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COVID-19's Impact and Adjustments on International Students in Universities

The COVID-19 pandemic started on Dec. 2019. By early 2020, it had affected the world to the extent that countries closed down their borders and embassies from various countries stopped operations. As countries no longer allowed international travels, this also meant that countries stopped receiving international students, scholars, and researchers for higher education institutions. Some students present within the U.S. at the start of the pandemic even abandoned their study and returned to their home country. The decrease of incoming international students seriously affected the U.S. and brought great changes to higher education institutions. Similarly, it has affected international students' expectations and decisions on studying abroad, and the university's relationship with them.

The loss of international students impacted the U.S. economy greatly. Offering higher education to international students is the fifth largest service sector export of the U.S. Pre-pandemic, international students could contribute up to forty five billion dollars from tuition, housing, dining, and other purchases. In 2019 alone, international students contributed about forty billion dollars in revenue. As the pandemic began to show its impact in 2020, the U.S. experienced a four percent loss of income from international students. This meant almost two billion dollars lower than the previous year. In 2021, a whopping decline of nearly twenty seven percent of income, or more than ten billion dollars, occurred due to the pandemic.

The pandemic not only had financial impacts, but also made countries lose the opportunity to attract more talents. Since 2016, higher education in the U.S. has attracted about a

million international student enrollment yearly. These international students were able to create and support over 450,000 jobs after their graduation.

As the pandemic hit, international students decreased by ten percent nation-wide, bringing the number of international students and enrollment rate comparable to the years 2013 and 2014. Many halted their education and left the U.S. at the start of the pandemic in hopes of returning once the crisis settles down, but many have not been back to the U.S. since. As Dr. Hofmann, the Assistant Vice President of University of Louisville's International Center commented, a lot of the students who left the U.S. thought that the pandemic was a temporary crisis and never expected it to span for years. Data have shown that many of the students who left, including resident students, transferred and continued their education in their respective home country or another place. In addition to the shift to online instruction, enrollment continued to decrease throughout these three years.

Taking the University of Louisville as an example, the university currently has about twelve hundred international students and scholars. Although the international student population of the university is not much, there were still about ten percent of decrease in international student population and decreased enrollment from students worldwide.

There were also students who remained in the U.S. during the pandemic. Reasons for this decision span from having their families in the U.S., feeling that the country was safer than their home country due to the medical facilities and how the government handled critical situations, staying for the job opportunities and having a better education system, and not being able to return to their country due to closed borders. Students that stayed in the U.S. received support from their university.

The International Center of University of Louisville worked with other organizations and members within the university to follow social distancing protocols for international students living in the dorms. They also helped with providing them with grocery support, Goodwill vouchers, and grants to assist students financially in the difficult times. One student coordinator at the University of Louisville commented on the mental health of international students. Various of the students that stayed were away from home and family, and were isolated from other students due to pandemic protocols. The International Center has tried keeping up with communications on a personal level with the students to help in this aspect.

Early 2021, the U.S. embassies abroad have restarted operations and slowly allowed visas to be processed and for international students to come into the country for higher education. International Centers in universities throughout the nation have started receiving more applications from students overseas. Although there was an influx in applications, reality did not keep up with the desired results.

Students and recent graduates overseas who applied to universities in the U.S. have met with challenges such as travel restrictions and delayed paperwork processing time, which prevented them from entering the country. Vaccination requirements were one of the greatest challenges international students had to face before stepping into the country. During early 2021, vaccines were still not widely available in other countries compared to the U.S. Student coordinators from International Centers would sometimes lose contact with potential students as many were not yet able to obtain the vaccine, and would give up coming to the U.S.

Similarly, processing times for the embassies have become longer than usual. Many U.S. embassy's appointment schedules were filled to the brim. Some students were unable to obtain a visa to travel to the U.S., which once again prevented international students from pursuing

education in the U.S. Due to cases like these, student enrollments could not recover to previous levels even though borders were starting to open up.

By mid 2021, country borders have opened up more and travel restrictions have been more relaxed. Based on University of Louisville's data, international students are slowly returning.

As of 2022, country borders have fully opened up and the U.S. has lifted travel bans and restrictions, welcoming the return of international students. Although the country is currently fully open, universities are still somewhat experiencing a decline in enrollments for Fall 2022 semester.

