Challenges of International Students from Pre-Departure to Post-Study: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Studying in overseas institutions presents international students with exciting opportunities; however, with these opportunities come challenges. Drawing on literature since the year 2000, this article addresses challenges confronting international students within some top sending countries and receiving countries. The challenges are categorized into pre-departure, post-departure, and post-study. The findings revealed pre-departure challenges, such as obtaining accurate information, understanding the admission procedure, and preparing documents for visa acquisition. Post-departure, international students face language barriers, financial issues, and cultural adjustment when they are in the host countries. Uncertain future and paperwork are the major challenges post-study. The findings of this article have useful implications for government personnel, as well as administrators of educational institutions that seek to attract international students.

Keywords: challenges, international students, pre-departure, post-departure, post-study, study abroad
INTRODUCTION

More than five million students were studying outside their home countries in 2017 (Neghina, 2017). The increase in international students studying abroad is not at all accidental. They represent a high-achieving and highly motivated group (Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010) and they greatly contribute to the economies of the country that hosts them. Tuition, immigration, and taxation policies of the host country are huge factors affecting the economic benefits created by international students (ICEF Monitor, 2014). Due to the increasing number of international students and their direct cost-benefit relationship to host institutions and host countries, a considerable effort and devotion to attract them has emerged. However, far less attention is paid to the challenges of international students in their journey as they prepare for study abroad, during their study, or at the post-graduation stage. This study takes a more comprehensive approach and seeks to address a number of questions as follows: (a) What are the problems faced by international students when preparing to leave their country? (b) What are the problems faced by students when arriving and studying in a new country? (c) What are the difficulties and threats faced by international students after graduation?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research surveys of international students and their challenges started about a century ago. The Committee on Friendly Relations (CFR) started an annual census of foreign students in 1915, and the Institute of International Education worked together with CFR in circulating the census questionnaire in 1921 (Du Bois, 1956). While many challenges of international students have remained the same for the last several decades (Bista & Gaulee, 2017), new and complex changes are evolving along with the rapid economic growth and technological changes. Since our research objective is to identify contemporary works with an impact on recent times, we decided to summarize findings of research articles published since 2000. In order to overcome the problems associated with a large number of published studies with varying quality, we applied a pre-planned review protocol (Kirch, 2008). We have used three terms “pre-departure,” “post-departure,” and “post-study” so that we could limit the number of subjective decisions that must be made during a literature review and increase the probability of identifying the relevant studies (Nicolescu & Galalae, 2012). For the purpose of this review,
international students are defined as students who are enrolled in an overseas higher education institution undertaking an undergraduate or postgraduate course (Al-Quhen, 2012), as well as students who graduated from overseas universities.

The extensive literature search was undertaken with thorough searches of two online search engines (Google and Eric). The search ranged from 2000 to 2018 and the main combinations of keywords considered were: (a) "international students" and "challenges," (b) "international students" and "pre-departure challenges," (c) "international students" and “post-departure challenges," and (d) "international students” and “post-study challenges." The studies we found were dominated by major sending countries and major host countries. This search identified a large number of overlapped articles. When the keyword "challenges of international students" was used in Eric, 50% of articles (31 out of 62) appeared from the Journal of International Students in the first four pages. Thus many of the articles in this study were primarily downloaded from the Journal of International Students. Moreover, existing studies have mainly been conducted in English-speaking countries, because of their popularity among Chinese, Indian, South Korean, Japanese, and Saudi Arabian students. English-speaking countries have a natural advantage in attracting international students. Not surprisingly, the US, UK, and Australia remain the first tier destinations for these international students (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2014). Bista and Dagley (2015) found that securing a scholarship, preparation of documents for the visa, passing college entrance exams, and obtaining the right information of the universities and colleges were the most difficult steps for those students who were preparing to study at U.S. universities. We initially aligned our literature scanning process to those domains as identified by Bista and Dagley (2015).

Inclusion Criteria

After a thorough analysis of the literature in each of these categories, three themes emerged: the language barrier, cultural shock, reverse cultural shock, and racism. We extended our search using these keywords. We found varying amounts of quite robust empirical evidence; the post-departure challenges attracted the largest number of studies. We found fewer evidence in pre-departure and post-study challenges. Thus we included a few book chapters and newspapers articles to include the challenges that appeared while searching in Google. Readers might wonder, reasonably, why we have chosen the few articles from newspapers. The purpose of our study was to gather information related to the challenges of the international student. Thus
summaries reported in a few magazines and newspapers were considered secondary sources (Galvan, 2013). A total of 79 research articles, book chapters, and newspaper articles were reviewed. A thematic-synthesis method was used to identify the sub-themes within the earlier mentioned themes in relation to the challenges of international students (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

RESULTS

Pre-Departure Challenges

Durkin (2008) identified the pre-departure period as the stage for "entry points" (p. 20) of study abroad. Compared with research on post-departure challenges, international students' pre-departure status and challenges have not attracted much attention in the previous studies. However, many sub-themes unique to specific countries have emerged from the study.

