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Recurring Themes Across Fractal Issues Facing International Students: A Thematic Analysis of 2016 Dissertations and Theses

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This section shares recent dissertations and theses with the *Journal of International Students* readers. There were about 139 graduate dissertations and theses related to the issues and challenges of international students in 2016. The complete versions of these selected dissertations are available in the ProQuest, Michigan-based electronic publisher. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global is the world's most comprehensive collection of dissertations and theses from around the world, spanning from 1743 to the present day. This database has found 17,164 results from 1922-2018 while searching the keywords "international student" in its search engine.

The leading institutions of higher education in producing dissertations related to international students/international education were as follows: University of Toronto (427), Indiana University (423), University of Southern California (401), University of Minnesota (339), The Ohio State University (304), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (299), Purdue University (298), Michigan State University (275), Walden University (258), University of California, Los Angeles (210), University of Maryland, College Park (205), University of Florida (203), Florida State University (198), Iowa State University (194), and Texas A&M University (192). This does not mean all dissertations/theses were related to international students as the keywords may appear in many other disciplines.

Written in 1922, *The Foreign Student on the American Campus* (by Anne Elizabeth Neely, the University of Chicago) was the oldest dissertation related to international student. ProQuest database indicated

1,426 results related to international student with 1,259 full texts since 2016. There were 139 doctoral dissertations and theses directly related to international students published in 2016. These dissertations and theses came from a variety of disciplines from American, British, and Canadian universities.

Across the 139 dissertations that came out in 2016, we found about a dozen themes. Not surprisingly, the most common theme was acculturation, with 32 dissertations. Other themes in order of the frequency were writing/academic skills (16), retention (13), language (9), counseling (9), global awareness (8), social media technology and online education (6), discrimination (6), identity (7), recruitment (5), teaching assistants (4), community engagement (4), career (4), college choice and mobility trends (4), community college (3), and miscellaneous (9). Below is a more detailed list of key ideas that were addressed in these various themes.

Acculturation

Acculturation in the context of international students involves the cultural adjustment of international students by adapting to or borrowing traits from the culture of their host community including the host institution. This theme consisted of the dissertations that addressed key issues such as student life satisfaction and transitional experiences ranging from food to spouses, games to campus life, and other socio-cultural adjustment issues.



Figure 1: A Visual Representation of Acculturation Issues

Writing and Academic Skills

The second theme consisted of other perennial issues facing international students such as academic and writing skills required by the new institutions they matriculated into. The complexities pertaining to the reading, writing, assignments, teamwork, and academic integrity were addressed in these studies

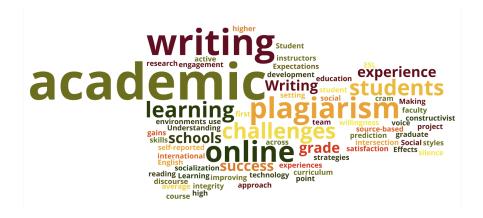


Figure 2: A Visual Representation of Writing Issues

Retention

About a dozen dissertations addressed retention strategies including college retention practices adopted by the host institutions, challenges that international students face when integrating, persistence, student-athletes' retention, retention and achievement, overall college experience, retention in online doctoral programs, engagement, effects of demographics on freshman retention, and use of tracking software packages such as MAP-worksTM for student success and retention.

Counseling

Counseling and mental health was another theme that talked about wellbeing and distress, psychological challenges, mental health resources, helpseeking intentions, resilience, language anxiety, and health care in reducing stigma.

Language

Many dissertations addressed unique challenges as experienced by students from various geographic regions including China and the Middle East. Issues associated with language proficiency such as academic self-efficacy, social relationships were addressed. Moreover, the role of language background, role of mother tongue, communication problems, and identities connected with accents and language learning needs were studied.

Miscellaneous

Many dissertations in 2016 addressed some unique issues such as international students' perceptions of Anglo-Saxon model, propensity to trust, policy experiences, hopes and experiences of international students in the UK, correcting misinformation on HIV/AIDS, roommate-pairing program, and experiences of international students with learning disabilities.

Teaching Assistants

A small number of dissertations (4) specifically addressed experiences of international students working as teaching or graduate assistants. Challenges of having to adjust to new classroom culture, feedback received and experiences of learning to teach in the U.S. were studied with various interesting findings.

Recruiting

Recruiting of international students was another theme that addressed various strategies including those adopted by various institutions including the community colleges. The studies included such topics as recruitment trends before and after 9/11, education agents in Canada, recruitment and representations, and student enrollment patterns in U.S. colleges and universities.

Identity

Identity issues of international students consisted of another theme. Topics included social media on identity formation, gender identity, emerging civic identity, cross-cultural identity, LGBTQ international students, identity and literacy development, identity negotiation while using L2 literacies skills, and identity and cross-cultural adaptation on social media such as the Instagram.

Community Engagement

A small number of dissertations addressed international students volunteering experiences and various ways of community engagement. Topics included community of practice, civic engagement, community service experiences, and cross-cultural adjustment.

Global Awareness

Some dissertations discussed the global awareness opportunities for local students due to the presence of international students by studying pathways of global engagement. Many other topics included study abroad on student academic achievement, global perspectives, cross-cultural friendship opportunities, internationalization initiatives, improving interactions, multicultural awareness, multiculturalism and cultural adaptation.

Discrimination

About half a dozen dissertations studied discrimination as experienced by international students in their host communities. Topics included social norm perception, language discrimination, Islamophobia, prejudice, veiled incivilities, and students' perceptions of social inequalities.

Career

A small number of dissertations explored career outcomes for international students due to their studies in the host countries. Topics included early career outcome differences, choices, experiences and perceptions of employability, branch campus of international institutions, university-towork transition, and professional career navigation.

College Choice and Mobility Trends

A small number of dissertations studied student mobility trends and college choice deliberations by international students. Topics included study abroad decision and university choice, decision making factors, and decision to attend a community college.

Apart from the thematic observations, interesting observations were found in the geographic regions specifically mentioned in these dissertations. Many of the dissertations addressed students from specific geographic regions. Here also not surprisingly, the dissertations that talked about Chinese students was the highest with 22 dissertations, followed by those about Saudi Arabia (12), Africa (4), United Kingdom (5), and Canada (2). Notable is that even though Australia attracts a large number of

international students and there must be many dissertations addressing international students, they are not usually available from ProQuest database, which was the main source that this thematic analysis based on.

These fractal issues facing international students are awaiting attention of host institutions' student affairs professionals.

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