Academic Experiences of Indian International Students in US Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and prospects for higher education across borders have led to a significant increase in the number of international students. Although international admissions offices do their best to ensure that international students possess the academic competencies necessary to pursue their education abroad, some students may still experience challenges due to cultural, educational, social, and many other differences between their home countries and education abroad. International students come from different countries and various factors influence their academic experiences. Some of these factors are common to all international students but some are unique to their country of origin. This article focuses on the academic experiences of six Indian international students at a southern higher education institution in the U.S. Data was collected through a demographic survey, focus group sessions and follow up interviews. Themes were constructed through a constant comparative method. Findings highlighted critical thinking, academic code of integrity, in-class participation, student-instructor relationship, English Accent, presentation of the learning material, meeting assignment deadlines, living alone, and approach to education as major areas of concern.

Keywords: International students, US higher education, Academic experiences, Academic challenges, Indian students, Qualitative.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute of International Education (2016) report, the international student population in the U.S. surpassed one million in the year 2015-2016 and 60% of these students were from China, India, Saudi Arabia and South Korea. International students bring cultural diversity to the U.S. classrooms and greatly contribute to the economy. As per the U.S. Department of Commerce, IIE (2016) report, international students contributed more than $30.5 billion to the U.S. economy and 72% of all international students received their primary source of funding from personal and family sources or other sources outside of the U.S. International students come from different cultures, influenced by different social and cultural beliefs and are acquainted with different educational systems (Hutchison, 2005). Differences in the requirements and expectations of the U.S. higher education system pose several academic challenges for these students. Although international students have some common academic challenges regardless of their country of origin, they also have some unique academic challenges associated with the academic emphases, philosophies of education, and methods of assessment that might vary from country to country. So, it is important for higher education institutions to be aware of the academic adjustment challenges of an individual group of international students so that they can be addressed appropriately to provide a positive learning experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. International Students in the U.S

The U.S. has been a center of attraction for international students from all over the world. With the increased focus on globalization, education across borders has become a common trend and has led to a growth in the international student population. The number of international students in the U.S. has increased from 34,232 in 1954-1955 to 1,043,839, in the 2015-2016 (IIE, 2016) surpassing one million. The increasing number of international students abroad and the prediction of this number to rise to 8 million by the year 2025 (Altbach and Bassett, 2004) makes it critical for universities abroad to understand and address the academic needs of this growing population. As per the Institute of International Education (IIE) website, an international student is described as someone studying at a higher education institution in the U.S. who has a temporary visa that allows for academic coursework. International students are required to maintain full-time student status as per the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) requirements, and they have great financial pressures as they have to pay out-of-state tuition. They have very limited or no access to welfare benefits, financial aid, scholarships, or student loans (Lin and Yi, 1997) and they are restricted to the availability and eligibility of on-campus jobs.

2.2. Indian International Students

Indian international students have their origin in India, in southern Asia. India, the seventh largest in land, second most populated, and one of the most diverse nations in the world is a country with many languages, religions, cultures, and ethnic groups. Its long and interesting history of education has been variously influenced by culture, religion, a caste system, foreign invasion and independence. Most Indian international students come from large metro cities like Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai and represent a privileged stratum of society that can afford education abroad. They mostly seek admission to fields such as engineering, computer science, information technology, business management, and medical sciences. The enrollment of Indian international students in higher education institutions of the U.S. has increased from 1,359 in 1949-1950 to 165,918 in 2015-2016 and India is one of the leading countries of origin of international students (IIE, 2016).

