

## International Students' Experience in U.S. Higher Education

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the challenges international students face while they pursue their higher education in U.S. universities. The qualitative, semi-structured interviews provided three themes: 1) academic challenges, 2) non-academic challenges, and 3) strategies for success. A sample of 15 international students at a selected U.S. public university were interviewed about their experience of university study, the barriers they faced, and how they had coped with these challenges. This research was motivated by two major research questions: 1) What challenges do international students face at U.S. universities? 2) What do international students do to be successful academically? The findings of this study indicated that the majority of international students face academic and non-academic challenges, including the language barrier, social, and financial barriers. There is also evidence that the main obstacles that these students encounter is speaking fluently followed by academic writing, and findings of this study suggest that there needs to be an additional focus on methods to improve the experience of this population in their academic life.

**Keywords:** international students, challenges, U.S. higher education, academic life.

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### Introduction

Recently, educators have become more concerned about international students' issues and success in higher education. International students comprise 5.5% of the students population in higher educational institutions throughout the U.S. (Bastrikin, 2020). According to the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2019), there were 1,095,299 international students in the U.S. during the 2018/2019 academic year. To highlight the growth in these figures, there were 134,959 international students in the U.S. in 1970 compared to 547,867 international students in 2000/2001 and over a million international students in 2016/2017 (Barta et al., 2020; Koh, 2002). The main destination countries for international students are the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Australia, with the U.S. as the leading country. The leading country in education that attracts students from all over the world is the U.S. (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017). Of these students, the majority are from China (accounting for around 32%), followed by Indian students (13%) and South Korean students (6%) (Barta et al., 2020). UNESCO (2019) estimates that there 5.3 million international students in total with the U.S. having 1.1 million in the U.S. in 2018, 1.3 million in Australia in 2017, 572,415 in Canada in 2017, and 458,520 in the United Kingdom in the 2017/2018 academic year. Therefore, there are approximately a million international students in the U.S., all originating from Asian and Middle Eastern countries.

The challenges that confront these students are increasing. A lack of language proficiency is one such challenge besides intellectual and emotional issues such as cultural shock, homesickness, and high expenses. These students come from

different backgrounds, various cultures and they are multilingual students. The more educators know about challenges international students face in U.S. universities, the better experience they will have, and consequently the quality of education provided for those students will improve. It is important to understand international students' academic needs to make them achieve more, learn better, and gain the maximum benefits from their experience. This study highlights the challenges facing international students at U.S. universities with the purpose of facilitating services for international students to ensure they are better able to cope with the difficulties they may face as international students.

### **Significance of the Study**

The contribution of international students to the U.S. is tremendous and their contribution extends beyond the economic realm to social, religious, and cultural aspects. In monetary terms, these contributions to the U.S. economy amount to more than \$44.7 billion (IIE, 2019). Besides, it is important to look at the significance of these students in terms of their contribution to the development of higher education in the U.S. and the eventual development of intellectual property. Han et al. (2013) asserted that a third of all postgraduate students in the STEM areas in the U.S. are international students who will eventually graduate to become faculty members and determine the course of the programs they are teaching. Most importantly, these are students who will go on to continue researching various scientific breakthroughs that have downstream contributions to the U.S.'s GDP. Put another way, without their international students, U.S. universities and technology companies will lose their scientific edge in terms of inventions, publications, and intellectual property.

