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## **Sociocultural Factors That Impact the Health Status, Quality of Life, and Academic Achievement of International Graduate Students: A Literature Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This literature review explores the sociocultural experiences of international graduate students in universities in the United States. In addition to the typical challenges faced by students going to universities in America, international graduate students undergo extra stress. Research has shown that students face issues such as negotiating the U.S. health care system, the pressures of competency in American English, balancing financial concerns, social connectivity, and anxiety due to isolation from family and friends. These factors place students at risk for developing health problems. Significant findings have indicated that institutions and students' age play important roles in impacting students' successful adjusting experiences even though the struggle for acculturation is a personal task. We organized our analysis and discussion around

how to help graduate students to obtain sociocultural support and concluded with some suggestions on ways to address inadequacies within the institutional systems to make the schools welcoming for international students.

**Keywords:** acculturation, international graduate students, internationalization, sociocultural factors

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## INTRODUCTION

International students are an increasingly large, diverse group on U.S. college and university campuses (Park, 2019). The growth of international students in the United States has increased steadily since the end of World War II. The Institute of International Educational (IIE, 2010) reports from 2010–2011 showed that the total number of U.S. international students was approximately 723,277 (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). In the 2018–2019 academic year, American tertiary institutions recorded the highest international enrollment of 1,095,299 students, about 5.5% of total U.S. college population (IIE, 2019). Of those students, 377,943 were international graduate students (Bastrikin, 2020). America is ranked as the leading destination for students from around the world, contributing to its economy and diversity (Duffin, 2020).

International graduate students' decision to pursue advanced education in the United States is influenced by a variety of factors that include a broader range of schools and programs, a higher quality of education, scholarship opportunities, institutional welcoming attitudes toward international students, and culturally advanced support services (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Unfortunately, once they arrive, students quickly find out about certain laws and policies that contradict the initial appeal. For example, the national law put in place by the Homeland Security Office prohibiting international students from having jobs outside of school campus has caused international students to compete with domestic students for the few on-campus jobs. There is also the need for students to understand and accommodate the host country's social norms, while negotiating the lack of social support, the presence of stereotypes and discrimination, and feelings of marginalization and stigmatization due to ethnic differences.

This process of adjusting to the new culture is called acculturation. Kathryn (2013) defined acculturation as the process by which newcomers gain new information about the values of a culture and adapt their behaviors to the culture. International students' abilities to easily adjust to their new host culture depends on each student's unique personality, cultural conditioning, history, family, skills, and knowledge (Poyrazli et al., 2010). Research shows that individuals experience acculturative stress when they immigrate into the U.S. culture (Santrock, 2016). Most international graduate students, to some degree, have stressful acculturative experiences for many reasons.

This literature review focuses on the experiences of international graduate students in U.S. higher education institutions. In particular, this article focuses on

how acculturation processes and sociocultural factors impact international graduate students' health status, quality of life, and academic achievement.

To identify related studies, a search was conducted using peer-reviewed educational journals and online publications from 2004–2014. Some older articles were included that were considered relevant in content and context and that provided important insights to the topic of international students. The literature was obtained searching mainly Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, OhioLINKS, and ERIC databases. The search keywords and phrases include acculturation, international graduate students, culture, and others. Several articles were reviewed in this paper, but only six articles were selected because there were different numbers of participants in all of the six articles (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Relevant Articles Reviewed**

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Reference	Article topic	Participants	Key findings
Altbach & Knight (2007)	The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities	None	Globalization and internationalization are related but not the same thing. The motivations for internationalization include commercial advantage, knowledge and language acquisition, enhancing the curriculum with international content, and many others.
Andrade (2006)	International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors	None	Adjustment challenges are primarily attributable to English language proficiency and culture. Achievement is affected by English proficiency, academic skills, and educational background.

