

Faculty perspectives regarding graduate international students' isolation from host national students

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Many international students are isolated from their host national peers and suffer loneliness and depression as a result. This study examined faculty explanations for international graduate students' isolation because faculty are in a unique position to observe and interact with both international and host national students as they spend time learning and working together within their academic department. Faculty believed that international students' strong ties with co-nationals, their weak English language skills, and their lack of time to invest in friendships all played a role in their isolation. They also identified host national students' friendship preferences and structural barriers as contributing factors. Faculty observations generally supported previous findings, however, one important difference is discussed in light of differing cultural norms regarding friendships.

International students, cross-cultural relations, faculty, graduate students, host national students

INTRODUCTION

International students often face significant challenges when studying abroad, including adjusting to a different culture and educational system, financial and academic stress, and communicating in a second language. Establishing social relationships, particularly with students from the host culture, is also among international students' major concerns (Chen, 1999; Furnham, 1988; Heikinheimo and Shute, 1986; Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, and Ross, 1994). According to Lulat and Altbach (1985), "Next to academic success, positive contact with natives of the host country ranks at the very top of international student needs" (p. 460).

The Importance of Contact with Host Nationals

A number of studies have considered how international students' relationships with host nationals affect their experience abroad. Academically, students paired with host national students in an eight-month peer support program in Australia had higher grades and higher retention rates than those who were not involved in the program (Westwood and Barker, 1990). Perrucci and Hu (1995) found a relationship between contact with host national students in the United States and satisfaction with one's academic program and academic appointment. Historically, establishing relationships with local people has also been positively related to international students' overall satisfaction with their nonacademic experiences abroad (Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Lulat and Altbach, 1985; Sewell and Davidson, 1961).

Conversely, limited social contact with host nationals is tied to feelings of loneliness, depression, and stress (Chen, 1999; Hull, 1978; Schram and Lauver, 1988). It is also negatively related to students' perceptions of their cultural and academic adjustment (Heikinheimo and Shute, 1986; Zimmerman, 1995).

International Students' Isolation

International students' ability to develop relationships with host nationals has significant consequences, influencing their overall level of psychological and emotional functioning, their academic performance, and their level of satisfaction with studying abroad. Nevertheless, many international students were isolated from host national peers (Arthur, 1997; Mestenhauser, 1998). For example, Trice (2004) found that 50 percent of the graduate international students at an American research university socialised with host nationals once a month or less. The purpose of this study is to understand better the causes for this isolation. In this case, the population of interest is students pursuing graduate degrees at a research university in the United States.

Causes of the Isolation

Previous studies have identified a number of factors that contribute to international and host national students' isolation from one another. Several researchers have examined international students' commitment to and level of interest in establishing friendships with host nationals (Alreshoud and Koeske, 1997; Bochner, McLeod, and Lin, 1977; Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Yang, Teraoka, Eichenfield, and Audus, 1994). Researchers have also explored the barriers that international students may face when they attempt to befriend host nationals (Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Lulat and Altbach, 1985; Penn and Durham, 1978; Sodowsky and Plake, 1992; Trice, 2002; Yang et. al., 1994;).

Considering first international students' commitment to establishing friendships with host nationals, studies have shown that some choose not to build relationships with domestic students because they lack the time to do so. Academic work takes priority, leaving little time for anything else. In a study of Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at an American university, Yang et. al., (1994) found that this was the third most common reason students gave for not having meaningful relationships with host nationals. The first two reasons were no opportunities to establish these relationships and cultural differences. Heikenheimo and Shute's (1986) interviews with 46 Southeast Asian and African undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at a Canadian university also showed that academic demands were a barrier to interaction with host nationals.

Considering international students' level of interest in befriending host nationals, Furnham and Alibhai (1985) studied the friendship networks of 140 international students from around the world who were studying at a British university. They found that these students strongly preferred co-nationals as their first choice for friends when they needed help with a personal problem or when they wanted to go shopping, to a movie, or to a party. They preferred host nationals only for more utilitarian functions such as help with an academic or language problem. The results matched those from an earlier study of Asian international students studying at an American university (Bochner, McLeod, and Lin, 1977). Using a different approach, Alreshoud and Koeske (1997) studied Saudi Arabians attending an American university and found that most students described themselves as only "a little" to "somewhat desirous" of engaging in activities with Americans.

