

Student Affairs and Services Mediates the Context for Students' Living, Learning, and Development: Lessons from COVID-19

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Abstract

This study presents findings from a survey implemented in May 2020 on responses to COVID-19 by Student Affairs and Services (SAS) practitioners around the world. Conducted by researchers from Germany, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, the survey yielded 781 valid responses. Results show the involvement of SAS practitioners in COVID-19 institutional decision-making, actions taken during the pandemic, and the critical impact SAS had on different student groups and universities located in different contexts. The research demonstrates how SAS mediated the impacts of differently constituted public domains and sociocultural contexts on students and how SAS responded to diverse student needs. Based on the data, we outline a model for understanding SAS's broader engagement with students in various contexts to enable conditions that promote student persistence and success.

Keywords

Student affairs and services, COVID-19, Student development and support, Student affairs model.

Introduction

From early 2020, global higher education has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and universities around the world have responded rapidly in a variety of ways within their respective institutional and national contexts to mitigate the pandemic's impacts (Tesar, 2020). The ways in which higher education leaders responded to the pandemic and redesigned basic aspects of education were varied, impressive, nuanced, and culturally bound (DAAD, 2020).

This article presents findings from a global research study conducted in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020. The findings provide rich material for developing a framework to better understand the work of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) in cross-cultural environments. The pandemic challenged the researchers from four different countries to collaborate in understanding how SAS was being affected by the pandemic and, in turn, contributed to mitigating the pandemic's effects on higher education and students in different global contexts.

Our collaboration was driven by a set of empirical research questions that sought to uncover the impacts of the pandemic in various contexts, the different ways in which SAS staff were implicated in responding to the pandemic, and how they conceptualised their roles. The study explores how and when SAS was engaged in decision-making, which services were considered essential, financial impacts of the pandemic, and if there were specific student populations that were more or differently impacted and supported.

Literature review

Study findings allow us to conceptualise the ways in which SAS interacts with and supports students in a diverse, global context. Our conceptualisation engages a social justice lens and we identify three primary domains impacting on students' ability to persist in their studies. These domains represent the overall context within which students are embedded: personal, public, and sociocultural. Understanding these domains, which impact students' overall higher education experience, can help SAS better serve students in these individualised contexts. We assert that a social justice frame guides the global practice of SAS and the domains impacting students' experiences must be understood so that appropriate programmes and services can be developed and delivered to best support a range of students. Greater understanding of students most impacted by the elements within these domains can also positively impact institutional success in terms of increased student access, retention, and completion (Schreiber et al., 2021).

Social justice in global SAS

The massification of global higher education over the past 50 years has fostered a firm focus on access and equity in the sector and in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Altbach et al., 2010). The foundational principle of social justice and opportunity for all now infuses SAS practice across the globe (Schreiber, 2014). To advance students' success and deliver the social justice agenda of higher education and SAS, contextual factors must align to support student success. Marinoni et al. (2020) concurred when discussing the impact of COVID-19 on global higher education by stating, "The only way to minimise this risk is through more collaboration between HEIs and between HEIs, governments, the private sector and society at large" (p. 40). The underlying mission of higher education and the social justice lens of SAS professionals (Bardill Moscaritolo & Roberts, 2016) together facilitate the development of global talent and engaged citizens, which supports personal growth, public policy development, and robust social institutions (Humphrey, 2020).

Since an equity frame drives the paradigm and approaches of SAS staff globally, they work to support students in various aspects of their academic careers, especially those most impacted by societal pressures. Schreiber (2014) asserted, "Student affairs, as an integral part of universities, has taken on a key position in contributing to social justice as one of the central imperatives of higher education" (p. 211).

The impact of higher education and SAS on students within their cultural context is at the core of the global provision of SAS. Yakaboski and Perozzi (2018) stated, "Student affairs practitioners have to practice within global and intercultural frameworks so that diversity and social justice and inclusion efforts, policies, and programs are inclusive of various identities including nationalities, citizenship status, religious practice, languages, and more" (p. 2).

