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Myanmar High School Students' Perceptions of College and International Readiness in Western Society

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of high school students associated with a United States-based preparatory school located in Myanmar regarding their readiness for college in Western society. In this two-stage study, quantitative data were collected using a 100-item 5-point Likert-scale survey focusing on college and international readiness completed by 49 participants, and qualitative data were gathered from 14 participants who participated in focus group interview sessions. Quantitative results yielded a mean of 3.42 (SD=1.08, N=49) for college readiness and a mean of 3.73 (SD=1.09, N=49) for international readiness. The qualitative findings showed the emergence of four themes: (a) mixed feelings on transitioning to independence, (b) concerns about adapting to a new culture, (c) lack of preparedness for college-level academics, and (d) unconcerned about making friends. These results indicated that the participants felt generally prepared to transition to a postsecondary setting in a Western country.

Keywords: college readiness, international readiness, international students, mixed methods research, Myanmar.

There are many difficulties in defining what it means to be prepared for college and how to measure college readiness accurately. Factors currently utilized for researching college readiness are grade point average, SAT/ACT scores, attrition rates, measures of success and persistence in college classes, perceived levels of happiness and acceptance, friendship, and social adjustment to college (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). Current and previous international students emigrating from Asian nations have identified additional significant social and cultural barriers to success. These include a lack of

academic preparedness, language comprehension difficulties, feelings of social exclusion, and homesickness. These factors add to the difficulty of transitioning to the college environment (Gautam et al., 2016).

Students who have attended secondary school in the Union of Myanmar face additional challenges to a successful transition because of the unique political situation in the country. In addition, many students in Myanmar are first-generation college students who do not have the advice and lived experiences of siblings, parents, or friends who have had these experiences. In the years since the 2010 opening of Myanmar's political borders, many Myanmar high school students have begun seeking opportunities to advance their education in Western colleges and universities (Kipgen, 2016). As this is a new opportunity for Myanmar students, it is important to understand the barriers to success these students face when transitioning from their high schools in Myanmar to a postsecondary setting in a Western country. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first-ever conducted in a secondary educational institute in Myanmar that aimed to determine the Myanmar high school students' perceptions of their readiness to transition to college in a Western country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The information presented in this literature review was utilized to inform the creation of the instrumentation used to collect data for the study. The information is divided into two sections: the four major indicators of college readiness and seven major factors affecting international readiness for students transitioning from Asian countries to Western nations. In addition, a discussion of current educational practices in the Union of Myanmar is also provided.

College Readiness Indicators

Globally, preparing students for the rigors of college success is difficult, as students from different regions face unique barriers. However, college readiness is a global issue that affects all international students preparing to enter a transnational college or university significantly. Research in many studies has found that readiness for college cannot be solely determined through academics alone, and often the determination of academic markers is a determination of college eligibility as opposed to college readiness (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018; Gautam et al., 2016). Conley (2007) has expanded on this limited view and additionally identified four specific indicators of college readiness, which are: (a) key cognitive strategies, (b) key content knowledge, (c) college knowledge, and (d) academic behaviors. These four indicators informed the first major focus of the study, that of college readiness, and are elaborated upon in the following section.

The first indicator of college readiness, key cognitive strategies, is thinking behaviors that include mind-based skills, such as problem identification, information acquisition, evaluation of source reliability, data analysis, and error identification (Conley, 2007). Many university professors have identified key

cognitive strategies as the primary area in which incoming first-year students demonstrate sub-par skills, specifically problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Espey, 2018). The second indicator, key content knowledge, refers to the set of standard academic concepts that each incoming first-year college student is expected to possess (Conley, 2015). Content knowledge also includes cognitive domains, such as basic mathematics, communication, political and scientific reasoning skills, and most importantly, students must possess a minimum level of academic writing and reading skills (Rasinski et al., 2017).

The third indicator, college knowledge, refers to the student's awareness of what is expected to enter and maintain a positive standing in college (Conley, 2007). This includes the understanding of the application process, financial implications, applying for loans, grants, and scholarships, and what tasks are necessary to complete between being accepted and attending college classes. Finally, the fourth indicator of college readiness, academic behaviors, is behaviors that students must perform, outside of knowing specific content knowledge, to be successful in a postsecondary environment. These behaviors are often metacognitive and include working in a group, showing persistence in education, setting goals, and monitoring self-management skills (Conley, 2007).

