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COVID-19-Related Challenges and Coping Strategies among International Students: An Integrative Review

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ABSTRACT: *This integrative review identifies COVID-19-related challenges among international university students and explores their coping strategies and university support. To the best of our knowledge, this integrative review is the first to address both the challenges encountered by international students during the pandemic comprehensively and their coping strategies. Using Whittemore and Knafl's five-step integrative review method, a systematic search was conducted across six databases and Google Scholar in February 2025, yielding 26 relevant studies. Two main themes and six subthemes were identified. The first theme focuses on challenges, including financial, psychological, and online learning impacts, as well as discrimination. The second theme highlights coping strategies, encompassing self-developing coping strategies and university support. In conclusion, international students have encountered numerous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational institutions, academic staff, and health professionals must understand the unique needs of international students, who may be reluctant to seek help. Addressing emotional, financial, and academic concerns is essential for promoting well-being and academic success during times of crisis.*

Keywords: International student, COVID-19, Cope, Challenge, Experience, Perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

International students (ISs) often encounter numerous challenges when transitioning to a new country for academic and personal development. These include securing affordable accommodations, overcoming employment barriers, navigating currency exchange issues, and managing limited financial resources (Calder et al., 2016). In addition, they face language barriers, communication difficulties, and homesickness while also contending with cultural differences and social integration challenges, which can contribute to isolation and loneliness (Wu et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these preexisting challenges. COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020; it rapidly spread worldwide, initially emerged in China and then affected numerous countries (Peng et al., 2020; Singhal, 2020). While the primary symptoms include fever, cough, and fatigue, less common symptoms, such as dizziness, shortness of breath, and loss of appetite, have also been reported (Chen et al., 2020). Governments responded with stringent public health measures, including international border closures, local lockdowns, and social distancing protocols, which significantly disrupted daily life and educational systems (Sarwar et al., 2020).

UNESCO (2020) reported that more than 188 countries implemented school closures, affecting over 91% of the global student population. Educational institutions were forced to suspend in-person teaching and rapidly transition to online platforms. This sudden shift created further stress and uncertainty among students, particularly those unfamiliar with digital learning environments (Sarwar et al., 2020).

Despite the growing literature on student experiences during the pandemic, limited research has been conducted specifically focused on international students. This literature review addresses this gap by examining their challenges and coping strategies and intends to inform future support frameworks and policy interventions. This integrative review aimed to identify COVID-19-related challenges faced by international university students worldwide and explore the coping strategies they employed. Additionally, this study aimed to investigate the types of support and benefits provided by universities to IS during the pandemic period.

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METHOD

This integrative review employed Whittemore and Knafl's five-stage framework (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), allowing for the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative studies to explore the challenges and coping strategies faced by international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. An integrative review facilitates comprehensive synthesis and enhances credibility (Hopia et al., 2016).

An extensive search of published literature was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including MEDLINE, Scopus, EMBASE, EBSCO, CINAHL, PubMed and Google Scholar, covering publications from January 2020 to February 2025. The search strategy utilized the following keywords: international university student*, international students*, COVID-19*, COVID-19*, coronavirus pandemic*, adapt*, coping*, adjust*, challenge*, barrier*, burden*, experience*, and perspective*. These keywords were systematically applied across all the databases to ensure a thorough and inclusive review of the literature.

This review encompasses studies conducted at various universities that have examined IS at the undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate level. An international student is defined as an individual who has physically crossed an international border and is residing in another country for educational purposes (OECD, 2007).

The current review focuses on the challenges that ISs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic period, along with the coping strategies they employed. It incorporates qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies. Unpublished studies, textbooks, expert opinion papers, narratives, reports, commentaries, and other forms of gray literature were excluded from the review. Studies involving IS in vocational tertiary education, non-English literature, and research not specifically targeting IS were also excluded.

The initial search identified 320 titles, which were imported into EndNote 20 for duplicate removal. After removing the duplicates, 196 studies remained. The EndNote library was then shared between two reviewers, who independently screened the titles and abstracts on the basis of the predefined inclusion criteria. This step resulted in the removal of 88 articles, leaving 108 papers for full-text screening. L.A. & L.G. independently assessed the full texts of all eligible studies. In cases of disagreement, S.Sh. was consulted to reach a consensus. Following the full-text screening, an additional 79 articles were excluded, resulting in 29 studies proceeding to the JBI critical appraisal. Among these, 16 studies adopted a qualitative approach, 8 utilized quantitative methodologies, and 5 adopted mixed methods designs. Flowchart of the study selection process (see Figure 1).

