A BMRC RESEARCH DIGEST
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COVID-19: Challenges and Resilience of International Students

A Case Study of Greater Sudbury in Northern Ontario

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What you need to know

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is causing unique vulnerabilities among international students in many Canadian cities. They face barriers in procuring the necessities of life, such as housing and employment, and feeling socially isolated. Those providing support to international students, i.e., educational institutions, and community organizations, are also facing unique obstacles. In addition to documenting the struggles of international students and institutions during COVID-19 we investigate how they manage and overcome those struggles.

What is this research about?

The objectives of the project are: (1) To examine how the pandemic affected pre-existing challenges facing international students and the institutions supporting them; (2) to assess the evolving needs of international students during the pandemic; and (3) to identify the strategies, resources and networks used, to adapt to the rapidly evolving crisis and prepare for future crises. We aim to stop rebuilding 'more of the same' and instead improve international students' mobilities while also emphasizing the transparency and responsibilities of local institutions during and beyond COVID-19 in Greater Sudbury.

How was the research carried out?

We conducted 32 in-depth interviews with 22 English-speaking and 10 French-speaking international students from diverse source countries (including India, China, Congo, Ghana, Algeria, and Iran) about their settlement challenges and the supports needed before and during COVID-19.

To date, we have conducted interviews with 9 local stakeholders, including city officials, officers from educational institutions, and service providers who have informed us about the challenges faced by international students and institutions in Greater Sudbury during COVID-19.

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What have we learned from the research?

Social and Individual Resilience of International Students: International students depended on their social networks outside the city during COVID-19 with a majority moving in with friends and family in the GTHA and even Montreal.. Despite living with relatives and friends, most students had to take low-paying essential jobs (maids/painters/retail clerks) to make ends meet, risking their physical and mental health.
Challenges of International Students: During COVID-19, international students in Sudbury had limited and inconsistent institutional support, especially from educational institutions. The city discontinued subsidized public transportation during COVID-19, affecting several facets of their everyday lives, such as finding off-campus housing and employment and accessing culturally specific foods. As a result, their financial precarity increased, many were confined in undesirable housing, and stress, anxiety, and isolation rose.
Institutional Resilience: The provincial or the municipal governments did not provide any support to the local institutions to assist international students. The local institutions took no distinct measures to overcome specific challenges institutions faced in assisting international students during the pandemic.
Challenges of Local Institutions: Due to lack of government and private funding, the local institutions in Greater Sudbury found it extremely challenging to provide any service to international students. They were also unable to systematically evaluate international students' needs.

How can you use this research?

The findings of the study can be used by the municipality of Greater Sudbury, community organizations, and educational institutions to develop specific strategies of immigrant retention at large. We believe that this research can help to plan for focused infrastructural development in Greater Sudbury particularly with respect to improving public transportation, building affordable housing at off-campus locations, and expanding ethnic businesses - particularly ethnic grocery stores. The study can also help to create public awareness about the importance of international students (i.e. economic and socio-cultural benefits) to the Northern Communities.

Who is leading this research?

This research is funded by SSHRC PEG 2020. Dr. Sutama Ghosh is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at X University, Toronto. Sohail Shahidnia, a Doctoral candidate in the Policy Studies program at X University, is this project's CO-PI and Sudbury Local Immigration Partnership is the community partner.

Learn more

Several research assistants have made important contributions, including Saad El Hakmi -- Doctoral candidate in the Policy Studies program at X University; Roxanna Eskandarpour, Masters candidate, Immigration and Settlement Studies program at X University, and Anasua Roy and Sanchayita Bhwomik are contributing as non-student research assistants.