

The Transitional Experiences of Graduate Students Living and Studying in Atlantic Canada

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This study provides an overview of the challenges faced by international students at a university in the east coast of Canada while pursuing their graduate studies. It highlights the key challenges that international students encounter during their academic journey and the implications these challenges have on their overall experience and well-being. This qualitative study explores various aspects of the challenges faced by international students, including financial difficulties, cultural adjustment, health, accommodations, language barriers, mental health, climatic, food, daycare, and employment. It examines the impact of these challenges on students' academic performance, personal growth, and social integration. The findings of this research emphasize the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for international students. It calls for the development of comprehensive support programs, financial assistance options, academic support services, and mental health resources to address the specific needs and challenges faced by international graduate students. Most importantly, the services and support programs offered to the international students need to be assessed to evaluate to which measure the international students are benefited with them. Moreover, it helps to upgrade and make necessary changes to the programs and services better serve the needs of the international students. By understanding and addressing these challenges, the university can foster an inclusive and supportive educational environment that enables international students to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.

Keywords: international students, graduate studies, challenges, financial difficulties, language barriers, cultural adjustment, academic pressure, mental health

Introduction

International students continue to grow in number worldwide, prompting researchers to look for ways to make the study abroad experience more fruitful. International students are a valuable component of the internationalization process in schools, colleges, and universities across Canada, both in terms of bringing an international perspective and more diversity to the classroom. Their presence on campuses and within communities provides significant cultural, social, economic, and educational benefits.

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada manages the International Student Program and issues study permits to foreign nationals seeking study in Canada. The International Student Program is demand-driven. In 2019, there were close to 720,000 study permit holders in Canada (IRCC Minister Transition Binder 2021: International Students). In particular, international students bring international and intercultural perspectives to the classroom and the communities in which they live, which helps expand Canadians' views of the world.

Internationalization and globalization are a large part of the university discourse as institutions of higher learning attempt to make their campuses, programs, and services, and perhaps more importantly their students more culturally aware and responsive to international and global contexts. A diverse campus provides opportunities for students to learn how to live and work effectively with others different from themselves (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Social adjustment and satisfaction are also important factors to international student retention and success. The study focused on the challenges international students face with the ability to adjust to a new culture, the language, academia, and socialization with other students.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the different types of challenges faced by the graduate international students during their studies at this university in the East Coast Canada. This study enables the graduate international students to reflect on their own experiences and to identify whether, or not, those challenges influenced the success of their academic goals and social lives.

Statement of the Problem

International students come across many challenges while attending a foreign university since they are outside of the home country without their families, friends, and closed ones. Arthur (2004) discussed issues such as culture shock, alienation, and even simple things in daily life that may have a psychological impact on international students, which in turn may cause them to experience serious problems related to their academic and social experiences. International students are less likely to experience social and academic challenges if they have a good relationship with their academic advisor. International students are a part of both the academic and social community in the country where they live and study. That is why it is important to encourage international students to integrate into college activities (Lin & Scherz, 2014).

Research Questions

The study is guided by a general question and four subsidiary questions.

General research question: What are the challenges experienced by graduate international students during their studies at this East Coast Canadian University?

Subsidiary research questions:

1. What are the experiences and perspectives of the selected group of graduate international students while attending the university?
2. What are the needs and concerns of the selected group of graduate international students with regards to academic and social life?
3. What do the selected group of graduate international students report about their campus experiences?
4. What do the selected group of graduate international students report about the orientation program and other peer supportive programs held by the university?

Assumptions

1. Students have a number of challenges when doing graduate work in a foreign university.
2. Students are willing to talk about those various challenges.

Limitations

1. Participants may experience some limitations but not all that were discussed earlier.
2. This being a qualitative study, means that the survey results are not generalizable to the general population.

Review of Literature

For many international students, adjusting to a foreign land is not easy, as they face a variety of problems. Fostering the way of belonging is a crucial element in developing a campus community (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). A sense of belonging is formed through building relationships with institutional agents and peers (Smith, Gauld, Tubbs, & Correnti, 1997). After they arrive in the host country, international students often experience a loss of shared identity making transition difficult academically, personally, and socially (Bunz, 1997; Hayes & Lin, 1994).