The collective knowledge of global SAS continues to increase, with the publication of Ludeman and Schreiber's (2020) SAS compilation, Liddell's (2019) summary of *60 years of scholarship* and Smith's (2019) tracing of scholarly discourse in SAS, which reveal the depth and breadth of SAS knowledge. These and other publications have helped inform and improve the understanding of what Torres et al. (2019) described as the "low-consensus field of Student Affairs" (p. 645) and have expanded the knowledge of both internationalisation of SAS and the global practice of SAS (Osfield et al., 2016).

Personal domain

Personal characteristics of students are a key determinant when designing and delivering SAS programmes and services, which includes the engagement and provision for cultural minorities of that country or region. SAS must consider individual students and their various characteristics, resources, and multiple identities (Jones & Abes, 2013) in approaching their work, so that students can achieve their individual and unique goals. Students' race, ethnicity, religious tradition, socio-

economic background, abilities, preparedness, and so forth variously impact students, their perspectives, and their ability to persist in higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students' personal background characteristics and educational and life experiences are key factors that shape how they approach and engage with higher education. Experiential indicators with education, such as engagement with peers and affiliated organisations (Kuh et al., 2005) affect the pathways students take toward completing degrees and learning.

Public domain

Students depend upon basic services and social elements to be productive students and contributing citizens (Rivera et al., 2020). When public infrastructure, like adequate transportation, sanitation, health care, social and protective services, and so forth are weak or non-existent, students' ability to learn is significantly impacted. Included in the specific context of COVID-19 is the need for safe housing, stable wi-fi networks, and other basic services, as well as the ability to access these services reliably from home. At the most macro level, the public domain incorporates government oversight and funding of higher education (Tran et al., 2020), policy stances such as those related to visas, student mobility, and tuition fees (Liu, 2021), as well as the consistency of those leaders and policy agendas.

Public support affects students differently and varies significantly across world regions (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). In some regions, a lack of infrastructure related to food, water, electricity, shelter, and access to basic health and social services impairs students' ability to persist and succeed in their studies (Schreiber et al., 2021).

Sociocultural domain

The process of educating students must consider social and cultural nuances and realities (Evans et al., 2020), especially during a time when more students vary in age, have children of their own, are married, and may be caring for family members or need to work to sustain themselves and their families (Perna, 2010). These realities present in various forms related to family responsibilities, childcare, working during university, health care, and cultural perspectives that impact students differently during their studies (Rivera et al., 2020).

Sociocultural variations curry advantage toward particular societal demographics, which can lead to diminished social capital for certain segments of the population, especially students from historically marginalised groups. Higher education has long served as a relief valve to systemic poverty and a facilitator of upward mobility (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). The underlying mores and assumptions that constitute the organising structure, fabric, and ultimate expression of country and regional culture are intrinsically tied to the development of an educated citizenry and impact powerfully on college student success (Rivera et al., 2020). Sociocultural impacts on students must be acknowledged and mitigated by SAS to remove barriers and facilitate success.

Methodology

To investigate the reality of SAS during early COVID-19, explore variations in responses from different world regions, and identify implications based on the data, four researchers from Germany, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States jointly designed an online survey in 2020. The survey was specifically designed to reach SAS practitioners across the globe, most of whom were operating during national lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To reach as many practitioners as possible in these conditions, we employed specific strategies. We contacted and emailed international, regional, and national SAS professional associations and networks who forwarded the survey to their members. This was followed by communication with key individual professionals inviting them to complete the survey and forward the survey completion request to others. Social media was also used to reach potential respondents. This set of sampling techniques are variably called chain-sampling, chain-referral, snowball sampling, or

referral-sampling (Goodman, 2010). After the survey had been open for one month, responses reached a number deemed adequate for analytic purposes and meaningful interpretation (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

We used the *virtual snowball* method because participants during the early COVID-19 phase were difficult to reach and access, and our target populations were diffuse, while timelines were limited (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Virtual snowball sampling does not generate a random and statistically representative sample that could suitably be used for rigorous testing of hypotheses. Rather, as it would be with qualitative research, this type of sampling can be used to compare and describe observations, and to develop theory and hypotheses.

Moreover, since the onset of virtual epistemological communities which are allied around issues and interests and are not located in similar geographical regions or time zones, this kind of sampling has been used more widely (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). Virtual pathways help link disparate members of associations, especially those who may not have affiliation with organised structures.

