

## Kenyan International Student's Experiential Reflections on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

Peggy Sayo<sup>1</sup>, Anne Njathi<sup>2</sup>, Jerono P. Rotich<sup>3</sup>, Patrick O. Mose<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,4</sup>Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, USA; <sup>2</sup>North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695, USA;

<sup>3</sup>North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC 27707, USA

Corresponding Author: [peggysayo8@gmail.com](mailto:peggysayo8@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has left an indelible mark on people's lives and academic institutions. Like any other students in the U.S., Kenyan international students have had to come to terms with a new norm in navigating the uncharted waters in their education. The purpose of this article is to elucidate seven Kenyan international students' anecdotal reflections on their experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on their studies.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Kenyan Students, International Students, Diaspora

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### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 virus, which originated in Wuhan, China in late December 2019 (Zhu et al., 2020; Chahrour et al., 2020) has inflicted suffering, upended and impacted various aspects of people's lives around the world. The disease spread rapidly to other parts of China necessitating a complete lockdown in the city of Wuhan in late January 2020. After several weeks, the virus had been reported in other countries, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). As of March 30, 2020, approximately 740,157 cases had been confirmed globally with about 35,097 deaths. Although China, Italy, and Spain were the first hardest hit countries, the U.S. soon became the leading country with the total number of infections. For instance, out of the 740,157 confirmed cases, 143,532 cases and 2,572 deaths were recorded in the United States. COVID-19 is reportedly the second worst pandemic to hit the U.S. after the 1918 Spanish Flu. As of July 15, 2020, there were approximately 3,413,313 cases and 128,740 deaths in the United States. During the same period, about 13,405,694 cases and 580,552 deaths had been recorded worldwide (Boulos & Geraghty, 2020). In addition to these deaths, the pandemic has also led to many furloughs and layoffs. Statistics showed that around 45.7 million Americans claimed pandemic-related unemployment benefits by mid-June 2020 (Manscar, 2020).

International students in the U.S. have suffered from the impacts of COVID 19 from academic disruptions to daunting financial constraints, safety concerns and travel restrictions. These negative impacts have contributed to the students' increased anxiety and higher levels of uncertainty. When different states in the U.S. issued lockdown orders, universities were forced to shut down until the spread of the virus was brought under control. According to García & Weiss (2020), the pandemic has overwhelmed educational institutions' functioning and outcomes worldwide. They further indicated that school shutdowns have dire public health consequences and economic crises, posing significant hurdles to both students and teachers. The U.S. has the world's largest population of international students with more than a million choosing to advance

their education and life experiences at American universities. Additionally, nearly 5% of the total number of students enrolled in these universities are international students, and the number is expected to increase (McGee et al., 2020). International students play an integral part in these institutions as they contribute to the neighboring school communities' economic growth, enrich diversity, and raise the institution's global profiles. According to Loudenback (2016), international students pay up to three times more than in-state students in public institutions, thus contributing monetarily to a tune of about USD 9 billion a year. Sahlu (2018) notes that three U.S. jobs in higher education, including accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance are created for every seven international students enrolled.

### **COVID-19 and Kenyan international students**

The outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted university campuses across the U.S., forcing institutions to operate remotely and for students to complete their 2020 spring semester virtually. This closure impacted Kenyan students enrolled in higher institutions of learning. According to Malinda (2020), there were over 3,450 Kenyan students enrolled at U.S. colleges during the 2018-2019 academic year. Although studying in the U.S. is an enriching experience for these students, navigating through their day-to-day lives has been extremely challenging during the pandemic. COVID-19 has led to academic disruptions, financial problems, safety concerns, and travel restrictions, therefore, causing anxiety and uncertainty among international students.

