, eliciting feelings of discomfort and unease for racialized international students who identify with the victims based on race and ethnicity. This phenomenon reflects characteristics and conventions of vicarious racism. According to Truong et al., (2016):

> People of color can experience racism vicariously via the encounters of family members, friends, community members, or strangers. When individuals

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> experience secondhand racism, they can come to the realization that they are also vulnerable to the racism that they have vicariously experienced, and they can encounter harmful emotional, psychological, or physiological consequences as a result of these experiences (P. 227).

Thus, racial injustices exhibited towards people of East-Asian descent were collectively shared particularly by Chinese international students. It should further be emphasized that racialized international students who arrived in Canada from repressive political and social environments perceived Canada to be more accepting in comparison to their own countries. That being said, one participant of African descent did mention that not all acts of subtle racism were influenced by the pandemic given Black people were always historically facing racial prejudice.

Overall, our participants' experiences of vicarious racism suggest that Canadian universities need to seriously enact policies and strategies to deal with systemic and institutional racism faced by racialized international students. Buckner et al. (2022) in their study of international students in the context of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion policies (EDI) in two provinces in Canada suugest that "international students are still not viewed as a specific equity seeking group" (pp. 51-52). Our findings demonstrate a need to implement more culturally responsive and accessible support services and strategies that facilitates domestic and international student interaction. Additionally, universities should integrate a reporting mechanism or protocol that will allow racialized international students to report and express their grievances of overt or implicit racism on-and-off campus. In acknowledging that racialized international students are subjected to vicarious racism, more research and impactful and meaningful interventions are needed to truly understand how vicarious racism negatively implicates racialized international student.

All participants of our study denoted that as international students they always encountered financial challenges; however, the pandemic has certainly exacerbated their financial adversities which was mainly attributed to limited employment opportunities due to lockdown restrictions. Additionally, the inflation in the basic cost of living has led many international students to often seek bursaries and financial assistance from family. Few international students were privileged to secure a funding package from their university; however, they expressed their funding package to be inadequate as it does not sufficiently keep pace with inflation rates. Furthermore, racialized international students perceived that many industries and services within the travel and hospitality sector took advantage of the escalating costs during the pandemic as airfare prices from East and South Asia to Canada had exponentially increased fees. Thus, such unanticipated financial barriers were unaccounted by the university, especially during the transitional phase from remote to in-person/ on-site campus classes. Majority of the participants reported that the university's increase in tuition fees has caused significant financial strain which was indicative of the university's lack of compassion towards equity deserving groups such as racialized international students. The hike in university tuition has the potential to create systemic inequities and disparities such as limiting the access to higher education while also increasing their debt and financial stress. Since international students from developing world are already economically disadvantaged, students will develop a sense of being deliberately discriminated or excluded by the university. Buckner et al. (2022) in their study

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of international students also discussed the gap between increasing tuition between domestic and international students and this they claim to be as a result of not including international students as an equity-seeking group in EDI policies. They further argue that " while we understand that the EDI framework is a work in progress, universities should have clearer direction of how EDI can address the multidimensional nature of the student body" (p. 52).

Participants' unanimous grievance regarding financial challenges aligns with our review of literature that the neoliberalization and commodification of higher education has made it monetarily and mentally burdensome for international students (Lawrence & Rezai-Rashti, 2022; Firang, 2020). This unanimity demonstrates the urgent need for Canadian higher education institutions to recognize and address their marketization and internationalization strategy that perceive international students their "cash cow" and often fail to put into practice equity and inclusion for racialized international students and international students from less wealthy backgrounds (Anderson, 2015; Guo & Chase, 2011). We want to highlight especially that for international graduate students, the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency has created immense pressure for them to complete their studies within a certain time limit. As monetary concerns compound with immense stress, studying abroad could be harmful and unsustainable for many international students. It is high time that Canadian universities and governments offer substantial support to racialized international students, an equity deserving group that already contribute greatly to Canadian society, economy, and labor market (Crossman, 2023), by making institutional and policy changes.

Evidently, all participants of our study discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications negatively permeated every aspect of their academic success and outcomes. With the onslaught of the pandemic post-secondary students were given little to no choice but to comply with the demands of the universities' executive decision to move to remote (online) learning. The sudden transition to online (synchronous and asynchronous) learning was possible due to already existing digital infrastructure; however, some international students who made the expensive journey to attend school online when they have been inculcated in a face-to-face learning environment had difficulty adjusting. Consequently, if students had difficulties or have questions related to online learning platforms, software, hardware, connectivity issues, or other technology-related challenges they were on their own to troubleshoot. Although students were mindful of the limited library and IT services, participants, however, differed in that their supervisors and professors were pillars in providing steadfast academic support regarding assignments and course materials.