The method also offered advantages such as rapid replies and increased participation during an extraordinary period in history. It enabled penetration into hard-to-reach areas that may not have responded well to other sampling and contact methods, particularly in the context where most respondents worked at home due to COVID-19.

Instrument design

The online questionnaire covered four clusters of issues: nine questions addressed organisational decision-making in the context of the pandemic, four were on SAS pandemic responses, three questions were on financial implications, and three captured future thoughts on how the pandemic would affect SAS practices. The instrument also included: eight questions on student accommodation, eight on working remotely and organisational preparation, three on communication with students, and seven questions on the impact of pandemic-related measures on specific student populations. The survey ended with a set of demographic questions.

Participants did not have to answer all questions, which included various types, such as quantitative questions with closed choice options using a Likert scale, ranking, or graded responses, and qualitative, open-ended questions.

Data analysis

This research aims to describe the SAS reality during early COVID-19, to explore variations in responses from different world regions, and identify implications based on the data, rather than making statistically reliable generalisations.

The online platform Qualtrics served as the participant interface for data collection and initial reporting. Data was exported from Qualtrics into SPSS for cleaning and statistical analysis. Data arrays were reviewed, and most questions were cross-tabulated by region to ascertain geographical variations. The descriptive statistics and related graphs were drawn up in SPSS and Microsoft Excel to illustrate the data. The qualitative data gathered by means of open-ended questions were exported into the data analysis programme NVivo, then coded for thematic development.

After cleaning the data for duplicates and incomplete responses, the final data set included responses from 781 practitioners who completed the survey either in full (353 respondents, 45%) or partially (428 respondents, 55%). Each response was identified by country and categorised by world region using the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2018) and International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) classifications of geographical regions. As shown in Table 1, there were more than 100 responses from all regions except Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) and the Middle East, making it viable to conduct inter-regional

comparisons in most cases. Respondents that made up the Oceania region were almost exclusively from Australia and New Zealand, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 1: Respondents by region

Region	Number of respondents
Africa	118
Asia	144
Europe	207
Middle East	35
Oceania	108
North America	149
Latin America and Caribbean	20
TOTAL	781

Table 2: Respondent countries in Oceania

Country	Number of respondents
Australia	83
Fiji	1
New Zealand	23
Tonga	1
TOTAL	108

Ethics

The research design and method, including questionnaire and consent form, were submitted to the institutional review board of the American University of Sharjah, the home institution of one of the researchers, and was granted approval on 29 April 2020.

Limitations

There are well-known, inherent limitations in online surveys, for example, those related to response rate and completion (Creswell, 2013). A limitation in this survey was that it was only made available in English, thus limiting the ability to capture data from practitioners who operate in non-English speaking world regions.

Furthermore, it might have been preferable to use countries, rather than world regions, as the basis for comparison to capture the rich variety of responses. However, a small sample size in some countries would have compromised meaningful comparison.

Findings

The analysis of the data demonstrates a level of consistency across the global sample, yet, in every survey section there is regional variation. Much of this variation makes sense in relation to what is known about the genesis and initial spread of COVID-19 and what is known about broad differences in the sociocultural and political contexts into which HEIs and SAS are embedded.

COVID-19 initial decision-making

When and how did SAS practitioners first become involved in decision-making in response to the pandemic? More than one third (34%) of survey respondents reported their institution's first

meeting about COVID-19 took place in March 2020. Not surprisingly, Asia and Oceania were among the first regions to address the pandemic, with 33% and 31% respectively reporting their first institutional meetings about COVID-19 taking place as early as December 2019 and January 2020. Just 8% of respondents from Africa, and 10% from both Europe and LAC reported initial meetings in those same months.

The majority (72%) of SAS practitioners were not involved in these initial institutional meetings, except for those in Asia, where just over half (51%) reported that they were included. The least likely to have attended initial meetings were SAS practitioners in North America (86%) and Oceania (84%). Eventually, most SAS staff (85%) were included in managing institutional responses within a month of the initial meetings, and the vast majority of reporting institutions (86%) closed or went fully virtual during March 2020.