Factors Affecting International Readiness

The second major focus of this study was student readiness for the international transition. The transition from high school to postsecondary education is difficult for many students, and the difficulty in successfully performing the transition increases when the student transitions to a new community (Lee et al., 2018). Seven recurrent factors have been identified through a literature review as the most common factors affecting international readiness for students transitioning from Asian to Western nations. These factors are (a) cultural barriers, (b) social exclusion, (c) language barriers, (d) homesickness, (e) lack of friends, (f) lack of international college knowledge, and (g) academic concerns (Bista, 2015; Leong, 2015; Telbis et al., 2014). These seven factors are defined and their importance is discussed in the following section.

The first factor affecting students' international readiness is cultural barriers. Differences in culture manifest as different values and actions in the academic and classroom settings of different regions (Nieto, 2018). International students, specifically those from East and Southeast Asia, report significant difficulties in acculturating and assimilating into the dominant Western culture, especially the United States (Leong, 2015). The second factor is social exclusion. Social exclusion is related to language and cultural barriers and can pose a major problem relating to the experiences, outcomes, and health of students (Bista, 2019). Social exclusion can be a result of, and also result in, a student's unwillingness to participate, communicate, and interact with professors and peers. This can lead to detrimental and instrumental loneliness, as reported by many international students (Wawera & McCamley, 2020).

The third factor affecting students' international readiness is language barriers. The acquisition and use of the English language are commonly identified as the most significant factors affecting successful student transitions from East or Southeast Asia to postsecondary settings in Western countries (Sharaievska et al., 2019). According to Haugh (2016), international students who have already made the transition identified language difficulties as the most significant factor affecting their academic success. The fourth factor is homesickness. Regarding homesickness, college is the first time most students live away from home. Students often struggle with the lack of parental, family, and peer support, and the result can be tangible, often causing depression or loneliness (Tsai et al., 2017). In addition, East Asian international students have reported the highest degree of homesickness, often because the East Asian culture values family and parental interactions more than Western society (Tsai et al., 2017).

The fifth factor is the lack of friends. International students often report lower social interactions and networking levels than what they expected before studying internationally (Bista, 2019). According to Perry (2016), many Asian students studying in the United States lack American friends and find cultural differences inhibit the formation of friendships outside of their cultural background. The sixth factor impacting the international readiness of transnational students is due to a lack of understanding of logistical processes, defined as international college knowledge. These include the college structure, required university forms, and additional fees (Conley, 2007). The lack of college knowledge manifests in a lack of knowledge about the application process for scholarships and financial aid, the deadlines for acceptance into specific programs within the university, and a lack of ability to find and utilize international support (Lee et al., 2018). Finally, the seventh factor, academic concerns, is commonly cited for international students. Students often enter colleges or universities unprepared for the rigors of college-level academics, and the student's home region can significantly influence the level of pre-college academic preparation the student has received (Martirosyan et al., 2019).

Education in Myanmar

In understanding barriers to success for Myanmar-based transnational students and the differences these barriers exhibit compared to transnational students from other nations, it is important to understand the educational structures within the Union of Myanmar. The inconsistent history regarding education in Myanmar has created unique challenges for Myanmar students seeking post-secondary opportunities. Education has always been highly valued in Myanmar and Myanmar once boasted the highest literacy rates of any Southeastern Asian country. However, starting in 1948, a 62-year military hold of the government eradicated liberal public education (Oo, 2015). The election of a more democratic government in 2010 reintroduced the opportunity for liberal education in Myanmar. However, the period of military dominance left the country with few resources, facilities, and educators (Brown & Hung, 2022). The lack of an established proficient educational system has motivated many students

and families to enroll in private schools in Myanmar and seek educational opportunities outside of the country, especially postsecondary education.

Within the context of private education in Myanmar, there also exists a variety of choices for students and their families. Due to the proximity of China to Myanmar and the Chinese influence on the country, many international schools in Myanmar have focused on preparing students to transition to China for postsecondary education and employment (Li & Han, 2020). Other private schools in Myanmar are religion-based and these schools value language education in one of the many national languages in addition to English (Tin, 2014). Also, Western-based international schools are common throughout the country which value English language acquisition as well as an understanding and assimilation of Western culture (Li & Han, 2020). According to Tin (2021), many educational institutions throughout Myanmar, regardless of goals, are reforming their curricula to fit a more Western system of education, which includes student-centered classes, more interactions with teachers, and individualized education plans for students. Also, for most Myanmar citizens, the ability to speak English is seen as a designation of personal value and future opportunity (Li et al., 2019; Tin, 2014).