Closely linked to the scientific contribution of international students, the literature has also noted the contribution of international students in creating iconic companies that have gone on to have international significance even outside the U.S. Indeed, Lenzner (2013) makes the bold claim that 40% of the most successful U.S. international companies were founded by immigrants. Anderson (2016) observed that 21 of the 87 privately held U.S. companies valued at \$1 billion or more they reviewed had

a founder who first came to the United States as an international student. Some of these organizations have become global brands outgrowing their startup status. Additionally, the founders of some extremely prominent global brands, including PayPal, Google, and WhatsApp, were founded or partially founded by immigrants, thus highlighting the significance of international students not only in terms of the financial contribution to the US economy but also in establishing businesses that have gone on to become global brands. International students contributed to their host countries economically, scientifically, and culturally. An understanding of this student population's experience will provide better services and thus encourage more of them to study in the U.S.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An exploration of adult transition theory is appropriate since this study examines the experiences of international students in host universities (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Schlossberg defined the transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Evans et al., 2010). An adult transition is classified as anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents, and international students experience one or more types of transition when transitioning to U.S. higher education. This theory is appropriate in this research since international students may view their experience in U.S. higher education as a transition to a new university life. Nancy K. Schlossberg (1981) introduced the transition theory in her article *A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation in the Counseling Psychologist* journal; this theory was initiated by Schlossberg because a “need existed to develop a framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and aid them in connecting to the help they needed to cope with the ‘ordinary and extraordinary process of living’” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 213). Accordingly, this theory provides a theoretical foundation to better understand the adult transition and coping strategies that can assist students who experience a transition in a host university. The adult transition theory asserts that each individual views the transition differently since their ability to adapt will differ from one student to another. According to Goodman et al., there are four major factors

in managing adults' transition (known as the 4S factors): situation, self, support, and strategies. Each of the 4S factors impacts international students' experience during their pursuit of higher education.

### **Literature Review**

International students are one of the most underrepresented groups of students (Berry, 1997; Wang et al., 2012). Studies have shown that there are over 800,000 international college students in the U.S. (Snell & Zhou, 2015), and these individuals often experience many challenges while studying abroad (Andrade & Evans, 2009). One of the major challenges that international students face in the U.S. is language proficiency, which is essential in communicating with professors and fellow students in an academic and cultural setting markedly different from what they are used to (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015). Studies have shown that there is a correlation between students' success and level of language proficiency (Stoyhoff, (1997); indeed, Hofmann (2010) found that international students who spend two years or more in host countries experience less stress compared to those who have resided for a shorter time.

In terms of non-academic challenges compared to their peers, Akanwa (2015) highlighted several issues that international students encounter such as cultural barriers, limited support services, pedagogical challenges, financial challenges for those without a full scholarship, and having to renew visas and remain legal in the U.S. In her study "Factors affecting international students' transition to higher education institutions in the United States" (Kwon, 2009) found that the main fear that international students expressed was the financial pressure (90%), followed by the fear of failing (36%), the fear of not making friends (7%), and homesickness (6.1%). Studies have also shown that the Office of International Students (OIS) has developed various world hospitality programs and established better counselling services (Kwon, 2009). International students face challenges in trying to leverage the university resources to overcome these problems, for instance their social and cultural isolation and their attempts to integrate into other groups and social activities within the campus (Alsahafi & Shin, 2017).

Stress has been reported as one of the problems most likely to impact international students. In their study entitled “Chinese International Students' Academic Stressors in the United States”, Yan and Berliner (2009) identified the most stressful aspects of international students' lives in the United States: first, students' lack of proficiency in the English language (Evans & Morrison, 2011; second, the high level of motivation to achieve success (Alsaahfi & Shin, 2017); and finally, Chinese students' interaction with faculty because their hierarchical society means they are more sensitive to evaluation and feedback. Within this study, international doctoral students also reported feeling marginalized while working in an unfamiliar academic environment; the diverse cultural backgrounds of these international students affected their attitudes towards open criticism. According to Wang and Li (2011), international students, whose cultures avoid open criticism and critical comments, find it difficult to respond to the feedback of supervisors, highlighting the impact of the feedback provided to international students by professors. A final important point to make is that negative comments about international students' home countries isolate them from the learning environment (Lee & Rice, 2007).

### **Research Questions**

The main research questions that guided this study are: 1) What challenges do international students face at U.S. universities? 2) What do international students do to be successful academically?

