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# The Academic Experience of 1st Year International Students at Northeast Normal University: A Case Study of Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

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## Abstract

The present study explored the Academic Experiences of 1st year International Students in Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China. The trend of globalized education attracting thousands of international students towards China every year for their Higher Education & its flow is increasing so far. Hosting universities are trying to provide them with all the required facilities in order to achieve maximum academic performance and high satisfaction by the international students. That's why this study aimed to investigate the academic experiences of international students and what do they perceive. The current study involved 80 1st international students from various countries who were enrolled in Bachelor, Master, and Ph.D. programs in NENU, Changchun, China. The study employed the quantitative method which is followed by the adapted questionnaire, at 5-point likert scale developed by Almeida at el in 1999, namely Academic Experience namely QVA-r. It is comprised of five dimensions, i.e. Personal, Interpersonal, career study and institutional. As per statistical findings among all dimensions career and institutional dimension shown best adaptation rate among 1st-year international students in NENU. Male participants were determined with better adaptation in contrast with female students. QVA-r has shown as a good tool to evaluate international students' academic experiences of higher studies.

**Keywords:** Academic Experiences, International Students

## Introduction

Education is the process of gaining knowledge which plays an important role in forming the human society. Thus The aim of education, according to Whitehead (1932), is the production of active wisdom (as cited in Elliot, 1996); hence, involving in research makes one an individual in the formation of knowledge. In the present age, higher education plays a key role in the development and advancement of a nation by nurturing novelty and escalating higher professional skills. As per UNESCO, the higher education takes part in the association of cognitive and academic domains as well as in the growth of society. It reveals revolutionary perspectives and opportunities of rationality by means of creative and inventory skills. Higher education is increasing in a speedy pace at global level as well, In line with OECD, the number of higher studies students in foreign countries was remarkably increased between 1985 and 2008, and this vogue is supposed to be carried on. Globalization of

education is reflected as the major foundation of novelty, directed to collaboration by dealing with multi-cultures.

Higher studies institutions facilitate scholars in supplying supportive ground in order to alter the conceptions into creativity. With respect to innovation, the United States of America is considered as the most benefit taker by higher globalizing of education through combating international students at a high level in contrast with other countries of the world, that are also assisting international students (Gang, Wei, and Jing-Lin, 2009).

The numbers of factors are responsible for attracting students for higher studies towards foreign countries, such as economic support, availability of the latest equipment in laboratories, well-furnished libraries. The British and Australian universities made an association with the British Council and Individual Development Plan, respectively in order to accelerate studies for international students up to 5.8 million by the year 2020 (Asteris, 2006). Several Chinese universities are also hosting international students independently and with the cohesion of Government council, i.e. China Scholarship Council (CSC) or independently by granting different kinds of scholarships, funds, or self-financed, in order to provide a platform for international students to take part in the input of globalized education.

According to the report of China's Ministry of Education 2017, the enrollment rate of foreign students is increased up to 10.5%, i.e. about 489,200, in comparison with 2016. It is further aimed by the Government to increase the number of foreign students about 500, 00 till 2020. Moreover, it is also noticed via statistics information that interest towards higher academic studies is remarkably increased in China. About half of the total international students, i.e. nearly 241,500 (49.38%) are registered in certain series of academic degrees in a broad series of disciplines. This shows about 15% growth occurred in contrast with 2016's academic enrollments. Focusing only at Masters and doctoral enrollments, it is noticed that about 19% increase in strength of foreign students occurred each year, and reached to 75,800 students in 2017.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of international students in China</b>
2011	291,880
2012	327,659
2013	355,629
2014	377,054
2015	397,635
2016	442,773
2017	489,200

Source: Ministry of Education / Center for Strategic and International Studies

According to figures the strength of international students in China has been doubled in the last decade. At the end of 2017 China is considered the most famous place for students across the countries of Asia.

Moreover, the background of foreign students is belonged from diverse cultures and countries, because of this they are different from their host countries in many ways, e.g. local language is entirely dissimilar from the native language of their sponsored countries, as a result of which they have to struggle hard to adjust to the new country in terms of social adjustment, academic facilities, physical needs international students office activities. (Talebloo&Baki, 2013).