The educational structure in Myanmar has undergone another radical shift since we conducted this study in 2019. In February 2021, the Myanmar military again resumed control of the country's government and enacted a one-year state of emergency, significantly limiting access to public schooling (BBC World News, 2023). Although the government has enforced bans on communication and restricted travel, political borders are not strictly closed (San, 2021). The ability for students to leave the country for postsecondary education has made seeking international education opportunities paramount for many Myanmar students. As the number of Myanmar students seeking college opportunities in Western education systems increases, identifying and addressing the needed skills for student success in a different culture and an international academic setting becomes increasingly essential.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to determine the Myanmar high school students' perceptions of their college and international readiness to transition to college in a Western country. This information will not only be useful to the Union of Myanmar, but it will also be useful to postsecondary institutions throughout the world that accept and respect the inclusion of international students, specifically those from the Union of Myanmar. The following research question guided this study: What are Myanmar high school students' perceptions of attending a United States-based preparatory school in Myanmar regarding their readiness for college in Western society?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 49 students participated in this study and were chosen using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2019). There were 37 participants in 11th grade and 12 participants in 12th grade. All of the 51 students enrolled in the 11th or 12th grade at the study site school were asked to participate in the study. Two students in the 12th grade chose not to participate in the study, providing a 96% participation rate for the potential study candidates. The ages of the participants were comparable to those in a traditional high school in the United States.

Setting

The setting for this study was a private, for-profit school in an urban area within the second-largest city in the Union of Myanmar. The school was in its seventh year of operation at the time of data collection in 2019. Approximately 1,100 students attended the school, ranging from pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade. The school had approximately 50% of students with Myanmar heritage and 50% of students with Chinese heritage. The school employed 64 foreign teachers, all of whom were native English speakers, apart from the two Spanish Language teachers. The students were required to communicate only in English while on campus, and all instructors at the school spoke only English when interacting with the students. In addition, the curriculum was based on requirements for public schools in the United States. The school and academic focus were typical for a western-based private school within Myanmar functioning to prepare students to attend college in a Western nation.

The cost to attend the school was approximately \$10,000 U.S. dollars per year for secondary students, and the students came from business-minded families primarily. The mission of the school was that every student, upon completion of their 12th-grade year, would be accepted into a university in a Western country, predominately focusing on universities in the United States. Based on the first author's observations and teaching experiences in Myanmar, Western-based international schools throughout the nation focused on similar standards of education and college preparation. Therefore, students attending any of these schools in Myanmar would likely be arriving at Western colleges and universities with similar levels of preparation and academic experience. The study site was chosen because it was representative of the education, values, and student populations of most of the western-based international schools within the country.

Data Sources

This study incorporated two data sources: (a) a student readiness survey and (b) semi-structured student focus group interviews.

Student Readiness Survey

The student readiness survey consisted of 100 Likert-scale items following an introductory section collecting demographic information through 9 demographic questions. The student readiness survey was adapted from four previously validated surveys conducted by Antonoff (2014), Cacioppo and Petty (1982), Shen (2017), and Spenner and Bryant (2002). All four surveys have been previously utilized as self-surveys given to students in the 12th grade or before entering university for the first time. They were all designed for English-speaking students graduating from traditional high schools in the United States. Because the participants in this study were all attending an English-only international school, they had adequate cultural knowledge and English language skills to understand all the survey items in context.

There were two stages of the data collection process. During the first stage of data collection, all 100 survey items were modified to be phrased as independent statements and to avoid negative wording. The survey was created to address two sections: the four indicators of college readiness and the seven factors affecting international readiness. These 11 indicators and factors served as survey subscales in collecting and analyzing data. Among these survey items, 63 items made up the college readiness section of the survey, as defined by Conley (2007). The four major indicators for college readiness are (a) key cognitive strategies (survey items 1-24), (b) key content knowledge (survey items 25-29), (c) college knowledge (survey items 30-33), and (d) academic behaviors (survey items 34-63).

The remaining 37 survey items addressed the seven most common factors affecting transnational readiness in the international readiness section of the survey. Those seven factors are (a) language barriers (survey items 1-4), (b) cultural barriers (survey items 5-12), (c) social exclusion (survey items 13-17), (d) homesickness (survey items 18-21), (e) lack of friends (survey items 22-25), (f) lack of international college knowledge (survey items 26-31), and (g) academic concerns (survey items 32-37). The Cronbach's alpha values for the two major survey sections were 0.90 for the four indicators of college readiness and 0.86 for the seven factors affecting international readiness.

