

Exploring the academic experiences of African international graduate students in a midwestern university in United States of America: A phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that the experience of international students on U.S. university campuses is replete with cultural, social, relational, work-related and linguistic challenges. This study explored the experiences of two international graduate students from Africa (male = 1, female = 1) as they adjusted to campus life at a Mid-Western public U.S. university where they were pursuing graduate degrees. Phenomenological methodology was utilized to explore African students' live experiences and hear their voices individually through semi-structured in-depth interviews that were digitally recorded. Data were transcribed, coded, and reported thematically. Three main themes emerged; role of instructors as mediators, social interaction, and active classroom participation. In addition, two other relevant findings also emerged; language ability and education systems. These were relevant to the purpose of the study but were not common experiences for both participants. The findings of this study have implications for internationalization of education globally.

Keywords: Phenomenology, academic experiences, international student, graduate student.

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INTRODUCTION

International governments have viewed study abroad opportunities in the United States as vehicles in which to build academic, scientific and technological capacities (Teferra, 2002). There are many positive outcomes of international study, such as increasing the diversity of students' population, adding new perspectives to classroom conversations, increasing one's awareness, and appreciation for other countries and cultures. However, despite these positive outcomes, international graduate students often face significant challenges when studying abroad, including adjusting to a different culture and educational system. Feelings of isolation, challenges adapting to different learning and teaching styles, financial constraints, and difficulties acclimating to unfamiliar climates and cultures have been recognized in the literature (Jones et al., 1999).

Over the past 20 years, the world has become

interconnected in different areas, such as trade and commerce, research and development, information technology, and education. Concurrently, the international student population enrolled in American institutions of higher education has grown considerably. More internationals are studying in the United States than ever before. According to the Institute of International Education (2010), 690,923 student sojourners were enrolled in American colleges and universities in 2009/2010, an increase of 30.45% over the period 2000/2001. In this context, Andrade and Evans (2009) have pointed out that, "The approximately \$14.5 billion contributed annually by international students and their dependents for living expenses [in the United States] is significant. This is one of the key reasons for global competition for international students" (p. 7). In addition, because these students come from different geographic

backgrounds, they significantly contribute to the promotion of cultural diversity in the classroom and on campus, enriching the academic environment and adding educational value to it. International graduate students complete research that attracts grants and helps guarantee future faculty and program growth. Moreover, the diversity of these students provides contact with other cultures and worldviews for fellow students and brings different research perspectives and life skills into the learning environment. By virtue of living and studying in a foreign country, international students exemplify drive and resourcefulness that could be modeled by all students.

Nevertheless, given their culturally diverse backgrounds, international students may experience adjustment strains within their host environment that are unique to them, such as cultural differences, language constraints, and social behaviors. Even though research on the adjustment issues of this student body is extensive (Ward et al., 2008), there seems to be a dearth of efforts in the literature to integrate findings (Yoon and Portman, 2004; Andrade and Evans, 2009). Extant research demonstrates that international students' adjustment to college is much more difficult than it is for their U.S. American peers due to a variety of additional challenges caused by cultural, social, linguistic, and educational differences (Fritz et al., 2008). Adjustment difficulties are more prevalent among international students of color, those with stronger foreign accents or communication difficulties, or those whose cultures differ significantly from that of the majority of the host country (Hanassab, 2006).

Moreover, the problems related to cultural adjustment often differ by a variety of factors, including English language ability, perception of social acceptance, length of time in the U.S., students' race and ethnicity, and experiences with discrimination (Constantine et al., 2005). Therefore, it is of paramount importance that higher education professionals continue to identify and address the needs of this unique and extremely diverse population. The academic problems faced by international students pursuing higher education are discussed in a number of studies (Asmar, 2005; Barron, 2006; Johnson, 2008) that have identified a number of learning and teaching issues. For example, some learning challenges faced by international students identified by Robertson et al. (2000) are difficulty in understanding colloquial language, high tuition fee, and psychological feeling of isolation. In a New Zealand university study, Johnson (2008) finds that international students are not able to comprehend lectures because they come across different English accents and teaching styles from lecturers who have migrated from other countries to New Zealand to take up teaching jobs. From a study of the first-year international students at five Australian universities, Leder and Forgasz (2004) have delineated loneliness, language competence, and lack of

familiarity with the new academic milieu as the challenging issues faced by the students.

