

# The socio-economic and psychosocial impact of lockdown Measures of Covid-19 pandemic on International Students at St. Lawrence University-Kampala

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**Abstract:** Corona virus disease pandemic has had far reaching socioeconomic and health impacts worldwide. Its effects on the higher education sector has presented with different manifestation especially among international students studying in Uganda. At St Lawrence University, the lockdown imposed by government had dire consequences on international students. The study on the socioeconomic and psychosocial impact on students was premised on the need to explore the socioeconomic challenges faced by international students of St Lawrence University as a result of the various lock down measures of COVID-19; and to examine the psychosocial impact of lock down measures on international students of St. Lawrence University. A total of 85 international students were included in this qualitative cross sectional study. The findings indicated that anxiety was the main psychological effect. The main stressors were financial hardships, improbability about their future especially regarding their survival, the likely effects on their studies and career. It is recommended that the university management sets up a contingency plan that includes international students during the unforeseen circumstances and considers the provision of online counseling to both national and international students. The government contingency plan should always be inclusive of international students.

**Keywords:** International Students, Socioeconomic, Psychosocial, Covid-19

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has reached almost every society in the world. The most dangerous pandemic during our time, as the world grapples with this public health crisis, many of the governments adopted a strategy of either partial or total lockdown. In Uganda, on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the President addressed the nation on Corona Virus pandemic and explained that the virus spreads faster among big groups of people which necessitated a lock down. Among the large groups cited were the 15 million students in the country who needed to be protected. The President ordered all education institutions in the country to close by 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (The New Vision 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020). This unprecedented move by the Government to close

all education institutions caused a disruption in the school's academic calendar.

Like other countries, authorities in Uganda put in place a lockdown (BMAU briefing paper (3/20) May 2020) that involved the closure of public places and the country's borders, social distancing, stay home except for emergencies, banning of public transport and instituted several public health measures such as washing hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (especially after being in public places, or after blowing or sneezing and coughing), use hand sanitizers (containing 60% alcohol) and to avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2020). The key areas that needed extra attention in an attempt to control the spread of Covid-19 were given an acronym M.E.N by the President. It was also recommended that mandatory quarantine of suspected cases and people with recent travel history outside Uganda be imposed (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2020; The Republic of Ministry of Health Uganda, 2020). The government was to provide basic necessities such as maize flour and beans to the most 'deserving population' especially in the district of Wakiso and the country's capital city Kampala (BMAU briefing paper (3/20) May 2020).

Studying abroad is one of the fastest growing elements of higher education (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Lassegard, 2006). In the East and Central African region, Uganda is among the top higher education student receiving country. In 2006, for example, the country attracted 11, 992 foreign students (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2006). Globally, many countries had to close education institutions as a preventive measure to protect students from the pandemic and Uganda was no exception. The abrupt closure of universities affected the delivery of student services, increased the uncertainty levels especially caused by the lock down extensions and the limitation of student support networks (Burns et al. 2020).

There seem not to have been any special preparation to cater for international students who were expected to have gone back home when the lock down measures of all education

institutions were announced. Many international students got stranded especially in the hostels either due to lack of transport to travel back to their home countries or because of the unexpected travel ban that restricted movement of persons from one place to another. Lock down measures tend to restrict all known forms of social interaction and when it comes to international students, it may mean long periods of loneliness and social isolation that are potential stressors. The ILO (2020) report acknowledges how measures adopted to fight the Covid-19 pandemic are making social interactions both within and outside work very difficult. Social interactions are a key tool in providing social support that helps people to cope with stress. Stansfeld (2005) identified the sources of social support to include coworkers, supervisors, family members and friends, all of which lockdown measures have greatly hampered. It was upon this premise that this study explored the socioeconomic and psychosocial impact of lockdown measures of Covid-19 on international students at St. Lawrence University. The study was guided by two research objectives: 1) To explore the socioeconomic challenges faced by international students of St. Lawrence University as a result of the various lockdown measures of Covid-19 2) To examine the psychosocial impact of lockdown measures on international students of St. Lawrence University.

## II. RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.1 Socioeconomic impact of Covid-19

As a measure to limit the fast spread of Covid-19 in the country, the government announced lockdown measures, mandatory quarantine and social distancing rules (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2020) that affected the lives of many Ugandans whose livelihood is mainly in the informal sector (MoFPED, 2020). Services in the informal sector provide employment and income to many people in Uganda but were considered non-essential during the Covid-19 lockdown (The Observer Team, 2020). This had an effect of breaking the known informal social networks that people used to rely on to access basic necessities. The social exclusion policies emphasized during the lockdown also made it difficult for international students to access information not only regarding their families abroad but also about Covid-19 itself since their income sources through social support networks had been greatly constrained. Burns et al. (2020) identify the use of social media alleviating feelings of loneliness and maintaining support networks among the student community. However, this may be constrained by financial difficulties that many students are going through due to the instituted lockdown measures.