Student Focus Group Interviews

During the second stage of the data collection, a total of 14 participants were selected to participate in two separate student focus group interview sessions, consisting of seven students in each session to further gather information on their perceptions of college readiness. The student focus group interview questions were designed mainly based on the initial participant survey results. The interview guide contained eight interview questions. Sample questions such as "How prepared do you feel to attend college in Western society? Why?", "What do you feel will be the hardest part of attending college in another country?", "What are you most excited about for college?", and "What are you most concerned about regarding college?" were asked.

Procedures

The research procedures involved four stages. First, the 49 participants completed the student readiness survey at the host school in April 2019. The survey was conducted in one 45-minute session, although none of the participants took longer than 30 minutes to complete the survey. Second, the first author then conducted two semi-structured student focus group interviews with 14 participants. These participants were chosen purposefully using maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2019). Each student focus group included seven students: two students who responded positively overall, three students who responded neutrally overall, and two students who responded negatively overall on the student readiness survey from each of the 11th and 12th grades. All of the student focus group interview participants were represented through pseudonyms. The first student focus group interview included seven 11th-grade participants (Beth, David, Jennifer, Jessica, Karly, Kevin, and Marla) and the second student focus group interview included seven 12th-grade participants (Andrew, Brian, Charles, George, Lucy, Robert, and Rodney).

Third, the interviews were scheduled during the first weeks of May 2019 and were conducted at the host school. Each interview lasted 45-50 minutes and interview responses from the student focus groups were recorded using audio software. All interviews were conducted in English and participants' responses were recorded verbatim. Finally, data from the student focus group interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed fully during the summer and fall of 2019.

Data Analysis

For quantitative data analysis, the survey data were prepared by first coding the responses numerically. The coding system used for the Likert-scale items was 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. Then, survey responses were categorized based on the four indicators of college readiness and the seven factors affecting international readiness. Finally, both descriptive and inferential statistical procedures were performed on the survey data to determine central tendencies, standard deviations, and rankings using SPSS statistics software.

For qualitative data analysis, the student focus group interview data were first analyzed and coded (Saldaña, 2016). The responses were then categorized into common themes that emerged from the interview data. The interview findings are presented with emergent themes and direct quotes that support those themes. For example, the theme of concerns about adapting to a new culture emerged through multiple quotes, such as "The food, "gunshots", "Like, we want to know what to call people. We don't want people offended by us", and "Like in our country, we touch friends, and there, you can be in trouble for accidentally touching someone."

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

College Readiness Survey

The average participant response for the college readiness section of the survey was 3.42 (SD=1.08), indicating that the participants, overall, felt prepared to make the transition to a college or university (see Table 1). The subscale with the highest reported mean was the key cognitive strategies (M=3.55, SD=0.95), and the lowest reported mean was from the college knowledge subscale (M=2.88, SD=1.12). The subscale of college knowledge was the only subscale with an overall mean of less than 3.00. The remaining two subscales from the college readiness section of the survey were academic behaviors (M=3.46, SD=1.11) and key content knowledge (M=3.08, SD=1.12). A one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference among the four subscales of college readiness, $F(3, 192) = 11.78, p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests indicated that participants had significantly higher means in the subscales of key cognitive strategies and academic behaviors than in the subscale of college knowledge.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of College Readiness Indicators

Rank	M	SD
College Readiness		
1. Key Cognitive Strategies	3.55	0.95
2. Academic Behaviors	3.46	1.11
3. Key Content Knowledge	3.08	1.12
4. College Knowledge	2.88	1.12
Overall	3.42	1.08