Whilst one of the primary decision-making drivers was “ethic and care,” institutional decisions were impacted directly by, and/or took leadership from, myriad different organisations and governing boards, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, local and regional health departments, and internal emergency management structures. The regional variation in this area was vast, from an LAC respondent reporting, “All decisions were made by the crisis committee,” to “Decisions were made following the Ministry of Education/Government guidelines,” stated by a Middle Eastern respondent. In North America, adherence to local and regional authorities was common, for example, “Getting information from our provincial chief medical officer”. This increased integration with, or reliance on, external organisations was likely enhanced during the pandemic and could lead to expanded collaboration in the future.

An overwhelming majority of SAS staff reported being key role players in ongoing institutional decision-making (Figure 1). The extent to which respondents disagreed was relatively consistent at about 15% for each of Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Asia, the Middle East, and LAC had the largest percentages of those who strongly agreed that they were key decision makers. Thus, the strength by which respondents agreed that they were key decision makers, and the extent to which they were integral to ongoing decisions, varied substantially by region.

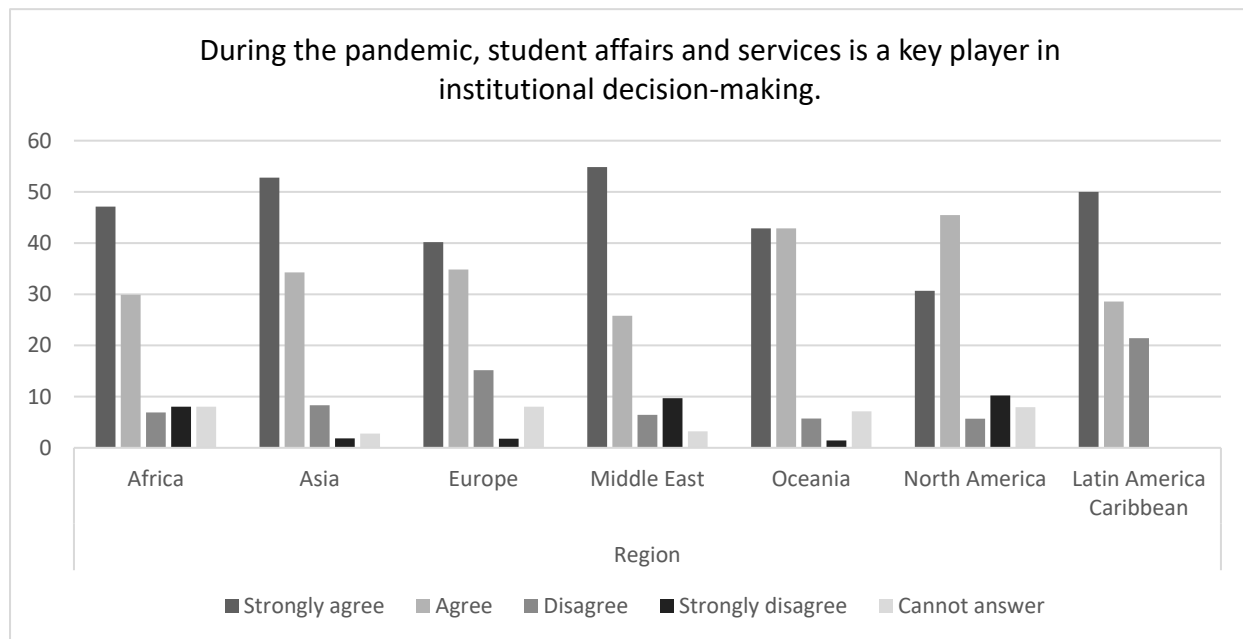


Figure 1: SAS as key decision makers

Essential services during the pandemic

Results showed that the SAS response to the pandemic involved several dimensions, including the continuous provision of services that were declared as “essential” and supporting their institution in moving learning online. In the process, mistakes were made and innovative ways to manage were developed.

More than three-quarters (76%) of respondents indicated that aspects of SAS were designated as “essential functions” at their institution at the beginning of the pandemic. Contrary to their lower level of initial engagement in decision-making, North American respondents (87%) and those from Oceania (84%) indicated that their institutions deemed some SAS areas essential, whilst SAS areas in the Middle East, whilst still high, were least likely to receive an essential designation (64%). SAS functions that were most likely to be declared essential across all world regions were: counselling, health care, academic support, and student accommodation, in that order. Responses from Oceania are shown in Table 3, in relation to those from the rest of the participants. Of particular note is the focus on health care and student centre engagement in Oceania compared to the rest of the sample.