General Entry Point Difficulties for Chinese Students

China is the world’s largest source of international students (Institute of International Education, 2016). In total, 5,194,900 Chinese students have studied abroad over the last 40 years, and 1,454,100 students were enrolled in overseas higher education institutions in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, Chinese students still experience difficulties prior to entering study abroad programs, including choosing the best university, deciding whether to use an agent, and having confidence about language barriers.

Chinese students are well aware of various universities ranking available and make references to the Times Higher Education, The Guardian, QS World University Rankings, and Shanghai rankings to decide a desirable place to study (Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2017). Chen (2017) also identified that Chinese students perceived that graduating from a reputable international school is important for future career and life prospects. Even though students place value on the reputation of various institutions by looking at rankings in magazines and websites, enrollment numbers of Chinese international students at these high-ranking institutions are not high (Boado, et al., 2017). This implies that getting admission at well-ranked institutions is one of the challenges for Chinese students. This could be, in part, because of the high cost of high-ranking colleges. Another challenge is that Chinese parents have started questioning the value of sending their children to distant countries given that more recently many universities in Asia have placed favorably in prestigious world ranking (Spinks & Wong, 2010). Ling and Tran (2015)
reported that the international students’ use of education agents to assist in the selection and enrollment process for a study abroad program has become increasingly important in Chinese international students’ quest for information and decision-making processes. In the case of China, some agents are hired by host foreign institutions to recruit, and they take a service charge to connect students to U.S. community college. This function is also viewed negatively by many U.S. baccalaureate institutions (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014).

The level of confidence is another challenge because Chinese students foresee English proficiency issue and the difference in the learning environment as two notable barriers in English-speaking countries before departure (Tang, Collier, & Witt, 2018). Finally, a challenge has been a decline in visa approvals starting in 2017, which has been seen among students from China (Kavilanz, 2018).

**General Entry Point Challenges for Indian Students**

India, currently the second largest sending country after China, is projected to become the number one sending country by 2025 (Falcone, 2017). Kavilanz (2018) reported that common challenges for Indian students include passing the GRE, obtaining a visa, and getting the appropriate vaccinations. Another common theme that has emerged among Indian students is the issue of financial problems. A majority of Indian students are self-financed through private loans. Cost and return-on-investment calculations are major deciding factors when choosing where to study abroad. The fluctuations of Indian currency make students particularly sensitive to financial issues (Clark, 2013). Prospective Indian students are also advised to complete a full body check-up because treatments are very expensive in the host country, in particular, dental and eye care (Yocket Editorial Team, 2018). Certain countries in Asia and Africa require students to obtain an international certificate of vaccinations before students depart for their studies abroad (Alexander, 2012). The *Times of India* (2015) noted that Indian students have immunization requirements as part of their application process. Among the requirements for them are Measles Mumps Rubella vaccination, Hepatitis B, Meningitis, Diphtheria, Tetanus, and other vaccinations, in addition to tuberculosis skin tests, chest X-rays, and blood tests. However, the doctors aren't always aware of which vaccinations are required for study abroad (Favin, Steinglass, Fields, Banerjee, & Sawhney, 2012). Even though it is very time consuming, a student needs to get more than one dose of vaccines within 4 weeks.
General Entry Point Difficulties for South Korean and Japanese Students

South Korea has the fourth highest number of students pursuing studies abroad (Hyun, 2016). But South Korean parents are increasingly capable of directly acquiring information on educational opportunities for their children. Agents are utilized at a minimum (International Trade Administration, 2016). Unlike Korea, the use of institution, consultancy, or agent is more prevalent in Japan. Japanese speakers tend to avoid disagreement and asking direct questions while searching for information. Getting the right information about the culture of host countries and information about the program of study are identified as challenges for Japanese students (Brian, 2012; Zamborlin, 2016).