International Readiness Survey

The overall average for the international readiness section of the survey was 3.73 (SD=1.09). The seven subscales within the international readiness section of the survey had means ranging from 3.04 to 4.25 (see Table 2). The two highest recorded subscales averages, and the only two subscales of the survey that recorded a mean greater than 4.00, were the cultural barriers (M=4.25, SD=0.92) and social exclusion (M=4.16, SD=0.93) subscales. The two lowest subscale means came from the lack of international college knowledge (M=3.04, SD=1.12) and academic concerns (M=3.37, SD=0.95) subscales. The other three remaining subscales were: lack of friends (M=3.88, SD=1.00), language barriers (M=3.68, SD=0.98), and homesickness (M=3.55, SD=1.15). These numbers indicate the participants felt prepared overall for overcoming barriers to the international transition, and all the subscales received positive responses (M>3.00) for

preparedness on average. A one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference among the seven subscales of college readiness, $F(3, 336) = 21.84, p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests indicated that participants had significantly higher means in the subscales of cultural barriers, social exclusion, lack of friends, language barriers, and homesickness than in the subscale of lack of international college knowledge.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Factors Affecting International Readiness

Rank	M	SD
International Readiness		
1. Cultural Barriers	4.25	0.92
2. Social Exclusion	4.16	0.93
3. Lack of Friends	3.88	1.00
4. Language Barriers	3.68	0.98
5. Homesickness	3.55	1.15
6. Academic Concerns	3.37	0.95
7. Lack of International College Knowledge	3.04	1.12
Overall	3.73	1.09

Student Focus Group Interview

Four major themes emerged from the student focus group interview data. These themes were: (a) mixed feelings on transitioning to independence, (b) concerns about adapting to a new culture, (c) lack of preparedness for college-level academics, and (d) unconcerned about making friends. Each theme is elaborated upon in the following section.

Theme 1: Mixed Feelings on Transitioning to Independence

In analyzing the data to categorize the participant responses, the most prominent theme to emerge in student focus group interviews was the theme of transitioning to independence. Responses around the theme of transitioning to independence were dichotomous. The participants indicated the idea of independence was the most exciting part but also the biggest concern about the transition to a postsecondary setting in Western society. When asked what non-academic aspects of the transition the participants were most excited about, most participants responded with some form of independence. For example, George

stated he was most excited about “freedom. Stay away from parents.” Karli said simply, “I will be on my own!”

In contrast, some participant responses also illustrated the opposing view of the transition to independence and the participants’ concerns over being independent for the first time in their lives. In response to the question of what non-academic aspects of the transition she was most excited about, Jessica mentioned independence but was more reserved in her excitement. She explained: “I think it also makes you a more responsible person. We have a lot of things taken care of here, but when you get there, you have to be responsible to take care of yourself and pay your bills. So, it is exciting, but it is also, like, stressful at the same time.” Robert explained why the transition is challenging coming from the Myanmar culture:

Being independent is, like, really difficult compared to here [in Myanmar]. Like, Asian families, they have, like, extended families, especially the teachers here, they tell us what to do and when to do it, but like, in college, we have to depend on ourselves. We have to catch our own deadlines, and it’s really difficult because we are not used to that kind of class.

Theme 2: Concerns about Adapting to a New Culture

The second most prominent theme in the student focus group interviews was the theme of culture. When relating culture to overall readiness, the participants revealed that the majority of the aspects they felt unprepared for were cultural. Despite the strong positive response to overcoming cultural barriers from the survey, the references to culture were shallow during the focus group interviews. For example, Kevin stated he felt he was a “7 out of 10” on a scale of overall preparedness. He explained those numbers were not higher because of the “environment”, by which he meant the physical environment and weather. When asked specifically about other cultural concerns, the remainder of the participants’ responses in both of the focus group interviews were single words or phrases that included: “The food” (Andrew), “money” (David), “drugs” (Beth), “sex” (Rodney), and “gunshots” (Robert).

Another cultural concern that the participants shared regarding culture was interpersonal interactions. The participants showed great awareness of cultural differences around the expression of gender identity, sexual harassment, and accidentally offending someone and voiced their concerns. Andrew explained, “like in our country, we touch friends, and there, you can be in trouble for accidentally touching someone.” The participants also showed an awareness of the gender fluidity model that is commonly accepted in many Western countries. “We don’t want to offend people,” said Brian. “Like, we want to know what to call people. We don’t want people offended by us.”

Theme 3: Lack of Preparedness for College-Level Academics

The third most common theme to emerge during the interview process was the theme of academics. The participants understood that the level of academic expectation would be higher in a postsecondary setting and showed concerns over universities' expectations. Overall, the participants felt confident in their academic skills but mentioned certain aspects of the academic transition that caused them concerns.