International students frequently undergo a period of cultural adjustment, which can prove to be a demanding and overwhelming experience, especially when their own cultural background differs significantly. This adjustment period encompasses the acquisition of new social norms and communication patterns, acclimating to unfamiliar educational systems, and grappling with emotions of homesickness and isolation (Li et al., 2018).

Most international students report a few degrees of culture shock when they arrive and start their studies (Furnham, 1988; Olaniran, 1996; 1999; Selvadurai, 1992; Thomas & Althen, 1989). They appear to need time to get adjusted to the new cultural setting. Cultural shock might impact their studies as well; hence that shock is typically manifested as stress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness, rejection, and isolation (Oberg, 1960).

The cultural challenges faced by international students can impact their academic performance and overall well-being. These challenges can include differences in communication styles, values, and attitudes towards education, which can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Differences between students' expectations and the social and academic realities of a host institution can further complicate cultural adjustment (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Moreover, Yeh and Inman (2007) state, "International students reported experiencing feelings of loneliness, isolation, and homesickness, which were compounded by language barriers and cultural differences" (p. 107).

Friendship networks seem to be a critical thought about how well international students accommodate stress (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). "International students often experience a sense of dislocation or a feeling of being in-between cultures, because their cultural expectations and communication styles may differ from those of the host country" (Chirkov, Safdar, & de Guzman, 2018, p. 65).

International students encounter numerous cultural, linguistic, and social challenges when adapting to a new educational environment. These challenges can include difficulties with language proficiency, unfamiliar teaching styles, and cultural differences in classroom interaction and expectations (Yuan & Lee, 2014, p. 31). People who have a robust social network tend to regulate school life in their host country more quickly and effectively (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Schram & Lauver, 1988).

International students indicate a stronger preference for creating friends from the identical country or students from other nations over students from the host country (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Little is known about the extent to which international students are fulfilled with their experience, associated with peers and staff individuals, and take part in an assortment of other educationally deliberate exercises. Individual coping styles

and social networks of support are important influencers on how international students deal with stress and pander to the transition to their host country (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Zhao et al., 2005).

The level of cultural diversity or multiculturalism of an institution may influence an international student's choice to attend. Zhao et al. (2005) found that when the density of international students per total student population increases, they try to engage in more diversity related activities. Density may contribute to social isolation and an overcompensation on academics, whereas high density could contribute to an inordinate amount of socializing by members of some groups which can have an adverse effect on academic performance and social integration with domestic students (Zhao et al., 2005).

H. B. Tompson and G. H. Tompson (1996) claimed that the absence of a stable social support system had a notable impact on the level of comfort experienced by students in academic environments. It influenced their ability to address language barriers, adapt to daily norms and practices, and engage in informal classroom interactions. Dillon and Swann (1997) revealed that one of the major areas of insecurity for these students was their lack of confidence in their English language skills. This finding highlights the challenges faced by international students, particularly from East Asia, when it comes to acquiring proficiency in a foreign language.

Developing confidence and proficiency in academic English can require sustained effort and can affect international students' academic and social adjustment (Dillon & Swann, 1997; Senyshyn et al., 2000; H. B. Tompson & G. H. Tompson, 1996).

The lack of confidence in language skills is not limited to East Asian students. Senyshyn et al. (2000) referenced the work of H. B. Tompson and G. H. Tompson (1996) who found that international students enrolled in business programs also identified the lack of confidence in their language skills as a significant barrier to a positive adjustment experience. This suggests that international students across different disciplines and cultural backgrounds face similar challenges when it comes to language proficiency and the impact it has on their academic and social integration.

Poor English language proficiency limits the capacity of international students to be completely included in learning, and attempting to adjust to diverse dialect and slangs of the nearby mentors heightens the challenge for international students. Competency within the local dialect helps international students to begin social interaction, to discuss with college staff and workforce individuals, conjointly to settle down at their new places.