Before the pandemic, international students would have a specific timeline to complete their studies. However, the disruptions caused by this pandemic have significantly interfered with this timeline. The sudden transition to online learning has made it difficult for some students to keep up with their coursework for a variety of reasons: Most have experienced unequal access to technology, functional laptops, reliable high-speed internet and, in most cases, depended on laptops offered by their universities (Gonzales et al., 2018; Lim, 2020). Gonzales et al. (2018) further pointed out that technology challenges can adversely impact academic performance, especially when students are required to complete their coursework online. Similarly, faculty members who are not tech-savvy are constantly faced with challenges of transitioning to online instruction (Sahu, 2020).

## **METHODS**

This analysis adopted an informal reflective study to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of international students from Kenya who are studying in the United States. Seven students enrolled in institutions of higher learning during the pandemic provided their reflections for this paper. The method utilized in this analysis is an experiential reflective case study approach, loosely based on an action research methodology. According to Barraket (2005), an action research methodology is an iterative process of change or intervention, data collection and analysis, and reflection that leads to action outcomes. Likewise, a qualitative case study would be appropriate if the purpose of the study was to illuminate specific patterns of behavior (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995).

### **Participants**

A purposive sampling was used to select the seven Kenyan international students for this study. The seven participants were selected based on the following: (a) members of the Kenya Students

in Diaspora (KESID) foundation; (b) were currently enrolled in higher education institutions in the U.S.; (c) had volunteered to share their reflections via zoom, radio or Facebook live; and (d) were willing to write their experiential reflection. As a result, the seven (5 males and 2 females) students who agreed to participate were pursuing either undergraduate or graduate degrees. It should be noted that although numerous attempts were made to include more female participants, they all declined to participate.

### **Experiential reflection on the impact of COVID-19 on Kenyan international students**

The following segments highlight firsthand reflections of the seven students as they narrate their challenges during the pandemic. Since these reflections are verbatim, the students elected to use pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

1. Okioma – Completed a master’s degree and transitioning to a Ph.D. program
2. Kariuki – First year at a community college
3. Naliaka – Second year master’s student
4. Wekesa – Second year master’s student
5. Wanjiru – Second year Ph.D. student
6. Kipkoech – Undergraduate student
7. Kiprop – Second year master’s student

#### *Student #1. Mr. Okioma – Completed a master’s degree and transitioning to a Ph.D. program*

I just completed my master’s degree during the spring semester of 2020. I came to the U.S. in August 2018 to pursue a Master of Science degree in chemistry at Youngstown State University. Before coming to the U.S., I was a high school teacher in Kenya for five years. Given the impracticality of teaching in Kenya and studying in the U.S., I resigned from my position to pursue my dreams as I believe one’s dreams surpass temporal gains or comfort. However, the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen challenges, especially since I wear two hats: a student and a teacher. I was doing well until the pandemic hit and forced the campus to immediately shut down. The closure necessitated a shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. The sudden change in instruction modality was announced over spring break, leaving us with little time to prepare courses for an online delivery. We were encouraged to work remotely, a move that caused a lot of anxiety. The ever-increasing number of new infections and fatalities occasioned by the pandemic casted a shadow of uncertainty over my health and studies. However, the desire to achieve my academic endeavors pushed me to adapt to the new norm. Being a graduate student and a teaching assistant, I frequently held online meetings with my research advisor, and also prepared instructional materials for my online teaching, which demanded a lot of time. A more daunting and challenging task included the application of an online assessment in a chemistry course that is designed for in-person instruction. Despite these challenges, I was able to conduct my online classes successfully. It is worth noting that since I was a graduate teaching assistant, the stipend that I received, cushioned me against the economic hardships that some students were facing.