Four 12th-grade participants (Brian, Robert, Lucy, and Marla) mentioned concerns about the increased rigor of academics in university. Brian was concerned about the academic side of the transition because of a lack of exposure to specific content in high school. He stated, "I think it is more academics because my major is kinesiology, but in high school, I didn't do any kinesiology when I chose my major, so I am more clueless than most others, like, students that come from other places." Robert shadowed the opinion of Brian and stated "I'm concerned about the academics too because the major I chose is hard." Lucy also mentioned studying in a new environment adds to the difficulty of the increased academic rigor. She said, "I think it is both. Like, we have a new place, but we also have a new environment, so the study is also harder."

Theme 4: Unconcerned about Making Friends

The participants seemed to realize that social aspects of the transition could be a barrier to a successful overall transition but were either underplaying the emotional impacts of such a barrier or did not think it would be a big adjustment. The participants looked at the prospect of meeting new people and making new friends with excitement. For example, Lucy said she is "excited to be in a new environment. We got family and everything in this country, so this is a new adventure for me, and I like making new friends and working on other things." Charles also seemed unconcerned about meeting new people and making friends and stated that making friends is "...so easy. It's just like, you like the same things. It will be easier if you can find common things." Karli agreed that one aspect of the transition she is most excited about is "meeting new people." Marla, confident in her ability to make new friends, replied to making new friends with an answer of "there's a Facebook group."

DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results Discussion

For the quantitative survey results, the four indicators for college readiness used in this study were suggested by Conley (2007) to determine student readiness for the college transition. The overall mean score for this category was 3.42, suggesting the participants felt ready for the college transition but were not overly confident. This perceived readiness for college-level academics may be due at least in part to the participants' enrollment in a United States-based college

preparatory school with classes taught entirely by Western teachers in Myanmar. The participants enrolled in the school with the expectation that they would be attending a college or university in Western society upon completion of their secondary studies.

Within the scope of the four indicators for college readiness, the participants revealed they felt most confident in utilizing key cognitive strategies to be successful in a Western college or university ($M=3.55$). The high positive perceptions of key cognitive strategies bode well for the participants as many college professors also identify key cognitive strategies as the least developed skill set of the four indicators of college readiness for incoming freshmen (Espy, 2018). According to Conley (2015), key cognitive strategies is also the set of skills that most significantly impacts college success.

At the lower end of the scale, the lowest of the four college readiness indicators and the only indicator perceived as somewhat negative was college knowledge ($M=2.88$). Within college knowledge lies the understanding of the structure of postsecondary education, including the accepted format for engaging in social settings with peers and educators (Kim & Sax, 2017). Like many college-preparatory schools, the Myanmar-based preparatory school focuses primarily on ensuring student college eligibility and acceptance instead of college success, doing little to ensure students are successful once they arrive at their host universities (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). For students who have had a Western teacher supervise and support them while applying for college, the lack of support upon arrival in a Western country may be much more significant than expected.

In terms of barriers to international readiness, the overall average for the international readiness section of the survey was 3.73, suggesting the participants generally felt ready for the international transition. Among the seven common barriers to international readiness, participants reported that their perceived ability to overcome cultural barriers ($M=4.25$) was ranked the highest. This may be impacted by the nature of their secondary school, their exposure to Western culture through the school, and the expression of the teachers' and administrators' values. This daily exposure to Western culture in schooling and the direct instruction about cultural expectations in the College and Career Readiness class, required for all seniors, may benefit the participants. At a minimum, it should alleviate the number of common incorrect assumptions about expectations involving interactions between the students and professors (Bista, 2019) and the stress involved in a transition to a Western-dominated "classroom culture" (Nieto, 2018).

In contrast, the barrier with the lowest perceived positivity was the lack of international college knowledge ($M=3.04$). Many freshmen report lacking university support regardless of their country of origin (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Being unfamiliar with Western universities may accentuate the inability of the participants to find and utilize support. The lack of knowledge in finding support may cause the participants who need support to become unwilling to use readily available supports, even if those supports are freely offered. According to Martínez et al. (2019), not taking advantage of or being unaware of university support could be socially or academically detrimental to student success.

Qualitative Findings Discussion

For the qualitative findings, four themes emerged from the analysis of focus-group interviews. For the first theme of mixed feelings on transitioning to independence, the participants were excited about the freedom and responsibility of living independently but were also concerned about the added burden of being on their own. Their excitement stemmed from having attended a preparatory school in Myanmar with the expectation of attending college or university in a Western country and having time to prepare and adjust to the idea that they would be going to college in another country. However, they were concerned about their upcoming independence because the majority had not been away from home for an extended period and were unaware of the expectations of independent living.