Data Quality Evaluation

The methodological quality of the selected studies was assessed via “The Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal” tools. This includes the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research and the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies (Porritt et al., 2014). Additionally, the Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was employed to appraise the quality of the mixed-method studies (Hong et al., 2018)

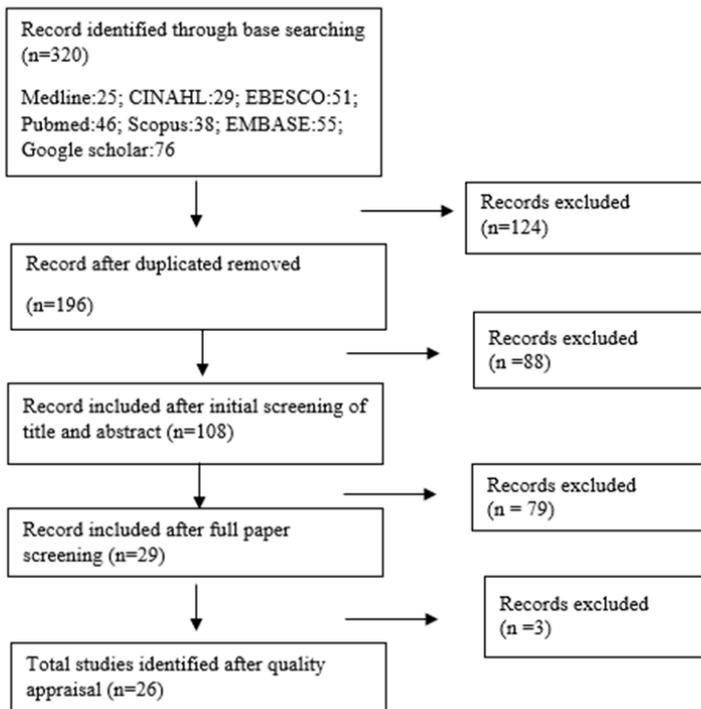


Figure 1: Flowchart of the study selection process

The quality appraisal of the first five studies was carried out independently by two researchers, followed by a discussion between the researchers to achieve agreement. The decision was made to include only qualitative and quantitative studies that met at least 50% of the criteria, as the JBI has not described a specific cutoff point for the inclusion of studies (Kanninen et al., 2021). For mixed-method studies, the quality of quantitative and qualitative components is appraised individually to ensure their rigour (Hong et al, 2018). Two mixed-method studies were excluded based on their methodological quality.

Table 1: The Included Studies' Profile

First Author/Country/Year	Aim	Design	Sample	Data collection method
Beckman et al, 2025 Australia	To examine how COVID-19 affected the health and well-being of IS in Australia	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=31) IS. Different degree levels, mean age: 27	Online semistructured interview
Cairns et al, 2021 Portugal	To examine the impact of the pandemic on IS, focusing on their experiences during the 2020 lockdown.	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=27) IS. Different degree levels, aged 20-28 years old.	Online semistructured interview
Cairns et al 2022 Portugal	To examine the challenges facing IS during the lockdown period	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=27) IS, aged 20-40 years. Different degree levels.	Interview via Zoom & Skype
Chen, 2020 China	To investigate how IS coped and adapted psychologically during the initial phase of the pandemic.	Qualitative study	Convenience & purposive sampling (n=4) IS. 3 males,1 female	Reflective diary for 3 weeks, then an interview was conducted.
Gao et al, 2024 USA	To assess the experiences and effects of COVID-19 on	Quantitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=405) undergraduate and graduate IS.	Online survey

			the well-being of international students.	
Hannigan & Saini, 2020. New Zealand	An exploratory case study on international students' experiences of lockdown in New Zealand.	Mixed-method study	Purposeful sampling: (n=50), IS responded to the survey, and (n=6) were interviewed.	Online survey and interview
Hari et al, 2023 Canada	To explore the challenges & concerns of IS affected by the pandemic	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=13) IS. 9 females, 4 males. Graduate and undergraduate students	Online interview
Honegger & Honegger, 2020 U. S	To understand the lived experience of IS during the pandemic.	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling, (n=20) IS.	Questionnaire in a narrative form
Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021. Australia	To explore how IS from collectivistic cultures navigate social experiences in individualistic environments & how their cultural values affect their mental health	Mixed-method study	Purposeful sampling (n=104) IS completed the survey. 60 females, 42 males, 2 others. Age average=18-30. (n=20) IS for interview	Semistructured interviews via online
Ivanova, 2021 Australia, Japan	To explore the social involvement of IS & their day-to-day interactions with	Qualitative study	Purposive sampling, IS (n=30) in Japan (n=32) in Australia. Graduate or undergraduate students.	Semistructured interviews, face-to-face & online interviews.