On the road of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, universities across the country have learned to adjust, develop, and implement new strategies to support both resident and foreign students. For example, University of Louisville has encouraged and promoted more in-person classes for the students and engagement throughout the campus communities. With how students have displayed homesickness, loneliness, and depression, social interaction with other students during classes are encouraged. Dr. Hofmann has also mentioned how universities have learned what they do really well with online learning, but students, especially international students would still prefer presencial classes for the social interaction, where "students don't want to travel halfway around the world to stare at a computer screen." A lot of the learning is done outside the classroom, where students can walk to the front of the classroom after class and ask questions to the professor, which cannot be done the same way virtually.

Even with the decline of undergraduate students, the outlook on the return of international studies is currently quite positive. The pandemic stopped the inflow of international students temporarily, but it will not prevent international students from going out of their country

to study abroad in search for better opportunities. As Janice Kim, the Director of University of Louisville's International Center said, "The U.S. is a hotspot for education, a diverse learning environment, and an asset that no other countries have." Now that the gates are open, students are coming back.

Word Count: 1205

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Interview Notes

Dr. Paul Hofmann
Assistant Vice President
International Center

Q: How long have you been working in ISSS?

A: "I have been working in the International Center here in the University of Louisville for only three months. I was not here during the pandemic. I was at another university at California, so I would be able to speak in more general terms, as in national trends for international students, where I imagine the situation here to be very similar."

Q: Could you describe a little about what your job consists of?

A: "My title here is the Assistant Vice-President for the International Center. So my role is working with ISSS, study abroad, and all things international."

Q: Looking over the effects of the pandemic, how has the pandemic impacted international students in the past two years?

“What was happening was that institutions throughout the states and internationally were pivoting. A lot of classes were changed to online. I remember at that time there were a lot of international students, there were lots of students coming into the office to get travel signatures on their I-20 Form to return at some point in the future. Looking back at it, I think everybody thought that this was just going to be a short period of time, a couple of months, where international students thought this was going to be a short visit home and come back. Now we know it is not the case, and we can look at the impacts it has had. The online studies were very difficult due to time zone differences, and if they were to do it again they would have stayed. A lot of the students just timed out or transferred. COVID created a situation where everybody was reevaluating the situation of their whole lives.”

Q: How do you think the pandemic has impacted international students themselves in their studies?

A: “There was a lot of loneliness and homesickness. For students that did stay, now all of a sudden they are all online, there was no longer social interaction. Homesickness, loneliness, and depression started to set in and we don't know how this will affect the future. We do not know if this will affect retention rates and other factors.”

Q: Services the university will keep even if the pandemic is over?

A: “There were some good that came out of the pandemic in terms of higher education. We learned what we can do online well, and also what we thought we could do online well but could not. In my perspective, so much of the learning happens outside of the classroom, and in my mind, students don't want to travel halfway around the world to stare at a computer screen.”

Q: What do you think will be some challenges that the university will have to face during the recovery of the pandemic regarding international students?

A: “The challenge moving forward is how can we take what we learned that we do well virtually, continue to that, but how can we get back to the in person events and programming that are very important.”

Q: Do you think international student enrollment will recover as borders are opening?

A: “Nationally, it will. At UofL, I hope. The situation with the pandemic is that there are more and more universities looking for international students, and it gets more competitive. So we have our work cut out for us. I think it will, but it will be hard work.”

Q: Is there a goal for the number of international students?

A: “There hasn’t been a stated goal, but I would like a goal for myself of 2000, to double.”

Q: Do you think the existing services to support students will continue to be offered? (Eg. Goodwill vouchers, funding, grants.)

A: “I believe it will still be there. The universities know that this is something students are needing.”

Q: How about internationalization here in Louisville?

A: “Internalization here in Louisville is at its infancy. We recognize its importance and its benefits, but we are only starting to build now. We have all the academic programs here but we are in the process of building it. It is a priority but with every priority there are competing priorities.”

Maria Martinez
International Student Coordinator

Q: How long have you been working as a student coordinator in ISSS?

A: “Five years.”

Q: Could you describe a little about what your job consists of?

A: "I started working as a coordinator for programming activities for international students and orientation. But with the pandemic, we had to stop all of that to decrease human contact in the activities. Now what I do is to make sure international students come here for their visa and I-20."

Q: What percentage of the students are international students?

A: "There are about twelve hundred international students, as in undergraduates, graduates, PhD students, exchange students, scholars, and students currently in OPT."

