

# AGAINST ALL ODDS: SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON NONTRADITIONAL INTERNATIONAL LEARNERS PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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**ABSTRACT:** The decision to migrate to a foreign country with an unfamiliar educational system to pursue higher education as a nontraditional adult learner is a decision that is not taken frivolously. Despite the motivation and excitement coupled with such a journey, there are numerous unforeseen accompanying challenges from a socio-cultural perspective that can influence this experience and hence have a rippling impact on the learning process. This qualitative study explored the experiences of seven nontraditional international students that travelled to the United States to pursue higher education. Data were collected through structured interviews using convenience sampling. The study revealed that the major challenges experienced by international students from a socio-cultural perspective were a) Language and communication barriers, b) Acceptance and assimilation to social-cultural differences, c) Racial identity and associated stereotypes, and d) Networking (making friends). With regards to socio-cultural influences that impacted the learning process, the following themes emerged: a) Language barriers, b) Difference in the learning environment, and c) Support from faculty and classmates. The study contributes greatly to the field of adult education and adult learning from an international perspective.

*Keywords:* International, non-traditional, adult learners, social cultural

An international student in the United States (U.S.) can be defined as an individual, “non-immigrant” that migrates to the U.S. for the purpose of obtaining higher education and does not have citizenship or permanent residency at such time. Within colleges and universities in the United States, the international student population contributes vastly to the overall student population and hence influences not only the changing demographic landscape of students but also contributes to cultural diversity, which can present many benefits and challenges at both the individual and institutional level. According to the Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange (Institute of International Education, 2015) there has been a significant increase, the highest rate of growth in 35 years, in the amount of international students transitioning to the U.S. to obtain higher education. In the academic year 2014/2015 approximately 974,926 international students represents spanned countries across the world. The most prevalent countries being India, China and South Korea while China being the top country of origin for international students. China and India together accounted for 67 percent of international students studying in the U.S. in the academic year 2014/2015. It is also worth noting, that a large percentage of international students also migrated from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Latin America and the Caribbean (Institute of International Education, 2015). Subsequently, it was also notable that international graduate students compared to international undergraduate students showed a significant increase and accounted for the greater number of new students reversing a two-year trend that reflected undergraduate’s students accounting for the greater new student population (Institute of International Education, 2015).

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The migration of international students to the U.S. to receive higher education contributes greatly to the U.S. economy and has a positive impact on academics. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in 2014, more than \$30 billion was contributed to the U.S. economy by international students studying in the U.S. Such funds would have been generated from personal, family, scholarships, universities or governmental funds of the international students and their host countries. With regards to academia, the inclusion of international students within the college/university community contributes greatly to enhancing the learning experiences and prompting exposure to U.S. students (domestic students) with regards to the inclusion of international perspectives in the learning environment, research initiatives, networking, developing long term business relationships, and preparing students to be global citizens. Additionally, The American Council on Education has emphasized the value of preparing graduates to “operate effectively in other cultures and settings...and to better meet their responsibilities as citizens” (as cited in CIGE, 2012, p.3). From an educator’s perspective, the inclusion of international students provokes educators to modify their teaching strategies and create a learning climate to benefit different groups (Halx, 2010), hence promoting a learning environment that is culturally aware and sensitive.

Despite the trend of internationalization in higher education and the benefits not only from an institutional perspective but inclusive of the economy, international students encounter numerous unique challenges. Such transitional challenges experienced by international students are quite different from those that the traditional American (domestic student) would encounter (Andrade, 2006). These challenges can include but are not limited to: pressure to adjust (acculturation), financial constraints, limited support systems, culture and social differences, language barriers, different academic environment and much more. Most of which can be categorized under the conceptual theme of social-cultural. On this premise, this study was designed to explore the social-cultural experiences of international graduate students studying in the U.S. and to explore whether these social-cultural experiences has influence their experiences as non-traditional adult learners.

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are the experiences of non-traditional adult learners that travel internationally to receive higher education from a social-cultural perspective?
2. How has the social-cultural difference influence the learning experience of nontraditional learners receiving higher education internationally?

### **Theory**

The theoretical underpinning for this study is the sociocultural theory. Although this theory is vastly defined and utilized in a multiplicity of contexts, there is still a commonality that exists-- the underlying fundamental concepts of social and culture (Rezaei 2011). Vygotsky, a psychologist, originally introduced the theory, recognized specifically with regard to theories of learning and development, which emphasizes that learning occurs within a social world and is the origination of human intelligence in

society and culture (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch, 1991). It is Vygotsky's belief that social interaction has an essential role in the development of cognition. This theory was selected for this study because it provides a theoretical explanation with regard to the experiences of international students seeking to receive higher education in the USA and how the social-cultural difference can influence their learning experience.