Establishing social relationships, particularly with students from the host culture, is also among international students' major concerns (Chen, 1999). It appears that international students experience more serious and painful adjustment to U.S. campus life than do native-born or host students. Alienation is what happens to the socialized individual when he or she becomes removed from his or her own nature and the natural world through knowledge. Previous literature suggests that international students experience more serious alienation than do American students due to difficulty in adjusting to new campus life in the United States. Factors such as loneliness (Alexander et al., 1981), helplessness, desire for dependence, hostility, fear and bewilderment are some of the emotional and psychological characteristics associated with the process of adjustment or alienation experience (Schram and Lauver, 1988).

Schram and Lauver (1988) studied alienation among international students including powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social estrangement as its definition. They found that among the international students at a large Southwestern United States University, non-European undergraduates who spend little time with others are the most likely candidates for alienation. They recommended developing orientation programs, such as intradepartmental buddy systems, which encourage international students to become acquainted with Americans and provide opportunities for interaction.

Few studies have focused on academic experiences of African international graduate students and how these experiences impact on their transition process. For example, Marcketti et al. (2006) studied international graduate students in a College of human sciences. Their findings indicated that international students face challenges in balancing responsibilities and lack of culturally familiar resources. Furthermore, participants mentioned feelings of isolation within their research programs. This study was too specific by selecting a college of human sciences only. To fill in the gap, the present study was not specific on the program and hence the college under study offers a broad-based curriculum. In addition, the present study sought to investigate academic experiences of the international students. Many African international students have needs and issues that make them unique when compared with other international students. Stebleton (2007) outlines three distinct issues that separate present African international students from various other groups of international students: a) the impact of colonialism, slavery, and identity, including racism and discrimination; b) the influence of contextual factors that promote an ongoing state of living in uncertainty; and c) the experience of negotiating the conflicting messages between the African

and Eurocentric, Western worldviews. Stebleton (2007) posits that because of the endurance of a long and complex history of colonialism, international humiliation and the assumption of inferiority by people around the world, African international students have experienced a psychological and socio-psychological legacy of colonialism and slavery that cannot be ignored.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the academic experiences of two African international graduate students at a Mid-Western University in United States in order to reveal the anxiety, expectations, challenges, and opportunities they face in their academic pursuits. The study's overarching question includes "What are the academic experiences of African international graduate students at the Midwest University?" Specifically, the following sub-questions were explored:

1. What are the academic expectations of the international students at the Midwestern University?
2. How do the African international graduate students participate in classroom discussions?
3. What are the social expectations of international students at the Midwestern University?
4. What is the role played by instructors and classmates in helping international students adjust to the host countries' academic traditions?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This qualitative study explored the academic experiences of two African international graduate students at a Midwestern university in United States. Through the lens of interpretivism, the researcher views the world as constructed, interpreted, and experienced by my participants in their interactions with each other and with wider social systems. To answer the research questions, a phenomenological study was suitable, whose purpose is to understand a participant's experience of living in real life situations, not experimental situations. Phenomenology attempts to understand lived experience in real situations. This study sought to gain deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African international graduate students in their academic life from their perspectives.

The study was conducted in one of the respected public universities in Mid-west of United States of America. The university emphasizes integration of diversity as reflected in the number of international students admitted. The university engages state, national and international communities to enhance educational, economic and cultural development. I conveniently selected this study site because it admits a significant number of international students from Africa.