	civil society organisations during the COVID-19 crisis			
Kivelä et al, 2024 Netherland	To assess mental health outcomes among university students during COVID-19, compare Dutch and IS, and to examine the moderating role of student status	Quantitative study	Convenience sampling, (n=349) (2020, <i>n</i> = 207, IS=81), (2021, <i>n</i> = 142, IS=88).	Online self-report survey
Koo et al, 2023 U.S.	To investigate the IS experiences, challenges, & perspectives on racism and racial discrimination in the U.S during the pandemic	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling, (n=18) IS. 8 males, 10 females	Three virtual focus group interviews
Koris et al, 2021 Spain, Hungary	To examine international students' perceptions of the shift to online learning during the pandemic while enrolled in the Erasmus mobility program at European host universities	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling, (n=14) IS, 4 males, 10 females. 7 stayed in the host country, 7 returned to their home country.	In-depth semistructured interview via an online interview.
Lin et al, 2022 U.S	To assess depression and anxiety levels among Chinese international students in the U.S during	Quantitative study	Purposeful snowball sampling (n=1881) Chinese IS in the U.S universities, mean age 21.39.	Online survey

Lu et al, 2022 China	the pandemic and identify the contributing factors To examine the relationships between COVID-19-related stressors, coping and depressive symptoms among international medical students, testing the mediating role of coping and the moderating role of perceived social support	Quantitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=519) international medical students, 53.18% are male, 46.82% female, 67.24% live with family or friends, & 32.76% live alone	Online survey
Maleku et al., 2022 U.S	To provide preliminary empirical evidence on the mental health of IS, focusing on aspects such as discrimination, loneliness, anxiety, and depression.	Quantitative study	Purposeful sampling, (n=103) IS, age mean=27.8. 40 male, 63 female. Graduate and undergraduate students.	Online survey instrument with three open-ended questions.
Masud et al, 2021 China	To observe the experiences & challenges faced by IS at Huzhou University during the pandemic	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=8) IS, 5 males, 3 females	Semistructured face-to-face interview

Mbous et al, 2024 U.S	To document the challenges faced the IS while studying in the U.S during the pandemic	Qualitative study	Convenience sampling, (n=13), 4 male, 8 female, 1 missing. Age mean (26.3).	Semistructured interview and four focus group interviews.
Menge & Kayonga, 2022 Sweden	To explore the coping strategies devised by IS amidst the pandemic	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling, (n=8), 3 male, 5 female, aged 24-42 years.	In-depth interviews
Misirlis et al., 2020 Netherland	To analyze the level of loneliness, depression, and stress levels among IS in relation to their social media use and the role of the host university.	Quantitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=248), 71 male, 171 female.	Online survey
Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021 Eswatini	To explore the psychological experiences of international higher education students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Eswatini	Qualitative study	Purposive sample (n=15), undergraduate IS. 8 females, 7 males, age range from 20-30 years.	Face-to-face interview
Pappa et al, 2020 Finland	To explore how the shift to online teaching and learning during the pandemic period affected the well-being of international students at Finnish university	Qualitative study	Purposeful sampling (n=37) IS, master's degree programs. 10 males, 27 females, average age 29.03 years.	Online questionnaire & an open-ended question

Wilczewski et al, 2021. Poland	To investigate student experiences with online learning during the pandemic.	Mixed-method study	Purposeful sampling (n=362) IS. Different degree levels, (n=11) IS participated in the interview.	Semistructured narrative interviews via Google Meet.
Xiong et al., 2024 USA	To explore the association between perceived discrimination and psychological distress among IS during the pandemic.	Quantitative study	Convenience sampling, (n=188), 99 female, 89 male, different degree levels.	Online survey
Xu & Tran 2021 China	To explore Chinese international doctoral students' perceptions of navigating a disrupted study trajectory during the pandemic	Qualitative study	Purposeful snowball sampling (n=16), Chinese international doctoral students,6 males, 10 females. 7 students in China, 9 students overseas.	Semistructured online interview
Xu et al, 2021 U. S	To explore the lived experiences of Chinese international college students during the initial COVID-19 quarantine period in the U.S.	Qualitative study	Purposeful snowball sampling (n=14) of international Chinese students.13 females,1 male, average age 30 years. Different degree levels.	Semistructured interviews via Zoom, using individual & focus groups.