To ensure the continued and sustainable online learning for international students, it is crucial to thoroughly examine the discourse on equitable access for under-represented groups, particularly racialized international students, and address the gaps identified in their online learning experiences and pedagogy during the transition. Understanding and mitigating challenges can lead to improved educational outcomes and inclusivity for all. Empirical research on the neoliberal institution's role in offering open and accessible online schooling is urgently needed should other future global crises and social protests transpire.

Uniquely, some students were hyper-vigilant of the various governmental services that provided an opportunity for students to depart when their citizens' host institutions

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were going into complete lockdown. Such services allowed students to quickly evacuate promptly rather than be stranded on university grounds without access to provisions in complete isolation. The elicited anecdotes suggest the vital presence of governmental intervention along with institutional cooperation and coordination, especially with having effective higher education risk management strategies and emergency contingency plans to ensure the well-being of vulnerable international students from developing countries.

Other factors were the lack of services for students' well-being. Irrespective of the limited mental health services for international students who identify as equity-deserving groups within the university, international students were unable to access the health and well-being services part of their university tuition and ancillary fees. Moreover, racialized students stated that it was difficult to locate any culturally relevant or sensitive health and wellness services offered by their university. Thus, the widespread closure of university services, especially mental health, and counselling services, could have resulted in unpredictable and perilous outcomes.

Nevertheless, the pandemic disruptions generated a mandate for campus residents to live in complete isolation and quarantine to prevent the contraction of COVID-19. However, living in isolation with little to no interaction with peers, families, and university personnel has exacerbated uncertainty and fear. Since the nature and developments of the pandemic frequently changed, students became very apprehensive about travel restrictions, travel documents (visa issues), and border closures. The feelings of isolation were intensified due to the cancellation of academic conferences creating limited opportunities to network and progress in their academics. Therefore, the onus is on the university to provide continious communication opportunities for their racialized international students to network with other students. A stronger re-focus in international student community engagement is needed to mitigate the effects of loneliness, and to prompt advocacy and representation, professional networking opportunities, and inter-cultural student involvement.

Though racialized international students disclosed frustration and disappointment in the lack of institutional action to alleviate the financial burden, our participants appreciated their support and understanding from supervisors and professors as they were able to not only empathize but support their students. Two graduate students from the study conveyed that their supervisors and professors who were mindful of their students' financial burdens actively sought funding and compensated short-term research assistantship to mitigate the financial pressure. As a result, some international students appreciated their supervisors and often turned to them to provide advice and support beyond their academic scope. However, in opposition to prevailing views, one international student from India articulated that their respective university reimbursed her for hotel quarantine cost upon her arrival to Canada. This student expressed that she was relieved to find that her university would provide a remuneration up to a thousand Canadian dollars to cover some of the unexpected expenses incurred because of COVID-19 provincial quarantine policies. Unlike domestic students who were entitled to Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), international students developed a heavy reliance on limited university funding; nonetheless, the very same students had to develop an alternative plan in case they were ineligible for the funding.

It becomes evident that higher education institutions need to continuously assess their existing measures, policies, student services, and strategies particularly during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Ongoing improvements will allow universities

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to appraise their strengths and weaknesses in supporting racialized international students; however, to do so requires the inclusion of international students' voices when making executive decisions at the institutional level that affect their everyday lived realities. The active involvement and representation of international students will allow universities to shorten the gaps within the cross-sectoral university coordination to provide tailored support based on their unique needs and experiences. By doing so, the university will be able to cultivate and enhance the campus climate for international students to mitigate their experience of exclusion because of inequities and financial difficulties. Furthermore, integrating ongoing evaluation will provide the universities to address the systemic barriers that equity-seeking students' groups are facing on campus and bolster their accountability and transparency.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest to be cited here.

Funding

This research was financially supported by Faculty Research Development Fund # R3073A23 at the Faculty of Education, Western University.

Human Participants

All ethical guidelines are observed in terms of research participants. This research also received its Ethics Approval (#119310) from Western University, Canada.

Originality Note

The authors confirm that the research is their original work; and proper citations are included where others' works are cited.

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