In order to provide all requirements to the foreign students, Sponsoring universities of China is facilitating foreign students in a holistic manner, e.g. well-furnished laboratories, comprehensive database libraries, comfortable living facilities, appropriate funds, and highly qualified professors. Whereas international students are required to work hard to meet the academic standards, in order to complete respected program so they may get certificated. Therefore accomplishment of the academic program is based on the experiences they endure, and in that regard, universities should consider all the needs & requirements of international students in order to

attain good academic performance. Several factors are involved in the attainment of academic performance. According to one survey, international students reported that they require a wide range of academic assistance facilities, like a comprehensive database and skills to use libraries (Hughes, 2010, Catherine Ferguson, 2011). These academic facilities can be covered by providing adequate guidance in language and academic learning expertise, mentoring help along with foreign student consultants, approachability toward all academic reserves, and student unions (Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008). Moreover, it is also reported that, the introductory lessons or programs by university are presented in the very beginning of the academic session (Hughes, 2010) while several students may not be able to come university on time, some seem busy in the adjustment and arrangement of requirements related to accommodation due to which they can't concentrate properly in academics.

The above pointed out challenges may influence the academic performance of international students, and can slow down their progress, in such manner hosting universities should tackle these problems and supply enough assistance in order to adjust in a new setting. This study is designed to investigate the academic experiences of first-year international students at Northeast Normal University (NENU).

### **Context of the Study**

The present study is executed at one of the sixth national normal universities in the People's Republic of China, namely Northeast Normal University, located in the Northeast of China, the capital of Jilin province. It was first named as Northeastern University founded by Communist party in Benxi, Liaoning province, in 1946. It was moved to Changchun and renamed as Northeast Normal University in 1950(n.d.nenu.edu.cn).

NENU covers an area of about 1.67 million square meters comprised of 23 schools, providing different majors, offering 145 Masters and 77 Doctoral degree programs. The total number of students in NENU is 25218 including 10,945 Doctor & master's program students, among them 635 are international students (n.d.nenu.edu.cn). NENU has also made international exchange program relations with more than 200 foreign universities of over 40 countries. From 1950, NENU has successfully hosted about 10,000 international students from more than 90 countries (<http://www.csc.edu.cn/studyinchina/universitydetailen.aspx?collegeId=12>).

### **Theoretical framework**

Almeida's concept of academic experiences supports my study. In 1999 Almeida explained these experiences as students' views and thoughts in terms of daily basis occurrences during the life of the university. The theory is incorporated into the following five aspects.

#### **Individual aspect:**

It involves the physical and emotional state of health of a student like control over emotions, sentimental strength, positivity, self-confidence and power in taking decisions. The weakness of these features may lead to anxiety, confusion, isolation, physical weakness, negativity, and imbalance emotional state along with sorrow, feeling of complex and low confidence. (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day,2010) reported three major obstacles for newly arrived international students in the United Kingdom, i.e. the feeling of loneliness, economic issues, and homesickness which affect their academic progress. As per findings of Popadiuk (2008), female international students were reported with greater psychological suffering as compared to males, which influenced them in adapting to the new environment.

#### **Interpersonal aspect:**

It is related to interaction and relationships with other people of university, i.e. classmates, teachers, that leads to intense attachment. It is revealed by some studies that some factors cause difficulties for international students to adjust in the new environment, which includes unfamiliarity with the language of the host country, cultural dissimilarities, economic problems, hectic schedule that creates difficulty in maintaining relationships with

native ones (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011). International students also been reported with the unsatisfied relationships with their teachers, leads to weaker understanding (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010)

#### **Career Aspect:**

It is referred to thoughts in terms of the selected program of studies and career identification, which involves gratification and motivation towards expertise of that program that leads to professional development. The motivating factor of conducting higher studies in abroad for students is to gain proficiency in foreign language and brighten their career opportunities (Domville-Roach, 2007).