Table 3: SAS essential services: Oceania compared to the rest of the sample

Essential services	Oceania %	Rest of the sample %
Counselling	73	65
Health care	73	55
Academic support	51	49
Residence halls/student accommodation	49	46
Student centre	41	25
Other	20	17
Dining/catering/retail	15	23
Campus labs	10	10
Intercultural services	7	8
Bookstore	2	9
Recreation sport	0	7

Responses revealed innovative decision-making and variation in approaches to serving students. Qualitative coding showed that efforts broadly fell into categories of student support services, and financial assistance. SAS staff provided support to students during the change to virtual learning by setting up helplines; issuing newsletters; providing free webinars; assembling virtual town halls; providing laptops and wi-fi hotspots; and issuing grants to assist with job loss, rent, and other basic needs. Some creative responses included “virtual resident assistants” (Asia), “Wellbeing Warriors” (Africa), and even free parking to reduce congestion on public transportation (Oceania). The volume of communication from SAS staff to students in myriad formats, frequently with individualised phone calls, emails, and social media outreach, was striking.

Financial implications

Many of the support mechanisms and essential services that SAS provided had significant financial implications for SAS. Noticeable is the diversity of responses. For instance, North America had most responses in the category of providing full or partial refunds on housing fees, whereas it was lowest on providing free wi-fi hotspots. Middle East responses were lowest on offering transport

money to return home, whereas all regions appear within a similar range for offering online specialists/consultants to support students. Africa appeared lowest in refunding housing fees, perhaps due to the housing fees often being paid via government grants; however, Africa had the highest response on offering free data access to students, as well as wi-fi hotspots, probably due to this being fragile and unreliable in some African contexts. Table 4 shows the ways in which respondents from Oceania differed from those of other world regions in the allocation of resources to students.

Table 4: SAS financial support mechanisms to students

Financial relief effort	Oceania %	Rest of the sample %
Refunded student housing costs	69	66
Refunded meal/dining costs	62	57
Refunded parking fees	56	37
Refunded other fees	48	45
Provided transportation to student to go home	44	52
Offered tuition discounts while staying online	42	29
Refunded government bursars and sponsors	27	34

Financial impacts were an element of most decisions and responses made in relation to the pandemic and had both short- and long-term consequences. More than half (53%) of respondents believed that there would be financial ramifications from the pandemic for two or more years to come (Figure 2). Respondents from Asia anticipated the shortest duration of financial setbacks with one quarter estimating the impact at just one year. Conversely, respondents from Oceania expected the longest duration of financial implications.

