

The Academic, Social, and Migratory Experiences of International Graduate Students Enrolled at the Université de Montréal: A Study of Persistence

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From its earliest times, higher education transcended geographic boundaries so nowadays international students are a significant element of the social and cultural landscape of higher education, but international graduate students form a diverse group with different motivations for study and have become a sizeable segment of the student body in the Canadian higher educational system. However, this specific student population has not been completely understood and their diverse experiences have not been explained. This research paper deals with the issue of persistence among international graduate students enrolled at the Université de Montréal. Because the number of international graduate students has increased, strategic, social, and economic goals must be discussed. Hence, the purpose of this research is to develop a strong understanding of the factors influencing persistence and student success.

Purpose

According to Altbach and Teichler (2001), the global mobility of people and globalization contribute to the fact that students have more opportunities to study abroad. The number of international students has significantly increased in most universities. For example, between 1999 and 2007, the number of international students has significantly increased by 53% and six countries in the world host about 62% of international students, representing 2.8 million individuals who study outside their home countries (UNESCO, 2009).

Over the last fifteen years, Canadian universities

have used various strategies to attract highly skilled talent from all around the world. Most institutions recruit international graduate students through a variety of approaches: they promote themselves at education exhibitions, they advertise in local media or they employ local agents to provide the institution with information on programs and financial facilitation for example. They understand that the presence of international graduate students contributes to the internationalization of campuses, stimulates research and innovation (McHale, 2006), and also offers significant economic benefits (Conférence Régionale des Élus de Montréal, 2006; Kunin & Associates, 2012). International students contribute more than \$8 billion per year to the

Canadian economy, and they enrich Canadian society with their ideas and different perspectives (CIC, 2013).

Indeed, Canada is one of the major host countries to international students. Last year, and for the first time in its history, Canada welcomed more than 100,000 students, an increase of 60% since 2004 (CIC, 2013). However, we do not know much about international graduate students in Canada. Although we think they play a key role in the economic performance of their host country, and despite their ubiquity, international graduate students on Canadian campuses have been understudied, there is a limited body of research on international graduate students' persistence.

I have chosen to study the academic, social, and migratory experiences of international graduate students enrolled at the Université de Montréal. In this institution, the total enrollment of international students increased from 2,536 to 4,287 between 2003 and 2012, an increase of 69% representing 23.8% of the graduate enrollment at the university (Bureau de la Recherche Institutionnelle, 2013). Hence, the purpose of this research is to develop a strong understanding of factors impacting on international graduate students' persistence.

Theoretical Framework

A large number of theories on attrition and retention in postsecondary education have explained persistence in higher education as the result of complex interactions over time, and, according to the research, the most important one is Tinto's longitudinal model of attrition (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's model considers the impact of academic integration and social integration in a new environment. The first one, academic integration, refers to the university as a place of learning, and stresses a student's interaction with the institution and more broadly with the academic staff. The second one, social integration, refers to school activities and emphasizes the organization of the university as daily interaction with peers (including other students). A successful (or unsuccessful) integration might push a student to review his or her initial goals and to decide whether or not to complete their studies. Is that model

applicable to the international graduate students?

I noted that Tinto's model in particular is not sufficient to understand persistence among international graduate students. Thus, I wanted to analyze the academic, social and migratory experiences of these students and the meaning they give to such experiences (Dubet, 1994; Rochex, 1995). Finally, I wanted to explore the concept of *temps de l'étrangeté*¹ (Coulon, 1997). In other words, the innovative approach was to choose two complementary sociological points of view, the sociology of academic and social experience and the ethnomethodology and to combine them with Tinto's model of attrition.

The specific purpose of the research is to build a more detailed model for understanding life and study conditions among international graduate students enrolled at the Université de Montréal. Based on the fact that their life and study conditions are different but not necessarily more difficult than their Quebecois counterparts, I first identified the relative importance of different factors of persistence among these students.

Such a framework provides the basis of methodological tools that will first contribute greatly to helping international graduate students clarify their social and academic experiences and as a consequence will help them understand factors impacting their persistence.

Questions of Research

International graduate students encounter many of the common problems that Canadian graduate students confront. The research questions are as follows: What are the factors of persistence among international graduate students, and how do the academic, social and migratory experiences of international graduate students impact their persistence? In addition, it was relevant to determine whether there are other factors and to identify other resources used by these students to overcome difficulties (strategies, integration, social networks, etc.).

