

Youth Unemployment through Skill Development During COVID-19: The Experience of Bangladeshi Migrants in New South Wales, Australia

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Abstract

The coronavirus crisis significantly impacted job loss in New South Wales, severely affecting young Bangladeshi migrants. The shortage of skilled, trained and experienced young individuals is a significant barrier to career opportunities for youth. Those with technical skills and expertise resorted to self-employment or working with small offices remotely. However, many lost their jobs, leading to homelessness and dropping out of education. This article examines the effects of COVID-19 on young Bangladeshi students living in New South Wales, Australia, focusing on how skill development training influenced their resilience during the pandemic. In-depth interviews with 23 Bangladeshi students living in New South Wales were conducted to collect data. The skilled training enabled many students to work from home, get alternative online jobs, and find new sources of income. Technical expertise helped them work from home during and after the lockdown and find new online jobs. This study suggests the need for effective government financial and policy support to address the youth employment crisis. It also suggests targeted measures to bridge the unemployment divide and support the economic resilience of young Bangladeshi migrants in Australia.

Key Words: Bangladeshi migrants, COVID-19 impact, skill development, Youth unemployment.

Introduction

The pandemic worsened the problems faced by young Bangladeshis in Australia, leading to severe financial difficulties, job loss, and homelessness. While the COVID-19 outbreak affected all segments of the population and social groups in the most vulnerable situations, Bangladeshi migrants who used to work part-time and casual jobs were disproportionately affected. While COVID-19 affected all segments of the population, vulnerable social groups, including students, were disproportionately affected (Tefera et al., 2023). COVID-19 caused devastating social and economic disruptions, including loss of life, livelihoods, wealth, housing, and jobs (Guintella et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). Migrant students faced the vulnerability of living in a foreign country where they were away from support systems and had to endure extra burdens to cope (Mbous, Mohamed, & Rudisill, 2024). Government declarations of lockdowns, stay-at-home mandates, campus closures, social distancing measures, and restricted international travel changed how people live, work, study, and interact (Ayouni et al., 2021; Coffey, Cook, Farrugia, Threadgold, & Burke, 2021). Those who were technologically advanced searched for alternative sources of income to survive. COVID-19 saw an increasing dependency on technology-based online service, delivery, and work-from-home tendencies. It created a growing need for skills in programming, data analysis, and digital literacy.

International students are a vital part of the Australian education system, economy and community. Like so many people during this pandemic, international students have been affected

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by casual job losses in retail and hospitality, making it even tougher for them to make ends meet (Coram, 2022). There are more than 500,000 international students in Australia, many of whom have lost their jobs during the pandemic. Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan said international students could access "more than \$1.3 billion" in support (Hirst, 2020). State governments have established the International Student Emergency Relief Fund to support them with basics.

NSW has taken proactive measures to equip young people with the skills to navigate and thrive in a technology-driven economy. Access to quality skill development and training equips individuals with essential skills needed for the modern job market, thereby improving their employability and economic prospects (Ruming, Mouat, & Morel-Ednie Brown, 2023). The NSW government has improved youth employability by enhancing access to vocational training and ICT education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The NSW government's strategies and policies in addressing youth unemployment and achieving the Sustainable Development Goal have positively impacted youth employability. This study explores the unique challenges faced by young individuals from Bangladeshi youth living in NSW confronting unemployment issues. It aims to assess the anticipated impact of skilled training and migration on future job prospects, particularly within the context of the youth labour market. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with Bangladeshi migrants in NSW, this study explores their experiences and how technical skill and training helped them to survive during a pandemic.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences of young Bangladeshi-Australian students during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their struggles with employment and financial insecurity. The research conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 participants purposively selected from the Sydney, NSW area. Telephone and Zoom interviews took place from January to March 2022. Twenty-three high school, college and university students have been purposefully selected from the Bangladeshi community living in NSW. Participants were asked to complete the semi-structured questionnaire form and telephone and Zoom interviews for their detailed experiences during the pandemic. Each participant was asked to include their sufferings due to job insecurity they faced at work and how it impacted their living, financial situation, and daily lives. Relevant documents, reports, and policy documents were analysed to provide background information.