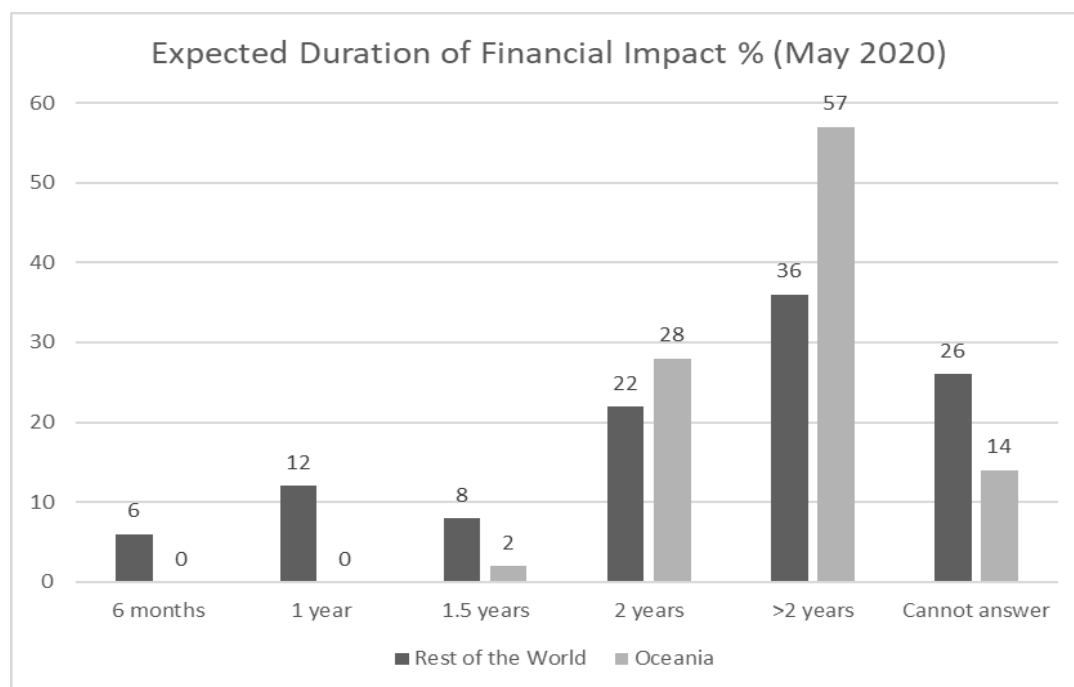


Figure 2: Expected duration of pandemic financial impacts

Changes in SAS

Our analysis of open responses shows that the majority of respondents anticipated long-term consequences of the pandemic falling into four categories: 1) increased online programmes, support, and services; 2) drastic change to SAS jobs; 3) reduced budget and staffing changes; and 4) restricted student activities. For example, a respondent from North America replied, “We will offer more services online, even when we return to face-to-face services”. It was generally agreed that more remote work would occur, with European respondents using phrases such as “virtual fora,” “remote delivery,” and “online engagement”. Responses from Asia focused primarily on the reduction of services and programmes related to student life, whereas budget and staffing concerns permeated all regions.

Staying in touch and impact on international and other student populations

Staying in touch with students was one of the important functions of SAS. Staff most often relied on social media to disseminate institutional information, and email and video conferencing was used extensively to communicate with students, student leaders, and student clubs/organisations.

Because COVID-19 impacted various groups of students differently, counselling and health services remained available to students, as well as financial support for individuals with accommodation issues. North American professionals said they offered “emergency grants and counselling,” “tutoring, staff support,” and “counselling, health services, career services, and housing and dining” specifically for international students.

The data indicate that international students were most impacted by COVID-19, with a specific mention of Chinese students, followed closely by low-income and students with special needs. Whilst SAS staff in Africa offered some specific services to international students, their focus was primarily on low-income students and those from rural and/or challenging home situations. Notably, Oceania was the only region where a majority of respondents indicated that some student populations were discriminated against, as opposed to all other regions where this perception was in the minority of responses. Moreover, we heard from participants how students returned home to crowded living conditions that, in many respects, could not match the campus learning environment. If some faced family challenges at home, others longed for home; respondents noted that international students had a high level of emotional stress caused by the inability to get home because of border closures and transportation restrictions.

Discussion and implications

Leading HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging and complex, and response decisions have had wide-ranging consequences (Crawford et al., 2020; Tesar, 2020). SAS, in concert with their institutions and governing organisations, led a shift to virtual learning and operations that required herculean efforts by faculty, staff, and students. Delivering courses, programmes, and services virtually was new to many in higher education. Students were impacted severely and differently, and the data show that SAS responded promptly, innovatively, and efficiently when establishing support and transition mechanisms such as free webinars, town hall meetings, wi-fi hotspots, virtual tutoring, and more. Different foci and emphases can be seen in the data on financial assistance to students, the programmes and services deemed essential in particular regions, and the extent to which SAS professionals were engaged in the key decision-making of their institutions.

The pandemic has underlined the centrality of SAS to HEIs and the higher education sector overall, with SAS staff deeply (whilst variously) engaged in institutional decision-making, providing support for moving to virtual learning and development, and providing essential services such as accommodation, mental health counselling, and financial assistance to students. In many ways, the pandemic highlighted the essential nature of SAS work to students and HEIs.

In this section we extrapolate from the literature and research results that three primary domains affect students—personal, public, and sociocultural. The influence of higher education and SAS on these domains, and consequently on student and institutional success, is substantial (See Figure 3).