Participants

After getting a list of African international students from the African Students' Association, two students (male and female) were purposefully selected as cases which are rich in information from which data can be gleaned (Patton, 2002; Wolff, 2002). They were contacted through email and asked to participate in the study. The

choice of graduate students was necessitated by the fact that the university admits very few international undergraduate students. At the time of y study, we had four undergraduate students, out of whom only one had come from Africa for admission. The other three live in United States with their families and hence may not have provided the information needed for this study. After this screening process I ended up with a list of 12 students from a total of 36 international students, who met the criteria from whom I purposively selected two participants; one male (age = 33 years) and one female (age = 27 years). One participant was in his final year of doctoral program and the other in her final year of Master of Arts in Actuarial sciences. They were thus deemed to have more and richer experiences than the rest of the international students.

Data collection process

Three semi-structured in-depth interview schedules were used for data collection. An interview protocol with open ended interview questions and follow-up questions and probes was used. The interviews were approximately one week apart allowing time to transcribe the participants' stories and have the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy. Field notes were also used as tools for data collection. Interviews were held at a mutually convenient time and place. The duration of the interviews ranged from 29 to 60 min. With permission from the participants, the interviews were digitally recorded. Probing questions were used to elicit additional details of various statements. Probing helped me to get the core reality of what I was studying.

Data analysis procedures

The context of the data was examined closely by the researcher and a combination of themes was sought. Through bracketing, the researcher suspended as much as possible personal meanings and interpretations and entered into the world of the participants who were interviewed. Each interview was transcribed as soon as practically possible after taking place. The text was read several times and statements that appeared to be revealing about the phenomenon were underlined or highlighted. Such statements included: making friends, socializing, feeling home-sick, hanging out with friends, etc. Categories were then identified by making constant comparisons of the highlighted statements. Themes were generated which captured as accurately as possible the way these two students experienced their academic pursuits in the Midwestern University in United States.

Qualitative validity and trustworthiness

Qualitative validity was determined through the use of various strategies to check the accuracy of the findings. These strategies included member checking, trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility. Member checking was done through taking some specific descriptions and themes back to participants to determine accuracy of their interpretations. Trustworthiness is determined by transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To achieve dependability, a detailed description of sampling strategy, participants, data collection methods, maintaining and preserving all transcripts, notes, audiotapes were done; a process referred to as audit trail. Trustworthiness through linking data to their sources was achieved, a strategy of confirmability. Authenticity was achieved when each participant's experiences were reported in such a way that it maintained respect for the context of the data as much as possible, so that the reader can arrive at an impartial decision. Finally, credibility was achieved when the data were analyzed through a process of reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its

relevance and meaning and ultimately developing themes and essences that accurately depicted the experiences of the two African international graduate students

Ethical considerations

Participants were advised in writing of the voluntary nature of their participation and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were also advised that at any time during the process they could decline to answer any question. The research objectives were clearly delineated in writing and articulated to the participants. A written consent from each participant was obtained. Furthermore, the participants were informed, in writing, of all data collection methods and activities such as making provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the participant's information and making available to them "written" transcriptions and interpretations of the data for member-checking for accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic experiences of two African international graduate students at a Mid-Western University in United States. Several interrelated and complex themes emerged from the data analyses. Three major recurrent themes were: (a) social interaction, (b) mediating role of instructors, (c) active classroom participation. In addition, two themes emerged: (i) language ability and (ii) education systems.

Theme 1: Social interaction

International students' academic experiences are partly associated with their establishing relationship with American students. Social interactions by my participants were a critical theme. During transcription and data coding of the interviews it became clear that the participants experience difficulties in making friends with host students. This in turn has had implications on their academic experiences. The reasons ascribed to failure to make friendships revolved around cultural differences and mere discrimination by some host students. It was evident that participants came to US with high expectations of making friends and interacting with American students. On arrival, they encountered a culture shock and had difficulty adapting to life in US, which left them isolated or alienated from other members of their group. My participants suffered anxiety that resulted from losing their cues to social interaction. These cues may include the many ways in which one orients himself to daily life. Africans are used to shaking hands as a way of greeting, when invited to go out to say a restaurant, they do not pay the bill, some facial expressions and words mean different things for Americans and Africans.