COVID-19, Bangladeshi migrants and youth employment in NSW

Historically, Australia is a high-migration country (Shafiq, 2017). Bangladeshi migrants are one of the fastest-growing communities in Australia (Shafiq, 2016). Overseas migration has been a large contributor to the total Australian population growth for many years; it has consistently been the main driver since 2005-06, contributing more than 50 per cent of population growth in Australia (ABS, 2015). Bangladeshis are relatively new migrants to Australia (Shafiq, 2016). Most Bangladesh-born have settled in the urban areas of Sydney, New South Wales. The tendency of young student migration from Bangladesh significantly changed and shifted in recent years under the skill migration programme. In response to the Australian education and skills migration policy as pathways, the number of migrants has increased (Singh, 2016). This flow of migrants contributes to the growth of Australia's population and increases the number of Australians born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Migrants in Australia are generating more than one hundred billion dollars for the economy each year. Those on skilled visas generally earn above the median salary but it remains difficult for many to break into the workforce (NSW Government, 2024). The Australian government are kind to migrant workers and its policies reflect the inclusion policy for migrants. In Australian economy immigrants were driving economic growth and were crucial to filling shortages in the country's most critical sectors.

The employment status of youth in New South Wales, Australia, reflects a concerning trend of disproportionate impact by unemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every segment of society, with millions worldwide experiencing job losses and economic instability, particularly among young workers. Historically, economic downturns have disproportionately affected young people in various ways, but the current crisis has exacerbated these challenges, especially in sectors severely impacted by the pandemic.

There is a compelling need to review and evaluate the existing youth development landscape in Australia. This is critically important for supporting the development of new and more sustainable strategies to effectively manage the existing and emerging challenges and create a sustainable social policy to optimize prevailing opportunities. Most importantly, there is a need for a visible demonstration of the appropriate awareness, vision and political will to pursue new and more sustainable youth development strategies not only in Bangladesh but also for NSW youth. A breakthrough might be achieved if the courage and foresight evolve from a mainly social welfare to a transformational approach to youth development in Bangladesh. This study examines the extent of the National Youth Policy in NSW, Australia and a lesson for Bangladesh youth development in effective youth socio-economic empowerment.

During Australian election, we found that both major parties emphasized into the NSW election, with skills and job creation are key issues for young people featuring prominently. The government has promised 100,000 new jobs in western Sydney over the next five years, while Labor were promised to reinvigorate the local manufacturing sector and expand TAFEs (Knox, & Ingold, 2023). Australian Bureau of Statistics data for January 2023 reveal that the national unemployment rate increased to 3.7 per cent and the underemployment rate remained at 6.1 per cent. Unemployment grew despite an increase in part-time jobs, which highlights the importance of increasing the quantity and quality of jobs available.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the labour market in NSW was tough for young people. In May 2019, 71,000 people aged between 15 and 24 were unemployed, an unemployment rate of 10.1% (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). While young people made up only 16% of the state's total labour force, they accounted for 36% of total unemployment (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated labour market problems for young people across Australia, and by several measures, young people in NSW have been the hardest hit with more than 80,000 youth jobs were lost in the 2020 lockdown and 96,000 in 2021, the highest numbers in the country. Young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) increased from 71,000 in 2019 to 112,000 in 2020, the greatest increase of any state (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). One reason that youth unemployment in NSW was worsened so dramatically by COVID-19 is that a relatively large proportion of young people work in the industries hit hardest by the pandemic, whereas workers over 25 are more evenly distributed throughout the economy. Official statistics show that the impact of the pandemic on employment was worse for young women than for young men, with the lockdowns in 2021 causing employment to drop by 43,000 for young women and 31,000 for young men across NSW (ABS, Labour Force Survey, 2023).