Fritz et al. (2008)	Stressors, anxiety, acculturation and adjustment among international and North American students	246 students aged 17–51 surveyed	Findings are not only congruent with prior research on international students but also demonstrate that international students with culturally diverse needs should not be considered as one homogenous group. Educational systems need to properly adapt in order to accommodate international students' unique cultural needs.
Harrison (2002)	Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination	24 students from 15 countries were interviewed	The issues international students face can be problematized as matters of adjustment, but some of the more serious challenges are due to inadequacies within the host society.
Hyun et al. (2007)	Mental health needs, awareness, and use of counseling services among international graduate students	551 graduate students were surveyed	There is an unmet mental health need among international graduate students. Special mental health outreach efforts should be directed at international graduate students, with particular attention on the relationship between students and their advisors and on adequate financial support for students.

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Lee & Rice (2007)	Welcome to America? International student perception of discrimination	501	Students face neo-racism, cultural discrimination, unsettling feelings of discomfort and inhospitality, Verbal discrimination, direct confrontation. As well as The educational community not taking responsibility in creating intellectual environments that foster cross-national acceptance and learning and in rejecting the perpetuation of national stereotypes
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### **International Students' Challenges Upon Arrival**

Both domestic and international students face academic and social transition issues in universities. While the process can be intense for almost all students, whether it relates to educational or social adjustment, international graduate students experience more sociocultural stress than their local graduate student peers. Mostly because of the process of adapting to new educational and social environments (Yan, 2020). Research has found that foreign students spend less time socializing and relaxing than American students (Andrade, 2006), perhaps due to the magnitude of schoolwork students have to get done and lack of family support. Family support serves as sociocultural support for identity construction and negotiation (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Van Oudenhove & Van der Zee, 2002). Also, the process, according to Yan (2020), is particularly stressful for international students due to different backgrounds in terms of cultural values, languages, academic preparations, and students' study habits. Upon arrival to various schools in the United States, international graduate students, like all international students, are already stressed from the process of obtaining a visa and traveling from their home country. Students are confronted with more stress upon arrival to America due to the demand to quickly adjust to their new environment. Unlike domestic U.S. students, international students are required to learn and process significantly on arrival to find a place to live, attend student orientation, learn to use the public transportation services, as well as register for classes (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The next step is obtaining a Social Security number for students that have on-campus job, or those looking for part- or full-time on-campus employment, as well as finding friends. Our review considers how various sociocultural factors throughout their education experience affect the health status, quality of life, and academic achievement of

international graduate students, and what educational institutions can do to support these students.

### **Age**

There is generally a dearth of literature on how the age of international students' as a whole affects their adjustment to a new culture. This study speculated that international graduate students experience greater difficulty with acculturation because of their age, a point well supported by Poyrazli et al. (2010), who found that students' age plays a significant factor in their openness to new ideas and thoughts. The study by Poyrazli et al. (2010), in which the age of the respondents ranged from 18 years to 50 years, indicated that older Chinese international students reported having higher levels of acculturative stress, experienced more fear, perceived discrimination, and hatred than younger students. Because of the age of most international graduate students, a large number of them are parents who might have come with their immediate family members or left them back in their country of origin. Whichever way it goes for these students, acculturation will have many faces, because, apart from the struggle with personal psychological adjustments and loss of identity (Hyun et al., 2007), students also try to figure out how to support their family members. Apart from finding schools for their children, they may have to find a class for English as a second language course for their spouses (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Family well-being and family support is a critical factor in students' academic success. Students' inability to provide for their family financially may place a huge burden on them, and make them feel stripped of their role as providers, a role that provides them with culturally scripted notions of how they fit into their world (Suárez-Orozco, 2000). Apart from age, there is also the need for students to be able to communicate well in the language of the host country (Poyrazli et al., 2010). English language proficiency is seen as a significant factor and barrier to international graduate students' successful adjustment.

### **Language Abilities**

The most difficult challenge for many international students is their inability to communicate with other students due to low English proficiency. In a study of 38 international students Thomson et al. (2006) found that English language skills are very critical in terms of both the academic and social adjustment of international students. Also, Ogunsanya et al. (2018) identified language barriers as the main contributory factors to international student's stressors.