For the second theme of concerns about adapting to a new culture, the participants shared concerns over their upcoming adjustment to postsecondary education in Western society. This is unsurprising, as most international transplants must relearn incorrect cultural assumptions that they have held for many years (Bista, 2019). International transitions can be especially difficult for Eastern students because they are relearning incorrect cultural assumptions, and at the same time, learning the accepted Western manner of interacting with their peers and professors academically (Perry, 2016).

For the third theme of lack of preparedness for college-level academics, despite the negative perception of academic challenges, it is encouraging to note that the participants could identify specific aspects causing the concern. By addressing the features of concern, students will target their weaknesses and overcome them to become more successful academicians (Martinez et al., 2017). The participants specifically stated concerns over the increase in academic rigor associated with the transition to tertiary academics. Because the rigor and pacing of tertiary academics are beyond what the participants are used to, the participants must employ quality cognitive learning strategies and display appropriate academic behaviors (Hora & Oleson, 2017), such as effective time management skills, prioritizing academics, and setting appropriate academic and social goals (Stevens et al., 2019).

For the fourth theme, the participants voiced excitement and were unconcerned about making new friends. However, according to Gautam et al. (2016), individuals are drawn to others with similar backgrounds, cultures, and languages in high-stress environments, such as induction into an international university. Bonding with other international students instead of local students may cause the participants to disassociate from the host university (Ross & Chen, 2015). This may become especially problematic for Burmese students, as they may identify with other Asian students, with whom cultural barriers may still be present. There are also cases in which students have felt isolated from both the host universities as well as their transnational peers if their peers perceive new arrivals have not assimilated enough into the host culture to be accepted (Li et al., 2021). The disassociation with the host university may exacerbate other

transitional issues, such as homesickness, feelings of loneliness, and isolation (Bista, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has two significant limitations. First, this study was framed using only a singular perception of the most prominent barriers. It is possible that delving into the interplay between barriers, such as how language impacts culture and social exclusion may reveal different perceptions. Secondly, some findings seem to simplify the complexity of Myanmar high school students' perceptions without considering the interplay of various factors at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

Regarding future research, recontacting the participants to determine how effectively they felt they transitioned and interviewing students from other international schools within the Union of Myanmar could provide additional insight into the degree of success surrounding this significant transition. Additional studies could be conducted at international schools within Myanmar functioning with different goals. Furthermore, studies could be conducted to address other factors presented within this study to fully explore the interplay between these stated factors and additional factors of college readiness. Finally, because the survey was compiled to address the specific situation at the study site, it could be adjusted to address the phenomena more completely across the country, or in similar locations around the world.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we provide two recommendations for students in similar situations preparing to make the transition. First, to alleviate the barriers to international college knowledge and address concerns over adapting to a new culture, Myanmar students should familiarize themselves with the host university before beginning their studies. This should include contacting the international student services to ensure proper handling of all government-required forms and visas, seeking language and writing support, and finding opportunities for cultural and social engagements with local students. Second, to alleviate the barriers to college knowledge and address concerns over preparedness for college-level academics, Myanmar students should contact their academic advisor to begin developing a program of study and to ensure they meet all prerequisites before entering the university. With a minimum of time and effort on the part of the students and those individuals supporting these transnational students, the barriers to success in Western colleges and universities for these students can be greatly minimized.

Conclusion

This study reflects the changing needs of international education in the Union of Myanmar and is significant for international education throughout the world.

Despite the limited sample size of participants in this study, the high participation rate provided sufficient data to reach saturation at the study site. As the site was representative of most Western-based international schools in Myanmar, this study serves as a significant initial study for determining college and international readiness at similar sites across the nation and is transferrable as baseline data for other sites across the country. Although the information provided is not a comprehensive look at international education or students making the transition from Myanmar to the United States for educational purposes, it does provide a perspective of the challenges faced by many Myanmar students making an international transition for post-secondary education.

The results yielded by this study are in many ways similar to those yielded in other studies addressing transnational students from Asian countries. However, it should be noted that some significant differences exist in students originating in Myanmar and other Asian nations, specifically barriers associated with the unique political situation in Myanmar, such as a lack of general international knowledge and interactions, both academically and socially. As the numbers of transnational students from Myanmar and worldwide continue to grow, all involved parties need to be aware of these perceptions.

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