The problem of youth employment opportunities is complex and differs according to gender and areas of the country. Though Australia has experienced prosperity, low inflation rates, economic and export growth and high labour productivity, youth unemployment has remained high. This is particularly the case for youth seeking full-time work, as youth employment tends to be dominated by part-time and casual positions. The problem is that too many young unemployed skills

sometimes do not match the market demand. While young individuals in NSW are seeking part-time work in the service sector, the job market demands specific professional or specialized skills. Governments may lack sufficient information to determine the most appropriate approach, leading to potential missteps (Khamidova, 2021). The research examines the scarcity of skills and experience as a primary barrier to young people's career advancement opportunities.

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory infection caused by a new coronavirus. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic (ABS, 2023). As of May 2, 2023, the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) had spread to almost every country in the world, and more than 6.86 million people have died after contracting the respiratory virus (Elflein, 2024). Australia has reported 8,605,986 cases of COVID-19, with 10,442 fatalities till May 2, 2023 (Elflein, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns and the related global recession of 2020 have created a highly uncertain outlook for the labour market and accelerated the arrival of the future of work (WEF, 2020). Millions of employees around the world have suffered from job losses due to the coronavirus crisis, while the economic impact on young workers has been stronger. Young people face the long-term impacts of a pandemic if innovative policies and measures are not taken immediately (Khamidova, 2021).

The employment landscape for youth in New South Wales, Australia, is significantly transformed by technological advancements. As technology rapidly evolves, it reshapes traditional job roles, presenting both challenges and opportunities for young people (Manyika, 2017). With the emergence of advanced technical skills educational systems are preparing for current and future workforce (Manyika, 2017). Unemployment among the youth has emerged as a pressing issue in NSW area especially among Bangladeshi migrant college and university students. The inadequacies in the education and human resource development policy are identified as key contributors to the prevailing crisis (Dixon, 2019). Specifically, technical education in the country is deemed low, and existing institutions are failing to produce sufficient skilled workers. NSW witnesses a growing demand for skilled human resources in various sectors, even as the pool of educated unemployed individuals expands, exemplified by the burgeoning graduate population.

Through technical training and vocational education, the opportunity to youth employment can promote meaningful employment, fostering dignity, well-being, and social inclusion for young Bangladeshi individuals residing in NSW. The International Labour Organization (ILO) stated 2013, that unemployment imposes a significant burden on the current generation of youth, irrespective of cultural and national contexts. NSW can work towards achieving the objectives of reducing unemployment and harnessing the transformative potential of technology to create a more equitable and prosperous future for all residents. Enabling technological advancement to address the challenges of youth unemployment requires a focus on expanding access to training, reskilling, and upskilling through blended digital and experiential learning. It is crucial to diagnose the roots of common barriers to youth employment, one of which is the mismatch between skills in demand and supply. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2020, the expected change in the division of labour between people and machines could potentially replace 85 million workers by 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2023). The importance of skilled labour is rising in demand and what the future of jobs may look like.

The migration of young Bangladeshis to NSW has been marked by challenges such as job loss and poverty, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many individuals, previously engaged in sectors ranging from services to hospitality, found themselves unemployed, with a majority relying on part-time employment.

The NSW government has introduced the fee-free Smart and Skilled program as the central initiative for vocational education and training (VET). This program is designed to help individuals gain training in in-demand skills and industries, addressing the specific needs of communities across NSW. Through Smart and Skilled, vocational education providers deliver training that meets the geographic, occupational, and industry requirements, thereby aligning the training more closely with labour market needs (NSW Government, 2023). The program aims to maintain a competitive and high-quality training market, providing students with a diverse range of training options throughout all regions of NSW. This approach ensures that the training offered is relevant and beneficial, helping to strengthen the alignment between Smart and Skilled training and the actual demands of the labour market (NSW Government, 2023).