Failure to interact with local individuals may cause social shuns and miscommunication which can lead to need of social support (Chen, 1999). Halic, Greenberg, and Paulus (2009) conducted a study exploring the experiences of non-native English-speaking international students regarding language, culture, and identity in the context of their graduate studies. They employed a phenomenological approach to explore eight international graduate students' experiences. They concluded that the participants perceived English as both a barrier and a channel of access. They recommended that there is a need for educators who work with non-native English-speaking international students to address "not just the academic but also relational and affective issues" (p. 92). Workshops that specialize in essential scrutinizing, rundown and review, verbal presentations and composing offer help upgrade many challenges common to international students (Spencer, 2003).

In International Student Security, Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, and Forbes (2010) highlight the significance of clear instructions and explicit expectations in supporting international students' academic performance. They argue that universities should provide detailed guidelines and assessment criteria to help students understand the expectations and requirements of their coursework. Clear instructions reduce ambiguity and enhance students' understanding, allowing them to better engage with the content and demonstrate their knowledge.

Similarly, Carroll and Ryan (2005) discuss the importance of language support resources for international students in the edited volume *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. They suggest that universities should provide English language support programs, such as language courses, writing workshops, and conversation clubs, to help international students improve their language skills and bridge any gaps that may exist between their current proficiency and the academic English required for their studies. These language support resources create a supportive environment that encourages students to develop their language abilities and feel more confident in their academic pursuits.

Kosheleva (2015) at the National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University focused on 60 students from various countries, including China, Vietnam, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, and Cote d'Ivoire. The research aimed to explore stress indicators among these international students, with a specific focus on climate conditions. Approximately 24.4% of the respondents expressed fear or anxiety related to the climate conditions in the host country. This suggests that a significant portion of the students experienced stress or discomfort due to the unfamiliar or challenging climate they encountered during their studies.

Failure to adjust to a new environment will cause international students to experience psychological symptoms (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000) such as feelings of inferiority, confusion, homesickness, loneliness, uneasiness, anger, isolation, misplaced of characters, sleep deprivation, low inspiration, incapable to focus and lacking of self-confidence. Some called themselves "homeless" or not having any comfort they can call their domestic or put to live though being a student. A coordinated student-centered values approach to campus data, student services, referrals and student systems will upgrade a student's capacity to either self-manage personal issues or get to the proper help/services to help in addressing issues before they got to be issues. A few students succeeded in their studies, but some became physically sick, greatly on edge and distressed (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013), or turned to drugs or alcohol (Presley, Meilman, & Leichter, 2002).

International student administrations regularly offer assistance to international students with travel, introduction, money-related issues, enrollment, lodging, counseling, and (particularly) fruitful adjustment to the campus and community (Komives et al., 1996; Schuh et al., 2010). Internationalization Offices have the capacity to give advice and guide the international students. Many international student organizations exist on most campuses. At some institutions this office may be connected with academic issues of students or an international programs division; in any case of where the service is found officially, student issues have a major part in international student success (Komives et al., 1996, pp. 441-442).

Students, faculty, and administrators at post-secondary institutions realize and accept that students experience anxiety related to their studies. Faculties give related support for students encountering such uneasiness (Paden, 2012). Students frequently cover up more private issues, stress or uneasiness related to their funds, housing or difficult connections, regularly since of shame (Dwoskin, 2010) or fear of stigmatization, or jeopardizing their scholastic objectives (McLaughlin & Jones, 2009).

Some students lived with their families, whereas others chose to live alone or in shared accommodation. Some of the latter might have also experienced poverty, which means they had inadequate income for housing, food, clothing, and other essentials, and were living below the country's identified poverty income line (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008). While pursuing their education, international students are expected to pay for their tuition fees, accommodation, transportation, food, and other basic needs. Unfortunately, the high cost of living and rent in Canada can pose a significant financial burden on international students.