Data Sources and Method

This study was conducted at the Université de Montréal,

¹ The Temps de l'étrangeté, literally translated as 'time of strangeness,' refers to the first steps of an individual in his or her new environment. This period is described as a very sensitive and crucial moment as the individual loses their former landmarks (family, country, social status) and has to find new ones. In the case of international graduate students, the temps de l'étrangeté is obviously a crucial period in their host university and country.

one of the largest universities in the city of Montréal. The university enrolls approximately 46,000 students annually, including approximately 4,200 international students from more than 100 countries. Regarding my methodology, this exploratory research used a mixed method.

The first step consisted of a descriptive and regressive data analysis (n=2566), in order to paint a portrait of the international graduate students in Montréal and major trends of persistence. I received institutional data from the Bureau de la Recherche Institutionnelle of the Université de Montréal. The database contains a wide range of variables (age, gender, origin country, mother tongue, faculty, program, GPA, amount of scholarships and salary on campus, persistence at the last semester, etc.)

I also wanted to discuss students' ability to make sense of their academic and social experiences. In the second step of the research, ethnographic semi-structured interviews were conducted with a limited number of volunteers (n=9). In the semi-structured interviews, a standard set of 25 questions were used, covering all aspects of international graduate students' experiences. The interview format generated a large volume of valuable data, providing substantial insights into academic and social integration, both in the host and the home countries. Semi-structured interviews were like conversations. I asked them a stem question on a topic and followed with impromptu questions based on their answers. This interactive method enables wholly new issues to emerge (i.e., specific factors). During the interview, students were asked about a range of issues including their reasons for undertaking doctoral studies at the Université de Montréal, how they became interested in their discipline, what made them choose to come to Canada to study, etc. In other words, the questions focused on aspects of the social and academic experiences in both host and home countries and institutions.

The study was generated by problems I observed in my day-to-day life as an international graduate student at the Université de Montréal. As a migrant researcher myself, it was easy to access and discuss with international graduate students. The participants and I mutually construct our 'shared heritage' as international graduate students during the research process. Reference to our 'common status' became a powerful tool as proximity in the interview was achieved through the similar migratory, academic and social experiences.

Findings

The most common challenges encountered by international graduate students are related to cultural and social shock, to financial limitations and to linguistic and academic competencies (academic composition, note taking, presentation skills, academic integrity, etc.). Results of the regression analysis indicate that persistence among international postgraduate students enrolled at the Université de Montréal is influenced mostly by economic and academic factors, such as scholarships, relevant work experience on the campus (teaching assistantships and research assistantships) and French language skills.

For most international students, forming friendships, especially with fellow students, and immersion in the host country's culture are their main goals. However, our findings draw a picture of two different groups of students: those who step over most barriers with ease and, by contrast, those who are isolated and disadvantaged by their lack of contact with Canadian students and do not identify with the host country at all. The second group of students found themselves confronted by the peer culture of the University, which necessitated a major cross-cultural adaptation and resources to do so. Students from developing countries experienced greater difficulties in social and academic adjustment, and they felt rejected by fellow students while working in groups during classes. Regarding their social and academic integration, they still have to deal and struggle with cultural boundaries, a lack of intercultural friendships and a general discomfort, even though Canada is described as a welcoming society. Findings also suggest the positive influence of good quality interactions with their thesis supervisors. Finally, and in a different matter, international students mention a strong relationship between their well-being and food. As a vehicle for maintaining their cultural identity in Canada, they struggle to accept a totally different food. Obviously, food is an important determinant of international students' well being and general comfort in the host country.

To sum up, a large range of factors impact international graduate students' persistence: quality of their social and academic integration, intercultural friendships, interaction with their supervisors, food habits, etc. and we understand that the most important ones are academic factors and financial supports as they have a greater impact on international students well-being, persistence, and success.

Discussion

Institutions see international graduate students as adding cash value. Indeed, it could be quite relevant to discuss how international education contributes to the economy, prosperity and well being of host societies and academic institutions. But it could be more interesting to discuss how institutions contribute to the international students success by supporting them. My doctoral research shows that studying abroad can be a stressful experience, and the role of financial supports and academic integration is still under-researched.

The article concludes with implications for practice and for further research. This knowledge could assist campus leaders in understanding the influence of crucial and considerable financial supports such as the scholarships and relevant work that international students need the most. Further research may focus on how institutions and host countries can create living and learning spaces across cultural boundaries. In other words, understanding the complexity of the persistence process will support international students, such as providing a climate for positive learning and living, a room set out, for international students, to meet Canadian students for example.

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Biography

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