The first reported case of Covid-19 in Uganda happened in the month of March 2020 among people who had travelled abroad or their contacts. This led many to view Covid-19 as an imported disease and led to the evident growth in apathy by the locals to this group of people. International students being non-citizens, unfortunately, became prime targets of those thought to be Covid-19 carriers, which may have had a social

toll on them (Bukuluki et al. 2020). It should also be noted that, since the lockdown came into force abruptly, many international students were not able to return to their home countries. The Universities, in which they were studying and some residing from, were ordered to close down leaving most international students to live as refugees of the 'pandemic' unfortunately with no recognized status as refugees. This meant that the international students were not catered for in the government Covid-19 relief plans, as the government policy requires that refugees reside in officially demarcated settlements in order to access material support and protection (UNHCR, 2019b, p.72). The lockdown rules that laid emphasis on restricted movement and social distancing rules made it hard for the international students to reach out to their colleagues who had possibly returned to their villages. This may have increased cases of social stigma and social isolation similar to that reported among urban refugees (United Nations, 2020a, 2020b). This phenomenon has made this study timely to explore the socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 on international students in Uganda.

### 2.2 Psychosocial impact of Covid-19

Many private Universities in Uganda lack the services of full-time professionally trained qualified counsellors. Even where they exist, they may not have the skills of providing online counselling and related support services to learners so crucial in such periods as experienced during the Covid-19 lockdown. This left many students' especially international students vulnerable to stigma-related stress, anxiety and depression associated with long periods of social isolation. Schools/educational institutions are looked at, as essential places where students can obtain psychosocial support and help reduce stigma levels (UNICEF, 2016). Schools provide avenues where learners can easily interact with each other, learn from each other, share emotions together and care for each other. Such interactions and a spirit of togetherness provided by the school environment helps to reduce the level of stigma-related stress associated with social isolation.

Mattingly (2017) has identified a restrictive environment similar to that experienced during the Covid-lockdown among the key psychosocial stressors. Other factors that affect a person's psychosocial wellbeing identified in the literature include: a feeling of identity loss, economic hardships, family separation, hostile environment, uncertain future, poor living conditions and a general state of hopelessness. Saladino et al. (2020) conducted a study on the psychological and social impact of Covid-19 on the population including college students. Saladino et al. (2020) submit that social distancing rules affect the relationship among people their perception of empathy toward others. Empathy makes people more attached to others and once the trait of empathy is lost among the population, the levels of stress in the population is likely to increase. Li et al., (2020) conducted an online survey on the general population in China where they found out that college

students are more likely to experience stress, anxiety and depression during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Data was sourced through semi-structured interviews that mainly took the form of telephone interviews that lasted between 15 to 20 minutes. The study involved 85 international students registered with the University from the faculties of Business and Management Studies, Arts and Social Sciences, Education and Computing and communication technology. The study participants were purposefully selected since our interest was with International students who stayed in Uganda after the lock down. The contacts of international students were obtained from the University Dean of students. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the information obtained from the interviews. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized, and analyzed on an ongoing basis as a source for further questions, the emergence of themes and as an eventual source for organizing patterns of response across categories and individuals in line with the aims of the study. Transcripts were coded and the coded data were used to answer the objectives of the study.

The study was conducted with the informed consent of the selected participants. The issues of anonymity have been ensured through concealing the identity of the study participants and reporting the findings of the study in aggregates. The sample size was not scientifically derived from the population of international students of St. Lawrence University. Thus, the conclusions of the study may neither be exhaustive of the socioeconomic and psychosocial impacts of the lock down measures of Covid-19 on international students.

### IV. PRESENTATION OF STUDY FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Background information of the study participants

49 (58%) of the respondents were male while 36 (42%) of the respondents were female. 34(40%) of the participants were from the Faculty of business and management studies, 31(26%) of the participants were from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, 15 (18%) of the participants were from the Faculty of Computing and Communication technology and 5 (6%) of the participants were from the Faculty of Education.

#### 4.2 Study findings in relation to the study objectives

##### 4.2.1 Socioeconomic challenges faced by International Students as a result of the lockdown measures of Covid-19

Objective one thought to explore the socioeconomic challenges faced by international students of St Lawrence University as a result of the various lock down measures of Covid-19. From the telephone interviews conducted with the participants, the emerging socioeconomic challenges that arose included but not limited to:

Limited upkeep 85 (100%). All students sampled reported to have had very little money for upkeep. The students said that they were living in uncertain situation throughout the lockdown as their survival depended on continuous borrowing from their national friends that could access funds from their parents and guardians. Mary, a Comoros national and a third year student of the faculty of Education reported that she depended on the food aid that was distributed by the university guild council. Nancy, a student from Kenya reported that the limited upkeep had affected her expenditure on essential items such as drugs and medicines. She reported that she and her colleagues had resorted to taking 'tea and a bun for a single meal in a day'. According to Nancy, this had greatly affected her health and by the time the lockdown was lifted she claimed to have developed ulcers.