## **Background**

### **Motivation and Challenges of International Students Pursuing Higher Education**

The decision to migrate to the U.S. to pursue higher education as a graduate student can be rooted in personal expectations of a greater quality of life, financial stability, international exposure and experiences and professional development. From a professional perspective, according to Asgari and Borzooei (2014) many international students are motivated as a result of many business and organizations around the globe requiring employees to possess the ability to think critically, communicate competently and engage in innovation--skills that can be augmented due to international exposure to higher education. Valdez (2015) indicated that reasons for mobility of international students are the gap in between educational supply and demand in many countries of origin and access to economic resources. Other scholars such as Liu, Elston, & Zhou (2013) suggest that an influential factor in the decision making process of Chinese students include students' social influences, specific countries valued for perceived high quality of education and social-economic pragmatism. Despite the motivation of international students to pursue higher education in the U.S. and their country of origin, international students encounter many unique challenges that can impede their experience while pursuing higher education and hence has impact on their learning experience.

There is a vast amount of literature that amplifies the challenges encountered by international students pursuing higher education and spans across a multitude of domains. International students encounter a great amount of challenges that domestic students would not normally encounter (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Unlike domestic students, international students in addition to transitioning to a foreign country with the goal of pursuing higher education are required to adjust to a new academic/learning environment that varies in most instances from their host countries, a new culture, language barriers, and communication style (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Further challenges include but are not limited to: lack of social support (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002), excessive amount of loneliness and isolation (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002, Rajapaksa, academic challenges, disengagement from educational activities (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), acculturation challenges (Campbell, 2015), unfamiliar teaching practices, communication barriers, and identity issues (Jackson, Ray, & Bell 2013; Kim, 2012; Kuo, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Sue & Rawlings, 2013; Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingsbury, 2014; Young, 2011), cultural insensitivity by academic advisors and research supervisors specifically regarding doctoral students (Sato & Hodge, 2009); indifferent mentoring relationships and inadequate career guidance (Knox et al., 2013).

Specifically as it relates to social and cultural issues, challenges included but are not limited to: a vast difference as it relates to the norms and social practices in an American society that were not common in their host culture or social practices (Jackson, Ray, & Bybell, 2013; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010), identity complications, which were often related to their different race and ethnicity (Kim, 2012), change in family structure and relationships as an adjustment strain (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). Other challenges include: change of confidence, which can influence academic success (Telbis, Helgeson, Kingsbury (2013), change in culture values (Marin, Gamba, Chun & Organista (2003), cultural shock and its influence on learning, depression, relationship challenges and anxiety (Mesidor & Sly, 2014), acculturation level and stress (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015, and social support or lack therefore (Bai, 2016). Despite the voluminous literature on the experiences of international students, there is limited literature that focuses specifically on how such challenges influence the experiences of the nontraditional international students and more specifically on their learning experiences as adult learners.

## **Method**

### **Study Design, Data Collection and Analysis**

A qualitative design was employed in this study and was reflective of structured interviews. Approximately seven in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of two months which ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length. Convenience sampling was utilized to recruit participants for this study. Feasibility and access to participants were the underpinning for the sampling technique used (Andrews & Frankel, 2010). The inclusion criteria for participants were: participants must have been born in a country other than the United States of America, migrated to the United States as an adult to enroll in an institution of higher education as a non-traditional adult learner, obtained or currently obtaining a graduate degree from a university within the United States, and both genders. Participants were informed of their rights not to participate in this study in compliance with the Institutional Review Board.

Open coding was the method of qualitative analysis used with a focal point of establishing themes and main concepts coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Recurring topics in the text were recognized as themes and sub-themes utilizing the research structure provided by the research objectives, research questions and the theoretical framework. This process allowed a deeper understanding and explanation of issues that were being studied. To ensure greater validity and reliability, a peer reviewer read through the data to ensure themes and categories corresponded with the research questions. Upon completion of the transcription, the participants were allowed to review for accuracy and ensure it was a true account of the information relayed.

## Participants' Demographic Profile

There were a total of seven participants in this study who are categorized as international students: three males and four females. The participant's age range varied. The participants represented Asia  $n=3$ , The Caribbean  $n=3$ , and Malaysia  $n=1$ . The educational level of the participants included both masters ( $n=1$ ), currently enrolled in a doctoral program ( $n=5$ ) and recent graduate from the doctoral ( $n=1$ ). Employment status of participants varied.

## Findings

### Research Question One

What are the experiences of non-traditional adult learners that travel internationally to receive higher education from a social-cultural perspective?