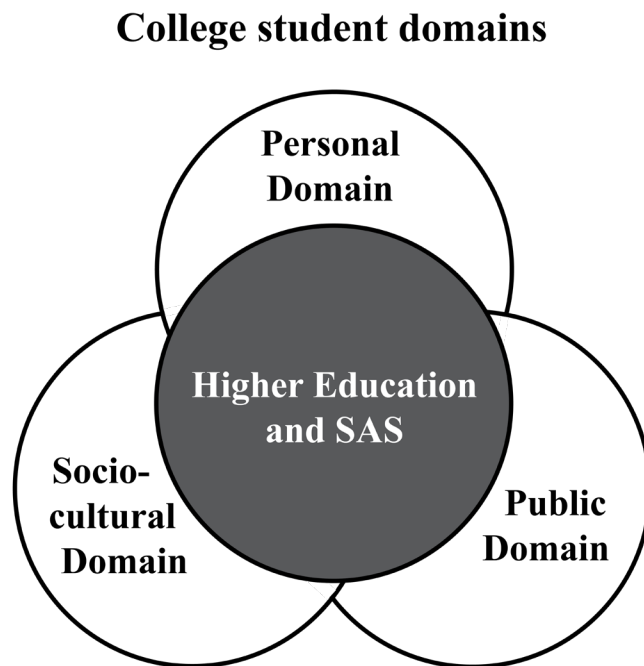


Figure 3: Four contextual areas relevant for student success

Higher education and SAS domain

Emerging from the data, we argue that four domains collectively constitute the contextual conditions that influence and determine student success from an SAS perspective. We define these domains as: *personal*, *sociocultural*, *public*, and *higher education and SAS*. The higher education and SAS domain affects each of the other three domains in the quest to support students, level the playing field for students with different challenges, promote fairer conditions, and, thus, deliver equitable access to high quality educational experiences. The ability to impact students and their communities and context through the teaching and learning process is a powerful tool for higher education and SAS practitioners (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). By engaging and supporting students, providing financial assistance, sustaining housing opportunities, providing robust virtual services in many areas of need, and other creative methods, SAS have demonstrated their value to HEIs and student success, especially during COVID-19.

Given the extraordinary conditions investigated in this study, its results reveal a great deal about the relevance and impact of SAS practitioners, their institutions of higher learning, and their broader sociocultural impacts, which may not otherwise have been evident. Whilst the personal, sociocultural, and public domains mutually influence and shape the individual student experience, the higher education and SAS domain acts upon the others. It mediates and mitigates impacts, primarily by providing programmes and services that enhance, support, or substitute dysfunctional elements of the other domains. The student is embedded into this dynamic and complex contextual system, both influencing and being influenced by it.

Personal domain

Most institutional assistance reported in this study was provided for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and international students. The focus on financial assistance in multiple formats demonstrates the consideration of students' individual needs and unique circumstances. In the context of COVID-19, regions like Africa and LAC focused primarily on providing online devices (e.g., laptops and tablets) to students, while other regions focused more heavily on grants to international students and providing refunds. The results evidenced the equity lens of SAS practitioners, who focused on students' basic needs and provided special services to those most needy at the time, such as international, minority, and low-income students.

As described earlier, one of the overall drivers of decisions made during the pandemic was consideration of "ethic and care." This demonstrates that SAS staff were considering students' personal characteristics in the provision of programs and services. For example, SAS staff had to be sensitive to students who did not have viable alternative housing options and living arrangements, supporting them in housing accommodations when institutions closed or went virtual. Further, health care, personal-social support, and mental health counselling for individual students was important and even deemed essential in almost every surveyed world region. To provide the most relevant services in the ways in which students needed them, SAS practitioners communicated extensively with students, student body officers, and clubs and organisations, using a variety of media to help shape the kinds of support and development responses suitable to the students in each context.

Public domain

Higher education and SAS provide support to students that is essential to their post-secondary education success. Whilst much of this support is specialised and primarily targeted to students, in many cases, SAS provisions are essentially supplementary to public services. Thus, a continuum of global HEIs could be conceptualised, from those which are embedded within a country's broader public provision of comprehensive social and welfare services (typical in continental Europe) to HEIs that supplement and provide a range of services for students that would otherwise not be sufficiently available (often the case in HEIs in developing regions).