For other students, this new normal created more stress due to extra workload, financial strain, and other uncertainties. There was a lot of work to do that was wholly unknown to me. Somehow, I had to mentally grapple with it and prepare for this cryptic moment in life. I had to move my research from a wet laboratory research format to a theoretical computer model to accomplish my set tasks. The department guided us on how to defend a thesis as well as do our final semester examinations online. I worked on my thesis remotely, communicating with my advisor through scheduled digital meetings and emails due to social-distancing and restricted entry to the university premises. These restrictions denied me an opportunity to collaborate with other students. A collaborative research environment is very pivotal to my professional growth. The online working environment was not wholly grim; it allowed me to learn how to formulate learning materials for online instruction, redesign my project to fit the prevailing conditions and prepare for academic forums like conferences. Perhaps, I would not have attained the level of proficiency that I did had the environment been the usual one.

Besides the stress of school, new U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) guidelines for international students to enroll in only in-person classes put international students like me in a precarious situation. My new Ph.D. institution, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, sent me a message indicating that my classes would be held in a hybrid format to meet the new ICE directive. This did not mean that in-person classes would be unavailable to students because universities could switch to remote teaching in the middle of the semester should the pandemic prompt such a move. However, as an international student, I would be forced to attend at least an in-person class to maintain my legal status even though my health would be at risk. Seemingly, such draconian policies made international students feel unwelcome as it would be foolhardy to brave the real threat of death posed by the pandemic. Our ray of hope relied in several institutions that sued the government to reverse the ICE directive. Other institutions looked for ways to assist international students to remain in the country and to pursue their studies. It is important to acknowledge that there are individuals, institutions, or organizations willing to assist others during such pandemics.

*Student #2. Kariuki – first-year community college student*

I came to the United States on a student visa in January 2020 to study information technology at Bergen Community College in New Jersey. While in Kenya, my family and I looked forward to a decent transition as I planned for my educational journey to the United States. Upon arrival, life was going on well, having secured an on-campus job as a Student Technology Consultant assigned to help computer users in our computer labs. The pay seemed decent and covered some of my fees and living expenses. That was until coronavirus hit the United States. Being in New Jersey and close to New York, where there was the highest number of coronavirus cases, our school was closed almost immediately. This happened when I was about three weeks into my on-campus job. Everyone received an email from the school indicating that due to the pandemic the college will be closed. This occurred in mid-March when we were on spring break. After contacting my lab supervisor, I got to understand that our services as Student Technology Consultants would not be needed until school reopened, which as of this writing, is not yet known.

Significantly, too, the virus in Kenya disrupted many things. My parents and brother lost their financial sources of income, leaving my other brother to meet most of our needs. COVID-19 has left little or to no funds for me to continue my education. My request to the Kenyan government would be to help us financially with college tuition. Personally, I have a 3.87 GPA out of 4.0 (A-

grade), therefore, the government can include us in scholarships and grants for which we are eligible. I believe such assistance would be beneficial for us and our communities once we finish our education, as giving back would be much impactful.

*Student #3. Naliaka – second year master’s student*

I have always perceived life as one big puzzle. If that was anything to go by, the current global pandemic has been the final nail on the coffin. The pace at which COVID-19 has destabilized lives brought in a hard to fathom new normalcy. What began as a virus in China, at the onset, did not seem to affect the plans I had for my final academic year in graduate school, until it hit the United States. I did not know that the last week before spring break was going to be my last in-person class. The news came in fast. First, it was the stay at home order by the state. Then came the university's email extending our spring break for one more week and requesting students not to return to campus until further notice, and then moving all classes to virtual platforms. While all this was happening, the death toll from the pandemic was rising day by day in the U.S., the last country in the world anyone ever thought would record the highest number of deaths.