The response was unanimous amongst the study participants as it relates to their experience being influenced from a social-cultural perspective. The major themes that emerged from a social-cultural perspective included: a) Language/communication barriers, b) Acceptance and assimilation to social-cultural differences, c) Racial identity and associated stereotypes, and d) networking (making friends).

**Language and communication barriers.** All of the participants, whether or not English was their first language, indicated that the language barrier was an overwhelming factor as it relates to their social-cultural experience and adjusting to life in the U.S. while pursuing higher education. Approximately 43% of the participants indicated that English was not their native language. As a result of this, prior to pursuing higher education although they would have prior exposure to English language, still pursued additional English courses to ensure they were proficient in the English language, which ranged from six months to one year. However, despite the initiative to engage in additional English classes, the barrier of the English language still existed. One participant was very candid and explained that when communicating with other students, faculty or persons with whom he may have to interact, he would always question himself as to whether he was communicating correctly and how his voice sounded. He stated, "When I first moved here and even now, the thought would come to my head regarding my voice. If I am saying the right thing and if I am saying it clearly... one thing associated with me is my accent."

With regard to the other participants who indicated that English was their first language, barriers with regards to the English language still existed. One participant from the Caribbean indicated that English is the only language she knows. However, there was still evidently a communication barrier. She indicated that Americans do not realize that they too speak with an accent. However, to her surprise, Americans only recognize the accents of international individuals not realizing that all people speak with an accent. She indicated that the English she speaks originates from the British; this creates a challenge compared to American English as it relates to the enunciation, pronunciation and spelling of some words. There would be some instances when Americans would

correct the manner in which she pronounced a word. For example, the enunciation of the word “Exuma” and the spelling of the words “colour” and “favour” (British English) and color and favor (American English). She stated, “rather than acknowledging there is a difference there would be the underlying assumption that the British English is incorrect.”

Communication styles was a sub theme that emerged. It was particularly noted with regards to the participants of Asian descent. One participant indicated that their communication style is more reserved and indirect compared to the American style of communication. She indicated that if there is an explicit desire for something, it is done indirectly in her country. However, in America, it is a common practice to communicate directly. She indicated that this is indeed different for her but is a positive factor and is very effective especially in institutions of higher education.

It was worth noting that language and communication barriers were an overwhelming concern for both English as the first language (but spoken with an accent) and those for whom English was a second or third language. Participants indicated how this impacted them not only as individuals but as nontraditional adult learners and the strategies they would utilize to minimize such barriers even to the extent of receiving accent modification therapy.

**Acceptance and assimilation to social-cultural differences.** The second theme that emerged was acceptance and assimilation to social-cultural differences. All of the participants indicated that there was a vast difference as it relates to social-cultural matters in the U.S. compared to their home country. Various sub-themes emerged: the difference in dress, networking or making friends, fitting in, cultural shock and difference in cultural values. It was revealed that the manner in which Americans would dress especially within institutions of higher learning was vastly different compared to how individuals would dress in institutions of higher education in their home country. It was made known that most institutions of higher education (in their home countries) would have a dress code that would guide how students would dress. Students would be required to adhere to such dress codes or would not be permitted to enter in any institutions of higher education. It was discussed that this also creates a concern with regard to children of international students. In some instances it creates a cultural divide within the household and in some instances it leads to questioning of cultural values.

It was revealed by some of the Caribbean participants that the issue of hospitality, which is usually considered the number one industry in their country, contributes to the need and value of always “being nice,” friendly, respectful, communicating with people whether they are known to you or not. Additionally, their culture is one that focuses on collectivism rather than individualism. However, in America as expressed by a participant it is the complete opposite. One participant indicated, she would enter a room or an elevator and say “good morning” or “good evening” and in most instances no one would look at her nor reply which is considered rude in her culture. However, it is embedded in Americans especially children not to speak to strangers because of security reasons. She indicated that this also has a rippling impact in the learning environment.

**Culture shock.** Another theme expressed by the participants when they initially arrived in the U.S. was culture shock. There were numerous strategies discussed with regards to how to adjust or assimilate to the American culture. Some strategies revealed included watching American television shows with the view of learning and adjusting to the culture, observing American students while in institutions of higher education and trying to dress and “act” as the American do to accelerate the adjustment to the American culture.