According to a report by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2019), “Affordability of housing and living expenses is a major challenge for international students in Canada, particularly those in larger urban centers, due to the high cost of living” (p. 7). The report goes on to state that the average cost of rent for international students in Canada is approximately CAD 800 to CAD 2,000 per month, depending on the location and type of accommodation. Due to the limited availability of affordable housing options, international students often struggle to find affordable and suitable housing, which can impact their academic performance and overall well-being.

A study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) found that high rental costs were a significant financial burden for international students in Ontario. Approximately one-third of international students reported spending more than 50% of their monthly income on rent and utilities (HEQCO, 2019). The cost of housing is a significant financial burden for many international students, and it can impact their academic performance, quality of life, and overall well-being. A University of Alberta report likewise associated higher housing costs with greater anxiety and stress among international students, with potential consequences for concentration and academic success (University of Alberta, 2018).

Tuition fees were high taking a large portion of a student’s “income” at the outset, and then there were living expenses on top of that including rent. According to Statistics Canada (2019), international students pay substantially higher tuition fees than Canadian students. In 2019/2020, the average tuition fee for international undergraduate students in Canada was CAD 29,714, compared with CAD 6,463 for Canadian undergraduate students.

Similarly, in 2019/2020, international graduate students paid an average of CAD 17,744 in tuition, compared with CAD 7,056 for Canadian graduate students (Statistics Canada, 2019). In 2020/2021, average graduate tuition increased to CAD 19,252 for international students and CAD 7,304 for Canadian students (Statistics Canada, 2020). These substantial differences in tuition costs can intensify financial pressure for international students, and financial and academic stressors may negatively affect their well-being and academic adjustment (Yan & Berliner, 2009).

High tuition fees can contribute to financial pressure and may compound the broader social and academic adjustment challenges experienced by international students (Mori, 2000; Yeh & Inman, 2007). For any individuals not working or working part time, and going to post-secondary institutions, their level of poverty multiplied (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2008).

The tradeoffs to pay for rent or food or for heightening tuition fees and books put huge weight on students living in poverty all through the school term (Urban Poverty Consortium of Waterloo Region, 2000). In spite of society and governments emphasizing that education may be a means to keep individuals engaged to find employment, the cyclical cuts in post-secondary education and increments in tuition fees have made things more regrettable for students over a long time. Strategies such as the “Transitions Services” instituted at DePaul Loop University in Illinois, assisted students during their years of study as well as after graduation when they had to pay back loans (McLaughlin & Jones, 2009). For Economic and Social Report of Canada (2021) states that over one-third of Canadian children aged 4 to 11 years regularly take part in a few frames of before- or after-school childcare, the foremost common sort being a before or after school program. Several studies have shown that newcomer families, including immigrants, refugees, and academic sojourners, have different socio-economic experiences than the native-born population (Beiser, 2005; Beiser et al., 2002; De Maio & Kemp, 2010; Newbold, 2009; Setia et al., 2011). These findings resound those of research on early childhood care, which recommend

that cooperation in early-years child care is lower among children from immigrant background in Canada and somewhere else (Cleveland & Forer, 2010; Kingsbury, Findlay, Arim, & Wei, 2021).

Many of the international student parents encounter role conflict, especially when they try to balance their parenting and academic responsibilities (Doyle et al., 2016; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). These parenting students often have difficulty in deciding which role to prioritize, causing feelings of inadequacy in performing their role as parents (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Such stressors can adversely affect their family's well-being and in turn impact the children.

Besides, these parents lack the benefit of extended family, as it is customary in traditional cultures that other family members often help parents look after the children. Thus, children of academic sojourners do not get the opportunity to spend time with their grandparents and other family members and miss socializing with other caring adults and peers (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). This may impact their children's well-being as it is important for children to learn social skills from other caring adults.

Some international student parents reported that their children often talk about the loss of leaving behind their home, family, and friends (Loveridge et al., 2018). To address this, many newcomer parents look for daycare services or playgroups for their 22 children. Access to childcare services allows both parents to work or engage in other activities (Doyle et al., 2016). It gives children a chance to make new friends and experience learning opportunities from other caring adults.