2.3. Contributions of International Students

International students provide opportunities for higher education institutions in the U. S. to broaden their cross-cultural perspectives and their views on education (Eland, 2001). In addition to enriching the cultural diversity and academic life, international students also contribute significantly to the economy of the U.S. In 2015, international students contributed $35.8 billion to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2016) and about 75 % of all international students received the majority of their funds from sources outside of the U.S. including family sources as well as assistance from their home country governments. International students help education institutions to promote campus internationalization and establish exchange programs that encourage university-to-university connections among different countries (Altbach, 2004). In addition to pursuing their academic and personal goals, international students also contribute to the economic, social and political development of their home countries (Selvadurai, 1991). International students create a multicultural mix that is necessary for anyone who intends to work in a world where jobs increasingly require the capacity to think beyond borders and across cultures. Recruitment of international students increases the potential to make American colleges and universities into classrooms for world citizenship (Goodman, 1996). They also bring intellectual, economic and cultural benefits to American campuses and communities that help American students to increase their awareness about other world cultures (IIE, 2003). Overall, international students add academic, cultural and economic value to universities abroad.

2.4. Academic, Social, Cultural, and Language Challenges of International Students

International students are familiar with the academic expectations and environments of their home countries educational institutions. When these students come abroad, despite intensive preparation to achieve their academic goals, some of them still feel unprepared and face challenges in adjusting to the educational system of the host country (Charles and Stewart, 1991). Some international students have more difficulties than others because students from different countries are accustomed to different teaching and learning styles (Eland, 2001; Xu, 2003). Other factors such as diverse cultural backgrounds, languages and social expectations also impact their academic adjustments. International students who come from very different cultural and ethnic backgrounds are likely to have more difficulties adjusting when compared to international students who come from cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are similar to the host country (Church, 1982; Yeh and Inose, 2003). The English language has been cited in the literature over and over again, as one of the major challenges for international students, and especially for students from non-English speaking countries (Zhai, 2004; Galloway and Jenkins, 2005; Andrade, 2006; Tidwell and Hanassab, 2007; Zhang and Goodson, 2011; Gautam *et al.*, 2016). Language challenges can also impede their social adjustments because of their hesitation to communicate with native students (Karuppan and Barari, 2010). Testing procedures in the U.S. also pose challenges for international students. Most international students are used to essay-type questions during an examination, which usually takes place twice a year. They are not accustomed to frequent testing and multiple-choice questions. When these students have multiple-choice questions and frequent testing in the U.S., it creates tension and stress that sometimes lead to poor academic success (Selvadurai, 1991). Adjustment challenges of international students are correlated to their ethnic backgrounds, cultures and countries of origin and hence they deserve to be studied individually. Being knowledgeable about the factors that influence the cross-cultural experiences of international students can help higher education institutions to better serve them (Campbell, 2015). Overall, international students can have a positive academic experience if their needs are correctly identified and appropriately met.

2.5. Importance of Studying Individual Differences among International Students

The international student population in the U.S. is quite diverse but their unique concerns are often overlooked. Although they have commonalities, their cross-cultural adjustments may differ based on factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, religious affiliations, linguistic backgrounds (Mori, 2000) and nationalities (Lin and Yi, 1997). For successful academic adjustments of international students, institutions should be willing to address their unique needs by becoming aware of cultural barriers, differences in the educational systems and other frustrations these students come across in adjusting to the academic environment (Lacina, 2002). There is ample research exploring the overall cross-cultural adjustments to specific adjustment challenges of international students. However, most studies on international students have either represented international students primarily as one whole group (Poyrazli and Grahame, 2007; Trice and Yoo, 2007; Kwon, 2009; Yuan, 2010; Zhou *et al.*, 2011; Ren and Hagedorn, 2012; Brauss *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2015) or have focused on a specific geographic region such as Asia (Heggins and Jackson, 2003; Kim, 2006; Jones, 2008; Sato and Hodge, 2009) and included students from several Asian countries such as China, India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, India etc. in a single study overlooking their unique concerns. Therefore, it is important to understand the challenges of individual groups of international students to help them successfully adjust to the new environment. Indian International students like any other group of international students, come to the institutions of higher education in the U.S. with high hopes of enriching their academic life. These students come from highly diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds. Understanding these students and the type of problems they experience during their academic adjustment process can help them adjust better.