**The ability to network (make friends).** Networking is a challenge for international students, which often has a rippling impact in the learning environment especially as it relates to group assignments and discussions. It was revealed that it is a frequent practice for international students to network and support each other especially those from the same country. In the learning environment, most international students would be in the same group. One participant revealed that the challenge that exists is that as soon as a friendship is developed, it would not be long before that individual graduates and moves on with his or her life. To the contrary, another participant indicated that just making friends was a challenge. He stated the fear of being rejected by Americans was a social challenge for him. Other challenges associated with networking/making friends included negative stereotypes associated with being an international student and language/communication challenges. However, there was one international student who indicated that he often is not recognized and fits in as the traditional international student because of his social status (financially advantaged). On this premise, he feels isolated as an international student with other international students and as it relates to the American students.

It is also worth noting that some participants indicated that the emersion with different cultures and social variety created a richer learning experience. The opportunity to learn about different cultures and its influence on the learning process and the diversity present in the American society creates a holistic learning experience and creates opportunities for future networking.

**Racial identity and associated stereotype.** It was revealed that racial identity and stereotypes associated with being an international student was noted and concerning. It was expressed that because of some noted difference associated with being an international student-- language barriers, communication style and physical appearances-- this created some identity issues and hence stereotypes. Such challenges evidently impacted the adjustment of international students to the U.S. Since none of the participants were Caucasians, which is the predominant race/ethnic group of the students in their current school, they were considered and categorized as a minority group, which is contrary to their classification in their home country. Often, there is a negative connotation associated with being a minority with which international students are not familiar or do associate themselves with.

It was interesting to note that 67% of the male participants indicated that there were negative stereotypes associated with them being males of color. Such stereotypes did not only manifest with students but also faculty, staff and administrators at their

respective universities. One particular male indicated that travelling from a country where he is considered the majority and now being referred to as a minority with negative connotations is unfamiliar to him. He stated, "I am comfortable with who I am but I can see [sic] the stereotypical dumb statements that would be made." He also indicated that there were instances where he was marked down with his graduate work because the professor thought that he did not actually do the work because it was of good quality. He explained that because of such negative stereotypes associated with being an international male of color he had to work harder. He stated "I have to be three times better so to speak and being a black male I am not use to that." Another male participant indicated that some Americans associated the intelligence level of international students with their accent or language barrier. Hence suggesting that because he spoke with an accent or his English was not as fluent, he was not intelligent. This had a rippling impact on confidence as indicated by numerous participants.

All stereotypes were not noted as negative, one participant indicated that although most American students thought he worked in a call center and/or very good at computer repairs because he was a Malaysian Indian, they all automatically assumed that he was very smart. He stated that, "I guess one of the biggest stereotypes is that I am hard working". He indicated that while in some instances this could be seen as a good thing it could also be equally mechanistic and dehumanizing.

## **Research Question Two**

How has the social-cultural difference influenced the learning experience of nontraditional learners receiving higher education internationally?

The major themes that emerged were: a) Language Barriers, b) Difference in the Learning Environment, and c) Support from Faculty and Classmates.

**Language barrier.** The results from this study revealed that language barriers impacted the learning experience of nontraditional international adult learners while pursuing higher education. For those international students for whom English is not their first language, this created a major problem with regard to the processing of information and being able to fluently communicate their thoughts whether with educators, in class discussions, group projects and some assignments (group or individual). An Asian male participant explained that although he speaks English, "I need more time to absorb new knowledge and longer times to finish my assignments." Another female Asian echoed this sentiment stating "...because English is my second language, it influences my understanding of knowledge...I use English to comprehend or master knowledge or skills required in higher education." As a result of this challenge, she spends a longer time and works harder to read a text book and write a paper to understand the knowledge. Within an adult learning environment, it is customary for the learning environment to incorporate class discussions. While this may have proven to be an effective manner in which to ensure the inclusion of student's personal and professional experience, demonstrate knowledge on a particular topic and promote critical thinking, for international students, especially those for whom English is their second language, it can create a barrier to the learning process. This barrier to learning may not only manifest itself as a language



barrier but also a cultural barrier. An Asian female indicated that she has a difficult time in the class when the professor teaches. She further expanded and said, “Normally when they ask for discussion, this is a tough time for me because normally in my country, we don’t have discussion with the students and the professor.” With regard to group work and projects, it was a general consensus that international students are often shunned from American students because of their language barriers and accents. This has a rippling impact on the self-confidence of international students and their ability to communicate and network effectively in the learning environment. Hence, in most instances, international students would utilize each other as support systems in the learning environment.