Ann said that she was shocked that:

"people just flash a smile at you or sometimes just say 'hi' as they pass on you. This does not happen back at home. At first I thought they do not like me."

All these factors contributed a lot to how the participants integrated socially in the new environment. Basically students must transform in order to deal with these differences between the cultures they are used to and the American culture. Social interaction is one of the many factors that can mediate this transition for international students. Social interaction in this context refers to the emotional and social wellbeing of students out of class that has an impact on their academic experiences. This is probably best described by Ann in her discussion of the importance of social interaction, "*It's about having friendships*". My participants communicated what social interaction meant for them in terms of building friendships and depending on one another, getting support from one another. Ann stresses that friendships are a type of human relationships that she is missing.

Ann: "Oh, okay. Well, fortunately for me I did not experience major events...because my family support is very important. But, I... I... well, I should say that may be---it is a bit difficult for me to have friendships here. I am pretty much emotionally independent but it is something I am missing; my friends...this type of interaction that I don't find anymore. I very much miss my friends. Maybe I am missing that interaction, that type of human relationship, the fact of being able to talk to someone and to not have to explain or justify yourself to anybody, and that you have a person you are sharing your experiences with. So this is something I am certainly missing and here in US may be it is because we are from different cultures or something like that. It is not easy to make friends, but I have better relationships with other international students, I should say..."

Dan further emphasizes this concept of social interaction by comparing the different cultures.

Dan: "We have and we are kind of a social....community....that togetherness...collective society. Yes, we are like we depend on each other ...I... one thing I have noticed here in US...it's more of independent life...."me, myself, and I". Everyone is thinking about himself. That was one big shocker for me, because I came here and I still thought that we could do group work but it's a different kind of thing. You can't really rely on someone to help you out.....even though some Americans are nice and it's still.....ah..you can still feel the independence in.. you know..." you can't ask me this"it's still there even though

some of them try to be nice...you can still sense it....yeah. That was one big challenge, but I got over it”

Most socio-cultural theories of learning posit that teaching and learning are shaped by the social and cultural context of the learning environment and the complex and dynamic human activity systems within them at a particular point in time. Such theories help to explain the connection between the conditions of the new learning environment and an individual's previous educational experience and their cultural and social background for facilitating or hindering learning. They are helpful in understanding the kinds of difficulties that international students report in their new learning environments. Results from this study indicated that international students' adjustment issues were associated with their establishing relationships with American students, which is consistent with other findings in the literature (Olivas and Lee, 2006; Ward et al., 2001; Andrade and Evans, 2009). In an effort to determine the extent to which social interaction is useful for predicting international graduate students' socialization patterns with Americans, Trice (2004) found that internationals' frequency of interaction with U.S. students varied tremendously by world region.

Theme 2: Role of instructors as mediators

As with most students when my two participants first entered higher education setting, they were uneasy about their ability to connect with both faculty and peers. The two participants indicated that a critical factor in facilitating an environment where learning can occur is the importance of instructor-student relationships. They described instructor-student relationships in several ways—through caring, building rapport with new students, being understanding, creating an environment for adjustment, and being responsive to different group of students. As part of their answers to the main question on describing the role of instructors in their academic experiences, Ann and Dan (pseudo names) articulated their thoughts,

Ann: Your experience in class depends very much on the instructor. So some instructors make you comfortable and others do not. I feel comfortable participating, answering questions, except one class...(pause) ...actually because that class the professor is a bit intimidating; not that he is nasty or anything, he is just a bit intimidating in the sense that ahm... he teaches things that are totally new to me

Probe: The economics class...?

Ann: Yes, exactly, yeah. I am not confident at all participating in this class, I could say that he expects some little understanding of the whole

subject...that I am a bit afraid I don't have....so I wouldn't be encouraged to ask questions or answer any at all.