3. METHODS

This was a qualitative study that included a demographic survey questionnaire, three focus groups, and six follow up interviews. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select six Indian international students on F1 (student visa), to make certain the sample was representative and informative about the topic (Patton, 1990). The major research question that guided this study focused on the academic adjustment problems the participants had experienced in the course of pursuing their graduate studies in the U.S. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and the participants were provided details about the research to make informed decisions about participating in the study. All participants had to sign an informed consent form prior to the data collection.

3.1. Participants

All the participants in this study had been in the U.S. for less than a year. Of the six participants, three were males, three were females and five were single, one was married. Four were in their early 20's, one in the late 20's, and one in the early 30's. One was from north India, two from south India, one from east India, and two from West India. Two of the six participants had prior travel experience and had been to the U.S. before, but not for educational purposes. Three were in the first semester, and three were in the second semester of their program of study. Two were electrical engineering majors, two were health administration majors, one was a computer science major, and one clinical psychology major. All participants had chosen to come to the U.S. to pursue their graduate studies. Five of them had undergraduate degrees and one had a graduate degree prior to coming to the U.S. Participants in the study were allowed to choose their own pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. The pseudonyms chosen were Amit, Anita, Aisha, Popeye, Sehaj and Smaran.

3.2. Setting

All participants in this study were enrolled at a particular Research Level II University in the southern U.S. It had seven professional colleges and, at the time of this study, offered 16 doctoral programs, 59 master's degree programs and 83 programs leading to bachelor's degree. The university included more than 800 full-time faculty and more than 20,700 students and represented students from all 50 U.S. states and 80 countries. The international student population of the university constituted a relatively small proportion of the total population. There were 657 international students of which 217 were Indian international students representing the majority. Of the Indian international students, 208 were pursuing their graduate studies and 110 were either in their first or second semester. Data collection for this study took place at one of the participant's apartment close to the university on Saturday evenings, in order to generate an atmosphere conducive to reflection and discussion.

4. DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study began with a demographic survey, followed by three focus group sessions, and concluded with six individual follow up interviews. The demographic survey questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gain baseline information about each participant regarding age, gender, academic background, prior travel experience, prior education, and other demographic characteristics. Focus group sessions were conducted over a period of two months and each lasted from 2 to 2.5 hours. Individual follows up interviews were conducted through email exchanges. Focus groups were the main source of data collection in this study and were used because they are considered to be an excellent qualitative method for exploring an issue from the perspective of the participants (Creswell, 1994). The focus group sessions also allowed the participants to have a flow of conversation, as they were not limited to pre-designed choices. The participants were more comfortable in discussing their personal views about their academic adjustment problems, especially when they listened to others. This comfort level might not have been possible if they were interviewed individually. It also helped them to relate to situations that were common to others in the group. Focus groups helped the researcher to gain insight into both individual and group perceptions and beliefs of the participants about their academic challenges. The researcher conducted a follow-up interview with each participant through emails after the focus group sessions to obtain more clarification about some individual responses.

4.1. Data Analysis

Patton (1990) points out that in qualitative research there is no one set way of analyzing data because each qualitative study is unique, and so the analytical approach is unique for each study. Data analysis for this study consisted of analysis of the demographic survey questionnaire, transcription of the recorded data from the focus group interview tapes, and follow-up interview responses. Data analysis was done concurrently with data collection. The ongoing analysis helped the researcher to stay focused; minimized the chances of collecting repetitious data, and prevented the researcher from being overwhelmed (Merriam, 1998). It also helped the researcher with the subsequent data collection and shaping the study as it was being conducted. The researcher transcribed the interviews, listened to the responses to make sure that each and everything said by the participants was transcribed exactly and completely and finally read and re-read the transcribed data to make summaries of the interpretations. The word-to-word coded responses and the interpretation of the responses were taken back to the participants from whom they were derived to check for accuracy of transcriptions and interpretations. Once this material was returned by the participants with any necessary corrections, the researcher re-read the transcribed data and came

up with nine themes. Themes were the common responses of the participants that were grouped together as they implied the same meaning.