Different General Pre-Departure Difficulties for Saudi Arabian and African Students

The primary pre-departure challenge for Saudi students is maintaining the balance between the program of their choice and financial sponsorship. In the Saudi context, the program of study selection is not determined by student choice but is influenced by their financial sponsors including the government and university employer as well as Saudi values, culture, and religion (Hofstede, 2003; Önsman, 2012; Yakaboski, Velez, & Almutairi, 2017). African students are subject to a number of specific challenges as they prepare for study abroad, and it has been noted that they face the complex and frustrating process of obtaining visas as well as the tensions they feel in leaving their communities. These challenges and pressure points are extensive and impact their subsequent ability to adjust to life in their host institution (Caldwell & Ssekasi, 2016).

On the basis of the literature review, we developed a model of pre-departure challenges. Figure 1 represents the model of pre-departure challenges.

Figure 1: Pre-Departure Challenges

![Figure 1: Pre-Departure Challenges](image-url)
The model represented the following key findings:

- Obtaining accurate information about university and college are the most common challenges for international students.
- Students seek admission in well-ranked universities but not all students cannot afford the tuition fees with living expenses.
- The difficulties encountered in preparing visa documents vary from country to country but is more pronounced in developing countries.

Post-Departure Challenges

Once international students have made a decision and completed the entire paperwork and visa interview successfully, they depart to the host countries with the hope of a positive educational experience. But the life they had imagined may not always match up with actuality when they arrive. Bartram (2008) suggested that particular prior information regarding food, culture, the academic system, finances, and accommodation should be provided to relieve their anxiety. We summarized the finding in three main sub-themes.

The United States as the Premier Destination for International Students and Associated Challenges

The United States is regarded as the leading destination for international students (Institute of International Education, 2018). Researchers have identified a number of academic and non-academic challenges for international students visiting the US. Horne, Lin, Anson, and Jacobson, (2018) revealed that students in the United States consistently reported lower levels of social satisfaction and feelings of being welcome. Feelings of alienation or separation occur as a result of their new surroundings (Burdett & Crossman, 2012; Gardner, 2013). Lee (2015) identified many examples of racial discrimination in the United States. The author noted that most of the students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East experienced at least some discrimination, whereas none of the students from Europe, Canada, or Australia experienced any discrimination. Lee (2015) labeled this discriminatory experience as neo-racism or “new racism” on the basis of culture and national order. International students from Asia often did not have sufficient prior knowledge of academic conventions practiced in the host country before their arrival, which led to difficulty in writing assignments and
reports (Campbell & Li, 2007). Swathi, Mark, Kara, and Ankita (2017) believed that international students in the United States experienced writing difficulties related to grammar and vocabulary, organization and flow of ideas, critical thinking, and plagiarism.

English language proficiency and classroom learning styles are considered primary challenges and barriers to academic success for students from East Asian countries including South Korea, China, and Taiwan (Andrade, 2009; Leong, 2015; J. Li, Marbly, Bradley, & Lan, 2016; Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011). International students whose first language is not English encounter socio-linguistic complications and challenges while taking university courses (Yan & Berliner, 2013; Zhou, Frey, & Bang, 2011). Chan (2013) argued that international students felt embarrassed about non-fluency followed by the perception of critical or negative judgment by fluent speakers. The depression and mental health symptoms of international students from East Asian and South Asian countries in the United States have been correlated to English language fluency, among other factors (Andrade, 2009; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Yakunina, Weigold, & McCarthy, 2011). Smiljanic (2017) investigated how lower scores created psychological problems. The author found that the lower scores in speaking sections in the TOEFL exam were related to more acculturative stress. Anxiety and avoidance were positively correlated with acculturative stress. Researchers (Perry, 2016; Safipour, Wenneberg, & Hadziabdic 2017) concluded that academic cultural differences seem to play a more important role in raising negative experiences and forming stereotypical views.

In addition to the language barrier, international students face cultural barriers in their social interactions with American students and professors (S. Li & Zizzi, 2018). Regarding learning styles, classrooms in the United States are different from what many students are used to in their home countries (Wong, 2004). Many Asian students are used to following the traditional lecture format and using memorization to obtain satisfied grades and passing exams (Leder & Forgasz, 2007). Similarly, international students from Confucian cultures are sometimes stereotyped as procrastinators, uninterested, intentionally isolated, or sometimes even characterized as inactive learners lack critical thinking skills (Young, 2017). The contributing factors of academic adaptive stress for international students are culturally and linguistically different teaching styles, curriculum structure, the minimum credit hour requirements, heavy course load, academic competence, and high expectation (J. Li, Wang, Liu, Xu, & Cui, 2018; Liao & Wei, 2014). Chinese students seek advice from agents to help formulate their study plans.
and transitional issues even in the post-departure stage. Support in transitional periods is common in Australia but rare in the US (Ling & Tran, 2015).