Reduced support from family 74(90%). When the unprecedented lock down measures were announced in the country, some of the international students were cut off from the known communications with their parents. This was mainly because the lock down measures involved travel restrictions that made it hard for the international students to reach out to their families for support. It also became hard to receive cash transfers from relatives that were supporting these students who also were facing a lock down in their own countries and possibly who were experiencing job losses during this period. This means that many international students were cut off from their informal social support systems through which they could access remittances in form of cash transfers. This affected the livelihoods of many international students whose livelihood mainly depend on support from their parents. The reduction in global remittances had been projected by the World Bank (2020) to decline sharply by about 20 percent in 2021 due to the economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

Social stigma and social isolation 72(85%). Being a foreigner in a country is associated with several challenges especially being cut off from your immediate family, relatives and friends. The Covid-19 pandemic may have worsened this situation as many communities in Uganda perceived Covid-19 to be an 'imported' disease coming from foreigners or those that travel out of the country. The fear that comes with a new disease did not spare the locals as well. In the early times of Covid-19 in Uganda, all the reported cases of Covid -19 were treated and ably recovered. However, this did not stop the communities to remain suspicious of such people that had recovered.

In some communities, people reached the extent of hunting down people with a recent known travel history. If the communities had become so hostile to their own, little wonder then that the international students were bound to face social stigma and isolation as the community became more suspicious of the international students. This notwithstanding that these international students had been in the country since January attending to school long before the lockdown was

announced. Abraham a South Sudanese international student reported how buying necessities became a problem as the shop keepers were always afraid of him. This fear seems to have been unfounded and contrary to the finding that the risk of disease transmission from migrants is minimal (Lancet Migration, 2020).

Other challenges reported by participants included: limited access to food 70 (82%), limited access to health facilities 60 (71%), limited access to information 26 (31%) and limited access to safe water 18 (21%). The limited access to food may be explained by the fact that international students had not been included in the priority list of government of those to benefit from the food distribution since they were thought to have returned to their home countries at the time of closure of the education institutions. The limited access to health facilities could be explained by the travel restrictions imposed by the government that were stringent in the early days of the lock down that even resulted in the death of some expectant mothers that failed to access health facilities during this time.

The general limited access to essential facilities in light of international students can be summed up in the effects of currency depreciation experienced during the lock down. Said a final year student from the Faculty of Arts and Social sciences decried a general increase in the exchange rates during the lock down. Said observed that before the lockdown, with 20,000 Nigerian Naira he could get about 200,000 Shillings. However, during the lock down, the same 20,000 Naira could only fetch him about 160,000 Shillings. This implied a reduction in the purchasing power of the remittances that Said could have received from his sponsors and the resultant impact on his ability to access the basic needs

#### 4.2.2 Psychosocial Impact

The second objective sought to examine the psychosocial impact of lock down measures on international students of St. Lawrence University.

The findings revealed the existence of heightened anxiety and stress among international students that mainly arose from public health measures such as ‘stay at home’ and curfew on movement from 7 p.m. to 6.30 a.m. Much as the government planned to provide for the most vulnerable groups especially in the Capital City of Kampala and Wakiso district, these efforts did not specifically target international students. The food distribution sponsored by the Government of Uganda to the vulnerable groups did not target international students, which worsened their woes. This was contrary to Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (Tomuschat, 2008).

Several students reported having had challenges of accessing government’s food aid during the lockdown. One student from South Sudan reported as having moved to Masindi when the University was closed. In Masindi was his nearest relative

who is also not a local citizen. To get access to government-distributed food during Covid-19 lock down required his uncle to present a national identification card that he did not possess since he is not a Ugandan! Neither did he possess an attestation card. An attestation card is usually used to identify refugees that have been legally allowed in the country (Omata& Kaplan, 2013). Unlike refugees living in organized settlements supervised by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)—the entity in Uganda in charge of refugees, urban refugees did not benefit from the ongoing food distribution, which affected their wellbeing and coping capacities. This rendered them vulnerable to starvation and its associated consequences. It increased their anxiety, stress, exclusion and other psychosocial problems particularly in the context of COVID-19 (United Nations, 2020).

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

The socioeconomic challenges faced by international students of St Lawrence University include but not limited to: limited upkeep; reduced family/social support; social stigma and social isolation; limited access to food, health facilities, information and access to safe water.

The psychosocial impact of lock down measures on international students of St. Lawrence University were manifested in heightened anxiety and stress among international students that mainly arose from public health measures such as ‘stay at home’ and curfew on movement from 7 p.m. to 6.30 a.m. The supportive measures designed by the government to support vulnerable groups during the lock down period never initially targeted international students. Neither were Universities that host the majority of international students well prepared to handle such emergencies brought about by Covid-19 lock down.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The university management should have a contingency plan that includes international students during the unforeseen circumstances. This should involve provision of socioeconomic and online psychosocial support services to students during the times of need. This would also imply the re-training of University staff in modern on-line provision of student support services.

Universities should have functioning counselling services offered by either the office of the university dean of students or university counsellor. The provision of on line counseling services as advocated for by Rajkumar (2020) should be seriously considered by University management. These services should be non-discriminatory in nature to both national and international students. This is essential to dispel myths, misconceptions and misinformation about COVID-19 that tends to breed discriminatory tendencies between national and international students. The counselling may help to address the anxiety and stress related to COVID-19 lock down.

The government should have a contingency plan that includes international students during times of calamities. The government should improve information access surrounding COVID-19 to help reduce stigma arising out of misinformation on Covid-19

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