

# An enquiry into the experiences of international students at the University of Oldenburg during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Introduction

Despite a need during the COVID-19 pandemic for social science research to build foundations for future evidence-based policymaking, in Germany such research has been particularly absent in regard to the experiences of current international students during the pandemic. This study inaugurates what is bound to be an important future policy related **research question: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of international students at the University of Oldenburg (UOL) in Germany?**

## Aims and Objectives

- To examine the material and psychosocial circumstances of international students at UOL during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To suggest future measures to improve international students' situations in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methods and Methodology

The University of Oldenburg (UOL) was selected as a case study. The case study used the concept of the Social Determinants of Health as a guiding framework.

Method 1: Survey (55)



Method 2: Unstructured Interviews (4)

## Findings

In the 2019/2020 Winter semester, 1,265 international students had been registered at UOL; 55 of these students participated.

## Demographics:

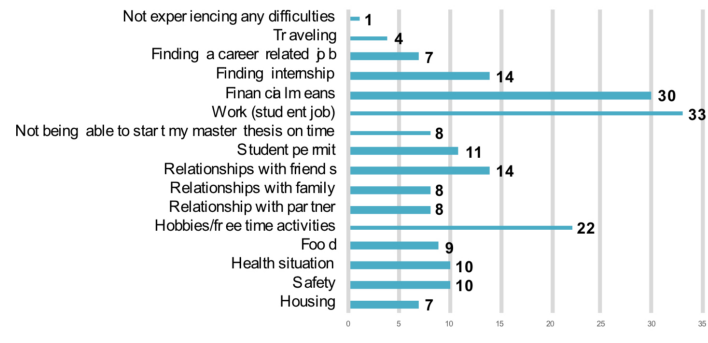
- Most of the students pursue studies in STEM areas (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).**
- Gender:** male (27), female (27), preferred not to specify (1)
- Age:** Mean age (26.7), Age range (21-42)
- Studies:** Master (32), Bachelor (17), PhD (6)
- Aimed graduation:** Sept-/Oct. 2020 (18), 2021 (25), 2022 or later (12)
- Home:** Asia (27), Europe (8), Africa (10), Latin America (8), New Zealand (1), N/A (1)
- Location during study:** Germany (51), home country (4)

## Acknowledgements:

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Students who participated in this study experienced difficulties in diverse/varying life domains during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Challenges Experienced during the pandemic:



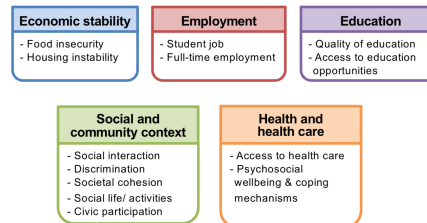
### A more in-depth inquiry into these experiences using narratives:

"[T]hat was a difficult situation as an international student who arrives in a country and wants to meet people... I was left alone without knowing what to do... that was a challenge." (Narrative A, August, 2020)

"So I don't really know, at the end of it, how I'm going to deal with the fact that I don't have enough credits." (Narrative B, August, 2020)

## Analysis

Most study results confirm the findings presented in existing literature, BUT our study has added in-depth information and context to existing findings.



## The Social Determinants of Health and UOL international students

- Employment:** Student jobs are very important for international students and the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted students' jobs.
- Economic stability:** Economic stability of students who lost their student jobs was threatened by the pandemic; this included significant impacts on housing but not significant impacts students' wishes on dropping out. Lack of adequate opportunities for future employment in Germany is a major concern for many international students close to graduation.
- Education:** International students requested more up to date, relevant and well-explained information. Online classes provided opportunities for independent and flexible learning, but the international students surveyed criticized the teaching, the workload, information, communication and some technical difficulties, and the lack of social interaction was a challenge for academic performance.
- Social and Community Context:** Main sources of support for international students were their families in home countries, international and German friends; these were also the main groups the international students themselves provided support to, and decreased social interaction had for some students a negative impact on their psychosocial wellbeing. Some students felt socially excluded or even discriminated against because of their nationality directly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Health:** Access to health services was a concern for some international students; many international students experienced stress, sadness, loneliness and anxiety.

## Recommendations

International students' experiences are diverse but there is a need for more involvement and tailored, well explained, accessible support services. Students suggest:

- Quicker processing of the student status for prospective students.
- Extension of the semester ticket.
- Disseminating detailed information in English for the separate faculties.
- Opening the university library for longer hours.
- Recording and uploading all online classes on StudIP.
- More time to meet deadlines and more exam dates at different time slots.
- Information on how to receive credits when courses could not be taken.
- Better academic, housing, food, psychological, medical, linguistic, financing and working space support services.
- Better support services for academic, housing, food, psychological, medical, linguistic, financing and working space.