International students who hold F-1 visas are usually restricted to work only on campus for a maximum of 20 hours per week. Due to campus closures, on-campus employment was no longer an option, thus eliminating our only source of income. Most of us survive on on-campus employment, so this was daunting to realize we had no other way to make money for food, shelter, and other necessities. I did not have money to pay my bills as I even went for two months without paying rent. Luckily, my landlord was understanding and allowed me to make small payments over time. As international students, COVID-19 took a toll on us in many ways. First, we were stuck in our apartments all alone, and secondly, we were worried every time we heard the number of cases were on the rise across the United States. I know many friends who had planned to travel during the summer break to carry out research and collect data for their theses and dissertations but could not travel. The travel ban forced many graduate students to either change their research topics, find alternative ways to collect data, or postpone their studies. I witnessed some masters students opting out of a thesis for a professional paper that only required the use of secondary data. International students who were scheduled to graduate in the spring and apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT) were gravely affected. Since most businesses and organizations were closed, most students who were searching for an OPT had difficulty securing employment.

When it came to employment, American citizens were given priority over foreign nationals. Even before COVID-19, it was already difficult for international students to secure jobs in the U.S. after completing their studies. "I am worried about those ones who are going for it now. What is their fate going to be like when the world eventually opens - up?" I could not help asking all these questions. Normally, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the federal agency that oversees lawful immigration to the United States and the one in charge of issuing OPT cards, gives international students a window period of three months after the issuance of the cards to secure employment. Due to the pandemic, this three-month timeline was a nightmare and impossible to meet for most students. Securing an OPT is the only alternative for international students to remain legal. Those who do not secure an OPT within three months are required to either go back to school or exit the country. Unfortunately, I am one of those whose OPT opportunities were greatly impacted by the pandemic. It was unsettling, stressful, and scary because I kept applying for jobs without any success. To make matters worse, I do not have a family in the United States. I am supposed to figure out my next move after my one-year house

lease expires. I am positive, though, that I will get a job before the three-month grace period expires.

Based on my experiences, I can attest that the U.S. is not a land of milk and honey, as we were made to believe before leaving Kenya. It is not easy to be an international student, but this pandemic has exacerbated the copious challenges. I am not discouraging those wishing to pursue their studies as the fruits are even sweeter once one graduates, secures a professional job, and lands legal documents. COVID-19 has made the lives of international students in America a dauntingly uphill battle.

*Student #4. Wekesa – Second year master’s student*

August 2019 was my inaugural arrival in the U.S. to pursue my master’s degree at Oklahoma State University. I was feeling nostalgic because this was my first time in the U.S. As a new student, I was bombarded with culture shock and the need to adapt to a fast-changing lifestyle and trends. It took me time, of course, to settle and adjust. The fall semester came with its share of challenges. I grappled with raising my first-semester fees as I was not on any scholarship. It was a struggle, but I managed to pull through and successfully enrolled for the spring semester classes. Slowly, I started adjusting to the American college environment. I made some new friends on campus and established a great rapport with my teachers and classmates. I had also developed a good connection with my academic advisor before the pandemic hit. After which, the pandemic created lots of uncertainties and panic. Everything happened very fast, and before I could process what was happening, schools were closed following the regulations by WHO and the Federal taskforce on COVID-19. As an international student, I was forced to shelter in as movement was curtailed. Additionally, shifting of classes online for the remainder of the semester became another hurdle. My technology skills were put to test as I was forced to learn the hard way. My first assumption that the virus would last for a few days and then die a natural death proved to be wrong. As the number of infections rose, states, including mine, put in stringent measures to slow down the virus.

As an international student, my life was interrupted as I was forced to come to terms with this new norm. Amidst calls across the globe to open international borders, economy, and ease safety guidelines set by WHO, I grappled with one unanswered question, will life ever be normal again? Given the virus’s broad and indeterminate impact on global mobility, flights put in stringent measures to comply with WHO health guidelines on social distancing and public health. I became more worried about the trickle-down effects on my studies. With the fear of lower availability of funding opportunities from universities and government and assistantship programs that enable graduate students fund their studies might be affected by budget cuts. As the U.S. government moved in to tighten its employment-based nonimmigrant policies, I was left concerned about my future especially after completion of my studies. Four U.S. senators had warned that international students could take away jobs that would otherwise go to unemployed Americans as the economy recovers. They urged the government to suspend the OPT program and issuance of H-1B, and J-1 exchange visas, which are major draws for international students.