4.2. Validity and Reliability

To establish the validity and reliability of this research, data were collected using three different ways for triangulation. An audit trail was maintained to document everything related to the study from the beginning to the end, direct quotes from the participants were used to support the findings, and the transcribed interviews were member checked to make sure that they were interpreted correctly.

5. FINDINGS

Findings of this study were presented in the form of themes that were constructed based on the common responses that implied the same meaning and were grouped together. Based on the responses, the researcher was able to identify the following academic challenges that the participants experienced and the adjustments that they had to make during their program of study.

5.1. Critical Thinking

All participants viewed the critical thinking approach required for graduate work as a new approach to which they had to adapt after coming to the U.S., as they were used to rote learning or memorization. They firmly believed that rote learning helped them build their basic foundation and that it was necessary to understand the basic concepts to be able to think critically. In India, they mostly used textbooks, reference guides, and instructors as their main sources of information. The curriculum was developed such that they were mostly tested on what content they had memorized rather than on the actual knowledge and application of the content. But after coming to the U.S., they had to learn to approach problems more in-depth than just looking at them from a theoretical perspective. Anita commented: "In India, I only used rote learning because the questions framed were such that it tested your memory more than your knowledge."

5.2. Academic Code of Integrity

Most of the participants were greatly concerned with the academic code of integrity, which is very strictly followed in the U.S. as opposed to in India. This code was something that these students had to be very careful about when they came to the U.S. In India, the participants mostly referred to their textbooks to do their assignments and even during the exams they just wrote what they had memorized from their textbooks and did not have to worry about any citations because in India they were tested more on the knowledge of the content than on the originality of their writing. After coming, to the U.S., they had to spend more time doing all their work themselves. More importantly, they had to be extra cautious when turning in assignments and during exams because they had to continuously remind themselves to use citations and follow the policy, procedures, and standards of their projects and assignments so that they would not be accused of plagiarism.

5.3. Approach to Education

All participants agreed to the fact that they had to get used to the more practical approach to education in the U.S. Most governmental educational institutions in India do not have sufficient resources to educate students using a practical approach to teaching and hence they mostly rely on textbooks. Participants were more accustomed to learning everything from textbooks and the lectures of their instructors, whereas in the U.S. they had to accustom

themselves to a more practical approach to education. They had to learn how to visualize the problems, and to think more practically rather than just looking at a problem from a theoretical perspective. Participants thought that the students in America were more knowledgeable because they not only used books but also referred to other resources in addition to their textbooks. Popeye said that the knowledge of Indian students is limited within the boundaries of the textbooks whereas students in America have a wider range of knowledge, and he commented: "They [American students] possess phenomenal practical knowledge, while we [Indian students] possess phenomenal book [bookish] knowledge."

5.4. In-Class Participation

Participants also expressed their problems related to participation. They were not used to any kind of participation in class because, in India, students are not required to do so, nor it is a part of the grade. Moreover, in India, students are required to maintain a quiet atmosphere and listen to their instructors' talk, as the instructors are the sole authority in class. Students do not have a say against the instructors. As a result, in India, the focus group participants had not participated in any kind of discussions in class and so were not used to in-class participation.

Amit commented: "There is a pin drop silence in the classroom in India. The students do not have a say against the instructor and raising questions or putting up your points before the instructor -- that is out of the question, impossible. There is not much interaction between the students and the instructor."

After coming to the U.S., the participants had to learn to take part in classroom debates and discussions because here active participation was not only required but also constituted a part of the grade. Participants noted that the expectations of the instructors were completely different between India and America.