### **Methodology**

#### *Research Design*

The research uses a qualitative research method using a semi-structured interview design. This method was appropriate because it provided in-depth information and access to aspects of a phenomenon that were not observable (Creswell, 2012). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants who voluntarily took part in the study. A semi-structured method with an open framework allows for more elaboration, and the researcher also asked participants probing questions when needed (Patten, 2002, p. 153).

#### *Research Site and Participants*

A volunteer sample of 15 international students from different countries was obtained by meeting people at an event that was held at the OIS. Criteria for selecting the participants include: 1) at least one year's experience in a U.S. higher educational institution; 2) non-native speakers of English; and 3) an age range from 23 to 35 years. Participants' names were pseudonymous (S1, S2, S3, etc.) to maintain confidentiality. Interviews were face-to-face, and by phone. Each interview took between 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were from different nationalities: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, Indonesia, Korea, India, Mexico, and China. They were seven males and eight females aged 23 to 35, and they were students from Nursing, Education, Business, and Engineering Colleges.

The study was conducted in a public U.S. university located in California with an enrollment of more than 35,000 students. Within this population, there are more than 2,000 international students from around 100 different countries studying in Art, Media and Communications, Health and Human Development, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Science and Mathematics, and Education. Other information about the setting or characteristics of the institution is not revealed for the purpose of confidentiality and privacy.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

<b>Pse udo nym ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>First language</b>
S1	Female	25	South Korea	Korean
S2	Male	23	China	Chinese
S3	Male	28	China	Chinese
S4	Female	31	Vietnam	Vietnam
S5	Male	26	Saudi Arabia	Arabic

S6	Female	27	Mexico	Spanish
S7	Male	33	Indonesia	Indonesian
S8	Male	31	Saudi Arabia	Arabic
S9	Male	29	Saudi Arabia	Arabic
S10	Female	26	South Korea	Korean
S11	Male	33	India	Urdu
S12	Female	27	Saudi Arabia	Arabic
S13	Female	25	United Arab Emirates	Arabic
S14	Female	29	India	Urdu
S15	Female	23	China	Chinese

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and all interviews were transcribed manually by an outside professional transcriber. Data was coded systematically to identify themes and to produce patterns and theoretical explanations from the in-depth interviews. After several careful readings of all transcripts, major themes and categories were identified. The researcher then highlighted keywords and sentences, along with merging codes into broader themes. Manual coding was used to ensure consistency, and subsequently all participants reviewed the transcription of interviews to check for accuracy.

The interview protocol invited the discussion to include international students' experiences at U.S. higher educational institutions, their expectations, and the challenges they faced. Participants were also asked about the services provided for international students, how often they use them, and what more could be done to enhance these services.

Following the transcription of the interview data, the researcher created a coding scheme to break up the data for further analysis before asking a colleague to review the transcripts and use

the coding scheme to code the data to ensure its reliability. Using an external auditor and peer debriefing helped to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

### *Limitations*

Since the study was conducted only in one specific region with a small number of participants, the results may not be generalized. However, it is recommended that further research efforts take place in this field to obtain more reliable results.

### **Findings**

Through this qualitative study, the researcher describes the experiences of international students in the U.S. The participants resided in the U.S. for at least one year. Only four participants hold bachelors' degrees and 11 have masters' degrees, and they originate from different countries. Many interviewees had received a full covered scholarship sponsored by their governments.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Academic Challenges	Language Participation in class Writing Students' expectations Professors Grades Working harder
None-Academic Challenges	Social life Budget cuts Financial support
Strategies for Success	ISO Resources on campus

Table 2. Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes for the Study

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is the academic barriers, which can be a significant challenge for the majority of international students. These students come from different countries, and they speak English as a second language, potentially causing issues for students in the first years of their academic life. Even though all students will have passed the language proficiency requirements before attending university, their potentials and skills vary on an individual basis; indeed, many students view language as the most prominent barrier they have encountered while pursuing their education in host universities. One interviewee revealed:

English is one of the main challenges. It is the language barrier. Some of us came to the United States with different levels of English ability. For example, one of my friends, who is from Korea, it is kind of hard for him to speak, and sometimes it is really hard for us to understand.