In this respect, higher education and SAS can be a catalyst for students who need public infrastructure and often serves as a surrogate for insufficient, inadequate, or absent public programmes and services. In many regions, the college campus can become an enclave where a breadth of SAS services supplement unreliable or absent public domain services. Students are provided with safe accommodation, transportation, health and mental care, childcare, wi-fi, and even food and water in the quest to provide an environment that is conducive for learning and development. Whilst not all services are free to students, most governments provide subsidies and/or other financial avenues that facilitate access to these programmes and services that sustain and support students in their pursuit of higher education. Colleges and universities typically also offer employment opportunities for students that can assist with their financial obligations and integrate students into the fabric of the academic community (Peck & Callahan, 2019).

The higher education and SAS function was particularly challenged by the pandemic to generate innovative ways to mitigate the potentially negative impacts of lockdowns, campus closures, and emergency remote learning on different student groups.

Sociocultural domain

The sociocultural domain accounts for various aspects of students' embeddedness in, and interactions with, their family, community, and society; it is imminently shaped by unique and shared values, cultural norms, and traditions. In many countries, college attendance is a time of transition when the relationship with other family members is redefined and expectations among

family members change. It is a stepping stone from one phase in life, career, or opportunity, to another. Conversely, there may be family and community norms that pose barriers to learning and development. The spaces provided by campus environments can offer separation from potential distractions, family responsibilities, and other obligations, whilst also providing services such as childcare and new friendship and affinity groups to offer support.

There are several findings from our research noted above that give insight into the way higher education and SAS impact learning in this domain, and how SAS mitigates some of the discriminatory voices also noted in other research (Mittlemier & Mok, 2020). For instance, the finding that mental health counselling for individual students was deemed an “essential service” in almost every world region may be understood, in part, with respect to the diverse kinds of challenges presented in the sociocultural realm.

Centering SAS

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided new evidence about how SAS mitigates the impact of barriers, failures, or omissions in the personal, public, and sociocultural domains, and contributes toward creating conditions that matter, which are conducive to learning and development. Our research suggests an emergent heuristic model that provides a wide lens to understanding SAS provision and differences across world regions, whereby certain domains have greater or lesser significance based on local realities. For example, in this study African respondents focused more on mitigating issues in the public domain by providing students with direct subsidies for items such as internet devices, data, and transportation. North American respondents focused more on providing supports in the personal domain, for example, supporting international students and developing creative mental wellbeing programs.

SAS within higher education is the primary source and agent of these support systems for students. SAS personnel are those that typically interface with students’ family members and supporters via outreach events, orientations, community resources, and so forth. Life circumstances and sociocultural elements intermingle, and SAS powerfully mediates between the domains based on cultural expectations.

Conclusion

The actions of SAS practitioners globally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have provided insight into the similarity and diversity of SAS around the world. The variations and differences in timing, range of support, style of work, and site of impact, reflect the diversity of contexts within which students and institutions seek to be successful.

Overall, we found that global SAS responses were attuned to the emerging personal needs of students during the COVID-19 crisis within different regional contexts. Responses were uniquely tailored to compensate for obstacles in the public sector, and SAS mitigated unfavourable sociocultural influences in the contexts of students’ social lives and communities. A focus on these student domains, combined with the equity lens of global SAS, provides clear guidance for supporting student and institutional success.

These three domains emerged as relevant to SAS practitioners’ support of students and the learning and development process. These domains impact and influence student development and success, some favourable and supportive, and some contrary and obstructive. What emerges from this research is that SAS is a powerful mediator of these influences, in some cases compensating for the deficiencies in the public domain, intervening in the sociocultural milieu, and supporting students personally. It also shows, however, that there are limits to the extent that SAS can play its social justice role remotely. Campus life and face-to-face provision of certain services remain indispensable for supporting students globally and for levelling the playing field, especially for students with special needs and students from less privileged backgrounds. Thus, the domains

collectively form a heuristic model to assist in understanding how higher education and SAS support all aspects of student development and success which can be variously interpreted and applied across global regions, even in post-COVID conditions.

This research further illustrates that SAS is an essential ingredient in supporting students and mediating personal and contextual influences on student success. SAS practitioners tailor their programmes and services to students to meet their unique learning and development needs. We propose that more research of these varied and potent engagements be conducted to gain a greater understanding of SAS around the world and lay a broader and more solid foundation upon which SAS can strive to become a truly global profession.

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