Dan: The one problem I have an issue with, I have my second class in statistics. We have an international professor from China and so when I learned that I am going to be taught by an international professor, I was so happy at first. I never knew I am going to have problems with him. It has been quite difficult for him to understand me. For instance he is not able to pick any of the words I say, sometimes I am left behind because I cannot like, (ahhhhhm...) contribute anything in his class, which is frustrating. There are a lot of assumptions. I don't know what happens in other classes where there are international students. But with me, I have a great concern. Instructors assume that all students are at the same level of understanding. If may be most of the classes could, like eh...create adjustment for international students, for instructors to know that there are new people coming in and that they should actually moderate in a sense that they are able to talk to these new students who have not always been around, so that they don't just teach like they are teaching a uniform group of people.

Both participants reiterated the importance of instructors in creating an enabling environment for learning. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Aper and Currey, 1996; Coleman, 1997; De Verthelyi,1996) that found if a faculty member designed ways of engaging international students in class these students will have a much easier time participating and gathering knowledge.

Theme 3: Active classroom participation

The two international students may have had troubles in classes when they first arrived. Cultural differences present very real personal and professional challenges in academics. Language issues are immediately apparent. Because of the language limitations, it is not easy for international student to fully understand what the instructors say or what the instructors want at the beginning, not to mention participating in class discussions. Interaction with these participants made it apparent that they too have had problems participating in classroom discussions. Language proficiency, demands of the American education system and American instructors, and cultural differences influenced their participation. Dan testified that:

“Growing up in chalk and duster classrooms, I mostly depended on teachers' lectures for course materials and preparation for the finals. The

Ghanian classroom, especially in rural districts, did not have basic teaching aids such as computers, televisions or copiers. Class attendance or course assignments were not the norms in the university system. Coming from that background to the American classroom, I was at a loss. I was not taught how to participate in the American classroom. In Ghana, students are expected to be quiet in the classroom. I did not know that being silent was a problem in the American classrooms (laughs...) in fact I did not know at first that speaking in the American classroom means earning a grade. From primary schools to graduate program in Ghana, none of the students' class participation was graded. Students were not required to present in the university classroom. So when I arrived here, I had to struggle for a while to gain my balance. In fact I did not do so well in my first semester. But now, I am doing quite good because I have learned the hard way".

When I interviewed Ann, her story revolved around language. She said:

"In my first semester, I was nervous in class discussions although my level of English was fairly good. I perspired a lot and lost my train of thoughts while speaking. My English sounded awkward and the class and the professor did not understand my accented English. I did not join class discussion out of fear that I would be unable to deal with the possible conflicts or misunderstandings. My self-esteem was low and I felt a sense of incompetence being in a graduate class. I remember very well this day when we had to present a paper in pairs. I worked very well with my partner and had our paper ready. On the day of presentations I almost passed out. I kept on trembling and when time came my voice was so soft. My classmates said they could not hear me. This made things worse for me. Anyway, I struggled and did my part. But I was surprised my partner who was an American was no better when it came to presentation. In fact we got the same score. From this day I gained confidence and now I make presentations with so much confidence".

Theme 4: Language ability

One of the participants strongly felt that her language ability affects her social skills and her classroom participation. With so many different cultures on campus she finds it more comfortable hanging out with other international students because she feels that they may be experiencing similar issues with language as well. Knowing that someone else may understand her plight in

terms of her language inadequacies gives her comfort that she has some allies who may understand her more. An interesting finding with this participant was that she has learned and studied in English throughout in her home country but she contends that American English is so different from the English she was taught. She expressed this in the quote below:

Researcher: What are some of the challenges that you face?