Table 2: Data extracted from the included studies

Subtheme Students	Theme One: The COVID-19-Related Challenges Among International						
Psychological Impact	Students experienced stress, anxiety, and grief: heightened isolation and limited social connection (Beckman et al, 2025)	Students experienced mental health challenges, isolation, limited support, and restricted access to mentors and services (Cairns et al., 2021)	Students experienced mental health issues during the pandemic period, with those having preexisting conditions like depression and anxiety particularly affected. Access to support services was limited during the lockdown (Cairns et al., 2022)	The lockdown adversely affected 86% of students' well-being, with stress levels higher among females (56%) than males (43%). (Hannigan & Saini, 2020)	Students experienced mental health challenges due to distance from family, lack of support, and isolation (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021)	Students experienced feelings of loneliness, fear, and mental health challenges (Ivanova, 2021)	IS reported significantly higher rates of depression, PTSD, anxiety and severe loneliness compared to Dutch students (Kivelä et al, 2024)

<p>Depression (24.5%) and anxiety (20.7%) were linked to COVID-19 exposure, financial stress, strained relationships from remote learning, insomnia, and low social support. Strong social support reduced these risks (Lin et al., 2022)</p>	<p>Among international students, 9.83% had mild, 3.08% moderate, and 2.12% severe depression. Younger age and COVID-19 stress increased depression, especially when negative coping occurred with low social support. (Lu et al., 2022)</p>	<p>Students faced psychological challenges like depression, fear, and isolation, alongside social, economic, and academic difficulties, leading to increased stress levels (Masud et al., 2021)</p>	<p>Students reported heightened anxiety and homesickness due to travel restrictions and prolonged uncertainty, along with loneliness, mental health challenges, and reduced motivation. (Mbous et al., 2024)</p>	<p>Students' anxiety was linked to loneliness, lockdown experiences, COVID-19-related stress, and low social capital. (Misirlis et al., 2020)</p>	<p>Students' well-being declined due to isolation, limited social networks, future uncertainty, and concern for their families. (Pappa et al, 2020)</p>
<p>Financial Impact</p>	<p>Student reported</p>	<p>Students reliant on</p>	<p>Students reported job</p>	<p>Many students experienced</p>	<p>Students who returned home</p>

	financial insecurity caused by job loss and employment insecurity because of the pandemic restrictions (Cairns et al., 2021)	part-time work, especially in insecure hospitality and tourism jobs, were particularly vulnerable. Lockdown led to widespread job losses, cutting off a vital source of income (Cairns et al, 2022)	loss during the lockdown, and were among the most financially affected by its impact (Hannigan & Saini, 2020)	financial hardship due to job loss and reduced employment opportunities (Hari et al., 2023)	still faced tuition and accommodation costs in their host countries, leading to financial strain, in some cases, study deferral and academic disruptions (Ivanova, 2021)	
Discrimination	Asian students experienced racial discrimination, heightened their anxiety and deepened	Chinese students experienced racism, which hindered their efforts to	East Asian IS reported overt racism, including verbal abuse, physical attacks, and	Students experienced discrimination, with higher levels significantly increasing	Students experienced occasional discrimination, more frequently reported among males and	Chinese students experienced xenophobia during the pandemic

Online Learning Challenges	uncertainty about their future (Honegger & Honegger, 2020)	integrate into Australian society (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021)	online harassment, which left them feeling unwelcome (Koo et al., 2023)	loneliness among IS (Maleku et al., 2022)	undergraduates (Xiong et al., 2024)	period (Xu & Tran., 2021)
	Limited lab access, interaction, and teacher contact reduced efficiency; some students faced distractions and low engagement (Wilczewski et al., 2021).	Students faced challenges adapting to remote learning, missing in-person interaction and struggling with content. (Honegger and Honegger., 2020)	Students reported reduced effectiveness in doctoral supervision and less engaging virtual networking. (Xu and Tran.,2021)	Students reported reduced peer interaction and challenging online coursework. (Pappa et al, 2020)		

