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Loneliness and Social Engagement of International Students in Japan and the United States

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THE NORTHERN ENGLAND
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STUDIES

Loneliness and Social Engagement of International Students in Japan and the United States: The Human Security Perspective

International Students' Loneliness

Loneliness among international students has been subject of several recent studies (Jiang et al., 2018; Wawera & McCamley, 2020; Neto, 2021). As newcomers and outsiders, international students lack social capital: they typically have few local friends, especially those outside their university and/or their age group. Most international students experience transient loneliness in response to loss of social support and disruption in peer networks related to sociocultural transition; however, in the absence of adequate support, transient loneliness can become chronic (Levesque, 2011). Given the link of loneliness to mental and physical diseases, addictions, delinquency, dropout and suicidal ideation, it is seen among critical aspects of international student security (Marginson et al., 2010). While being a part of cultural adjustment, loneliness also indicates lack of university support services and social engagement outside campus.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Life, Studies, Health, Finances

Restricted personal mobility during the pandemic prevented international students from joining activities outside campus or clubs at university, maintaining existing friendships or making new friends, visiting their families and friends abroad, and thus, exacerbated their loneliness (Chen et al., 2020, Misirlis et al., 2020; Orendain & Djalante, 2020). Many found it challenging being self-isolated in a new country without knowing anyone, not being able to access their campus, or being stuck at home with their families away from their destination country, campus and classmates for months. Those self-identifying as "introverts" and those building on their pre-pandemic experiences overcoming losses felt more resilient. Other successful coping strategies since the onset of the pandemic included focusing on their studies, regular religious practices, increasing online chats with their family and friends abroad, joining virtual groups based on shared interests.

Regarding the impact on studies, both US and Japan experienced considerable drop in international enrolments in 2020: by 15 % in the US and by 10% in Japan (IEI, 2021; JASSO, 2021).

Some international students reported decreased quality of online classes compared to their pre-pandemic experience, while others complained about their inability to do planned fieldwork overseas and having to redesign the study and extend the period of study. However, the most significant impact on studies was for those stranded overseas and unable to access the study destination for months or years. They reported poor internet connection/firewall preventing access to virtual classes or study materials, insufficient access to the university library online, mismatch between expectations of living and studying in a new country and reality of taking classes online from home, perception of lagging behind their classmates who were in the destination country. On the positive side, graduate students on the write-up stage of their thesis reported more uninterrupted time for writing during the lockdown.

In addition to concerns about contracting the virus, the pandemic affected international students' mental health: they reported increased anxiety, insomnia, depression, stress due to time difference if they studied online in a different country. Some attended a psychiatrist or school counsellor for the first time in their life during the pandemic.

Finally, the pool of part-time jobs providing income to many international students has drastically decreased due to the pandemic restrictions related to travel and eating out. Graduate students tend to be less affected as they often have scholarships and academic jobs on campus that can be done online. In addition, COVID-19 restrictions impacted eligibility for scholarships as many scholarships require being inside their destination country or led to the loss of the scholarship if they extended their studies beyond the standard duration of the programme. International students studying online from home were also unable to find a job in the destination country and some chose to suspend their studies for a semester or more.

Recommendations

Effective coordination among universities, volunteer organisations, and local governments is key to improving international students' social engagement on campus and with wider community. Universities alone cannot effectively solve the problem of international students' loneliness particularly if the problem originated from the university itself and community-based organisations may need to fill the gap. Volunteer groups often initiated or facilitated by local governments could become bridges between newcomers and the broader society and help revitalise local communities.

Recommendations for colleges and universities:

- Offering loneliness questionnaires as a part of bigger surveys on campus satisfaction rather than as standalone surveys.
- Accommodating for variation in students' needs and expectations depending on the time of their arrival in the host country, their age, personality type, marital/relationship status, their support network.
- Providing intercultural training to all students before and during the study abroad, preferably bringing domestic and international students together in one classroom.
- Preventing all forms of discrimination (teasing, bullying, exclusion) against international students in student clubs and societies.

Recommendations for volunteer organisations:

- Providing basic intercultural training to staff, volunteers, and students to minimise and effectively mitigate cross-cultural misunderstandings.
- Offering event series or long-term programmes instead of one-time events.
- Offering flexible schedule and reducing membership fees for international student members.
- Involving international students in event planning and decision-making in volunteer groups helps empower them and move beyond the "guest-host" paradigm.

Recommendations for local governments:

- Educating the public about advantages of migration for local communities and positive aspects of cultural diversity.
- Initiating community-based programmes facilitating friendly interactions.
- Inviting international students to participate in local festivals and community events.

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