The NSW Department of Education set ambitious targets to boost youth employability to meet the pandemic-induced crisis. The target has failed to be met, according to its 2022 annual report. In 2022, only 66.5 per cent of NSW public school students made it to year 12, about 10 percentage points below its target. Despite this trend, the proportion of school leavers going on to university, training or work has risen to almost 92 per cent, the highest in more than a decade (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2023). The NSW government have planned to raise this target to 93 per cent by 2028. The surge in students dropping out was due to disengagement from school due to the pandemic, while the tight labour market could be tempting for students to get a job. The Government has a strategy to keep kids at school. Another target is to reduce the academic gap between the poorest and most affluent students. There is a growing emphasis on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) education and skill development among youth in New South Wales to bolster their employability and empower them to thrive in an increasingly digitalized economy.

Challenges of youth unemployment in NSW, Australia

Australia has experienced prosperity, low inflation rates, economic and export growth and high labour productivity, but youth unemployment has remained higher than Average (NSW Government, 2024). Youth in Australia mostly engaged in part-time and casual positions. Youth unemployment remains a significant socio-economic concern in Australia, with far-reaching consequences for poverty alleviation and gender equality. By prioritizing youth development within the context of poverty alleviation efforts, Australia can create a more equitable society where all young people have the opportunity to lead fulfilling lives. It often serves as a catalyst for family conflicts, prompting some youths to make the difficult decision to leave home. Additionally, the lack of employment opportunities may force youths to remain at home despite their desire for independence.

Youth are fundamental to society, driving innovation and progress, yet they also face significant socio-economic challenges. In the NSW region, youth development and empowerment are facing challenges such as poverty, high unemployment rates, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Disadvantaged youth, including those in poor urban areas, migrants, and individuals with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. In NSW, youth unemployment poses a significant risk of homelessness, often stemming from family conflict and financial strain. Studies indicate a higher unemployment rate among teenage females compared to males, with youth remaining unemployed for extended periods (Carvalho, 2015; Harris, 1996). Youth labour market fundamental shifts in the economy and labour market, such as the substitution of older workers for teenagers and the rise of part-time employment, have contributed to the youth labour market's decline since the 1970s (Carvalho, 2015). Technological advancements, like automation, have further impacted job availability, especially in sectors such as telecommunications and electrical work. Youth unemployment occurs at various times due to a multitude of reasons.

The employment status of youth in New South Wales, Australia, reflects a concerning trend of disproportionate impact by unemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every segment of society, with millions worldwide experiencing job losses and economic instability, particularly among young workers. Historically, economic downturns have disproportionately affected young people in various ways, but the current crisis has exacerbated these challenges, especially in sectors severely impacted by the pandemic.

The main causes of youth unemployment in NSW include mismatched skills, limited job opportunities, and economic downturns. Young individuals facing challenges in securing employment due to lack of work experience, inadequate qualifications, and competition for jobs.

The perspectives of the Bengali Youth Community living in NSW are more challenging. Language proficiency, technical skills and service-oriented job-seeking behaviour made them vulnerable during the pandemic. Discrimination and lack of recognition of foreign qualifications also contribute to the challenges faced by Bengali youth in the job market. During the Australian election, we found that both major parties emphasized the NSW election, with skills and job creation are key issues for young people featuring prominently (Dinku & Yap, 2023). The government has promised 100,000 new jobs in western Sydney over the next five years, while Labor was promised to reinvigorate the local manufacturing sector and expand TAFE's (Knox & Ingold, 2023). Australian Bureau of Statistics data for January 2023 reveal that the national unemployment rate increased to 3.7 per cent, and the underemployment rate remained at 6.1 per cent. Unemployment grew despite an increase in part-time jobs, which highlights the importance of increasing the quantity and quality of jobs available.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the labour market in NSW was tough for young people. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated labour market problems for young people across Australia, and by several measures, young people in NSW have been the hardest hit, with more than 80,000 youth jobs lost in the 2020 lockdown and 96,000 in 2021, the highest numbers in the country (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). Youth unemployment in NSW was worsened so dramatically by COVID-19. Official statistics show that the impact of the pandemic on employment was worse for young women than for young men, with the lockdowns in 2021 causing employment to drop by 43,000 for young women and 31,000 for young men across NSW (ABS, Labour Force Survey, 2023).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both Australian state and federal governments implemented stringent measures, including lockdowns and the closure or restriction of various industries. While these public health measures were crucial in controlling the spread of the virus, they had severe socio-economic consequences on young migrant workers. During the pandemic, international students were excluded from the Australian government's financial support schemes. In the Australian context, the economic fallout from the pandemic disproportionately affected migrants and international students (Wootton, 2020). This policy decision affected their temporary visa status, lack of citizenship rights, and precarious position in the labor market (Coffey, Cook, Farrugia, Threadgold, & Burke, 2021). For many Bangladeshi students, the sudden loss of employment not only meant financial hardship but also brought them to the brink of homelessness and food insecurity. By examining the challenges faced by Bangladeshi students in securing income during lockdowns, this study investigates whether prior skill training played a role in mitigating joblessness or enabling alternative forms of employment, such as remote or home-based work.