Given the uncertainties on when the pandemic would be contained, a growing number of institutions shifted to online education beyond the summer and into the fall semester. Some including Columbia University and the University of Southern California considered other options such as blended learning. I was anxious to see how school life would be when we finally opened for the fall semester. For international students who could not travel back from their home countries, distance learning was the only option available to them.

*Student #5. Wanjiru – Second year Ph.D. student*

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequential stay-at-home orders did not only catch me off guard, but also presented challenging moments. It was a rather strenuous balancing act between my roles as a doctoral student, graduate teaching assistant, and a full-time mom. When most U.S. college campuses and elementary schools closed and transitioned to online learning during the spring semester to contain the spread of the virus, I was left with no option, but to perfect the art of juggling: I was faced with moving half a semester's worth of teaching content online while also managing my schoolwork, homeschooling, and caring for my son all day long. Then came pandemic-related loneliness, stress, and anxiety related to the coronavirus outbreak and stay-at-home orders, not only for me, but also for my son. It was a huge transition and shock because he could not comprehend the drastic change of normalcy. Hailing from Kenya, a predominantly collectivistic culture, the stay-at-home order felt like a daunting task. I am sure this was not unique only to me, but it also hit hard when one's family is more than 7,500 miles away, and WhatsApp messages, texts, and video calls become the only solace.

I am currently striving to prepare for my comprehensive exams due fall semester, but the tumultuous COVID-19 has almost derailed my efforts to study. In the meantime, I am practicing resilience and determination, going by the clichéd of "living each day at a time." The little reading and mothering I achieve in a single day are steps towards the light at the end of my dark tunnel. I do not know how the adjusted academic calendar will impact my timeline to take my comprehensive exams, conduct fieldwork for my research, write, and defend my dissertation. I am, however, grappling with the fears this global pandemic poses and its unprecedented long-term impacts on my studies, my life and my son's here in the U.S.

*Student #6. Kipkoech – Undergraduate student*

Life immediately after spring break became miserable, stressful, and full of fear and uncertainty. It began a few days after we arrived for the indoor track competitions in Birmingham, Alabama. I was fully prepared to compete in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II track and field competition, having prepared since the summer of 2019 before the cross-country season in the fall. The evening before my first race, we were informed that the entire national competition had been canceled. The team was asked to prepare to return to college. I was terrified and stressed since this was a race in which I had anticipated to perform well. I had put all of my efforts during practice and I was optimistic and ready to give it my best. This cancellation shattered my dreams. I could not believe I would not perform just because of a mysterious virus outbreak, which at the time was only on the news media.

It became worse after our spring break was extended further and our traditional in-person classes were all moved online. It took me some time to adjust, acquire a reliable computer, and ensure I had internet. This transition was an enormous challenge since I am a visual learner who understands better in a face-to-face classroom session than studying on my own. For instance, as a computer science student, learning in some classes proved to be difficult. I had to put extra efforts to ensure I kept up with homework and maintained good grades. With the closure of schools and campuses, I lost my on-campus job. Without an income, it meant I could not afford to pay my bills and meet my other basic needs. I was forced to use my little savings which did not last long. At times, I denied myself some basic needs out of fear of running out of my essentials.

My life changed drastically after my roommate, with whom I shared a house, tested positive for the COVID-19. Because I lived and was always around him, I was tested and forced to quarantine for three weeks and depended on our friends for groceries. Despite not showing any signs or symptoms of the virus, I was required to record my temperature every morning and send the results to the health department.

My life has been filled with uncertainties as we continue to live through this pandemic. It is my hope that this virus is contained soon so that our lives can return to normalcy. I miss being a student-athlete, which gives me a peace of mind.

