



# “It’s Not Just About You”: International Students’ Vulnerabilities & Capacities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Background

- International students (IS) in Canada have doubled in the last decade and continue to increase<sup>1</sup>.
  - IS’ vulnerabilities often overlap those of other marginalized groups, like migrants, ethnic minorities, and low socioeconomic populations<sup>2</sup>. Vulnerabilities are the pre-existing factors that weaken people’s ability to cope with disaster<sup>3</sup>.
  - IS’ capacities often overlap these marginalized groups<sup>4</sup>. Capacities are the pre-existing factors that strengthen people’s ability to cope with disaster<sup>3</sup>.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified vulnerabilities, but IS’ vulnerabilities and capacities remain overlooked.

## Purpose

Explore the potential material, social, and attitudinal vulnerabilities and capacities of international students studying at a postsecondary institution in Calgary, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methods

We used a qualitative descriptive methodology involving 11 semi-structured interviews with IS.

### Study Participants

- Undergraduate IS enrolled at University of Calgary at least since Winter 2020 semester and present in Calgary ≥ six months following shift to online learning
- Convenience sampling using online advertisements and snowball sampling until code saturation achieved

### Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews (30min-1hr) with 11 IS via Zoom
- Demographic and open-ended questions organized by material, social, and attitudinal vulnerabilities/capacities

### Data Analysis

- Deductive thematic analysis (NVivo) using the Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA) framework<sup>3</sup>
- Strategies for trustworthiness<sup>5</sup>: researcher triangulation, member checking, thick reporting, and reflexivity

## Results

Table 1. Participant characteristics represented as n (%).

Characteristics	Results	Participants (n = 11)
Age	18-20	7 (63.6)
	21-23	4 (36.4)
Year of study	Year 2	5 (45.5)
	Year 3	2 (18.2)
	Year 4	4 (36.4)
Gender	Female	7 (63.6)
	Male	4 (36.4)
Employment status	Part time	5 (45.5)
	Unemployed	6 (54.5)
Ethnicity	African	2 (18.2)
	East Asian	2 (18.2)
	Latinx	2 (18.2)
	Middle Eastern	1 (9.1)
	Multiethnic	1 (9.1)
	South Asian	4 (36.4)
Length of stay	1 year	1 (9.1)
	> 1 year	10 (90.9)
Type of residence	On-campus individually	1 (9.1)
	Off-campus with roommates	4 (36.4)
	On-campus with roommates	6 (54.5)

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes identified using the CVA framework.

Themes	Sub-Themes
Material vulnerabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balancing finances</li> <li>Housing conditions</li> <li>Lack of information</li> <li>Food inaccessibility</li> <li>Reliance on public transport</li> <li>Poor mental health</li> </ul>
Social vulnerabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of social support</li> <li>Culture shock</li> <li>Racism</li> </ul>
Attitudinal vulnerabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Nowhere to go”</li> <li>Feeling like a burden</li> <li>Perception of Canada as safe</li> </ul>
Material capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial support</li> <li>Knowledge about pandemic</li> <li>Mental health supports</li> </ul>
Social capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local social support</li> <li>Multilingualism</li> </ul>
Attitudinal capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resilience</li> <li>Religious and spiritual beliefs</li> <li>“It’s not just about you”</li> <li>Reflexivity</li> </ul>

## Discussion

- While cost of tuition and expenditure on food and housing increased, IS’ sources of income decreased.
- Excluded from supports like CESB in host country and “safety mat” of going home taken away led to inclination to be wholly self-reliant for the future.
- Crowded/shared housing increased risk of disease. Yet, housing conditions helped IS overcome lack of social support by cultivating local supportive networks.
- Reliance on “constants” like over-the-phone communication and religion for mental well-being.
- Due to past challenges and collectivist background, IS were resilient and self-reflective in using their existing resources to make the best of their circumstances.
- Multilingualism made diverse information accessible, but IS felt lack of personalized information.
- Shocked by discrimination and role of individualist society in pandemic responses, but were optimistic in seeing Canada as a safer country.

## Conclusion

- Call for universities and governments to address IS’ immediate needs: CESB, mental health, and information.
- To avoid disparities in disaster impacts, it is necessary to reduce IS’ vulnerabilities sustainably, for which capacities must be leveraged.
- Engage more IS in community-based participatory research to learn about the relationships between IS’ vulnerabilities and capacities.
- Knowledge exchange between IS, universities, and skilled staff like social workers may help advocate for capacity building programs that enhance resourcefulness, facilitate creation of local social networks, and help maintain students’ cultural, and religious beliefs.

## References

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