#### **Study Aspect:**

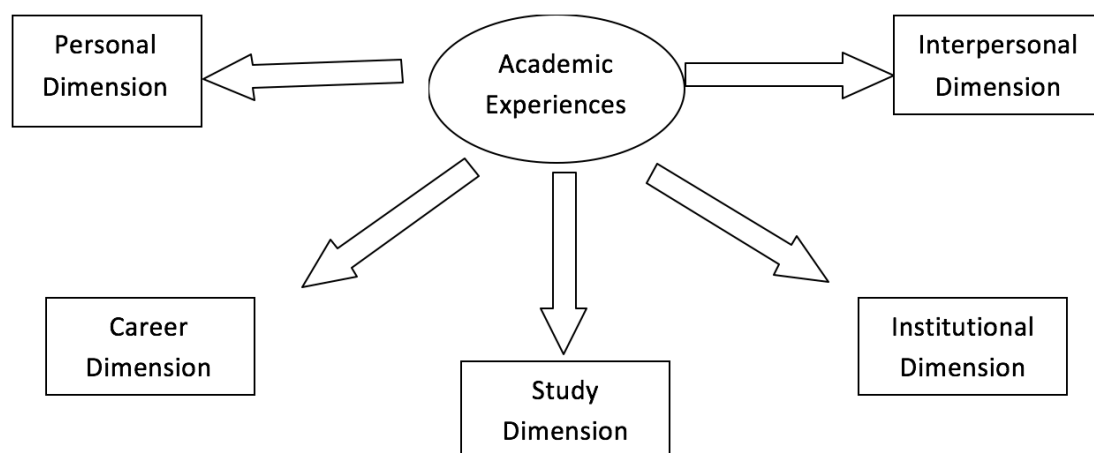
This dimension is related to student's routine and habits of study along with managing time. It describes the use of academic resources and library in order to improve learning and to achieve good academic performance. Sufficient supply of academic learning resources, i.e. library, well-equipped laboratories, reading rooms, and other services are necessary for acquiring good performance of students. Karemera et al. (2003) analyzed that satisfaction of student is positively linked with their results. Significant performance of students is the outcome of effective use of existing learning resources (Norhidayah Ali et al., 2009).

#### **Institutional Aspect:**

It refers to perceptions of students regarding the importance of institution, affection towards institution along with an estimation of facilities and services provided by the institution.

#### **Conceptual Framework:**

Based on Almeida's concept of academic experiences the conceptual framework is presented as below:



By examining the information regarding students' individual characteristics as the dimensions of academic experiences, it is beneficial in attaining a better understanding of the implementation of the personal, academic course and useful for institutional proceedings in advancing the international students' facilities, the stability of their studies and their academic performance.

#### **Literature Review:**

Over the past few years, higher education has endured considerable changes in order to fulfill the requirements and aligned with society. By facing these changes, universities have started to look for the new institution, as

society creates and pass its values, in order to upgrade human standing in terms of various aspects, (Cunha; Carrillo, 2005).

The transition from high school towards higher studies seems an interesting progression for most of the students, and they feel very excited as they can be facilitated in terms of career, professional and individual development. This stage gives more freedom and allows them to make new bonds and relationships by interacting with people within academic or beyond academic settings that result into the advancement of individuality and self-determination, (Almeida, 2007; Almeida, Cruz, 2010).

Shifting towards university plays a distinctive role in a student's life, as it provides opportunities for the development of various aspects by experiencing new academic, psychological and social experiences. At the same time, this transition may also cause anxiety and nervousness among students who are trying to adjust in the new academic environment, (Friedlander et al. 2007; Maze, Verliac, 2013).

However, as per previous studies, the evolutionary shifting towards higher education may be easier for some students and difficult for others. But to achieve academic goals, it is imperative to observe other contributing factors, such as intellectual skills, social adaptations, personality traits, and optimism. (Feldt, 2011).

According to few studies, students in the 1st year need to get particular attention after their arrival at the university, so that they may get easier adaptation. The attention should be increased for those students who are less capable of this transition or weaker in terms of the psychological state. (Soares, Poubel and Mello, 2009).

Previous studies have shown that about half of the university students have to face a different kind of difficulties in that academic phase. This may lead to poor performance of the student and drop out, particularly in their first year of study. (Almeida; Soares; Ferreira, 2002).

A number of studies have been done on perceptions and experiences of international students towards the learning of Chinese culture as shown from previous research, e.g. Akinkugbe (2013) studied the impacts of international students' on cultural background in the Bowling Green State University, the findings showed that students perceived that to learn the host culture and environment was somewhat different from their own perceptions.

However, Erkan&Walker (2016) conducted their study on the perceptions and experiences of Muslims International students with a sample of 189 in Canada. The findings showed that Muslim students were identified as fair with culture in Canada. The majority of Muslim students perceived that they had experienced unfairness only once during the previous academic year in university while Newsome and Cooper (2015) conducted a study on international students' cultural experiences with a sample of 18 in the UK. The findings showed that participants faced hurdles in satisfying their human needs. They often suffered racial discrimination, racism, and aggression. Similarly, Yuan (2011) studied the cultural experiences of Chinese students with a sample of 10 in the United States. The results indicated that most Chinese students often had more concerns about their insufficient language and cultural differences, which consequently increases their uncertainty when interacting with the host culture. In another study, Sulkowski and Deakin (2010) examined the culture learning experiences of international students in the UK. Their findings showed that there is evidence of a positive correlation between culture and learning styles of students. Similarly, Sliwa and Grandy (2006) investigated the cultural experiences of overseas students with a sample of 14 students and staff at University of UK. All participants' perceptions of learning culture were positive. In one study Ding (2016) explored the experiences of international students with a sample of 40 in China. The study found that international students perceived the low level of satisfaction with food, living and language barriers. Similarly, Brauss, Lin, and Baker (2015) studied on the social experiences of international students with a sample of 1,427 at Auburn University USA. Concerning gender, female international students perceived language barriers, lack of communication, cultural differences, than their male counterparts. In another study, Sumra (2012) explored the problems of international students in the People's Republic of China with a sample of 420. The findings proved that social