Many international students do not have sufficient economic resources to take their children to a language learning facility or a daycare due to the high cost of these services. Economic limitations are also tightly related to the quality of parental social resources and support available (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). In this case, children not only miss quality time with their parents but also miss the opportunity to meet new friends or caring adults due to limited parental income.

Finding affordable childcare has always been an issue for international student parents (Doyle et al., 2016; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). The childcare initiative is an outcome of a 2013 report developed by a University of Manitoba childcare working group that included student and faculty representatives, university administrators and on-campus childcare personnel (November 2013). The working group highlighted the child care needs of parents and identified the limited availability of on-and off-campus child care spaces (Friendly & Macdonald, 2014). It noted that,

Lack of childcare hampers recruitment and retention of new and existing faculty and staff...Childcare issues are a significant barrier for students with children and an important factor for their recruitment and retention... Indigenous student parents are particularly hard-hit by lack of quality, affordable childcare. Graduate and international student parent success is hampered by lack of childcare. (University of Manitoba Childcare Working Group, 2013, p. 12)

During their academic journey in Canada, international students encounter a range of challenges, and one other particular area of concern is related to food. International students, with their diverse cultural backgrounds, often face difficulties adapting to new culinary landscapes and unfamiliar dietary norms. These challenges include finding culturally appropriate food, sourcing ingredients for traditional meals, accommodating dietary restrictions or religious practices, and adjusting to different eating habits. Access to familiar and suitable food is essential for the overall well-being, physical health, and preservation of cultural identity among international students. Similar to immigrants in Canada, international post-secondary students may face acculturation and dietary acculturation challenges, which may hinder their ability to access preferred cultural or religious foods

(Aljaroudi et al., 2019). These challenges are influenced by factors such as limited familiarity with local foods and services (Booth & Smith, 2001; Calder et al., 2016; Chaparro et al., 2009).

Brown et al. (2010) indicated that the availability of food from a student's country of origin may alleviate feelings of anxiety and isolation. The study revealed that international post-secondary students encountered challenges related to food appropriateness, which pertains to the compatibility between the food options available and the students' preferences based on their religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009; Stewin, 2013). Many factors influence students' decisions to preserve familiar diets, including availability, time, budget, convenience, and taste preferences, which are shaped by cultural and religious identities. Cultural food items have been a significant challenge for students from non-European countries, some of whom traveled long distances to obtain preferred foods (Horacek & Betts, 1998). It is not only important to reduce hunger among international post-secondary students, but to do so by maintaining cultural identity with traditional foods, thus improving the acculturation experiences (Amos & Lordly, 2014; Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009; Power & Dietitians of Canada, 2005).

International students have the access for emergency food relief from the food bank located on campus. Food banks are unlikely to ensure food appropriateness (i.e., alignment with culture-specific foods), an important dimension of food insecurity, as they mainly distribute donated foods that are not always appropriate for culturally and ethnically diverse students, including international post-secondary students (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012).

International students encounter various hurdles, including cultural adaptation, language barriers, financial constraints, mental health issues, childcare, food and climatic changes. International students navigate a complex web of obstacles during their academic journeys. It is essential to recognize that these challenges are not insurmountable. Canadian institutions, policymakers, and support services have made significant strides in addressing these issues, aiming to create a more inclusive and accommodating environment for international students.

Research Approach

In this study a questionnaire approach was chosen to identify the challenges faced by the international students while doing their graduate studies in particular university. The participants responded to a series of open-ended questions that were sent via an email attachment; this allowed the participants' time to answer the questions at their own pace and in the setting of their choice without the presence of the principal researcher in order to reduce the impact of the researcher's presence. It is less obtrusive than a face-to-face interview; it eliminates interviewer bias; participants have more time to think about their responses and can respond at their own pace. The responses may not come out with their actual experiences and challenges. The participants may not feel comfortable in sharing their personal experiences with the researchers. Hence, the researchers decided to choose the questionnaire approach and make their responses anonymous to explore their real experiences and challenges faced while studying at this university.

