

The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on International Students in North Cyprus

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption across global higher education systems, with international students experiencing disproportionate academic, social, and financial challenges. In North Cyprus, the abrupt suspension of face-to-face instruction, international travel restrictions, and economic instability significantly affected international students' academic engagement and well-being. This study explores the lived experiences of international students in North Cyprus during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on perceptions of the crisis, disruption of travel and summer holiday plans, experiences with emergency online learning, and financial challenges related to tuition fees. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven international students enrolled at three universities in North Cyprus. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using iterative thematic analysis involving coding, theme development, and member checking to enhance credibility and methodological transparency. The findings reveal substantial emotional distress, constrained mobility, dissatisfaction with emergency online learning, and unequal financial vulnerability between scholarship-funded and self-funded students. The study highlights the importance of flexible institutional policies, strengthened online teaching practices, and targeted financial and psychosocial support to enhance international student resilience during global crises.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; international students; emergency remote teaching; higher education; North Cyprus; student mobility

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19), first reported in Wuhan, China in late 2019, rapidly escalated into a global pandemic, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a public health emergency of international concern in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Governments worldwide introduced strict containment measures, including lockdowns, border closures, and physical distancing, which profoundly disrupted social, economic, and educational systems.

Higher education institutions were among the most affected sectors. Universities across the globe suspended face-to-face instruction and transitioned rapidly to online learning. While this shift enabled academic continuity, it also exposed significant inequalities in access to technology, institutional preparedness, and digital competence (Hodges et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The rapid and unplanned nature of this transition is widely described as emergency remote teaching, distinguishing it from intentionally designed online education (Hodges et al., 2020).

In North Cyprus, universities were closed in March 2020 following government directives, and instruction moved to online platforms such as Moodle, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. This transition posed particular challenges for international students, who constitute a substantial proportion of the student population in the region. North Cyprus hosts a large and diverse international student community, primarily from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, many of whom rely on cross-border mobility and family-based financial support (University World News, 2020).

Travel restrictions prevented many international students from returning home or re-entering North Cyprus, resulting in prolonged family separation, financial uncertainty, and psychological stress. Disruptions to financial transfer systems and the loss of part-time employment further exacerbated these challenges. Recent research confirms that international students experienced heightened vulnerability during and beyond the pandemic due to their marginal legal, social, and economic positioning in host countries (Mok et al., 2021; Wang, 2023; Mihut et al., 2025).

Although a growing body of literature has examined the impact of COVID-19 on international students globally, relatively few qualitative studies have explored students' lived experiences within smaller and politically distinct higher education contexts such as North Cyprus. In particular, there remains limited qualitative insight into how international students experienced the intersection of emergency online learning, mobility disruption, and financial strain during the pandemic. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the impact of COVID-19 on international students in North Cyprus by examining their perceptions of the pandemic, experiences with online learning, disruption of travel plans, and financial challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 and Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the largest disruption of education systems in modern history, affecting more than 1.6 billion learners worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Universities responded by rapidly shifting to online learning modalities, often without sufficient time for pedagogical planning or infrastructure development. As a result, this transition exposed institutional weaknesses related to digital infrastructure, instructional design, and faculty readiness (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Hodges et al. (2020) argue that emergency remote teaching differs fundamentally from planned online education, as it is implemented under crisis conditions with the primary goal of instructional continuity rather than quality optimization. Empirical studies during the pandemic report that students experienced increased stress, reduced motivation, and cognitive overload as a result of this abrupt transition (Cao et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020). More recent research suggests that many of these challenges persisted beyond the initial crisis period, particularly among vulnerable student populations (Wang, 2023).

Online Learning Experiences and Challenges

While online learning can offer flexibility and expanded access, its effectiveness depends heavily on instructional quality, technological infrastructure, and students' digital literacy (Joosten & Cusatis, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students frequently reported dissatisfaction with online learning due to limited interaction with instructors, unstable internet connectivity, and increased academic workload (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Studies also highlight the emotional and psychological challenges associated with prolonged online learning, including isolation, anxiety, and reduced engagement. These issues were particularly pronounced in courses requiring practical application or problem-solving skills (Trust, 2020; Wang, 2023). Recent post-pandemic analyses further indicate that students' perceptions of online learning are shaped not only by technology but also by institutional support, communication, and pedagogical responsiveness (Almadadha et al., 2025).

International Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

International students were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to travel restrictions, visa uncertainties, financial dependency, and limited access to social support systems (Mok et al., 2021). Numerous studies report heightened psychological distress, anxiety, and uncertainty among international students regarding their academic progression and future mobility (Zhai & Du, 2020; Cao et al., 2020).

Financial vulnerability emerged as a central concern, particularly for self-funded international students whose family incomes were disrupted by lockdowns and economic downturns. Demuyakor (2020) found that many international students struggled to balance academic demands with financial insecurity and emotional stress during the pandemic. More recent integrative reviews confirm that financial strain, mobility disruption, and mental well-

being remain interconnected challenges for international students in post-pandemic higher education contexts (Zhou et al., 2025; Mihut et al., 2025).