and cultural problems among both male and female students were food, living, activities, health, language, and culture.

Similarly, Orth (2015) examined perceptions and experiences of international students with a sample of 14 regarding gender in Australia. The study found that international students had a variety of experiences such as eat new foods, old traditional methods, and culture and language barriers. The male students had communication problems and had a negative impact on host culture. In another study, Sultana and Smith (2011) studied perceptions of international students regarding social and cultural experiences with a sample of 36 concerned genders in the US. The findings showed that the perceptions of both male and female participants were positive towards the culture learning and experiences were comparatively better than the students' of home universities. Experiences of female students were more Significant towards the host culture than their male students were.

### **Research Objectives of the study**

- To understand the students' academic needs.
- To know the perception of international students regarding academic experiences at NENU.
- To explore the challenges encountered by international students academically.
- To examine the rate of adaptation of international students with respect to gender at NENU.

### **Research Questions of the study**

- What are the learning experiences of International students at Northeast Normal University?
- What are academic facilities being provided to international students at NENU?
- What is the adaptation rate of international students with respect to gender?

### **Significance of the Study**

I have chosen this study because China has got a significant ratio of worlds international students. The outcomes of students not only linked with the University but also highlight the name of China. With the help of my study students, progress can be improved. This study will elaborate not only academic experiences of international students but also explains their academic status at NENU, by examining their adaptation rate in University. By the help of this study, it will be easy to understand the challenges faced by international students so that they may be resolved. My study will be beneficial for teachers to understand the problems and academic status of their students. Furthermore, my study will be stepping stones for those who are interested in doing further study in the future.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Design of the study**

The design of the study was a quantitative survey which was sought through the questionnaire.

#### **Participants**

The participants of the study were selected randomly by means of simple random sampling. All the participants were 1st year of under and postgraduate students of NENU, i.e. Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral. 120 questionnaires were distributed among all 1st-year international students, 80 questionnaires were considered for analysis, while others were excluded due to incomplete information. The ages of participants ranges from 22 to 33 years (mean = 25.43 years), being 41% (n=33) were females and 58% (n= 47) were male students. As all international students belong from different countries, therefore they are grouped on the basis of their continents, a majority of the participants belongs to two main continents, i.e. 20 from Africa, 56 from Asia and rest of them placed in others. Educational level of the participants range from Bachelor to doctoral level, i.e. 3 from BS, 53 from MS and 24 were Ph.D. students.

Table 1- The demographic information of the sampled students

Variables	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	47	58
	Female	33	41
Age Group	Up to 20 years old	2	2
	From 21 to 25	42	84
	Greater than 25 years	36	45
Nationality	Asian	56	70
	African	20	25
	Others	4	5
Educational Level	Bachelor	3	4
	Master	53	66
	PhD	24	30
School	Chinese Language	7	9
	Education	18	22
	Economics	10	12
	Chemistry	10	12
	Geography	2	2
	Life sciences	15	19
	Environmental sciences	16	19
	Foreign languages	2	2

### Instrument

For data collection, researcher used Questionnaire of Academic Experience namely QVA-r, developed by Almeida et al. in 1999, It is composed of five points likert scale comprising 60 items in order to explore academic experiences, divided in to five dimensions, i.e. 1) Personal skills (13 items) 2) Interpersonal skills (13 items) 3) Career aspect (13 items) 4) Study approaches (13 items) 5) Institutional consideration (8 items) (Almeida et al., 1999). The validity of the questionnaire was evaluated through the Chilean population and found internal stability ranges between 0.89 and 0.72 (Abello et al., 2012).