Q: What are the demographics of the international students?

A: "We have students from everywhere, but most of them come from India and China."

Q: What were some concerns applicants or students had about the pandemic?

A: "When the pandemic happened, countries no longer allowed international travels. The U.S. embassies also closed in some countries and prevented those that would have wanted to come here to study, from actually being able to physically be here. These days the embassy is open, but we have situations of delays in paperworks such as the speed in which visas are issued. For example, some international students have their visa rejected the first time, and it takes too much time to reapply for one that they miss the opportunity to come here. Another concern was the travel restrictions. I had one person that contacted me about not having the vaccine and it was required to get it before coming to the U.S. The vaccine at that time was not available in his country yet, and he could have told that he would get the vaccine once he is in the U.S. I never heard back from him though."

Q: How has the pandemic impacted the number of international students in the past two years?

A: "Well, the number of international students dropped during the start of COVID-19, but not by much. A lot of students stayed here and could not go back to their home country because the

borders were closed. As for admissions and applications, it did have an impact in the fact that borders and embassies were closed and visas could not be processed.”

Q: From the question above, has any enrollment from specific countries or areas decreased?

A: “Everywhere showed a decrease in enrollments and applications since countries closed their borders and some students could not travel. We do not really have a large number of international students, but we have had a decrease of around ten percent of international students.”

Q: Has the pandemic affected in-person attendance of the university or intimidated students from coming to the U.S. to take the program?

A: “The attendance is still about the same. Because the pandemic isolated the students a lot, we could see that there was that yearning of being in contact with another person. As we can see right now, a lot of the students have come back to campus. There are students that yearn for that person to person contact. We also have a recruiter that is doing a great job at recruiting students.”

Q: Throughout the course of the past two years, what has the university done to help international students during the pandemic?

A: “The university is still providing the vaccine. We are also trying to get more in contact with the students since before there was not much of a close relationship between us and the students.”

Q: Looking back, has there been anything that you could have done better?

A: “We could have contacted the students more, on a personal level, to help them mentally since COVID-19 has isolated a lot of people. Also we could have helped them more with services such as helping the students find housing.”

Janice Kim
Director

International Student and Scholar Services
University of Louisville

Q: How long have you been working in ISSS?

A: "In UofL two years, and prior to that I have worked in Liberty University for ten years."

Q: Could you describe a little about what your job consists of?

A: "The primary role that I take is to report immigration compliance of F-1 and J-1 regulations in particular. I also help international students with their documents, recruitment, admissions, and orientation. We do it all for the international students and try to engage the internationalization of the campus."

Q: What percentage of the students are international students?

A: "The total number of international students is that there are about seven hundred international students and about two hundred scholars. We also manage OPT students, and that is about another two hundred. In total we have about eleven or twelve hundred international students that we work with."

Q: Where are the demographics of the international students?

A: "India and China are one of the tops and Nigeria is also one of them. The middle eastern countries are the consistent ones around."

Q: How has the pandemic impacted the number of international students in the past two years?

A: "The impact has been tremendous. Number one, there are travel restrictions. Students here could not travel back to their home country and family. We have tried to engage with more students virtually as best as we possibly can. It was also hard for students to come into the country."

Q: Throughout the course of the past two years, what has the university done to help international students during the pandemic?

A: “We collaborated with other departments with housing students to keep them in compliance with social distancing. We also tried to engage more with the students that stayed here, such as with activities. We also keep them in compliance with the regulations during this time, especially those with CPT or OPT.”

Q: Looking back, has there been anything that you could have done better?

A: “I think UofL did a fantastic job, whereas you can see how other institutions have managed during COVID. It was very limited, you cannot do a lot of in person things. For UofL, we had staff members from various departments, taking food to those that could not get them. Just showing care, we are a community of care. As a Cardinal we are a community. In the student activity center there is also the Cardinal Cupboard to provide necessities students need that they cannot get during COVID. Student involvement has also helped us with Goodwill vouchers, where international students could use those vouchers and shop for necessities at the store. International students are not eligible for federal aid or any other support. We did our best to help them. We make sure our international students feel at home amidst the homesickness and difficulties.”

Q: How do you think the pandemic will impact future enrollments?