5.5. Student-Instructor Relationship

Participants thought that it was very hard to talk to the U.S. instructors when they had questions and concerns since instructors were not immediately available to them for discussion like they were in India. Here they had to make appointments to talk to the instructors during specified office hours. Sometimes participants needed immediate answers to some questions and did not have the same state of mind and enthusiasm to ask the question/s when they had to make an appointment to talk to the instructor. This situation left the participants with unanswered questions and concerns related to their assignments and projects. In India, because they did not have to make an appointment with an instructor to talk about academic questions, whenever they had any questions or concerns, they just followed the instructor after class. This helped them to get answers to their questions immediately while the questions were still fresh in their memory. Sehaj was very disappointed when she found out that she had to make an appointment to talk to the instructor after class and she commented: "In India, professors talk to us and we can ask them questions right away. We do not have to make appointments or wait to ask questions."

5.6. English Accent

Some of the participants indicated problems in understanding American accents. They had problems understanding their instructors and other American students in class and vice-versa. The Indian educational system is based on the British educational system and Asian Indian students speak British English. Participants said that American English did not focus on the precise pronunciation of words and sentences, which had led them to ask their instructors and American peers to repeat some things. Sehaj had to ask one of her instructors to repeat what

he said. She said to the instructors, "I [It] will take time to get your accent. Can you be a little slow?" After that it was fine.

Participants noted that although they had problems understanding their instructors and peers and vice-versa, their problems were less severe compared with other groups of international students. Aisha made the point that even though she had a problem with an American accent, it was less severe compared to other nationalities and she commented: "I have heard the Chinese students when they speak. They do not know the exact formation of the sentences, so they can't come out with structure, and Americans do have problems understanding them, too."

Smaran said that he had problems with the American accent because some professors and students spoke very fast and it was hard for him to understand them. Participants who had problems with the American accent noticed that the problem was severe for the first few weeks but had eased over time. The researcher noted that the participants who had had prior travel experience did not seem to have any problem with the American English accent.

5.7. Presentation of the Learning Material

Whether it was presented in writing or orally, most participants had problems with how the material is typically presented in the university. In India, students are expected to express and elaborate on a particular topic in detail, and they are used to writing a lot. A lengthy piece of writing gives them the opportunity to express their knowledge beyond the point to show their instructors the way they think about that particular topic and so forth. However, in the US, instructors expect the students to be succinct and more to the point and so it was difficult for the participants to get used to that. Moreover, students in India are used to essay-type questions as opposed to multiple-choice questions and that made it even harder for them. Anita and Popeye were very frustrated because they were so used to writing page after page. They had a hard time adjusting to multiple-choice or to the point answers. Anita expressed her frustration and she commented: "Initially I had trouble because I wrote a lot and my professors were like, this is not India, don't write so much. It is ok, I know you know your stuff, so just give me that you know your stuff. Don't write so much."

Popeye was a little upset because he could not do more to impress his instructors by elaborating on his answers beyond the point. He wanted to demonstrate that he knew more than what they needed him to know, and he commented: "I like to elaborate on my answers because it gives me the opportunity to express my views and impress the instructor."

Presenting the learning material in a more precise and specific manner was a challenge for the participants. In fact, unfamiliarity with multiple-choice question patterns had sometimes led to poor grades.

5.8. Meeting Assignment Deadlines

Most of the participants had to adjust to the fast-paced life in America. In India, most people are very easy going, whereas in the U.S., people operate within a time frame and greatly value time. Aisha and Amit had problems meeting the assignment deadlines. They acknowledged a lot of stress because of deadlines for projects, assignments and exams. Meeting deadlines sometimes got difficult for Amit and he commented: "I have problems in meeting the timelines for the assignments. It is tough when all deadlines come together, and I have to turn in everything around the same time." Aisha was a little worried in the beginning because she was very relaxed in India. After coming to the U.S., she noticed that Americans greatly value time, and that observation helped her learn to manage her time more effectively. She commented, "I noticed how American people manage time so well. They do everything and

don't just focus on a single thing for a longer period of time, which helps them to maintain a balance between their work, study and personal life."