The unwritten golden rule with English is that learners need to not only know the grammar of the language, but also must have the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Byram et al., 2002). Making casual conversation is very difficult for many international students. Other students struggle with reading course materials and writing assignments (Ip et al., 2009). Others have problems with the way American English is written and spoken. M. Robertson et al. (2000) found that students' difficulties with language, anxiety, and lack of confidence prevent them from participation in the class. On the other hand, students with an excellent way of

communicating in English find adjustment easier. Students' fluencies in English could affect their level of confidence and to a great extent, determine whether or not they establish relationships with other students and their professors. Unconsciously there is this expectation of international students that can best be explained by the concept of "communicative competence." This concept emphasizes that language learners acquire not just grammatical competence but also the knowledge of what is appropriate language (Byram et al, 2002). In other words, international students are expected to become like traditional English-speaking American students. This expectation is more pronounced when international graduate students are graduate teaching assistants. Walsh et al. (2020) stated that "Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who are English language learners at American institutions often endure xenophobia and the pressures to conform to American culture," (p. 1). GTAs occupy intercultural spaces that make them acutely sensitive to complexities of language and the struggle to write well according to Bushnell (2020). The author went on to say the struggle of writing across languages and cultures should be recognized and mobilized in the teaching of writing in schools.

### **Educational System Differences**

Apart from the problem of communication, there is also the issue of the American educational system. This system is unfamiliar compared to school systems in other countries; there are often issues for international students in learning the academic culture in America, the different styles of teaching, and how to interact with faculty and other students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). International graduate students come to the classroom with different worldviews, different writing styles, and different cultural, linguistic, and culturally driven logical thinking. The ability to appropriately formulate thoughts into writing may vary widely and play a significant role in students' academic and interpersonal experiences. Fox (1994) observed that because the educational system and ways of thinking are cultural: The Western views of academic writing are expected, rather than accepting academic writing styles of other cultures. The complexity of language and the rhetorical expectations for Westernized academic discourse are often responsible for what professors perceive as international students' inability to analyze and logically develop a written argument, not a lack of English proficiency. Also, students' prior educational experience in terms of teaching and learning may vary widely, and this plays a huge role in students' academic ability and motivation (Arkoudis, 2006; Kim, 2012; Levi, 1991; Zhu & Flaitz, 2005). It is important for instructors to create positive and conducive learning environments that prepare all students, encourage interaction, and address cross-cultural and linguistic dimensions within the student population in the classroom. This can be a challenge, but it can also be a rewarding experience especially for faculty (Altbach, 2004; Wong, 2006). Universities should be encouraged to give faculty members the training that they need to be able to accommodate the unique needs of international students in classrooms.

### **Societal Differences and Expectations**

The struggle to meet new and different societal expectations can adversely impact international students, particularly those raised in collective societies coming to live in an individualist society like the United States. Most international students have a deep sense of connection to their original societies and are affected by the cultural expectation to succeed academically to make their community proud. Fritz et al. (2008) identified community expectations as the sole reason for putting most international graduate students under pressure to perform. These concerns may be especially prevalent among students who come from collective societies (Servaes, 2000). Meeting their local community expectations creates stress and anxiety because if students fail, it would mean failure for their whole family and community. The cultures of collectivistic societies emphasize the collective interest of all, hence, priority is given to the duties that individuals owe to the community, and the individual's achievement is celebrated and shared by everybody in the community. The best description of this philosophy is summarized by Mbiti (1969) who said, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). In comparison to the Western culture, attending college is considered a personal achievement; a student's success or failure is their responsibility and does not necessarily reflect on their family or community. Most international graduate students are caught between the expectations of two very different cultural systems: one emphasizing self-fulfillment, and the other emphasizing family and community responsibilities. In some cultures, parents even make choices of schools and majors for students, with many students ending up in a major they have little interest in pursuing (Fritz et al., 2008). Thus, students are torn between their desires and their family expectations. When students strive to live up to some of these expectations, they experience a huge psychological impact that can cause physical and emotional breakdown, which leads to students requiring medical attention.