Findings from these last three studies suggest that many international students have little interest in establishing friendships with host nationals. Alreshoud and Koeske (1997, p.243) assumed that the Saudi Arabian students' attitudes were due to "vast cultural differences" between the two cultures. However, none of the researchers pursued students' reasons for these preferences. The following studies took a different approach by broadly exploring the barriers international students cited as inhibiting intercultural relationships.

Heikenheimo and Shute (1986) found that differences in male-female relationships, enjoyment of different recreational pursuits, and different values inhibited intercultural relationships between Southeast Asian and African international students and host Canadian students. In the study by

Yang et. al, (1994) Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese students perceived that cultural differences, including values and beliefs, were significant barriers to meaningful relationships with Americans. It is important to note, however, that while some students in these two studies avoided relationships with host nationals due to cultural differences, others viewed differences simply as a barrier that must be overcome to establish cross-cultural friendships.

Several studies have also found that international students who faced racial discrimination, who were culturally dissimilar to the host culture, or who had difficulty communicating in English are more likely to experience social isolation or poor social adjustment (Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Lulat and Altbach, 1985; Penn and Durham, 1978; Sodowsky and Plake, 1992; Trice, 2004). In addition, the Southeast Asian and African students in Heikenheimo and Shute's study (1986) perceived that Canadian students' ignorance about their home countries and cultures hampered relationships – the Canadian students did not understand these international students' backgrounds, traditions, or values. African students in the study also felt that Canadians were cold and avoided closeness, which made it difficult to establish friendships with them.

Finally, Trice (2002) found that graduate international students in the United States who had experienced problems establishing relationships with American students offered several reasons for their isolation, each of which attributed responsibility to Americans. They included American students' lack of interest in befriending them, their ethnocentrism and discrimination against international students, and their impatience with foreign accents. In addition, students described American students' tendency to want shallow relationships rather than so-called 'real friendships'.

These studies indicated that international and host national students were often fairly isolated from each other. However, while some studies suggested that this was strictly the international student's choice, other studies indicated that host nationals played an important, if not primary role in fostering the isolation. The latter set of studies cited in this literature review suggested that, as members of the host culture, domestic students had the power to decide whether they would befriend students who were weaker in the sense that they often struggled to understand the language and cultural norms, and might also look different from host students (Bourdieu, 1977; Tierney and Jun, 2001).

Because international students' isolation is a significant issue that influences their overall experience abroad, it warrants further investigation. By better understanding the causes, faculty and student affairs professionals can develop more appropriate interventions to increase international students' social interactions with host nationals.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to increase understanding of the complex reasons why many international students are isolated from their host national peers. The focus, in particular, is on international students studying at the graduate level. Using a different approach than those used in previous studies, this study relies on data gained from interviews with faculty members. This population is in a unique position to observe and interact with both international and host national students as they spend hundreds or even thousands of hours learning and working together within their academic department. Faculty members spend time with students in classrooms, in laboratories, and in student and faculty offices. From their vantage point, they may be able to provide insight into the extent to which both host national and international graduate students' attitudes and behaviors contribute to international students' isolation.

The research questions guiding this study were:

- (1) To what extent do faculty members perceive that international and host national graduate students are academically and socially integrated within their department?

- (2) If faculty members perceive that members of the two populations are often isolated from each other, what do they believe causes this isolation?
- (3) Do their explanations for students' isolation match the findings of previous research on this subject?
- (4) Do foreign-born and native-born faculty members offer different explanations for international and host national students' isolation from each other?

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Participants

In order to answer these questions, the researcher interviewed faculty members from four academic departments within three professional schools at a top research university in the United States. The four units included a mechanical engineering department, a materials science and engineering department, an architecture department, and a public health department. They were selected for their relatively high graduate international student enrolment, (each enrolled between 18 and 59 percent international students at the graduate level) and their similar organisational structures.

Within each department, the chair was interviewed first, followed by five or six faculty members. Most chairs recommended two or three specific faculty members for interviews who served on key departmental committees or who were especially interested in international student issues. The researcher attempted to interview both foreign-born and American-born faculty, those with and without tenure, males and females, and those who had not been directly identified by the chair as having a special interest in international student issues. Therefore, two or three additional faculty members from the unit were purposely selected based solely on their ability to fulfil these criteria. In all, 27 faculty members were interviewed, including 12 foreign-born faculty and 15 American-born faculty, 23 tenured and 4 non-tenured faculty, 23 men and 4 women.