Popeye viewed learning to manage time as a positive aspect because it helped him to maintain his reputation and good image and he commented: "Things are taken in a much more casual way in India. I mean that kind of casual approach is absolutely not tolerated here in the US."

Participants had to learn to adjust to life in the U.S. Overall, learning to adjust to the fast-paced life was one of the major factors in the participants adjustment, and it taught them how to operate within a time frame, how to be consistent with their work, and to become more serious about utilizing their time effectively.

5.9. Living Alone

Most of the participants expressed concerns about living by themselves. Living alone and away from family was very difficult for them because in India children have very close family ties and do not move out of the home until they are married or become self-sufficient enough to survive on their own. And, it is culturally unacceptable, especially for females to live by themselves or move out until they are married.

Participants said that in India they did not have to worry about paying for their education as their parents paid their expenses and took care of everything. Most of the participants belonged to elite families and so they were not used to cooking, cleaning, washing and doing household work as they had maids who did all the work for them. When they came to the U.S. they had found it quite difficult, at least for the first few weeks, to live and do everything on their own. Female participants expressed more concerns about living by themselves than the male participants. Aisha commented: "Here I have to live on my own, which, you know, I didn't go back home, I never lived in a hostel or something, I did not go away from home, so that was a big thing for me. Yeah, that was really hard for me." Anita, being the only child, had the hardest time adjusting to an independent life in the U.S. and she commented: "Living away from my parents was a surprise since I am the only child and was pampered and now I have to do everything by myself, pay my bills, take care of my accounts and be very careful about how much money I am spending so that I don't overspend and stuff like that."

Living away from family along with taking responsibility for themselves was quite a big adjustment for the participants and especially for the female participants who had never lived away from their parents. The female participants also indicated that living away from family is considered culturally unacceptable in Indian society.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Participants did have some academic problems that were common with other groups of international students, but they also had some problems that were specifically related to their cultural beliefs, family ties, and differences in the educational systems. In terms of differences in learning approach, the participants reported the independent responsibility of learning as less motivational because it did not encourage them to work harder as they did not have anyone competing with them and nor did they have any societal pressure to perform well. This difference indicated that the academic environment in India is highly competitive, and learning is not only the responsibility of the student but also a concern of the society as a whole including family members, friends, and relatives, a belief creating academic pressure in terms of high academic expectations. In spite of coming from a highly competitive academic environment, participants still faced challenges in adjusting to the academic environment in the U.S. They had experienced difficulties due to the differences in the educational systems, the cultural beliefs, social structure, and the poor infrastructure of their home country education system.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the participants were products of a highly competitive and poorly facilitated academic environment with limited resources, dominated by the instructors, influenced by high expectations of the family, bounded by cultural beliefs and the social structure. They felt that they could have adjusted better and more quickly to the academic environment had their problems been identified, understood and dealt appropriately. This study also indicates that for international students to have a positive experience, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind their challenges so that they can be appropriately addressed.

As mentioned in the literature review, there is no dearth of research regarding overall cross-cultural adjustments to specific adjustment challenges of international students. However, most of the existing literature either focuses on international students as one whole group or have grouped students from specific geographic regions overlooking their unique needs. Indian international students in higher education institutions of the U.S. are one such group whose academic experiences have not been studied extensively. The researcher hopes that this study with six participants will contribute to the limited literature that exists on Indian international students and open avenues for future studies to understand this growing population, which is expected to increase even more over the coming years. Overall, understanding the academic adjustment problems of any individual group of international students and providing adequate, appropriate and timely assistance to resolve those problems can make their academic adjustment much easier, leading to a positive academic experience anywhere in the world.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study has some notable findings, there are some limitations. The results only reflect the experiences of the six participants involved in the study which warns against the generalization of the results to a larger population. Similar studies with larger sample sizes can be replicated with other cultural groups to understand their unique experiences. Comparative studies of the individual groups of graduate and undergraduate international students can also be conducted to identify the differences and or similarities of their academic adjustment experiences.

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