One of the participants mentioned that problems with language forced one of his classmates to drop out of university and return home because he failed to achieve an acceptable proficiency level. He stated:

I knew someone three years ago, who used to work in Health Administration from India. He was very poor in English. He found it difficult to attend class and talk to people around him. So, he ended up dropping the classes and went back to India because of language difficulty.

The English language is clearly a substantial obstacle for many international students during the adjustment to life in a new country.

Class participation was evidently a challenge for some of the participants, especially in their first semesters, while others did not feel that it was a barrier. Language is the most important tool of communication; students express their thoughts, views, and beliefs to their professors and classmates in discussions in and out classes. Approximately half of the study participants found that class participation was not a challenge for them even though they were not used to participating in discussions in their home countries; rather, they viewed discussions allowing expression as a unique feature in the U.S. teaching style. In the U.S., students are given

more chances and freedom to express themselves and their ideas with no restrictions. Therefore, students think critically and exchange experiences with their professors and colleagues, which increases the intellectual and psychological connectedness between the two parties. Outlining this point, one student commented: "Never, I started learning English when I was a kid. So, I don't face any problem in class participation. Just the first semester was a little difficult for me because I was not familiar with the teaching style in the U.S., but otherwise, everything is good." Participants from Asia found discussion in class to be a regular academic challenge. In particular, participants from China believed that they felt shy when attempting to participate in the lectures, with one interviewee stating: "I think if you talk to professors like a person to person, it is kind of easy. But speaking my opinion out in class is challenging." Class participation can be challenging to varying degrees depending on the students themselves, their background, and their proficiency in English. For example, one student believed that "Chinese students are very shy, and they don't like to talk about what they really think. But Americans' thinking is really straight, they will talk about what they think." Another student further explained how class participation is a challenge for Asian students: "Yes, I mean it depends on their ability to speak. Like I am from Indonesia, and students from Asia are kind of shy. We, from Korea, Japan, and China, don't have the courage to speak out."

Another common obstacle is academic writing, which requires a high level of proficiency to express ideas in a concise and clear manner. All the interviewees confirmed that academic writing is a major challenge for them as a large portion of the requirements in the courses depend heavily on writing, especially for master's and doctoral students. More than half of the participants from Indonesia, India, Korea, and Saudi Arabia indicated that academic writing is a barrier since they need to edit and proofread their assignments constantly before submission; however, few participants in this study believed that Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the U.S. provide sufficient help to improve their academic writing skills especially if a student was not well-prepared back home. For example, a participant shared the following: "IEPs are not enough."

A master's program requires a high level of wiring skill, and you have to be perfect." Half of the participants asserted that they hardly proofread their essays because there simply are not enough resources on campus available for international students. Indeed, one student who proofreads her assignments with the tutor at the International and Exchange Student Center (IESC) suggested:

Some services are good, and others are not. I went to the IESC for the writing center for four to five times, it was not so good. After the appointment, I could still find so many mistakes. But tutors in the international office are very good. I prefer to deal with tutors at the international office rather than the writing center at the OIS. I have a problem as this semester, they have just two days – Monday and Wednesday. This is a little bit hard because two days are not enough. If I have an assignment, I am stuck with these two days. Also, in the writing center, no matter if I have one page or seven pages, they give me 30 minutes and I think it is not enough at all.

Similarly, the researcher observed that students who visited the writing center more than once were not encouraged to go there again. These students believed that consultants did not proofread their essays or help them to be better writers. It can therefore be asserted that the writing center is not helpful for international students. Students are allowed to visit the writing center once a week and consultants usually review no more than two pages during each half hour visit. This is a challenge for students who do not have enough time and want to review their essays of ten pages or more for instance. Students need more support and help to enhance their writing skills and proofread their assignments.