Ann: "Uhhh...well one big shocker I got was language. I have learned English throughout my school years at home. But when I got here the Americans don't understand me. When you say something they respond by..." what did you say? This always annoys me. It makes me not to actively participate in class. My friend took me out for lunch. I went to the counter to ask for water. The lady shouted back at me..." what did you say?" I was thrown off balance. I asked myself what I had done wrong. My friend laughed at me. I was so annoyed. She didn't have to shout at me. When they come to our country, we accommodate them. We know they are different from us and accept them that way. I fear mixing with them (laughs). But I am getting better nowadays"

Dan had conflicting perceptions and feelings about language. To him, English was not a challenge and he was in fact unhappy that he had been forced to go through an Intensive English program for a whole semester before he began his program. His response to the same question went like this:

"What exactly do I say? Like in class? Or general? Well I know what I want, when I have learned or not learned, but well, ...sometimes they look down upon students from Africa...may be you are not good enough. No we have good students from Africa, we have intelligent people. It's just that they didn't have the opportunity. For example, if you tell me to take TOEFL because I can't speak like an American, but I was not born here. Americans can't speak Aghan language; what I speak. So you cannot say that I do not qualify for assistantship based on my TOEFL score...This is unfair. We speak English, understand English but we can't speak and pronounce words like Americans."

English language was found to play a critical role in both classroom discussions and social interactions. These findings are very consistent with those from other studies, most of which show that mastery of the English language appears to be an important component of acculturation (Olivas and Lee, 2006; Andrade and Evans, 2009).

Theme 5: Education systems

The participants said that they had found it difficult to adapt when they were confronted with a non-didactic pedagogy including the more student-focused, discussion-based seminar format. Many courses still run extensive lecture programs in their countries, and while it is recognized that these are not popular and not particularly successful vehicles for learning in some ways, at least they were familiar to my 'African' participants. But in this Midwestern University, Dan and Ann experienced difficulties with changing expectations and roles in the classroom.

The views of the participants (from interview transcripts) attest to this:

Dan "...back home we are taught using the 'chalk and board' method, where teachers are the 'givers' of knowledge and students are the 'recipients'. Teachers and authorities provide almost everything, everything is lecture method, all we as students are expected to do is to listen, copy, memorize and reproduce during exams. Here in America you engage in discussions. Testing is mainly through projects. I discovered that it is easier to pass here so long as you know what the professor wants you to do. I even wonder why some students fail. Although it is difficult at first, if you get a good professor who knows you are different and helps you, passing is not as hard. At home we don't ask the professor so many questions. We really respect them (laughs). I don't really know if it is respect or fear."

Ann: One thing that stood out to me is that back home, I was used to instructors giving handouts or notes were written on the chalkboard. It was totally different here...it is a lecture format. So I was thrown off for a couple of weeks. I was looking out for notes...(laughs) but those things never came...(laughs). Then I discovered I had to go along as the lecture progresses. You have to read a lot even if some instructors give some handouts.

Probe: Do you find that teaching style to be better?

It's been for the better. It's helping me to take notes and pay more attention in class because when you know you are not getting any notes, you pay attention.

To note, there appeared to be overlaps in the themes. For example, language seemed to cut across all the themes. This overlap in the themes indicates that they are connected and hence addressing or describing the same phenomenon; academic experiences. These complex interrelated themes had influence on each other,

but mainly the participants' social interaction directly and often adversely affected their academic plight and created relationship barriers.

In responding to the need of students to communicate and participate in classroom discussions, coupled with the mediating role of instructors, professional development initiatives may be set up. Simple solutions to teaching methods based on inclusive educational practices are particularly pertinent in this regard. With regards to social interactions, social support systems in universities in US should be improved so as enable international students adjust socially. In addition, host-country students should be sensitized and trained on diversity of culture and learn to be both accommodative and supportive.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the limited literature on the perspectives of graduate students from Africa studying in the United States. However, only students from one institution were included in the sample and findings were based on a small sample size. Attempts to generalize these findings to all African graduate students studying in the United States should be approached with caution. Findings from this research present many fruitful opportunities for informing universities in U.S. A longitudinal study in which participants are re-interviewed once they have graduated may add more discourse to this research topic.

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