*Student #7. Kiprop – Second year master’s student*

During spring break, we all dispersed to various destinations in anticipation to resume classes in a week. We were cautioned to take appropriate measures to be safe from COVID-19. One of my professors warned us against visiting crowded places. He added that if possible, we should stay home and observe all the guidelines that had been put in place by the CDC and all health departments. As the situation worsened, the return date to campus was extended to two weeks, then a month, and finally until further notice. University closures were a damning challenge because learning was switched to virtual platforms. This transition was difficult and studying courses like economics and statistics virtually became a big hurdle.

As a graduate research assistant, my field involves in-person practical observations and switching to an online platform became an uphill task. The unexpected transition to virtual learning required me to have a good laptop and reliable internet. Furthermore, I had to adjust to doing my research work without the guidance of my program advisor. Unfortunately, I was forced to drop a statistics course because I could not keep up with the workload and lacked the one-on-one assistance from my instructor and peers. Because the entire university was closed and campus employment suspended, I had to host three Kenyan undergraduate students without accommodation. Since most international students rely on on-campus employment, they, too, lost their jobs. I nearly became jobless had it not been for my advisor who agreed to continue working online with me.

Despite the risks posed by COVID-19, I have had the opportunity to learn and acquire new skills and survival tactics. I have advanced my computer skills as well as first aid skills. Moreover, it has taught me the value of life as this virus has shaken the status quo and proven that we are all vulnerable. We need to be more vigilant, sensitive and take care of ourselves and the community around us.

## **DISCUSSION**

From the above experiential reflections, several themes emerged and were summarized into the following: (a) life disrupted, (b) academic interruptions, (c) financial constraints, (d) cost of living against lack of summer internships, (e) disruptions of research, projects, and internships, (e) limited OPT opportunities, (f) heightened stress and anxiety, and (h) toughened immigration and visa policies. The following discussion is a detailed report of these themes:

*Life disrupted:* Given the uncertainties as to when the pandemic will be contained, growing numbers of institutions have shifted to online education beyond the summer. For international students unable to travel, distance learning will likely be more common. Some observers have



suggested that the rapid global shift towards distance learning would come in handy for international students.

*Academic interruptions:* The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic disrupted university and college campuses across the U.S., forcing students to finish their spring 2020 semester virtually and institutions to operate remotely. International students are on a specific timeline to finish their studies. Academic disruptions exacerbated by COVID-19 attract a set of new challenges that might interfere with this timeline. The quick transition to virtual learning and lack of face-to-face interaction made it difficult for some students to keep up with the online workload due to unequal access to technology.

*Financial constraints:* International students continue to face daunting financial constraints. Due to a lack of legal employment resulting from campus closures, several students and their families struggled to raise funds for tuition and provision of necessities. According to Schulmann (2020), seventy-nine percent of prospective students surveyed by World Education Services (WES) expect economic conditions in their home countries to be negatively affected by the pandemic; 43 percent fear they will no longer be able to afford to study abroad. Although universities are doing all they can to support international students on scholarships such as academic, athletic, or graduate assistantships, some are afraid that their funding may be cut or reduced drastically.

Other students continue to struggle financially due to a lack of on-campus employment as a result of universities transitioning to virtual learning. F-1 visa restrictions limit international students to work for a maximum of twenty hours per week. These students can only work on school premises that provide services for students on campus such as: the school bookstore or cafeteria or other work performed at an off-campus location affiliated with the school. On-campus employment is the category freely permitted by the USCIS regulations. However, due to institutions moving all their programs and services online, international students are unable to work on-campus, resulting in major financial constraints on their side.

*Disruptions of research, projects, and internships:* COVID-19 has had a profound impact on students' research projects, internships, thesis, and dissertations. Students who were conducting in-person lab experiments, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, fieldwork, and other data collection in the community were forced to put everything on hold. Similarly, those students who were to travel to their home countries during the summer break for their research could not do so due to the COVID-19 related travel ban. Students were encouraged to either delay their research work or find alternatives, including switching to writing professional papers using secondary data that may not be as reliable as when they would have done the research in person. Similarly, some Master's students opted out of the thesis to the professional paper route, which requires secondary data. Although universities are making accommodations by either giving extensions on projects and research, students may not graduate on time. Likewise, students who had secured internships to gain firsthand experiences in their areas of specialization have been forced to forego them.