In contrast, students from India, China and Vietnam indicated that writing is not a challenge for them because they were well prepared for writing in English in their home countries. None of these individuals visited the writing center or saw the tutor proofreading their assignments during their studies, with one stating: "No problem in writing too because we studied English in my home country for more than fourteen years." Another said: "Writing yes, it can be difficult because sometimes the way we

write, the ideas, the words, and the language we use is a little different. Those who are not good in English can have problems.” An interesting note is one student who thought that writing is not a difficulty, not because he is excellent at writing but because of his Business major as this course requires a higher proportion of presentations rather than writing.

A large number of participants have expectations regarding the mechanism and method of studying in the U.S., which is different from studying in their home countries. The majority of interviewees believed that the education system in their home countries is different and more complicated compared to the U.S, with one intimating: “I think the whole education system in my county is different. In China, the teacher is only talking, and we listen but here it is totally different. Students need time to get used to it.” Additionally, students expect that professors in the U.S. may distinguish between international students and American students; according to the interviewees, these professors have standards and they do not differentiate between international students or non-international students, meaning there is no lowering of standards to meet students’ potentials and international students have to make greater efforts to achieve these standards.

One of the significant findings is that some professors grade international students exactly on the same scale as their native speaking peers. Indeed, one participant commented: “We have to be similar to the native American speakers because professors say there is no difference between international or American students. They deal with students equally in grades, projects, or assignments. This is the biggest challenge for me.”

Studying in a non-native language a major challenge for international students since they believe that they have to spend more time studying and preparing for classes compared to their native speaking peers. One student disclosed:

It is hard. It is even like I am doing extra work rather than focusing on my courses and my materials. I am working on my writing skills, speaking skills. Even if I have a presentation, I focus on practice more than material, and

what I am going to say. So, it is not easy, but I am trying to do my best.

Another area explored in this research is other non-academic challenges that can affect the participants' academic life in host universities. Some of these challenges are social or emotional while others are mainly economic issues. It is important to consider these challenges on an equal basis compared to academic challenges because they are major factors that impact students' success at U.S. institutions. For instance, participants indicated that the budget cut affected them more than other non-international students since there were not enough classes offered, thus preventing them from graduating on time. Additionally, some participants reported that finding a job on campus was a challenge, ultimately seeking help from IESC to find a job. One interviewee succinctly explained:

But now I want to know something like how to find a job. But they (IESC) tell me that you can find one on the internet. I came here to talk to someone, not to a machine, I pay a lot of money. I don't get what I want. I went to the career center, but they told me to apply online and I did but I could not find anything. I have a lot of limits.

However, the lack of information led these students to the office that was not in charge of hiring students; the career center is designed to help students to find part- or full-time work.

Within this study, the participants suggested that an increased number of diverse festivals and events that represent other foreign countries on campus would help to increase awareness. As an example, one interviewee stated that the university should:

Celebrate all festivals of all countries. The only lack I feel compared to other schools that my friends are in. They have big huge festival celebrations such as Eid or Diwali, or any festival around the world which is quietly celebrated. That's lacking in my university, so there is less interaction among international students.

It is important to show some cultural and social events from countries around the world in order to allow students to display their national events and heritage on campus. By understanding those

students' needs and expectations, U.S. universities will help them to learn, grow, develop, and succeed.

To be successful academically, the participants in this study suggested paying attention to what professors say in class, attend classes on time, complete all required assignments, work in group projects, participate in class, and ask professors for help when it is necessary. They believed that spending more time studying and preparing for classes is important to succeed. Furthermore, some participants suggested proofreading all assignments before submitting them. They mentioned that collaborating with classmates as well as managing time and stress is also a significant aspect of achieving success. In general, the participants were satisfied with the services available for them at their university.