Theme Two: Coping Strategies

Self-Developed Coping Strategies	Students used coping strategies like physical activities such as yoga, jogging, and walking (Cairns et al., 2022)	Students adopted coping strategies such as self-isolation, protective measures, and relaxation techniques (Chen, 2020)	Students used digital tools like apps and instructional videos, and expressed interest in brief phone or video counseling to manage pandemic-related anxiety (Gao et al., 2024)	Students used coping strategies like sleep, music, social networks, religion, media regulation, regular exercise, online activities, sports, and financial support (Menge & Kayonga, 2022)	Students used humor, prayer, isolation, and teamwork to cope. (Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021)
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University Support

Students reported that staff support provided some relief during the pandemic (Xu et al., 2021)

Students made use of university support, including daily necessities and food (Chen, 2020)

Students actively sought support during remote operations and, in some cases, received help such as free food, emotional check-ins, and remote counseling services (Honegger & Honegger, 2020)

Students reported receiving teacher support, flexible emergency remote teaching and technology use (Koris et al., 2021)

Students noted that institutional strategies, such as maintaining academic continuity through online learning and improved communication, helped them cope during the pandemic. Online learning provided constructive distraction and sustained academic engagement (Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021)

Students reported the flexibility of online classes, particularly the recorded lectures and the absence of commuting, which improved their time management and academic focus (Wilczewski et al., 2022).

Finally, this review comprised 26 studies, including 16 qualitative studies, 7 quantitative studies, and 3 mixed-method studies.

Data analysis

Data analysis for this review began with the extraction of relevant data from the included studies, which were organized into a summary table to enable the synthesis and comparison of study characteristics (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The profiles of the included studies are shown in Table 1. L.A. performed the initial data extraction, and the final list of extracted data was reviewed and agreed upon by all the researchers. The extracted data were used to identify themes across the primary data sources and aid in interpretation (see Table 2). Following data extraction, a systematic comparison was conducted to identify and refine the themes and subthemes, guided by Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) approach. Similar categories were grouped, color-coded, and verified against primary sources. The researchers finalized the themes through discussion, and the findings were synthesized into a cohesive summary (Table 3).

Table 3: Generated Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
The COVID-19-related challenges among international students	Financial impact Psychological impact Discrimination Online learning challenges
Coping strategies	Self-developed coping strategies University support

FINDINGS

The reviewed studies included research from Canada, Portugal, Spain, Hungary, Eswatini, Australia, Japan, Finland, the United States (U.S.), China, New Zealand, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Poland, involving 4,605 ISs across the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Two studies also included local students, with outcomes specifically focused on IS (Kivelä et al., 2024; Wilczewski et al., 2021). Participant numbers ranged from 4 (Chen, 2020) to 1,881 (Lin et al., 2022). Seven studies reported average student ages, typically between 20 and 40 years. This review identified two main themes: challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and coping strategies. The challenges included four subthemes: financial impact, psychological impact, discrimination, and online learning challenges. Coping strategies were divided into two subthemes: self-developed coping strategies and university-provided support.

COVID-19-Related Challenges among International University Students

Financial Impact

Studies from countries such as Portugal, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Japan, and the U.S. (Cairns et al., 2021; Cairns et al., 2022; Hannigan & Saini, 2020; Hari et al., 2023; Ivanova, 2021) have extensively reported the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international university students. These studies detail the financial hardships encountered by the IS and the effects of these hardships on students' academic progress and overall well-being. A consistent finding across the literature is the considerable financial distress caused by job loss and employment insecurity as a consequence of pandemic restrictions (Cairns et al., 2021; Cairns et al., 2022; Hannigan & Saini, 2020; Hari et al., 2023).

Concerns about exposure to COVID-19 in workplaces further discouraged students from pursuing available jobs, exacerbated their financial difficulties and increased their reliance on transnational family support (Hari et al., 2023). In Portugal, Cairns et al. (2021) conducted semistructured interviews with 27 international students and revealed their heavy reliance on part-time employment. Many students worked in high-risk sectors, such as delivery drivers, healthcare and supermarkets, as the closure of universities and extended academic timelines heightened financial pressures, compelling students to increase their number of working hours to meet living costs.

Scholarship-dependent students were also affected, as economic instability in their home countries weakened their financial support, making scholarships insufficient. As a result, even those ISs who had financial aid sought employment to support themselves and their families (Cairns et al., 2022). Additionally, students who returned home often had to continue paying tuition and accommodation costs in host countries, leading some to defer studies and disrupt academic progress (Ivanova, 2021).

These findings highlight the need for more robust and sustainable financial support mechanisms for IS, particularly during global crises.