*Limited OPT opportunities:* Due to the pandemic, many international students are having challenges securing OPT opportunities. International students applying for the OPT this year stand very low chances of securing employment. Since the pandemic hit the U.S., most Americans have lost their jobs and until early July, statistics show that 40 million Americans had filed for unemployment. It was already difficult for international students to secure employment in the U.S. after completing their studies prior to COVID-19. Because there are those students who are in the middle of their OPT, this pandemic has led to many people being laid off from their jobs.

International students, who were on OPT, have found themselves in this unemployment situation with a limited time to declare their immigration status. Given the current state of affairs, it is frustrating for them since they not only need to worry about their health, but also risk becoming illegal immigrants. With the temporary suspension of issuance of H-1B, H-2B, L and work exchange related J-1 visas, international students, whose OPT is coming to an end and had hopes of being employed are at a standstill. Their fate is unknown given this temporary suspension, and even though the job market looked possible for them pre COVID-19, the situation is uncertain.

*Heightened stress and anxiety:* COVID-19 took a toll on the mental health of most international students. The students' reflections in this paper alluded to their intense stress and anxiety created by the unprecedented pandemic times. They also had to navigate the effects of their campus closures, unfamiliar learning and teaching formats and platforms, teleworking for graduate students, changes in clinical practice sites, research, or internships. As many universities and colleges closed on-campus housing and dining, international students, especially those with on-campus housing, were forced to find alternative off-campus living. The stay at home orders were more daunting, especially when students are miles away from their families and have to find solace in calls, texts, and messages from their loved ones from home. The stress was further escalated by ICE announcement that directed international students to either leave the U.S. or transfer to universities offering in-person classes if their institutions were transitioning to fully online. On July 6, 2020, ICE had announced that international students who were registered to take classes online in the fall semester entirely will not be allowed to enter the U.S. or must leave if they are already in the country. Although this announcement was later dropped after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University instigated a lawsuit, it created undue stress and anxiety to international students.

*Toughened immigration and visa policies:* As the west faced the reality of unemployment, laws and regulations were enacted to cushion their citizens. As earlier noted, four U.S. senators warned that international students could take away some Americans as jobs. They urged their government to suspend OPT program and the issuance of H-1B and J-1 visas, a major drawback for international students.

## CONCLUSION

The students' reflections and testimonials revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic created overwhelming disruptions to their daily lives, some of whom were already facing diverse acculturation and economic challenges. The outbreak disrupted their lives and created uncertainties, anxieties, and daunting financial challenges. It generated tremendous obstacles to students' academic progress and well-being, requiring a response focusing on their social, emotional, economic, health, and academic success.

Given the uncertainties about the pandemic's future impact on higher education in the U.S., Kenyan international students who endeavor to pursue their studies in the future are encouraged to double-check with their office for international students before they travel. Those who plan to travel to the U.S. are encouraged to research, ask questions, and be prepared emotionally and financially. New students are also encouraged to register with the Diaspora office in Nairobi before departure, with the Kenyan Embassy upon arrival, and connect with the Kenyan communities and organizations in and out of the states they settle.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the following organizations for providing a virtual platform for Kenyan international students in the U.S. to share their experiential reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak: (1) Kenya Students in Diaspora (KESID) foundation, (2) Kenya Scholars and Studies Association (KESSA), (3) Diaspora Life Show and Standard Digital Videos, (4) The Daily Nation, (5) Trumpet of Hope Ministry, (6) Kassfm International radio and television, and (7) Kenyan Report YouTube.

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