Seven of the 12 foreign-born faculty members had lived in the United States at least 16 years, four had lived in the country for at least eight years, and one had lived in the United States for only four years. Five were born in Western Europe, one in Eastern Europe, two in Asia, two in Africa, one in the Middle East, and one in the Caribbean.

The study's focus was limited to faculty members' work with graduate students because a majority of international students at four-year institutions in the United States study at the graduate level (Davis, 2003). In addition, faculty members generally spent far more time with these students than with undergraduates as they worked with them on research projects and taught them in small seminar classes. The majority of the international students enrolled in the four departments came from Asian countries – specifically China, India, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Instrument

A review of related literature, conversations with administrators from the University's graduate school and English Language Center, as well as discussions with several international students, shaped the semi-structured interview protocol. The initial draft was pilot tested with an administrator and a faculty member who provided feedback regarding clarity and format. Revisions were then made before the interviews began.

The final interview protocol asked faculty members to describe ways in which international students had influenced their department's culture and specifically to describe international students' level of integration with their American peers. When applicable, faculty members were asked how they explained the segregation between international and domestic students that they had observed. The interview protocol also included questions regarding whether international students' presence had altered the way faculty taught, advised, or supervised their students or

altered departmental policies regarding enrolment, student financial support, and admissions criteria. Trice (2003) and Trice (2005) have detailed the findings related to these topics.

Procedure

All but three participants gave permission to record the interview and these tapes were subsequently transcribed. Notes taken during and immediately after the interviews provided the data for the other three participants.

Initial data analysis involved studying the interview transcripts to look for prominent themes. These were coded by hand and then a list of the codes was created. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the researcher was hesitant to begin the analysis by using pre-determined codes and matrices, so this more structured approach became the second stage of the analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984). By analysing the coded and organised data, relationships became evident (Creswell, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Once a draft that described and analysed the data was completed, a person from each of the four units reviewed the findings and provided feedback regarding the accuracy of the descriptions. In each case, no significant errors were found.

RESULTS

The majority of faculty interviewed believed that the domestic and international students in their departments were poorly integrated. Few communicated with each other outside of class, even though many shared office and research space as graduate assistants. Domestic and international students did not study together and they did not spend time together socially.

Strong Bonds with Culturally Similar Students

Foreign- and American-born faculty members articulated the same causes for the isolation. The first theme clearly placed responsibility with international students – they simply preferred to befriend those who were culturally similar to themselves. For example, an American-born faculty member from Materials Science and Engineering explained:

Korean students, don't take this the wrong way, but they have their own Mafia. They have their own community structure in place...They have childcare, they have medical care, they have their own travel agency. It's a set infrastructure for the Korean students. We have our own ghettos, if you will, within the department.

The following comment from a foreign-born faculty member in Mechanical Engineering also reflects this view:

Some ethnic groups tend to stick to each other way too much, even for their own good. Typically Chinese and Koreans tend to be like that. If you come from China, it's really great to have somebody that understands you, as being there to help you, walk you through the first steps and so on. But then if you only talk to Chinese students and their families and so on, and you never speak English, you never improve, you don't get as much out of the culture here, so you miss a lot.

Weak English Language Skills

As indicated in this last quote, faculty also perceived that many international students' weak English language skills contributed to their isolation from host national students. They observed many who preferred to speak their native tongue, even when working and studying in the department, largely because their relationships were with co-nationals. As an American-born faculty member from Mechanical Engineering described the situation,

We have a big office with research assistants.... When you go in there, the two Chinese guys will be sitting there talking in Chinese and the two Korean guys will be sitting there talking in Korean.

A foreign-born faculty member from Materials Science and Engineering also acknowledged that speaking one's native tongue can form an imposing barrier to intercultural relationships. "I tell them frequently, '...International students, don't speak your language in the lab or in class'".