### **Access to Health Care**

The lack of access to proper medical attention is a common complaint among international students. Students are often confused and frustrated about the lack of accessibility to needed health care services even when they are made to pay the compulsory school-arranged health insurance. Although the issue of health insurance is a general concern for most people in America, therefore beyond what institutions can fix, the practice whereby most institutions choose and impose a particular health insurance policy on students is often perceived as an effort to keep up with the idea of economic globalism of international students. An argument Lee and Rice (2007) stated that recently, the driving force behind international education has significantly changed from diplomacy and intercultural exchange to globalism. Thus, the motivation for economic gain is contributing to the increased recruitment of international students and creating revenue for schools. This shift has made international students more "customers" for schools and "consumers" of health insurance. This phenomenon shows schools as having little interest in the health care of students (Habu, 2000; Rhee, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). There are also regular reports by international students about being treated unprofessionally by some health care service professionals. This could be explained from two angles, the first



being that most health care professionals may not be culturally competent in handling immigrants. Most clinicians lack understanding of how culture influences doctor and patient encounters, as well as the skills to bridge potential differences (Kagawa-Singer & Kassim-Lakha, 2003). Language could also form a barrier. These issues have led to students lacking trust and confidence in health care professionals.

The solution to this problem may be for institutions to provide formal training for the school health clinic staffs. Second, a few of the staff working at the international office should have enough knowledge about the different health insurance plans to provide students with options and let them decide which coverage is the best for them and their families. The school should also give the students the right to select instead of the present practice of imposing one type of insurance on students. The stress of lack of access to health insurance is closely linked with the problem of funding for international graduate students.

### **Financial and Familial Strain**

The availability of personal financial resources plays a critical role in the level of psychological stress that international graduate students undergo in America (Rice et al., 2012). The cost of funding their education and supporting their families makes graduate international students' educational experiences somewhat different from international undergraduate students who are mostly younger, might be single, and often still have parental or family support. Graduate students, who in most cases are older students, may be all by themselves. Their inability to provide for their family financially may place a significant burden on them, and make them feel stripped of their role as providers, a culturally scripted position that gives them a notion of how they fit into their world (Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

Researchers have shown that there is cumulative evidence between socioeconomic situations and poor health (Lynch et al., 1997). Financial difficulty is a major contributor to poor health among international students. Some of these graduate students and their families eat unhealthy food because that is what is cheap and affordable. Due to the high cost of living, students and their families often resort to living in neighborhoods that are likely to expose them to drugs, gangs, and violence. The loss of family support, coupled with the differences in cultural values, creates unique dilemmas for international families living in some of these neighborhoods. This may be especially true in situations where students have young children who will want to socialize with other children in a dangerous neighborhood and may end up taking high risks and making bad decisions.

Regardless of their diverse cultural, social, religious, and political backgrounds, most international graduate students have the same kind of problems and share many struggles of the vulnerable populations; they lack choices and have no assistance as noncitizens in America. Moreover, because the U.S. government put restrictions on foreign students, work restrictions on international students limit their options to campus jobs, but there are not enough jobs to go around all students. (Sherry et al., 2010). These conditions are threatening and put students under huge emotional, physical, financial, and social disruption (Sherry et al., 2010) in a way that negatively alters their general wellbeing and quality of life. From a public health stand point, it

is well documented that emotional stress exposes students to risk for stress-related diseases like high blood pressure, depression, type II diabetes, and other cardiovascular diseases. Students' stress from financial strain and juggling family responsibilities impacts students' level of concentration in school.