Selection of Participants

The researchers contacted international students using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is selecting a nonrandom sample "because prior knowledge suggests it is representative, or because those selected have the needed information" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. G-6). This sampling method was used since the researcher

was seeking input specifically from the international students at a specific university. The sample consisted of one transgender student, male and female students, single students, student parents, new students, and senior students. Using personal contacts, the researcher got email addresses for the participants and sent an introductory email explaining the purpose of the study and asked if they would be interested in participating. Upon receiving replies from interested individuals, follow up emails were sent thanking participants for their interest with the consent form and questionnaire attached.

Data Analysis

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), data analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (p. 159). The researcher obtained 25 questionnaires each with 11 questions. To begin data analysis, 11 computer files were created containing all the responses to each of the 11 questions. The researcher then developed a coding system by reading each individual response three times and writing down words and phrases to summarize the main ideas of the response. These words provided a method of sorting the descriptive data such that material with similar ideas could be separated from the remaining data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The words and phrases were grouped based on common ideas, coded using letters and the researcher identified the theme that emerged from the data. For example, after reading each response to Question 1 three times, the researcher grouped all the common words and phrases, coded similar words and phrases using capital letters for example; S = stress and identified a number of themes that emerged from the data. All 11 questions were coded in the same manner, one at a time. Bogden and Biklen refer to this family of coding as perspectives held by subjects, “codes oriented towards ways of thinking all or some subjects share that are not as general as their overall definition of the situation but indicate orientations toward particular aspects of a setting” (p. 175).

Discussion

The experiences and perspectives of the selected group of graduate international students attending the university provided valuable insights into various aspects of their journey. The majority of the survey participants explore their experiences and perspectives related to financial challenges, cultural adjustment, healthcare, accommodation, language barriers, mental health, climatic conditions, food, daycare, and transportation. The selected group of graduate international students often have faced financial challenges. These participants discussed high tuition fees, living expenses, and rent as the main difficulties associated with financial challenges. Many students have stated that relying on personal or family funding to cover their educational and living costs, doing two or more jobs to earn more money while some participants have expressed concerns about borrowing money from friends and family were the strategies that they have used to overcome their financial challenges.

Some participants pointed out that it caused financial stress and impacted their overall well-being. Some of these elements are also present in the literature. Yan and Berliner (2009) conducted a study which revealed that the imposition of high tuition fees can result in elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and financial difficulties among international students. These challenges, in turn, have the potential to adversely affect their mental well-being and academic achievements. The substantial cost of tuition fees can intensify financial stress and compound the broader adjustment challenges experienced by international students (Mori, 2000; Yeh & Inman, 2007).

The survey participants highlighted that they are often burdened with higher tuition fees compared to domestic students. This disparity in tuition fees can create a sense of financial inequality and may lead to feelings

of unfair treatment among international students. They perceive that they are paying a higher price for their education, which can contribute to a sense of exclusion and frustration. This financial discrepancy can further exacerbate the challenges faced by international students, making it more difficult for them to afford their education and meet their living expenses.

International students have experienced a significant cultural adjustment when they arrive at the university. They may encounter differences in educational systems, teaching styles, and classroom expectations. Adapting to a new cultural environment, social norms, and making friends from diverse backgrounds can be both exciting and challenging. When students move to a new country, they often encounter cultural differences that can impact their daily lives, interactions, and overall sense of belonging. These challenges can manifest in various ways, including differences in social norms and customs, and adjusting to a new educational system.

According to the participants' responses, cultural adjustment problems manifested in various ways, including confusion, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, homesickness, and frustration. These experiences are consistent with research indicating that international students may experience loneliness, homesickness, social isolation, and other psychological difficulties while adjusting to a new cultural and educational environment (Mori, 2000).