Research Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant job losses, particularly affecting young Bangladeshi migrants and international students in New South Wales. This article analyzes the role of skilled development through technical training in reducing poverty and facilitating employment opportunities among young Bangladeshi migrants and students. The study conducted interviews with 23 young Bangladeshi youth residing in the NSW region of Australia. The study finds 12 youths lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic from the service sector. The pandemic also created opportunities for those equipped with technical education, as evidenced by 15 out of 23 participants who engaged in online service sectors during this period. Those possessing skill and expertise actively sought alternative employment avenues, showcasing the potential of technology skills in navigating economic challenges. Evidence suggests that access to technical training improves employability for disadvantaged groups (ABS, Labour Force Survey, 2023). The NSW government has introduced innovative policies like the fee-free Smart and Skilled program to address these challenges and align training with labour market needs. Youth who possessed technical expertise were better equipped to navigate the job market, with 12 of them managing to secure part-time work. Despite the advantages afforded by digital skills, nine youths still encountered significant obstacles in securing part-time work. Along with a lack of sufficient skills, Language proficiency barriers also increase the challenges of Bangladeshi youth unemployment.

The government provided targeted financial support to young migrants who lost their jobs or faced economic hardship due to the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, young migrant Bangladeshi students in Australia received significant support from the government to alleviate financial hardship caused by job losses and economic disruptions. This support included expanded access to income assistance programs like JobSeeker Payment and the Coronavirus Supplement. The JobSeeker Payment, previously known as Newstart Allowance, is a government welfare payment designed to support individuals who are unemployed and actively seeking work. Young migrant Bangladeshi students who lost their jobs during the pandemic could apply for the JobSeeker Payment to help cover living expenses such as rent, utilities, and groceries. Young migrant Bangladeshi students who were eligible for the JobSeeker Payment also received the Coronavirus Supplement as an additional source of income, further bolstering their financial resilience during challenging times. Among 23 participants 06 were eligible for the JobSeeker Payment and Coronavirus Supplement. They found this support as lifesaving and beneficial for their financial resilience during challenging times. It enabled their access to remote job opportunities in various industries such as tech support, food and service delivery, digital marketing, freelance work, and online training and tutoring. ICT education initiatives contributed to an estimated 20% increase in the employability of young individuals in NSW during the pandemic. Technical skills and expertise empowered an estimated 15% of young people to pursue digital entrepreneurship and create their own online businesses or startups. With the surge in online job opportunities among 23 participants, seven Bangladeshi students launch own digital businesses, through the e-commerce platform, app development, and online consulting program. It helped them to plan and pursue entrepreneurship despite economic challenges. Six young individual express their gratitude to the government cash incentives, fee free training program and it enhance their employability and increase adaptive capacity to evolving job market demands, opening doors to new career opportunities. Two university researchers who had plan to explore online networking received support to participate in online learning programs, webinars, and virtual networking events. Technical education not only expands the knowledge and skills of overseas student youth in NSW but also helps in building valuable professional connections. They are optimistic about leveraging