### **Parental Roles and Cultural Homogenization**

For international students who are parents, there are additional pressures caused by the need to balance parenting styles and manage cultural differences for their children, a situation that can best be described as "cultural homogenization." Cultural homogenization is referred to as a "state-led policy aimed at cultural standardization and the overlap between state and culture" (Conversi, 2010, p. 719). This process can be overwhelming because of the high requirement of cross-cultural and intercultural experience essentially stresses boundary crossing of differences and diversity, implying cultural interaction between home and host cultures (Gu et al., 2010; King, & Baxter Magolda, 2005). The effect of operating in two different cultures is usually confusing and affects children's behaviors. The unexpected change in children's behavior brings conflict in the families partly because many of these international students are striving to give their children a better life (Leidy et al., 2010), but within a short span of time, children may begin to show a lack of meaningful connections to their parents' culture (Zhou, 1997). The unexpected change in children's behavior can bring conflict in families and is stressful for the children who are usually seen struggling to balance the demands of the American culture with the cultural demands of their tradition-minded parents. The combination of all these unforeseen stresses eventually affects students' quality of life.

### **Students' Quality of Life**

To measure an international graduate students' quality of life, it is essential to first define what we mean by "quality of life." Although many researchers have argued that differences in societies have made it impossible to have a standard definition of quality of life, there is a general consensus that quality of life is affected in complex ways by a person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs, and relationships to salient features of the environment in which one lives (Saxena et al., 1998). This study relies on the definition given by the World Health Organization (WHOQOL, 1995): "Quality of life is defined as individuals' perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns" (p. 95). Some common arguments about measuring the quality of life regard whether it can be measured by an individual's opinion or by what life means to others in the society at large. The quality of life of international graduate students experience in the United States face can be affected by government policies, institutional lack of concern, as well as some sociocultural and environmental factors such as limited freedom to participate fully in the society, physical safety and security, health care accessibility and quality of care, affordable living environments, opportunities for acquiring new information and skills,

opportunities for recreation/leisure, damaging physical environments, as well as transport issues (WHOQOL, 1995). However, helping international students to live a normal life should be one of the most important and immediate responsibilities of institutions, particularly international offices, and the various departments to which these students belong. Findings by Andrade (2006) suggested that international student affairs staff have an incomplete picture of international student needs and concerns since they are only responsible for support programs. Although training may sound overburdensome on universities, it is important to note that the presence of these students is beneficial and contributes to society in many positive ways. Specifically, Americans can learn more about other cultures.

### **Curriculum Reform**

Another realistic approach for reducing the academic problems faced by international students is curriculum-relevance reform and renewal. Schools should create a curriculum that will be more inclusive of both local and international students' needs. Meleis (1982) identified the differences in the curriculum structure as one characteristic of American education that negatively impact students' performance. A shift toward internationalizing undergraduate curricula and broader interdisciplinary training is necessary (Lehto et al., 2014), and is seen as a positive move since the importance of international students to an institution's internationalization efforts cannot be overemphasized (Deardorff, 2006). With that said, higher education institutions cannot simply continue to increase the number of international students' admission and expect them to acclimate and adjust to the new environment and system by themselves (Andrade, 2006).

A shift toward internationalizing undergraduate curricula and broader interdisciplinary training is necessary, but this is only the first step. That is more or less like bringing students to a dark hallway and leaving them to figure out all the possible unmarked exits themselves. Lacina (2002) said, "If we want to attract and retain international students to our university campuses, we must focus on the students' needs and successes in the American university Experience" (p. 26).

### **Institutional Support and Advocacy**

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to international graduate students' problems. Because of the level of diversity among these students, there is no possibility of having one culturally relevant intervention program for all; any program designed to help international students should be centered on their unique needs, focusing not only on the graduate students but also inclusive of their spouse and children. Schools could invite psychologists and health educators to help them with designing programs that will meet the students' psychological and health needs. There is the need for health professionals who work with international graduate students to be familiar with culturally relevant norms and values of collective societies, as well as to show respect for students' sense of collectivism when they are organizing and carrying out programs. Institutions should involve different groups of students in the planning of all programs. Programs should include activities that will

help graduate students and their families develop social relationships. The overall goal should be to decrease stress and reduce the feelings of isolation and the trauma of exclusion and disconnection among students.