Accessing healthcare services in a new country has been a concern for the selected group of international students. They have encountered problems navigating the healthcare system in, understanding health insurance requirements, and finding suitable healthcare providers. According to the survey results, limited access to healthcare is a significant challenge faced by many international students. When studying in a foreign country, students may encounter barriers that prevent them from easily accessing the healthcare services they need. These barriers were identified by the participants as unfamiliarity with the healthcare system, financial constraints, and the lack of appropriate insurance coverage. The lack of appropriate insurance coverage has been a major factor in accessing healthcare services.

Some international students have reported about comprehensive health insurance or insurance plans that have limited coverage or restrictions. This has resulted in challenges when seeking specialized care, mental health services, or preventive screenings. Without adequate insurance coverage, students may hesitate to seek medical help, leading to potential health complications and a negative impact on their overall well-being.

Finding suitable and affordable accommodation was a common challenge for graduate international students. Limited availability and high rental costs made it difficult to secure housing close to the university. Due to the limited availability of affordable housing options, international students often struggle to find affordable and suitable housing, which has impacted their academic performance and overall well-being.

Some students relied on shared accommodations or commuted longer distances, impacting their convenience and overall quality of life. After analyzing the data collected through the survey, the researcher found that students spent more than half of their monthly income on rent. This was consistent with the HEQCO (2019) finding that approximately one-third of international students spent more than 50% of their monthly income on rent and utilities.

Language barriers have posed challenges in academic and social contexts. International students may face difficulties in understanding lectures, participating in class discussions, and expressing themselves effectively. Adjusting to a new language and improving language proficiency takes time and effort, impacting their overall academic experience. This lack of confidence in English language skills is a significant challenge faced by

international students, as highlighted by Dillon and Swann (1997), H. B. Tompson and G. H. Tompson (1996), and Senyshyn et al. (2000). The data analysis helped to find out that by addressing these language challenges through targeted language support programs, English conversation clubs, groups or activities and creating an inclusive environment can contribute to the academic and social integration of international students and enhance their overall learning experience.

The mental health of international students is a critical concern. The stress of academic workload has been a main factor to mental health. The data analysis helped to find that excessive levels of academic stress can result in an “increased prevalence of psychological and physical problems like depression, anxiety, nervousness, and stress-related disorders”, which in turn can adversely affect academic results.

One effective way the participants have practiced to reduce mental stress is by breaking down larger academic goals into smaller, manageable tasks. By breaking it down into smaller components, they create a roadmap that allows for a more structured and less overwhelming approach. Setting specific milestones and deadlines for each task has given the participants a sense of progress and achievement.

Another successful strategy that has been adopted by the participants to overcome academic pressure was by talking to professors or instructors. Most of the participants reported that building a relationship with the professors, supervisors, or instructors is crucial for managing academic stress. They have been valuable resources who could provide guidance, clarification, and support for the participants. Professors are often understanding and willing to help students who show initiative and a genuine interest in their studies. Their insights and feedback can help alleviate stress and provide valuable guidance for academic success.

International students may experience challenges adjusting to the climate of their host country, particularly if it is significantly different from their home country. Extreme temperatures, seasonal changes, and unfamiliar weather patterns can impact their physical well-being and overall comfort. The majority of the participants have used weather forecast apps in their phones to check weather conditions and dressed in the suitable gear to overcome climatic challenges. Meanwhile they have reported that they had to spend more money purchasing winter clothes.

Survey results show that international students have experienced challenges related to food, including dietary preferences, availability of familiar ingredients, and cultural dietary restrictions. Adjusting to the local cuisine, finding affordable and suitable food options, and maintaining a healthy diet can be important considerations for their well-being. International students encountered challenges related to food appropriateness, which pertains to the compatibility between the available food options and the dietary preferences dictated by their religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. This issue has been highlighted in scholarly literature by researchers such as Pinstrup-Andersen (2009) and Stewin (2013).

For international students who have children, finding suitable and affordable daycare facilities is a major challenge. Balancing academic commitments with childcare responsibilities requires careful planning and access to reliable daycare services.