this training for future employment prospects, recognizing the importance of networking and skill acquisition in securing meaningful employment opportunities in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the lives of the 23 participants in this study, leading them to a deeper understanding of life and the importance of resilience. They shared that the stress of the pandemic taught them valuable lessons about living more intentionally and ensuring their fitness to survive. Now, they spend every single dollar wisely, a stark contrast to their pre-pandemic habits where they were less calculative with their living expenses. Two participants experienced the tragic loss of a friend due to the frustration of joblessness, which underscored their previous lack of awareness regarding mental wellbeing. This loss has made them more conscious and proactive about the mental health of their peers. They now prioritize checking in on their friends and ensuring that they are coping well, understanding that mental wellbeing is as crucial as physical survival. Among 23 participants, 10 students pursued short-term vocational and professional ICT-based courses aimed at enhancing their skills to find new job opportunities. Five were high school students who pursued ICT courses to improve their future job prospects. Another five students were enrolled in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) centers, taking short-term professional courses to enhance their employability. The remaining 13 were college and university students. These college and university students received formal ICT training as part of their higher education curriculum. Eleven students who received professional training found it easier to apply for jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six students started their online businesses after their training. They worked hard and made profits by delivering food parcels and selling clothes online. However, as competition grew, four students closed their businesses in 2022. They stopped due to reasons like returning to their studies and dealing with fraud and registration issues in online business. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 22% of the students faced severe hardships, with two high school students (9%) becoming helpless after their parents died in 2020 and 2021. These students had to postpone their studies for two sessions and were uncertain about finding jobs, eventually completing their ICT courses and starting casual online freelancing. Additionally, 13% of the students, including three university and college students, struggled to arrange living expenses after their parents lost jobs or faced business losses. These students also had to postpone their studies for a couple of semesters due to financial difficulties. 25% of young Bangladeshi in NSW benefited from the diverse skill enabling them to explore multiple career paths and job opportunities. Among 9 female participants, 6 get training on aged care and certificate courses to equip themselves for future challenges. Among them 5 received their desired part-time and casual job. In the Australian context, the impact of COVID-19 has been disproportionately severe on young Bangladeshi migrants. Although some students have had the opportunity to work from home, balancing care with work has been challenging.

Conclusion

Young Bangladeshi students face a range of intersecting inequalities connected with gender, citizenship status, student status, and labor market demand. During the pandemic, Australian state and federal governments responded by closing or restricting the operation of industries where these students commonly worked on a casual or part-time basis, offering no material support to international students. The closure of workplaces during the pandemic led to widespread unemployment. This unemployment caused significant stress among Bangladeshi migrants. Participants reported that their household income was reduced to half due to the pandemic, making it difficult to manage with a single income earner in the family. The study finds that the pandemic has neglected the experiences of NSW youth, especially Bangladeshi students, placing them in economically disadvantaged positions. Governmental responses to the pandemic have made these

students uniquely vulnerable, exacerbating their precarious labour conditions. Migrant students experienced significant hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic across various areas. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened the vulnerabilities of migrant students in Australia, especially those from Bangladesh. The loss of part-time work and reduced family support led to severe financial hardship, while the shift to online learning created further academic and emotional challenges. Excluded from early government aid, many students felt neglected and unsupported. Although later assistance from the NSW Government provided some relief, it was limited and uneven. Students with technical skills managed the crisis more effectively, highlighting the importance of practical training. Financial hardship was a major concern, as many lost part-time jobs or had family support reduced, leading to difficulties in affording necessities, including rent and food. The shift to online learning exacerbated academic challenges, particularly for those lacking access to reliable internet or suitable study environments. Limited access to government support and welfare programs left many migrant students vulnerable and without adequate assistance. These compounded difficulties highlighted the need for targeted support measures to address the unique challenges faced by migrant students during such crises.

The experiences of young Bangladeshi migrants suggest that they had required urgent need for inclusive labor protections and support systems to survive. Australian government have successfully handled the health issues. However, economic suffering due to lockdown has affected all sorts of Australians, including Bangladeshi migrants. The financial support of NSW Government later helped the students to overcome the situation. Those with technical training have handled the situation more practically. that recognize and respond to the intersecting vulnerabilities of international students during global emergencies.

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