Few Opportunities to Work Alongside Host Nationals

Two other themes shifted the focus from international students to structural barriers that hampered cross-cultural relationships: research group homogeneity and a lack of time to commit to social relationships. First, culturally homogeneous research groups often served as a significant barrier because the graduate students spent much of their time working in a laboratory. Because members of the research group were all of the same nationality, they missed the opportunity to interact regularly with students from other countries. According to respondents, this homogeneity was generally not intentional on the part of the faculty, but was the result of both student choice and foreign-born faculty members' connections with sending institutions in their home country. As a faculty member from Mechanical Engineering observed,

I'm from India. It just so happens that a majority of my students are Indians. I don't know why. My [American] colleague next door has all American students. And this kind of thing I have seen. Looking at a Chinese professor, you'd see a lot of Chinese students. It's not intentional. At least in my case I know.... I don't know if it is that the Indian students who come from outside just generally feel more comfortable going to an Indian faculty member, or does the American student feel a little less comfortable approaching me?

Lack of Time

A fourth theme that faculty spoke about focused on international students' lack of time to pursue relationships with host nationals. Graduate students faced significant time constraints as they immersed themselves in their studies. As two people explained,

I think social relationships and getting to know something about the culture itself are mostly missed by a lot of international students where they are focusing on the books themselves and they go from housing to school, from school to housing. (Foreign-born faculty member from Architecture)

There's generally less socialising amongst graduate students than there used to be. I think that the pressure is great to produce quicker for the faculty, for contracts and so forth. (American-born faculty member from Materials Science and Engineering)

Host National Students' Preferences

A final theme that faculty discussed during the interviews suggested that international students were not the only ones who felt more comfortable interacting with culturally similar peers – many host national students felt the same way. A foreign-born faculty member from Materials Science and Engineering explained, "I tell them frequently, 'Domestic students, you reach out to internationals'". An American-born faculty member from Public Health observed,

I think that the American students tend to be the leaders in terms of student organisations and there are a number of them in the department. The foreign students aren't very active to my knowledge in that. And that's one of the approaches where they kind of integrate. So I think that there's a tendency for many of the foreign students not to...well I don't really know. I guess many of the American students may hang out more with other American students.

In order to summarise these findings, faculty members interviewed for this study believed that the international and domestic students in their departments were generally quite segregated. They attributed this to international students' preference for spending time with co-national peers, their limited ability to communicate in English, too few opportunities to interact with host national students, and their commitment to their studies, which often precluded time for intercultural friendships. In addition, they observed that many American students preferred to spend time with students who were culturally similar to them.

DISCUSSION

Faculty observations are consistent with previous studies which have suggested that international students often prefer to befriend culturally similar peers and at least some have little interest in pursuing relationships with host nationals (Alreshoud and Koeske, 1997; Bochner, McLeod, and Lin, 1977; Furnham and Alibhai, 1985). It is important to remember, however, that the interviewed faculty worked in departments with relatively high graduate international student enrolments (between 18% and 59%) and that the majority of the students came from only five Asian countries. Therefore, the students may have had less motivation than those in departments with lower and more diverse international enrolments to pursue friendships with host national students.

Faculty observations are also consistent with studies that have identified international students' lack of time and difficulty communicating in a second language as barriers to integration with host nationals (Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Penn and Durham, 1978; Yang et al., 1994). Results from this study went on to highlight the role that structural barriers such as research group homogeneity played in supporting isolation. This specific finding had not been highlighted in previous research but is important because, while structural barriers can be powerful forces for isolation, they are also among the easiest to remove.

The faculty perspectives described in this study provide, however, only limited support for previous studies which found that many international students desire and actually attempted to establish relationships with host nationals, but found that the host nationals were not interested (Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Trice, 2002). In some faculty members' eyes, American students generally had not made an effort to reach out to their international peers and so were in a way responsible for the isolation. Nevertheless, those interviewed did not describe American students' aloofness or blatant acts of discrimination that international students had described in previous studies. Perhaps faculty had witnessed these behaviors but did not feel comfortable sharing them with the interviewer. Additionally, the hurt that international students described when they were unable to establish satisfactory friendships with host nationals might partially be explained by cultural differences.

Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States are four of the leading host countries in the world (UNESCO, 2005). They are also among the most individualistic of all cultures (Hofstede, 2001). In practice, this means that societal members value independence, privacy, self-reliance, respect for personal boundaries, and individual responsibility (Kartalova, 1996). "Ties between individuals are loose" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225) and individuals from these countries tend to have numerous personal relationships, which may last for only a few years and may remain fairly shallow (Stewart cited in Wierzbicka, 1997).

In previous studies about international students' isolation (Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Trice, 2002), students spoke of their unmet desire for "real friendships" and close relationships that went beyond the casual level. These comments may reflect assumptions about the nature of friendships based on many international students' cultural norms. Researchers have long documented that the notions of 'friend' and 'friendship' are culturally specific and do not represent a human universal (Gareis, 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Kartalova, 1996; Wierzbicka, 1997).

Students from Asian countries represented the majority of those enrolled in the four departments included in this study and a large proportion of international students globally. Most were from highly collectivist cultures and had been brought up to have a high need for social contact. They were therefore dissatisfied when they were unable to establish this because it was very important for them to harmonise with other members of society. In Japan, for example, “being a ‘good’ person requires maintaining interdependence and fostering empathic connections with others” (Markus, Mullally, and Kitayama, 1997, p.16).

However, in many individualistic countries, one has to work to establish friendships, because they do not come naturally with one’s position in the community. For this reason, societal members develop skills, such as small talk and smiling, which help them form friendships (Gareis, 1999). According to Hofstede (2001), this is not the case in collectivistic cultures. “People have less need to make special friendships. One’s friends are predetermined by the social relationships into which one is born” (p.225). Consequently, they do not acquire as many skills in initiating friendships and are unsure how to pursue friendships with host nationals.

These cultural differences may help to explain why many faculty members believed that international students preferred to establish friendships with co-nationals, while at the same time previous research found that many international students reported that they had tried to befriend host national students, but were met with seeming disinterest (Heikenheimo and Shute, 1986; Trice, 2002). Compared to collectivist cultures, Americans and others from individualistic cultures may appear aloof and cold. Certainly, not all international students desired deep relationships with host nationals because of distinct cultural differences, and certainly outright discrimination existed at times against international students. However, differing cultural expectations regarding friendships may also play a significant role in explaining international students’ isolation from host nationals.

Based on this understanding of cultural differences, it is somewhat surprising that foreign- and American-born faculty expressed similar perspectives about international students’ isolation. Many of the foreign-born faculty members were from collectivist cultures. One explanation is that, regardless of their nationality, faculty seemed to respond to the interview questions based on what they observed, rather than the underlying causes. They saw international students chose to speak their native language in laboratories and offices, they watched them immerse themselves in their studies, and they saw them establish friendships with co-nationals. They did not observe them reaching out to host nationals or indicating in other overt ways that they wished to befriend their American peers.

In addition, perhaps the foreign-born faculty, all but one of whom had lived in the United States for at least eight years, understood friendship norms in a highly individualistic culture and recognised how important it was to take the initiative in establishing relationships with host nationals. They also knew the value, within cross-cultural relationships, of achieving a certain level of English language competency. Yet they had not seen students work at these things and maybe for this reason they did not believe international students were taking responsibility for their social lives. This is an interesting topic for further research.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several faculty members interviewed for this study offered suggestions for addressing the structural barriers to integration that they had observed. First, departments should deliberately increase research group diversity so that the laboratories where graduate students spend so much time do not consist of just one nationality. Including group projects in courses and assigning individuals to the groups, thereby allowing students to get to know one another as they learn together, would also be wise. Finally, providing study rooms, or other facilities where students could informally spend time together outside of class, could make a positive difference. In addition to diminishing structural barriers, helping all students understand how cultural norms

influenced friendship expectations was another important goal for which student affairs professionals would likely take responsibility.

International students' isolation is a complex issue that is not easily solved. It is true that intercultural relationships often take extra effort, but, from a developmental perspective, both host national and international students suffer when isolation exists. Opportunities to learn from each other and to broaden one's understanding of different cultural perspectives are severely curtailed. There are significant differences in the nature of friendships across cultures, but these differences need not be inhibitors to developing friendships. Research findings widely agree that "similarity of cultural background is not a necessary prerequisite for friendship" (Gudykunst, 1985, p.281). In fact, once a friendship has been established, attitudinal similarity becomes a much more important variable (Gareis, 1999).

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