A: “I think it is going to increase the enrollments, because there are those missed years. There is going to be an influx of students. The U.S. is a hotspot for education, a diverse learning environment, and an asset that no other countries have. For international students their aspirations are looking for that prestige and UofL has that to offer. So I see a potential influx. Those that have been waiting during the pandemic see the doors opening and they are going to

jump in. Also the structure of UofL is there to support internationalization, where it is one of the university's strategic plans."

Q: Has online learning affected students' decision on attending in-person courses?

A: "International students are required to be full time students, and at least three of them have to be in person. We are also delegating and promoting more in person courses. As for online courses, I think the professors have it harder. There are less interactions with students, so that has been a challenge."

Rose
Chemical Engineering Student on OPT
Penn State University

Q: Where are you originally from?

A: "Taiwan."

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: "Four years."

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: "Yes."

Q: What made you stay within the U.S.?

A: "The opportunity to work in the U.S. with OPT."

Q: What do you think of your decision?

A: "It was a great decision. I was able to find a job and use my OPT after graduation."

Q: Have you been afraid of what might have happened when you chose to stay here?

A: "Not really. I did not think it would affect me."

Q: What were some difficulties you experienced in the U.S. during the pandemic?

A: "Just the lockdown."

Q: If you had the opportunity to complete your degree online, would you have returned to your country? Why?

A: "I would not have, because I wanted to get a job in the U.S."

Tomas
Engineering Student
University of Louisville

Q: Where are you originally from?

A: "Argentina."

Q: How long have you been in the United States?

A: "I have been living in the U.S. for a little more than a year."

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: "Not really."

Q: What made you stay within the United States?

A: "Pursuing my degree."

Q: What do you think of your decision?

A: "I think it was the right one."

Q: Have you been afraid of what might have happened when you chose to stay here? (Eg. Catching COVID but the serious kind, or any lockdown/travel problems)

A: "No, because I think I was safer here than in my home country."

Q: If you had the opportunity to complete your degree online, would you have returned to your country? Why?

“Yes, but not because of the disease itself. But lower my expenses per month since living in the U.S. is more expensive than living in my home country with my parents.”

Aljair
Marketing Student
University of Louisville

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: “A little over a year.”

Q: Were you present in the U.S. during the pandemic (2020-2021)?

A: “Yes”.

Q: If yes, why did you choose to travel out of your home country to pursue this degree or program?

A: “I felt like I had better opportunities here in the U.S. to pursue this career.”

Q: What helped you make that decision?

A: “Not really sure, it was just an option.”

Q: Has your family disagreed with your decision?

A: “My family did not disagree, they were quite supportive and always wanted me to study abroad. I felt that they were helpful, gave me the opportunity to pursue a career in my specific field.”

Q: Were there any difficulties and challenges?

“Yes, a lot of paperwork, specifically because of the pandemic I had to bring vaccination cards, go through quarantines, and paperwork takes longer because in Panama the U.S. embassy was shut down for a while.”

Q: If there was a chance your program could be completed entirely online, would you still have chosen to attend the courses in person? Why?

A: “Not completely, I would still want to come for some time for the experience of studying abroad.”

Alicia
Intern Journalist at WPSU and Journalism Student
Penn State University

Q: Where are you originally from?

A: “Taiwan.”

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: “Since Jan. 2021.”

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: “No, my father thought that the U.S. was safer. He did not try to have me go back to Taiwan, and even traveled to the states to visit me for a period of time. Even with the protocols Taiwan had towards COVID, and that there were no cases for a prolonged amount of time, the situation was still dangerous, so staying was the best choice at that time.”

Q: What made you stay within the U.S.?

This question was answered in the previous question.

Q: What do you think of your decision?

A: “If I had known the U.S. handled COVID-19 this poorly, I would have not stayed. But in terms of long term considerations, yes, this was the right choice. The prerequisite was that this was the best choice only in a location that is isolated enough, such as Penn State, and that there is good enough financial background to support it.”

Q: Have you been afraid of what might have happened when you chose to stay here?

A: “Yes, when I hear about someone catching COVID-19 I still freak out. I was not necessarily afraid, just worried.”

Q: You covered two articles back in 2020 about COVID-19. What were your thoughts on that?

A: “Now things are less pessimistic and a lot of things have been normalized. Since there is better access to vaccines and boosters here, it is also better. But as mentioned before, close contact with a COVID patient freaks me out, even now.”

Gabriella
Marketing Student
University of Louisville

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: “Around a year.”