Psychological Impact

The psychological impact of the pandemic on IS has been extensively explored, with research revealing widespread experiences of depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021; Lin et al., 2022; Mbous et al., 2024). These mental health challenges are attributed to multiple factors identified across studies conducted in Portugal, Australia, Japan, Finland, China, the United States, the Netherlands, and New Zealand (Backman et al., 2025; Cairns et al., 2021; Cairns et al., 2022; Hannigan & Saini, 2020; Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021; Ivanova, 2021; Kivelä et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022; Masud et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2024; Misirlis et al., 2020; Pappa et al., 2020).

A key theme across seven studies is the negative effect of social isolation. The loss of social networks and physical separation from family contribute significantly to psychological distress (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021; Ivanova, 2021; Kivelä et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2022; Masud et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2024; Pappa et al., 2020). Lu et al. (2022) reported that higher levels of social support were correlated with reduced depressive symptoms among international medical students in China.

In New Zealand and the U.S., the IS reported increased stress due to academic pressure, financial concerns, and the psychological toll of lockdowns (Hannigan & Saini, 2020; Lin et al., 2022). Mbous et al. (2024) also reported heightened anxiety and homesickness due to travel restrictions and prolonged uncertainty.

In Australia, Beckman et al. (2024) reported that ISs experienced boredom, grief, and health-related fears, compounded by lockdowns, online learning, and border closures. Kivelä et al. (2024) reported that, in the Netherlands, ISs presented significantly higher levels of depression, PTSD, and loneliness than their domestic peers did. These studies highlighted international students' mental health struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need for improved support services, community engagement, and culturally responsive interventions.

Discrimination

Discrimination against IS emerged as a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, with studies from the United States, China, and Australia documenting instances of racism and xenophobic behavior. Both qualitative and quantitative research have revealed the adverse impacts of such experiences on students' mental health, academic engagement, and overall well-being.

In the United States, Koo et al. (2023) reported that 18 Asian ISs experienced direct xenophobic hostility, including verbal threats, and were blamed for the spread of the virus (Koo et al., 2023). Similarly, Honegger and Honegger (2020) reported that among 20 Asian students, racial discrimination contributed to heightened anxiety and uncertainty about their futures (Honegger & Honegger, 2020). A cross-sectional study by Maleku et al. (2022) revealed a strong link between racial discrimination and increased loneliness, which was in turn associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression among those with IS (Maleku et al., 2022).

In Australia, Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study on social experiences and integration. While most students reported positive interactions, three participants explicitly identified racism as a barrier to their integration during the pandemic. A broader qualitative study by Xu and Tran (2021), involving Chinese PhD students across six countries, including the U.S., revealed increased discrimination against Chinese nationals, which negatively impacts their academic experience and psychological well-being (Xu & Tran, 2022). Xiong et al. (2024) further reported that even infrequent experiences of discrimination were significantly associated with COVID-19-related anxiety and elevated psychological distress (Xiong et al., 2024).

These findings highlight the urgent need for universities and policymakers to create inclusive, equitable, and supportive environments for international students, particularly during global crises, to ensure their safety, well-being, and academic success.

Online Learning Challenges

The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a range of challenges for IS. These included dissatisfaction with online education, technical difficulties, increased academic workload, and weakened supervisory relationships for research students.

A mixed-methods study in Poland (n=362) highlighted significant dissatisfaction, particularly among students enrolled in laboratory-based courses. The lack of hands-on practical work, reduced class interaction, and limited teacher engagement led to decreased student satisfaction and academic productivity (Wilczewski et al., 2022). Similar issues have been echoed in studies from other countries, reflecting widespread concern about the quality of online learning during the pandemic.

In the U.S., Honegger and Honegger (2020) identified several key barriers for IS, including unstable internet connectivity, heavier workloads, and the loss of face-to-face communication. These factors collectively disrupted the learning process and contributed to declining academic performance.

For international research students, the impact was particularly pronounced. Xu and Tran (2021) reported that the shift to virtual supervision weakened the student-supervisor relationship, undermining the personalized guidance and academic support essential to research education.

These findings demonstrate the multifaceted challenges associated with the abrupt move to online education. Technical barriers, diminished interaction, and the loss of practical learning opportunities significantly affect ISs' academic experiences and outcomes.

Coping Strategies

The third theme identified across the literature highlighted a range of coping strategies that the IS adopted to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies fall into two broad categories: self-developed coping strategies and university support systems.

