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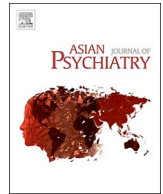
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Letter to the Editor

The overlooked minority: Mental health of International students worldwide under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond



Ever since the COVID-19 outbreak, unprecedented challenges of mixed origins have threatened the mental health of international students worldwide. Take the 5.3 million international tertiary students for instance, approximately 43.8 % of them are studying at the five largest host countries, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and France (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS] database, 2020). All of these countries are under the COVID-19 influence and four of them are severely affected (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

Compared to local students, international students are facing more impediments to maintaining their mental health under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Even under regular circumstances, international students are more prone to mental disorders (e.g., depression), struggling with the local medical system, and less motivated to seek psychological service than their domestic peers (Alharbi and Smith, 2018; Brunsting et al., 2018). The pandemic may have put them under a more isolated position abroad with less access to public resources due to monetary, informational, language, or cultural barriers. As the minority on campus, the specific needs of international students are often neglected by their host countries. For example, some campuses were closed without considering that many international students do not have a residence outside those campuses, nor do they have accessibility to a safe return to their home countries due to closed borders, reduced amount of international flights, and potential exposure to COVID-19 during the travel (Crawford et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

For those who stay in their host countries, they have unmet psychological needs of relatedness for being physically away from their significant others and lacking social support in the local community, not to mention the psychosocial problems associated with the society's responses to COVID-19 (Mackolil and Mackolil, 2020; Tandon, 2020). Furthermore, a surge of microaggression or even blatant discrimination has been rising toward international students, especially those of Asian origins. As perceived as threats, they are more likely to be scapegoated for spreading the virus or be attacked for acting differently towards COVID-19 (e.g., wearing masks) due to cultural differences (Cheng, 2020; Lowrey, 2020).

Therefore, we call for universities to take the initiative to reach out to international students and attend to their needs in a culturally sen-

sitive way. For universities in regions where the resources have been nearly depleted by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Navarro et al., 2020), they may consider mobilizing available resources at a worldwide scope to support international students for a united front globally. Given that perceived threats breed discrimination (Stephan et al., 2016), tailored measures are urgently required for local governments to target schools and communities as a whole and create a more inclusive environment for international students during and after the pandemic.

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Declarations of Competing Interest

None.

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