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of international students during COVID-19, much of the literature relies on large-scale quantitative surveys and focuses on major host countries. There remains a need for qualitative, context-specific research that captures international students' lived experiences within smaller and under-researched higher education systems. Responding to this need, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of international students in North Cyprus during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore international students' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in North Cyprus. A phenomenological design was considered appropriate because it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' subjective perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of a shared phenomenon within a specific context.

Participants

Seven international students participated in the study. Two participants were enrolled at Eastern Mediterranean University (Famagusta), two at Cyprus International University (Nicosia), and three at Girne American University (Girne). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they met specific criteria relevant to the study: all were international students residing in North Cyprus during the COVID-19 pandemic and had planned to travel during the summer holiday period. The sample size was deemed sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, as the aim was to gain depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between November 30 and December 11, 2020. Interviews were carried out via Zoom, telephone, and face-to-face meetings, in accordance with prevailing health and safety regulations. Each interview lasted approximately ten minutes and focused on participants' perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, disruption of travel plans, experiences with online learning, and financial implications related to tuition fees. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following an iterative and inductive process. First, the transcripts were read multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial open coding was then conducted by identifying meaningful units of text related to participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges during the pandemic.

Subsequently, related codes were grouped into broader categories, which were refined into key themes through constant comparison across participants' accounts. Although the interview questions provided an initial organizational guide, themes were developed from the data rather than predetermined, ensuring that the analysis reflected shared patterns of meaning.

During the analytic process, attention was given to comparative differences among participants, particularly between scholarship-funded and self-funded students, as variations in financial stress and online learning experiences emerged. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was employed by verifying summarized interpretations with participants, and reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analysis to ensure consistency and minimize researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented thematically to reflect shared patterns in international students' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in North Cyprus. Verbatim quotations are used to illustrate key themes and enhance analytical transparency. The discussion integrates relevant literature to situate the findings within broader research on international students, emergency remote teaching, and crisis-related disruptions in higher education.

Perceptions of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Future Uncertainty

Participants consistently described the COVID-19 pandemic as an unprecedented and deeply distressing experience. Many portrayed the situation using emotionally charged language, emphasizing fear, disruption, and uncertainty. The pandemic was commonly perceived not only as a health crisis but also as a socio-economic and psychological emergency that abruptly altered all aspects of daily life.

One participant described the experience as overwhelming, noting that "everything stopped at once-school, travel, work-nothing was normal anymore" (P3). Another participant emphasized the emotional burden created by uncertainty, stating that "the situation was terrible because no one knew what would happen next" (P6). These narratives reflect a shared sense of loss of control and prolonged instability.

Participants also expressed mixed expectations about life after the pandemic. While some believed that scientific developments such as vaccines would eventually allow a return to normalcy, others anticipated a permanent transformation of social and academic life, marked by increased caution, reduced physical interaction, and continued reliance on digital technologies. This divergence highlights the lasting psychological impact of prolonged crisis conditions on international students.

These findings align with previous research documenting heightened anxiety, fear, and uncertainty among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cao et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). For international students, such emotional distress was intensified by separation from family, restricted mobility, and limited access to familiar support systems.

Disruption of Summer Holiday Plans and International Mobility

International mobility emerged as a central theme across participants' accounts. Prior to the pandemic, all participants reported plans to travel during the summer holiday period, primarily to visit family members in their home countries. Travel was described as essential for emotional well-being, social reconnection, and recovery after the academic year.

However, pandemic-related restrictions rendered these plans unattainable. Border closures, lockdown measures, movement restrictions, and fear of infection resulted in the complete cancellation of summer travel for all participants (see Table 1). As one participant explained, *"I was supposed to go home and see my family, but everything was cancelled because the borders were closed"* (P5). Another participant highlighted fear as a key factor, stating that *"even though I wanted to travel, I was afraid of getting infected, so I stayed back"* (P2).

Table 1. Achievement of Summer Holiday Plans During COVID-19

Participant	Achieved Plan	Reason
1	No	Travel restrictions
2	No	Fear of infection
3	No	Lockdown measures
4	No	Movement restrictions
5	No	Border Closures
6	No	Pandemic uncertainty
7	No	Suspension of all plans

The inability to travel contributed to prolonged isolation and emotional strain, particularly for students who had not seen their families for extended periods. These findings support existing studies showing that travel restrictions disproportionately affected international students' mental health and sense of belonging during the pandemic (Mok et al., 2021). The results underscore the central role of mobility in international students' academic and emotional lives and the profound consequences of its disruption.

Experiences with Emergency Online Learning

Participants generally expressed dissatisfaction with the sudden transition to online learning. Although they acknowledged that online instruction was necessary to ensure academic continuity, many perceived it as less engaging and less effective than face-to-face education. Common challenges included unstable internet connectivity, reduced interaction with lecturers, increased workload, lack of motivation, and difficulty maintaining concentration.

One participant described online classes as passive and disengaging, stating that *"online classes felt more like watching videos than being in a real class"* (P1). Another participant emphasized technical and interactional barriers, noting that *"it was difficult to concentrate because of poor internet and lack of interaction"* (P4).