Q: Were you present in the U.S. during the pandemic (2020-2021)?

A: “Yes.”

Q: If yes, why did you choose to travel out of your home country to pursue this degree or program?

A: “I wanted to change my major to marketing and the U.S. has a broader range of opportunities for marketing related careers, and I wanted to develop the career here.”

Q: What helped you make that decision?

A: Funny enough, I did not want to come here at first since I was scared of catching COVID, but then I had an epiphany and now I am here.”

Q: Has your family disagreed with your decision?

A: “They were fully supportive of my decision.”

Q: Were there any difficulties and challenges?

A: “Mainly vaccination, there were just so many restrictions to travel abroad.”

Q: If there was a chance your program could be completed entirely online, would you still have chosen to attend the courses in person? Why?

A: “I would take the more challenging courses in person, otherwise I would not have come here.”

Tu
Finance Student
University of Louisville

Q: Where are you originally from?

A: “My family is from Vietnam.”

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: “About eight years.”

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: “Not at all, my family also moved here, so there is no point in going back to Vietnam.”

Q: What made you stay within the U.S.?

A: “Family.”

Q: What do you think of your decision?

A: "I am not a great decision maker, so I cannot say much about that. But I had no choice, my family is here so I do not have anywhere to go back to."

Q: Have you ever been worried or afraid of the pandemic seriously affecting you when you were here in the U.S.?

A: "Not really, but kind of. Everyone has COVID at least one time, and it has become more normal now. At the start of the pandemic it was scary though. I did not know what to do."

Q: What were some difficulties you experienced in the U.S. during the pandemic?

A: "Well, online learning. It was hard asking questions to the professor when we were not talking face to face, and harder to understand."

Q: If you had the opportunity to complete your degree online, would you have returned to your country? Why?

A: "No, I would stay, because in my home country, to find a job you need relationships to recommend you to the job. You also make less money, so there are better opportunities here. That is why my family all moved here."

Khem
Computer Information Systems Student
University of Louisville

Q: Where are you originally from?

A: "Nepal."

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: "Ten years."

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: “No, my family moved here too, so we did not have the choice to go back.”

Q: What made you stay within the U.S.?

A: “Education system, and family. Our country does not have a good education system and the Internet is also horrible.”

Q: What do you think of your decision?

A: “Not many thoughts, I did not have a choice.”

Q: Have you been afraid of what might have happened when you chose to stay here?

A: “No. The country handled it well, there was not much to fear.”

Q: What were some difficulties you experienced in the U.S. during the pandemic?

A: “None at all.”

Q: If you had the opportunity to complete your degree online, would you have returned to your country? Why?

A: “I would not go back, like I said, the education system in my country is really bad.”

Keshab
Criminal Justice Student
University of Louisville

Q: Where were you from?

A: “Nepal.”

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: “Twelve years.”

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: “No, my family is here with me.”

Q: What made you stay within the U.S.?

A: "My family is here and there are better job opportunities."

Q: Have you been afraid of what might have happened when you chose to stay here?

A: "I was not too worried about COVID-19."

Q: What were some difficulties you experienced in the U.S. during the pandemic?

A: "Not much. My family and friends are here so I did not have much trouble."

Q: If you had the opportunity to complete your degree online, would you have returned to your country? Why?

A: "Similar to what Khem said, our country does not have a good education system, the internet is horrible, and there are not many opportunities there."

Trang Do
MSBA Student
University of Louisville

Q: Where were you from?

A: "Vietnam."

Q: How long have you been in the U.S.?

A: "Five years."

Q: When the pandemic started, have you considered or been asked by family members to go back to your home country?

A: "No, I have my family here. My case is pretty special as I am an international student applying for residency, and I followed my family over. I did not really have the need to receive help from the university or the international center either."

Q: What made you stay within the U.S.?

A: “Better salary and job opportunities. My family is also here with me so I don’t have to go back to my country.”

Q: Have you been afraid of what might have happened when you chose to stay here?

A: “I was not afraid since I have my family here and the school sent emails to check up on us.”

Q: What were some difficulties you experienced in the U.S. during the pandemic?

A: “There were no challenges, I had all I needed from my family.”

Q: If you had the opportunity to complete your degree online, would you have returned to your country? Why?

A: “Education back home was not that great. I considered the education here better, and wanted to see America and live an American life. So, after bachelor’s I applied for the master’s program and hope for a better salary.”