Self-Developed Coping Strategies

IS across countries such as China, the United States, Portugal, Eswatini, and Sweden has adopted various self-initiated coping strategies to manage the psychological, social, and academic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cairns et al., 2021; Chen, 2020; Gao et al., 2024; Menge & Kayonga, 2022; Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021). In Eswatini, humor, isolation, prayer, and adherence

to preventive measures were common approaches among 15 IS (Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021). In China, students rely on indoor activities such as exercise, cooking, and reading to alleviate stress (Chen, 2020). Physical activity is also prevalent in Portugal, where 27 ISs incorporate yoga, walking, and jogging to cope with confinement (Cairns et al., 2021). In Sweden, strategies include sleeping to avoid stress, music, social networking, religious practices, controlled media exposure, and online engagement (Menge & Kayonga, 2022). In the U.S., the IS utilized digital tools, such as mobile apps and instructional videos, and expressed interest in brief, informal counseling sessions by phone or video to manage pandemic-related anxiety (Gao et al., 2024).

Support from Universities

Universities played a critical role in supporting IS during the COVID-19 pandemic by offering psychological, financial, and academic assistance. These institutional efforts were essential in helping students navigate the disruptions caused by the crisis. In countries such as China, Spain, Hungary, the United States, and Poland, universities have implemented a range of support measures for both domestic and international students. On-campus dormitories provide students with food and daily essentials, ensuring that their basic needs are met (Chen, 2020; Honegger & Honegger, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Academic staff also maintain regular communication through online platforms, offering health and emotional check-ins that contribute to a sense of care and stability (Chen, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). In the U.S., healthcare staff conducted wellness visits to assess students' physical well-being (Honegger & Honegger, 2020).

Despite early difficulties adapting to online education, studies from Spain, Hungary, and Eswatini reported that students developed a positive view of virtual learning once technical challenges were resolved (Koris et al., 2021; Ntinda & Ngozwana, 2021). In Poland, students appreciate the flexibility of online classes, especially access to recorded lectures and reduced commuting time, which allows for greater academic focus (Wilczewski et al., 2022).

The literature underscores the diverse coping strategies that IS has employed to manage the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. While self-developed coping strategies such as physical activities, social networks, and mindfulness strategies play a vital role in maintaining mental and emotional well-being, university-provided support, including essential services and academic adaptations, further facilitates students' ability to cope. These findings highlight the importance of both individual adaptability and institutional responsiveness in ensuring the well-being of IS during global crises. Future efforts should focus on strengthening support systems, particularly for students living off campus, to create more inclusive and comprehensive assistance frameworks.

DISCUSSION

This integrative review examined the challenges international university students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside their coping strategies and the

institutional support provided. The synthesis of the reviewed literature identified four central domains of challenge: financial impact, psychological impact, discrimination, and online learning challenges. Despite the unprecedented strain, the IS adopted a range of coping strategies and benefited from varying degrees of institutional support, although notable service gaps remain.

Financial impact has emerged as a predominant issue across the literature, with widespread job loss severely limiting students' ability to meet living costs, compelling some to defer their studies or return home (Firang & Mensah, 2022). International students' exclusion from national relief schemes, such as Canada's COVID-19 financial assistance programs, underscores their precarious status and reflects structural inequities in the treatment of nonresident populations during crises (Firang, 2020). The review reinforces calls for educational institutions to advocate for inclusive support systems that uphold the socioeconomic rights of international students, who should be recognized as vulnerable demographics in public policy planning.

Psychological challenges were equally pervasive. Students experienced heightened levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress, often compounded by separation from family, a lack of social networks, and financial insecurity. These findings are consistent with those of Billah et al. (2023), who reported that academic pressure, limited access to learning resources, and digital overexposure during lockdowns significantly affected students' mental health, resulting in symptoms such as self-harm and suicidal ideation. Importantly, the presence of strong familial ties and access to social networks served as protective factors. Institutional measures—such as mental health counseling, soft loans for digital tools, and partial financial subsidies—play a mediating role in reducing distress (Billah et al., 2023). These insights reinforce the need for higher education institutions to develop comprehensive and culturally sensitive mental health services tailored to the specific stressors experienced by IS. Charbonnier et al. (2022) evaluated an online self-help intervention in a nonrandomized controlled trial aimed at improving stress management and learning among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicated a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms and learned helplessness among the students in the intervention group, with no comparable change observed in the control group. These findings suggest a positive impact on the psychological well-being of participating students (Charbonnier et al., 2022). This type of intervention can be piloted among international students to examine its potential benefits for their mental health.