**Problems Faced by International Students in the UK**

The UK attracts large numbers of international students each year, second only to the US (Shea, 2018). Concerning the difficulties challenging international students in the UK, English language proficiency and financial problems are the initial challenges. The National Union of Students (2014) noted that self-funded students in the UK are likely to experience financial difficulties. Further, unreliable payment schedules for international students in higher education institutions cause financial hardship. Blake (2006) pointed out that self-funded Black-African students reported the problem of paying for their studies. In fact, Maringe and Carter (2007) found that all the students in their study reported facing anxieties about finances and 91% worried about how they were going to pay their tuition and fees. In addition, many students struggled to comprehend lectures. The productive skills of reading and writing posed the greater challenge (Wu & Hammond, 2011). International students faced significant financial pressure and difficulties in accepting and fitting in with the culture of the UK. These challenges may leave the students feeling disillusioned and cynical about the value of intercontinental learning (Ssekasi, Mushibwe, & Caldwell, 2014).

Researchers report non-academic challenges in the UK to include homesickness, feeling of isolation, stress, depression, cultural shock, and dietary issues (Alloh, Tait, & Taylor, 2018; Cowley & Ssekasi, 2018). Wu and Hammond (2011) presented the challenges of East Asian master's students differently. They encountered "cultural bumps" rather than "cultural shock" in the UK. The idea of "cultural bump" rather than full-blown culture shock was introduced by Chen in 2007. Beside cultural bumps, Brown and Jones (2013) found in their survey that 49 students out of 153 students had experienced some form of abuse in the UK. In most cases, this took the form of verbal abuse, though racism manifested physically for nine students.

**Challenges Encountered by International Students in Australia**

International students in Australia frequently face a wide range of social and academic transitional issues while adjusting to new learning and the social environment as well (Andrade, 2006). The language problem remains the same in Australia. International students in Australia face language difficulties caused by loss of confidence in their linguistic skills and negative
societal attitudes towards foreign accents (Park, 2016). At the same time, due to the cultural and language barriers, fewer work choices, relatively poorer working conditions and, in many cases, financial pressures, international students may be at the greater risk of occupational injury (Thamrin, Pisaniello, & Stewart, 2010). Similarly, Mills (2018) noted that international students in Australia encountered the challenges of racism and poverty. A survey conducted by Babacan et al. (2010) concluded that a large proportion of international students identified racial, cultural, or religious elements as threats to their safety in Australia. They further suggested the need to name and identify racism in all of its manifestations to acknowledge that it exists. A study by Yeoh and Terry (2013) pointed out five main areas of difficulties: the language barrier, time management, research resources, educational background, and cultural background.

Sawir Marginson, Deumert, and Nyland (2007) interviewed 200 international students residing in Australia and found that 66% had experienced problems of loneliness and/or isolation, especially in the early months of departure. Other research noted that international students who come from countries where the classroom is conservative may at first find the Australian classroom a bit chaotic (Dalglish & Chan, 2009). In Duangpracha’s (2012) survey in Australia, international students were psychologically and/or physically affected by bad experiences with the accommodation. Leaving in unsuitable accommodations produced negative feelings and bad experiences for most of the international students.

Figure 2 represents the model of post-departure challenges of international students on the basis of our review.

**Figure 2: Post-Departure Challenges**

The model referred to the following key points.

- The foremost post-departure challenge that every international student has to face is culture shock. The local environment and interaction present feelings of discomfort, frustration, and confusion.
- Other major challenges were financial and psychological, which include general living issues and socio-cultural issues.
• Language is the most common barrier to social interaction and academic progress.

Post-Study Challenges

Empirical studies demonstrate that international students from particular areas of the world have uniquely differing challenges after graduation. Nearly half of the international students who return to their home country from the US after graduation reported visa and work-related issues as the primary reasons for returning. Among alumni who have remained in the US, 47% reported a lack of professional connection as a major obstacle in finding a job (O’Malley, 2017). Many of the post-departure challenges continue to linger even after graduation. Ugwu and Trache (2017) highlighted that doctoral students continue to face a variety of challenges such as adapting to a new culture, experiencing English language difficulties, and cultural, social and adjustment barriers in the US, even after graduation.