Table 2- Values of reliability for the dimensions of academic experiences

Dimensions	Alpha
1- Personal skills	.89
2- Interpersonal skills	.86
3- Career aspect	.80
4- Study approaches	.83
5- Institutional consideration	.72

### Data Analysis:

Dispersion of questionnaires was taken place randomly in all the schools of the university by the researcher. Received data was analyzed by means of different statistical tests, i.e. Mean, Median, Standard Deviation and Spearman correlation analysis. All the results are figured out below.

Table 3- Demonstrate the results of five dimensions of academic experiences by Mean, Median, and standard deviation

Dimension	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Personal	3.31	3	.25
Interpersonal	3.39	3	.28



<b>Career</b>	3.6	3	.21
<b>Study</b>	3.5	3	.22
<b>Institutional</b>	3.7	3	.24

By calculating the mean, median and standard Deviation of all five dimensions of academic experiences, it is disclosed that all mean scores value is greater than 3. The highest mean value among all dimensions is obtained by institutional dimension, i.e. 3.7, which shows the best adjustment indicator, followed by the career dimension, i.e. M=3.6, identifying that both dimensions are present appropriately in the academic experiences of the first year of international students of NENU.

On the other side, the personal dimension is shown by the lowest adaptation rate (M=3.31), verifying that international students need to show a better tendency to become accustomed in the university.

Table 4- Assessment of dimensions with respect to gender

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>					<b>Total QVA-r</b>
	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Interpersonal</b>	<b>Career</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Institutional</b>	
<b>Female</b>	3.3	3.8	4.3	3.8	3.4	3.72
<b>Male</b>	3.6	4.2	4.3	3.5	3.6	3.84

Table# 4 represents the mean scores of all dimensions with respect to the gender of participants. It is revealed through results that male participants appeared to show a better adjustment rate as compared to female students. This finding is in line with Diego Roberto Lima dos Anjos, 2017, which shows a significant difference between male and females' academic adjustment among medical students, and males showed comparatively higher adaptation rate in all dimensions than female participants.

#### **Spearman correlation analysis between the 5 dimensions**

In order to investigate correlation among all 5 dimensions, Spearman correlation was used statistically. The results revealed the only positive correlations were considered of moderate magnitude between personal and study dimensions ( $p$ -value  $< 0.0001$  or  $r = 0.183$ ). Hence it can be formulated that feelings and desire for the study are associated with the psychological state of the students.

#### **Conclusions**

Regarding objectives of this study the academic experiences of first-year international students of NENU were overall found satisfactory with a good rate of adaptation, however, adaptation rate was found higher in male students with Mean 3.8, in contrast with female students, as they acquired total QVA-r 3.7. However, some studies identified that male students appear better in career and personal aspects as compared to female students, Schlich's, 2006. While as per our findings, it is identified that male and female students appeared the same only in the career dimension and found no difference with Mean value, i.e. 4.3.

Moreover, female participants performed better in study dimension with Mean 3.8, as compared to male participants with Mean 3.5. Thus it can be inferred that in female students adaptation rate in terms of study dimension is greater than male students. It is also proved statistically by past studies that female students have shown higher performance by achieving higher averages in the study dimension, Wilson et al., 1996.

Some studies also reported that female students show better performance in studies through systematic planning of their tasks, and found more responsible as they show more attendance in the classroom as compare to male students, Cunha, 2004.

Cunha in 2005 further concluded in his study that, females experience more anxiety and depression as compared to male students and possess a high level of psychological and adaptation rate as compared to males.

Spearman correlation revealed the positive relation between personal and study dimensions, which determines that interest and concentration towards study depend upon the psychological state of students.

This finding is in line with (Khramtsova, Sarrnio, Gordeeva, & Williams, 2007, Salami 2010, Tamara Turashvili, 2012), which identified a psychological state of students is interlinked with students' attitudes and academic performance in higher educational institutions. The intention behind several studies was to investigate the impact of psychological state, emotional intelligence and self-efficacy on students' behaviors and attitudes. Therefore optimistic emotions influence students' behaviors and attitudes that result into adaptation and success (Salami, 2010, Tamara Turashvili, 2012)

### **Suggestions:**

This study focused on academic experiences of international students, and Future studies should be conducted on other experiences, experienced by international students, such as cultural, social and physical experiences, in order to investigate their adaptation rate and thus be helpful in enhancing their adjustment in Chinese higher institutions.

This study reveals comparatively low adaptation rate in female students in contrast with males, so in order to investigate its reasons, another study must be conducted for deep understanding.

University authorities should take actions to improve the adjustment rate of new international students so that they may grow in their personal skills.

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