Discrimination, particularly toward the Asian IS, surfaced as a salient stressor during the pandemic. Discriminatory incidents—ranging from microaggressions to hate crimes—were reported to significantly undermine students' sense of safety and belonging, further intensifying mental health concerns. Lee and Waters (2021) reported that 30% of Asian and Asian American participants in the U.S. reported increased discrimination postpandemic onset, with elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms. Social support plays a buffering role, mitigating some of these adverse outcomes (Lee & Waters, 2021). These findings

highlight the urgent need for universities and policymakers to implement anti-racist strategies, such as culturally inclusive curricula and targeted mentorship programs that support underrepresented students (Chengying & Sagubo, 2025), particularly during such a crisis. In addition, institutions should foster inclusive environments that actively address discrimination and promote the well-being of marginalized student groups.

The shift to online learning posed another major challenge. The transition disrupted students' academic engagement, decreased student satisfaction and academic productivity, and contributed to declining academic performance. Similar challenges have been documented in the literature. Crawford et al. (2020) reported that the rapid shift to online learning during the pandemic isolated students from both their teachers and peers, which negatively impacted their academic engagement and decreased their academic productivity, particularly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or poorly resourced areas such as rural regions with limited internet access and inadequate learning infrastructure (Crawford et al., 2020). These findings highlight the need for improved innovation in online education. Given the advancements in the artificial intelligence (AI) era, integrating AI into online learning environments is increasingly recommended to improve student engagement. Muhammad (2023) suggested that using AI in online education can enhance individualization in learning. This means that students can be assessed by educators to identify their strengths and weaknesses, which helps in developing a customized curriculum. In addition, AI can provide real-time feedback, automate assessments and offer intelligent tutoring systems that promote deeper understanding and improve academic performance (Muhammad, 2023).

In terms of coping strategies, students adopted a variety of self-developed coping strategies, such as praying and engaging in physical activities. ISs share many of these strategies with domestic students. For example, Baloran (2024) identified praying, journaling, reading, and engaging in household activities as effective coping mechanisms used by university students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baloran, 2024). The current review also highlights the university support accessed by IS, including psychological services, financial aid and academic support, to help manage pandemic-related stressors. These findings align with those of Moscaritolo et al. (2022), who reported that educational institutions provided targeted assistance to the IS, facilitating the transition to online learning, offering academic and staff support, and addressing essential needs, such as food provision and financial relief, to enable them to continue their studies during the crisis (Moscaritolo et al., 2022).

In summary, while the IS demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of the pandemic, the review highlights systemic and structural vulnerabilities that compound their challenges. These include exclusion from national relief measures, inadequate digital and psychosocial support, and exposure to racial discrimination. Moving forward, higher education institutions must adopt an inclusive, student-centered approach to crisis planning—prioritizing financial equity, mental health accessibility, digital preparedness, and anti-discrimination

strategies—to support the well-being and academic success of IS during global disruptions.

Implications

The implications of this study highlight the urgent need for educational institutions to address the unique challenges faced by international students, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior research indicates that ISs are at heightened risk for mental health issues because of stressors such as isolation, cultural adjustment, and academic pressure (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Course administrators need to adopt innovative strategies to reduce student stress, and educators and mental health professionals need to be trained in recognizing signs of distress linked to pandemic-related challenges.

Given the reluctance of some ISs to seek help, universities, faculty, and health services must proactively engage with them. Creating peer support groups can offer essential social, academic, and psychological support. Moreover, collaboration between universities and government agencies to develop financial aid programs is vital to alleviate financial hardship and help students continue their education.

CONCLUSION

This integrative review highlights the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international university students, identifying major challenges, including financial hardship, psychological distress, discrimination, and difficulties with online learning. In response, the students employed self-developed coping strategies and utilized university support services. The findings emphasize the need for institutions to understand and address the specific mental health needs of international students. Training academic and mental health staff to recognize pandemic-related distress is essential. Proactive support, such as social, academic, and psychological support, can increase resilience. Additionally, university–government collaboration is vital to developing targeted financial support programs.

Limitations

Most studies in this review were qualitative with small samples, limiting their generalizability. Future research should examine IS in clinical programs such as medicine, nursing, and midwifery to better understand their unique challenges. The long-term impacts of the pandemic on international students' mental health and well-being also warrant further investigation to inform targeted support strategies.

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