International students face a multitude of challenges when pursuing their education abroad. From language barriers to cultural adjustment, financial constraints to social integration, these hurdles can significantly impact their academic success and overall well-being. Therefore, the researcher was able to provide the following recommendations after considering the data analysis and conclusion to support and aim to create a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters their academic and personal growth.

Recommendations

Financial challenges have significantly impacted international students' well-being and academic progress. Universities should establish robust financial support systems, including scholarships, grants, and work-study opportunities specifically tailored for international students. They should expand more career opportunities on campus to gain more work experience that would help international students in their resumes to find more jobs and income. Providing access to financial advisors who can guide students on budgeting, managing expenses, and exploring part-time job opportunities can help alleviate their financial burdens.

Universities should offer comprehensive cultural orientation programs to help international students adapt to the new cultural environment. These programs can provide information about local customs, traditions, and social norms, as well as practical guidance on navigating daily life in the host country. Creating platforms for intercultural exchange, such as international student associations and cultural events, can facilitate interaction between domestic and international students, fostering understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

One of the primary challenges for international students is language proficiency. Universities should establish comprehensive language support programs to assist students in improving their language skills. This may include language courses, conversation partners, writing workshops, and language labs. Providing access to online resources, language software, and language exchange programs can further enhance students' language acquisition.

International students often experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and homesickness due to the pressures of studying abroad. Universities should prioritize mental health services, including counseling, support groups, and workshops, that cater to the unique needs of international students. Culturally sensitive mental health professionals who understand the specific challenges faced by international students can provide invaluable support.

Universities should ensure that health care services are easily accessible to international students. This includes providing clear information about available health services, their locations, operating hours, and contact details. Considering extended hours of operation of Wellness Center at this particular university or providing virtual health services can accommodate the diverse needs and schedules of international students.

Providing clear and comprehensive information about health insurance requirements and coverage for international students would support international students to overcome their health care challenges. Providing guidance on how to navigate the health insurance system, including the process for filing claims and accessing services and clear communication about the coverage and limitations of health insurance will help students make informed decisions about their healthcare needs.

Universities should offer comprehensive academic support services to help international students navigate the unfamiliar academic systems and expectations. This may include study skills workshops, tutoring programs, academic advising, and writing centers specifically geared towards international students. Providing resources and guidance on research methodologies, academic integrity, and citation styles can also help them succeed in their studies.

Securing suitable and affordable housing can be a major concern for international students. Universities should provide assistance in finding on-campus or off-campus housing options that meet international students' needs. Offering guidance on rental agreements, roommate matching services, and resources for understanding local housing laws can help alleviate their housing-related stress.

Faculty, staff, and domestic students should receive training on intercultural sensitivity and awareness. This will enable them to better understand and support the unique needs and experiences of international students. By fostering a more inclusive and welcoming environment, universities can create a sense of belonging and promote positive interactions among students from diverse backgrounds.

This university should establish feedback mechanisms to regularly assess the effectiveness of their support initiatives for international students. Hence this university has extended their services to support in many ways to international students, but according to this survey results some of the problems and challenges of international students have not yet been addressed. Therefore, by conducting surveys, focus groups, or individual feedback sessions university can gather input from students. Actively seeking student input and addressing their concerns will help refine and improve the support services provided.

Addressing the challenges faced by international students requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses language support, cultural integration, financial assistance, mental health services, academic support, housing assistance, and intercultural sensitivity. In conclusion, this researcher has articulated a number of recommendations, which should ameliorate many of the challenges international students are currently experiencing in their studies at the university. However, there may be some services which international students may not be cognizant of. This researcher, therefore, strongly suggests that a forum conducted by the Internationalization Office be set up during the first month of the academic year to inform students of a variety of services that are available to them. For example, the services the support programs can be emailed as an attachment to the newly accepted students as a welcome package to make the newcomers be guided and feel safe in a foreign country. By implementing these recommendations, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students, facilitating their academic success, personal growth, and overall well-being. It is crucial to recognize the invaluable contributions of international students and provide them with the necessary resources and support to thrive in their educational pursuits.

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