### **Discussion**

Based on the findings of the study, even though U.S. institutions require a high level of proficiency in English language tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, or PTE it is obvious that the major barrier for international students is the English language. Gaining a degree from a U.S. institution requires proficiency in English language comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. The findings of this study are consistent with Wu et al. (2015) and Stoyloff (1997) with regards to identifying the English barrier as a common obstacle for international students.

It was not surprising that the level of stress was particularly high among international students. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature's consensus that there are concerning levels of academic stress for the majority of international students (Hofmann, 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Alshafi & Shin, 2017; Evans & Morrison, 2011). These students come from different backgrounds and cultures to obtain a degree from the U.S., and to achieve this goal these students undergo different levels of stress because of the changes to the learning process and teaching style. Students need time to be able to cope with these difficulties. The need to transition is a psychological issue and it is reasonable to take a little time to be able to adapt and deal with these challenges based on individual personalities and their ability to cope.

This result can be related to the research on international students to identify the most stressful aspects of their lives in the United States conducted by Yan and Berliner (2009). These authors found that interaction with faculty was a severe challenge for their participants because of their hierarchical society, which meant that they were extremely sensitive to the professors' evaluation and feedback (Yan & Berliner, 2009).

Surprisingly, the findings of this study are not in accord with a number of studies that confirmed that international students face a cultural shock as only one participant experienced a "cultural shock" during his first year at the university. The world has become a global village. Students come to the U.S. with a preconceived notion of the culture and background of the host country.

The participants asserted that the services available for international students on campus were helpful and were appreciative of what their host university has done for them. They all enjoyed studying at university and found the IESC helpful and supportive, especially with regards to documentation and advising. In addition, the tutoring at the IESC has been described as excellent and helpful, providing an excellent choice for students who did not like visiting the writing center and wanted to proofread their assignments or those who wanted to improve their speaking skills. U.S. universities facilitate many services for international students on campus, and they care about their students and want them to succeed academically.

The experiences of international students are undoubtedly special and unique. Nonetheless, if these students have gone through a few difficulties, it does not mean that students will fail; rather, it is part of the learning and adapting process. Indeed, the participants within this study felt grateful for having such an opportunity to study in the U.S. due to the prestige associated with the country's education system.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Based on this study, to enhance the experience for international students, the researcher suggests the following: 1) additional attention needs to be paid to enhancing the services provided for international students based on their needs on a

constantly changing basis; 2) more consultants should be provided for international students as this will enhance their proficiency in writing and speaking; 3) non-credit courses should be offered in English language and communication skills should be provided for international students during their first semesters in order to help them cope with the oral language difficulty and improve communication; and finally 4) further research on this topic is needed.

In summary, this study revealed that international students face many barriers while they pursue their higher education in the U.S. Studying abroad is beneficial for both students and host universities as those students play a key role in developing their communities at many different levels. A deeper understanding of the experience of this group of students will contribute to providing them with better services and improving their educational and cultural experience during their studies, which they will most likely carry with them after they return home.

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**Appendix: Interview Protocol.**

1. Tell me a little about yourself.  
Do you enjoy studying here in the U.S.?
2. Tell me a little about your experience as international student?  
Probe: Why did you choose to study here?
3. What challenges do international students face in the U.S.?  
Probe: What about you?  
What about class participation is that challenging for you?  
What about writing?  
Can you tell a story of one of your challenges that you face!  
How did you deal with it!
4. How prepared do you feel for classes here?  
Probe: Is it easy or hard compared to home country?
5. What things do you do to succeed academically?  
Probe: Can you elaborate on that?
6. How would you describe the services available for international students at the university?  
Probe: Have you ever used these services?  
How often do you use these services?  
Name some of these useful services!  
In what way do you find it helpful?
7. If you recommend any changes to the services to international students, what would you suggest?
8. How do you feel about this interview? Is there any last thing would you like to add?