More surprisingly, however, students who return home after overseas study in the United States sometimes find it harder to readjust in their own home countries. Le and LaCost (2017) reported that the Vietnamese international students who returned to their home country after graduation had difficulty readjusting even though they had lived most of their lives in Vietnam. Time in the US had changed them considerably, making it difficult for them to fit into their old lives in Vietnam. Le and LaCost (2017) found that Vietnamese returnees experienced reverse culture shock and most had made real efforts to fit back into the Vietnamese environment and culture. The trouble of Chinese returning students are no different: They experience hardship in trying to integrate into the Chinese job market (O’Malley, 2017).

Flood (2015) reported that the international students in the US are living their life year to year, not knowing what’s going to happen the next year. They have to broaden their scope to host country, third country, and home country. Returning to their home country is not the kind of future most international students want. The restrictive nature of US immigration policies also causes challenges for international students. Han, Gebbie, and Appelbaum (2015) claimed that the complex and restrictive nature of US immigration policies may limit the US to no longer be the premier destination for the world’s top international students.

An increasingly restrictive policy in the UK also aims to reduce the number of international students who “overstay” beyond their study abroad (Falkingham, 2017). The new rule for non-EU international students in the UK is that they should either get a job or get out within four months of
completing their study (Paul, 2015). Visa control makes life difficult and poses challenges for international students who want to stay in the UK after graduation. Therefore, 97% of international students leave the UK after their studies (Amy, 2017).

Although the figures of international students in South Korea is relatively low compared with the percentage in the US, UK, Australia, and Canada, they bring a potentially significant force of change to Korean society, which has 97% ethnic homogeneity (Shin & Moon, 2015). Post-study challenges of international students in South Korea find that if students get a faculty job in a Korean university, they are often perceived as temporary skilled labor, rather than being valued as full, contributing members of their academic communities. There is also a tendency among Koreans to perceive foreign professional employees as second-tier employees who were unable to secure employment in their countries of origin (Shin & Moon, 2015). But the case of Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden is different. They include immigration policies that not only expedite obtaining a student visa but also provide opportunities to work while studying and permanent jobs and residency after graduation (Lane, 2015).

Findings of these studies indicate that not every international student in the world feel the rush of excitement and freedom that comes with college graduation; they have to face further challenges that are not easy to overcome. Figure 3 represents the model of post-study challenges of international students.

Figure 3: Post-Study Challenges of International Students

The model summarizes the following key points.

- International students face pressure, immigration policies, and an uncertain future after graduation.
- International students want to pursue a career in the host country, which is becoming harder and harder due to new documentation requirements and policy hurdles.
- International students who return home permanently after graduation may confront reverse culture shock.

571
CONCLUSIONS

Definitely, academic mobility in higher education opens multiple horizons for many international students to study abroad. As international students discover the multiplicity of prospects and overture of experiences from the preparation level to graduation, they also undergo challenges as they prepare, adapt, and adjust in a new environment. Study abroad is a challenging experience for students of all nationalities and backgrounds and the transition is not easy. When we searched the keywords “challenges of international students” in Google Scholar’s all time collection, 3,960,000 results were shown in 0.9 seconds. As Bista (2016) suggested, numerous studies are published each year regarding the experiences of international students. Furthermore, as Bista and Gaulee (2017) documented, 139 dissertations were published related to international students, along with an ongoing interest in research in the area. The main reason for this review are to bring together the evidence coming from both small and large scale studies in the area. We acknowledge that the studies we looked at varied in the use of the sample sizes, research designs, and methodologies. Hence, readers are encouraged to consult particular studies for a better understanding of each issue at hand.

This summary of literature has categorized the challenges experienced by international students into three stages: pre-departure, post-departure, and post-study. This literature review will extend the number of titles about challenges of international students in a range of different countries. Thus, it will increase the quality and quantity of evidence of what the challenges of international students mean in practice.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite significant international student mobility around the world over the last few decades, a synopsis of their challenges such as the one this study provides was missing. As the literature has argued, the complexities of the challenges of international students around the world fall across many domains that are more akin to the systems approach to overall perceived student experiences. Thus, this review brings the issues together at one place for future researchers willing to take on more specific issues in various contexts.

Accordingly, a major implication from this review is that the challenges, categorized in specific stages, may provide much-needed information to policy makers, educational administrators, faculty, consultants, and others working in higher education in host countries. Specific issues of pre-
departure, post-departure, and post-study help to design support services catering to specific needs of these particular stages, and eventually to the development of a culture of continuous quality development at international universities of host countries.

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