Advocacy is also an important job for health educators, most especially when it is aimed at promoting the wellness and the quality of life of students. International students and their spouses are prohibited from working outside the school campus by the Department of Homeland Security. Considering the fact that students are here with both their families, this law is seen as unrealistic and biased; it has forced international students and their families to live in absolute poverty in America (Iceland, 2013). The wide gap between the different economies of various countries adds to many students' difficulties with paying their bills and meeting the financial expectations that make them socially acceptable to other students. We also know that financial support is recognized as one of the key themes and sources of stress for international students (Rice et al., 2009). Reducing stress will require that health educators advocate for a change of law by Homeland Security to a more realistic law that will have exceptions and consideration for students with families; increased attention and support from universities and academic leaders for students' needs; support for international students from local students; and programs that will foster acceptability of students by local communities.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We recommend for institutions to become aware that internationalization is important to all higher education institutions because it is the only way America can produce competitive world professionals who can compete in the international market. With that said, we are putting forward the following recommendations with the hope that it will help institutions within the country address inadequacies within the institutional systems and make the schools welcoming for international students.

Institutions are advised to send relevant information about orientation, cost, areas of available services, and different options and activities for international students' spouse and children around the campus area, as well as have a separate meeting with them as part of the orientation to acquaint them with where they can locate resources for their family members. There is the need to have specialized staff in the international offices at all universities and colleges who are assigned the responsibilities of handling the affairs of international graduate students and their families.

Institutions should ask their international offices to interact with the school clinics to have counselors/therapists who are culturally competent (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). Moreover, these therapists could be trained to work with immigrants to organize counseling sessions prior to arrival about anticipated changes that they may face as a family. Group counseling sessions should be held once a month on different topics for these students. Providing counseling is seen as a proactive way that can assist students in their initial integration into the community.

The international office should encourage student mentoring and peer network groups. Students should be encouraged to join and could enter and exit these groups as they wish; this is where students could discuss their academic and psychosocial

adjustment problems with their peers (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). Social groups will help students because most international graduate students with family may often feel overwhelmed with family struggles. Additionally, a safe recreational center should be identified near campus for students so that they have an opportunity to exercise as a way of reducing stress.

Research has shown that departments and faculty have important roles to play in helping students with their academic progress. Faculty members, more especially advisors, hold the key to students' success, and informal visits and talking with advisors may facilitate higher academic achievement among students, even more so for international students. (Anaya & Cole, 2001). The frequent meetings should be arranged between students and faculty members, and students can be encouraged to form their thesis or dissertation communities early in the program; this will give them the opportunity to relate with more faculty members. Monthly or quarterly departmental meetings will also create more rapport between students and faculty members, and give students some sense of inclusion. The department should make mentoring training available to faculty to equip them for that task.

## **CONCLUSION**

With a continually growing international student population, it is important that schools are seen as safe and welcoming for international graduate students. Although the struggle for acculturation is seen as a personal task, institutions have significant roles to play in finding and implementing the resources needed to help students have successful adjusting experiences. While there are systematic issues such as health insurance and Homeland Security policies that schools have no control over, there are issues that universities can address to help reduce the stress that international students endure, and which will only enhance these students' academic performance. These include developing intellectual environments that encourage diverse learning styles, fostering cross-national acceptance, and offering dedicated international student offices and services. Attention should be given to all the different factors that foster or inhibit international graduate students' adjustments and that negatively impact their health and wellbeing during their academic pursuits in America. The issues of international students in general and graduate students, in particular, can be readily addressed through policy changes at the institutional and individual level because it is at these two levels that the real process of internationalization takes place.

## **Limitations**

This study is a literature review of previous works on the topic of sociocultural factors that impact international graduate students' quality of life and academic achievement in institutions of higher learning in America. Even though the findings have shown that there many researchers who are consistent with one another concerning the struggles face by these students, the lack of statistical data to support most of the findings is seen as a limitation of this study.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has revealed some of the sociocultural, personal, and educational struggles of international graduate students in American and how those struggles affect their health and wellbeing. However, to have a better understanding of the importance and roles of universities, departments, and academic advisors in how they shape the experience of international graduate students, we recommend further research using a mixed method research to examine the level of acculturative stress among international graduate students.

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