Importantly, differences emerged in how students interpreted these challenges. While all participants reported academic difficulties, some linked dissatisfaction with online learning

to broader concerns about fairness, academic value, and institutional preparedness. These findings reflect broader critiques of emergency remote teaching, which differs substantially from carefully designed online education in terms of pedagogy and student support (Hodges et al., 2020; Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that while online learning enabled academic continuity, its rapid and unplanned implementation limited its effectiveness and negatively affected international students' learning experiences and motivation.

Financial Implications and Differential Vulnerability

Financial hardship emerged as a significant concern among participants, particularly due to the indirect effects of the pandemic on family income and economic stability in students' home countries. Lockdowns disrupted family businesses, employment opportunities, and financial transfer mechanisms, making tuition payment increasingly difficult for some students.

One participant explained that *“my family income was affected by the lockdown, and paying tuition became very stressful”* (P6), while another noted that *“financially it was hard because everything stopped at home during the pandemic”* (P7). Such financial strain intensified stress and uncertainty and, in some cases, threatened students' ability to continue their studies.

Although financial difficulties were not experienced uniformly, the findings highlight unequal vulnerability among international students. Students with more stable funding arrangements experienced comparatively less financial pressure, while others faced heightened anxiety related to tuition payments and institutional penalties. These results are consistent with previous studies identifying financial insecurity as a major challenge for international students during COVID-19 (Demuyakor, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020).

The findings underscore the importance of flexible and inclusive financial policies that account for students' diverse economic circumstances during global crises.

Institutional Support and Coping Strategies

Participants emphasized the need for stronger institutional and governmental support during the pandemic. Key recommendations included tuition fee reductions, flexible payment plans, removal of late payment penalties, and improved access to financial aid and welfare services. Participants viewed such measures as essential for reducing stress and enabling academic persistence under crisis conditions.

In terms of coping strategies, participants encouraged fellow students to remain resilient, comply with public health guidelines, engage in self-development activities, seek alternative sources of income where possible, and maintain academic focus despite ongoing uncertainty. These coping responses reflect adaptive strategies developed in response to prolonged disruption and limited external support.

These findings reinforce existing calls for targeted and inclusive crisis-response policies in higher education, particularly for international students who face compounded academic, financial, and emotional challenges (Chen et al., 2020).

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Key Findings

This study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected international students in North Cyprus across academic, mobility, financial, and psychosocial domains. Participants experienced cancelled travel plans and prolonged separation from family, leading to emotional strain and disrupted social networks. These outcomes mirror broader evidence that pandemic restrictions severely disrupted international student mobility patterns and academic trajectories worldwide (Mihut et al., 2025; Zayim-Kurtay et al., 2025).

Emergency online learning ensured continuity of academic activities but was widely perceived as less engaging and effective than in-person instruction. Many international students globally reported similar challenges with online and hybrid learning environments — including motivation loss, interaction deficits, and technology barriers — particularly in the early phases of the pandemic (Wang, 2023; Liu & Li, 2023).

Financial concerns also emerged as significant, with students reporting income disruptions and heightened stress related to tuition obligations. This aligns with integrative reviews showing that financial vulnerability and psychosocial strain were key components of international students' pandemic experiences (Zhou et al., 2025; Almadadha et al., 2025). Together, these findings support the view that international students' lived experiences during COVID-19 were highly multifaceted, involving intertwined academic, economic, and emotional challenges.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional Policies and Academic Practice

First, universities should adopt flexible academic and financial policies during crises. This may include tuition deferments, refund options, emergency financial aid, and waiver of late fees. Research indicates that such measures can greatly reduce financial stress and promote academic persistence for vulnerable students.

Second, improving online teaching quality is crucial. Institutions need to invest in instructional design training, digital infrastructure, and platforms that better support student interaction and engagement. Empirical studies show that prepared and responsive online learning environments foster more positive educational outcomes than emergency implementations do.

Third, universities must strengthen holistic student support services, including mental health counseling, peer support networks, and academic advising tailored to international students' unique needs. Educational research underscores that psychosocial support is a protective factor against maladjustment in disrupted learning contexts.

Policy and Crisis Response

Policymakers should integrate international student needs into national and institutional crisis response frameworks, accounting for mobility, employment opportunities, visa stability, and health access. Given the role that mobility and regulatory uncertainty played in shaping pandemic impacts, strategic policy design is essential for maintaining the resilience of international education systems.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's qualitative design and relatively small sample limit the generalizability of its findings. While in-depth insights were gained, larger samples across diverse contexts could yield broader patterns and facilitate comparison across regions and institutional types.

Future research should adopt mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to investigate long-term academic, financial, and psychosocial effects of global crises on international students. Comparative studies across different host countries and funding models can illuminate how policy, economic structures, and support ecosystems shape international student resilience and vulnerability. These directions are particularly pressing as international student mobility continues to evolve post-pandemic, with ongoing shifts in visa regulations and enrolment patterns documented globally.

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