**Difference in the learning environment.** A difference in the learning environment from a social-cultural perspective compared to the participant’s home country was identified as a positive theme that influenced the learning experience of international nontraditional adult learners. The theme learning environment includes sub-themes of teaching and/or instructional methods, interaction between student and teacher, standards of education and educational systems. Most participants identified the difference in the learning environment as a positive factor. Such current experiences contradict what they were exposed to in their home country, which emphasized the importance of rote memorization, memorizing the text, incorporating exams techniques which are reflective of the pedagogical approach. One participant explained that within her country of origin, “I would need to highly respect the instructors even if they are wrong.” She further stated that it was not uncommon to hear the phrase from an educator. “I am the authority on this and memorize it.” However, in the U.S., the approach to learning is vastly different with a focus on understanding of material, discussions, debates on differing points of view, promoting critical thinking among learners in higher education and reflective of the andragogical approach. From a social perspective, as it relates to communication between the educator and students, it was a general consensus that within their home country, the educator is dominant as it relates to the knowledge level and students’ roles are more passive. There is limited interaction between the students and the educator within the classroom environment with regard to course content and delivery of content. However, in the U.S. institutions of higher education, discussions are evident and encouraged by educators. Students’ opinions and experiences on a subject matter are encouraged and valued by not only educators but also by other classmates. As it relates to the type of relationship demonstrated between faculty and students, in the U.S. it is more as colleagues and/or friends. Students are given the opportunity to publish with faculty and present at academic conferences but in her home country that would never happen. The faculty in her country is the authority and the relationship with the students is that students are inferior.

**Support from faculty and classmates.** Support whether from faculty or fellow students is paramount in any graduate program. On this premise, the lack of support can be problematic. Within any graduate program, it is crucial to receive guidance from faculty, mentors and administrators and the constant flow of information regarding the program, courses, opportunities for growth and development and basically how to navigate the landscape of a graduate program. Without such guidance and the constant

flow of such critical information the success rate of any graduate student can be negatively influenced immensely. This sentiment was echoed by a male participant in this study. He reflected on his personal experience when faculty would provide specific students “usually Caucasians Americans” with certain information that he would not have been privy to but information which was needed to be successful in the program and the usual comments when he later received the information by another means would be “ you didn’t know that and I would say when was I supposed to know that...some of them are very secretive...there were some (faculty) who would share information but others would not.”

## **Discussion**

This research is meaningful and contributes to the field of adult education and adult learning practice and research in many ways specifically from an international learner’s perspective. First, the study revealed that the findings were consistent with the literature and supported the notion that there were some adjustment challenges from a social-cultural perspective for international students pursuing higher education in the U.S. Specific challenges echoed in this study were: a) Language and communication barriers, b) Acceptance and assimilation to social-cultural differences, c) Racial identity and associated stereotypes and, d) Networking. This suggests that the landscape of higher education is diversifying, which can be attributed to the increase in international students. Therefore, emphasis need to be placed on addressing the challenges they experienced from an institutional perspective and how to best meet those needs through program implementation and support systems (i.e., internationalization of curriculums, mentoring programs, networking opportunities, cultural sensitivity awareness and training, diversity training, proper orientation for international students and much more).

Second, with regard to a sense of awareness of how the social cultural experiences of international students in higher education influence their learning process, it is essential not only for the learner but educators of such students to be knowledgeable and sensitive to such needs. From a learner’s perspective, both international and domestic students, it is imperative to understand how to utilize the global perspectives that international students can contribute to the learning environment and utilize this unique phenomenon as a learning tool and opportunities to network. Additionally for international students, it is imperative to enroll in programs that can provide a supportive environment during the adjustment period and to network with fellow international students who can assist with social-cultural challenges one may encounter.

Third, as educators, it is crucial to ensure the learning environment is one that promotes cultural sensitivity and awareness, basically demonstrating an appreciation and understanding for difference. Further, it is imperative that educators take into consideration some of the challenges that impede learning from an international student perspective. Initiatives to address such issues can include opportunities such as: peer mentoring, network opportunities, and a supportive learning environment for students with differing backgrounds and cultural experiences. With regard to instructional

techniques, assignments and assessments, incorporate a myriad of techniques with an underpinning of cultural awareness and sensitivity, learning styles, and globalization.

## Conclusion

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of international students from a social-cultural perspective and how such experiences can influence and/or impede the learning process. The study was informative and identified challenges encountered by international students as: a) Language/communication barriers, b) Acceptance and assimilation to social-cultural differences, c) Racial identity and associated stereotypes and, d) Networking (making friends). Influential challenges specific to the learning environment include: a) Language barriers, b) Difference in the learning environment, and c) Support from faculty and classmates. The findings from this study were consistent with the literature. However, further research could supplement this study incorporating a larger sample size with more countries represented. Additionally, further exploration is called for into whether international students are transformed as a result of exposure to the various social-cultural challenges and would be a good focus for further studies.

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